Poetics and Politics

ROBERTA HILL WHITEMAN

March 2, 1992

Roberta Hill Whiteman: I've been thinking about the kinds of questions you asked, and also I want to share with you something about my people. It's always a treat to come in and talk to a group of students who are struggling to understand the same kinds of questions and issues that many Indian writers have been struggling with for quite a long time now. One thing I want to mention at the beginning is that I never really feel that I am a spokesperson for my people. I'm not. We have people within my own reservation who are recognized as spokespersons and who speak for the tribe. I am not in that kind of a position, and I am not what some people might call an authority on my own culture. I am still in the process, engaged in learning and recovering, and coming to understand what kinds of things have caused my tribal culture to change and grow and shift in different ways. I think of myself as an artist who is trying to understand the kind of situation that I have found myself in as I was growing up. I am trying to understand the things that my elders and relatives told me, trying to understand the kinds of things that other artists that I've encountered and teachers that I've encountered have shared with me.

So first, I thought I would tell you a little bit about the history of the people that I come from, so that you have a perspective. In our stories about where we come from, we

talk about the woman who fell from the sky and how she floated down from the sky and landed on the backs of birds. And then the birds called down and tried to talk to other sea creatures, so that this woman would be able to find a soft spot or a place to land. So many of the traditions that originated with the people were traditions that came from the idea of woman, of women being very powerful. Women could create life, so women of the community had a lot of say, had a lot of power. It wasn't always that way because, of course, cultures evolve and change. People go through bad times, and they go through good times. So, the woman who fell from the sky gave birth to a daughter, and then her daughter was out, they say, gardening, wandering around, growing food. She was impregnated by the wind, by the west wind. And then she gave birth. She, of course, had what we might think of as the two complementary powers in the world. They're not opposites as the missionaries like to portray them. They're complementaries.

One of the twins was Flint, and he wanted to go up. He said, "I think I see light up there, we should go up." And the other one was Sapling, and he said, "No, I think we should go down." Of course, when the twins were born they were polarized, so that the Sapling went down and was born in the way children are born, and Flint went up and was born under his mother's armpit and killed her in the process.

Like most complementaries, of course, things got mixed up. People didn't know who was who. The grandmother, the woman who fell from the sky, didn't know which of the twins had actually killed their mother. So she thought it must be Sapling. And it was agreed that it was indeed Sapling, because he was sort of that way, you know, kind of a crooked way. He liked to see what kinds of things could happen, if he changed things. He liked hard things, of course.

So, in this world then, there were these two complementaries that were created. One of them, Sapling, created human beings, created rivers that flowed both ways, created all the plants that nourish human beings, and created animals like the deer. His brother saw what he was doing and, of course, exerted his own powers to create things that would cause hardship. He made the rivers that flowed one way, put rocks in them, made thorns on berries, made the lions and bears that would challenge people. So in this world, there were these complementary energies.

When I was growing up, my father would always tell me that in whatever situation that is bad, there was always some good in it. Whatever person we run into who may appear to be bad, there is always some good in that person. And however good we think a situation is or however good we think a person is, there was always something there that will cause us some struggle. Nothing is ever clearly one

way or the other.

Now, that's part of our symbolic language, and informs how we think about the world being settled. We also have other kinds of stories and understandings about who we are as a people. One of these is what we call the origins of the Great Law of Peace. The Great Law of Peace was brought to us by a man who was a visionary. He was not from the Five Nations. He was a Huron man. He went first to the Mohawks, but he lived on the borders of the Huron people. It was not clear who his father was. He was raised at the edge of the town. But he had a vision when he was very young about how all things are related and how people need to learn to create peace. At the time he lived, there were tremendous blood feuds going on among the Five Nations. If someone were killed, then the relatives of that person would go out and kill more people. So the Oneidas, Mohawks, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas were engaged in this tremendous blood feud, going back and forth with a lot of warfare. It was a desperate time. People were afraid to walk around because they never knew when someone might be killed.

Then the peacemaker started traveling down with his vision. He realized he was going to go to talk to the Mohawks about this vision that he had. And at this time there was another man, by the name of Aay-oh-ehn-'ta. He

was a leader and had a lot of children, a lot of women in his family. He had nine daughters and a wife and loved them very dearly. During the blood-feuding many of his women were killed. Many of his daughters and his wife were killed. He was lost in such deep grief that he became a recluse in the woods. Perhaps he also went out and killed people. So desperate did he feel, so lost did he feel about human beings and how terrible the world was, he may have become a cannibal. While he was looking into a pot of soup, in his reclusive hut in the woods, he looked down into the soup and he saw the beautiful face of a man. He couldn't quite understand who it was. Of course, it was the peacemaker who was up in the smoke-hole and was looking down at him. But the face was reflected. And he went to find this man, but he couldn't find him. He was so startled at the image of this man that he went out and dumped his soup out and began wandering around. A dreamer came and told him, "You will meet someone who will talk to you and comfort you."

Well, of course, the peacemaker was looking and watching this man. He heard this man every now and then talking to himself in his cabin saying, "If I were in this grief I would comfort someone in this way: I would give them strings of wampum and talk to them and clear their eyes and clear their voice and clear their ears, so that they could

hear again." And so, the peacemaker heard this man talking about how he needed comfort from his grief. Eventually these two men met, and once they met, then they worked together to establish the League, the Great Law.

Part of the Great Law, then, is that people need physical sustenance; people need healthy bodies, and healthy minds. The earth has given us all these treasures to help us have this. That's part of our responsibility, to help other human beings to have good health: healthy minds and healthy bodies and healthy spirits. The second part of the Great Law is, of course, that from health comes a sense of righteousness, of justice, of understanding what kinds of relationships are needed among human beings, and, not only among human beings, but among the plants, among the animals, among the other forces in the world--the wind, the rock. And then the third is the possibility of creating peace. When people have healthy minds and healthy bodies, when they understand and have a sense of righteousness and understand their relationships, then they can work towards establishing peace. And that peace is something that is worked towards. We need to create it. Just as war is something that people create, peace is something that people create.

So, the Oneidas were the second group of people. The Mohawks went to the Oneidas and talked about forming a league. The Oneidas then went to Cayugas and Senecas and

the very last people they went to were the Onondagas. This was because the Onondagas had a terrible tyrant who lived among them. This tyrant was the one who needed to be convinced. And so they convinced him.

Now, they say, the League has been among us for a very long time. So when the European people came, they found that we had already formed this confederacy, this League, and that our image of ourselves was very much like a Quonset hut. In fact, that's where the idea of a Quonset hut came from, the way a longhouse looks. The whole nations were conceived of fitting into a giant longhouse. On the western door were the Mohawks, and on the eastern door were the Senecas. The Oneidas were the younger brothers, the Cayugas were the younger brothers, and then the Onondagas were the keepers of the central fire. They had this power to direct. The person who had become the tyrant was changed by the power of song, by the power of our ability to speak with one another, to become one of the central, keystone figures in the keeping of this peace.

So, we have relationships among the nations. If a person were a member of the Bear clan of the Mohawks, they would have brothers and sisters across the nation. Any person traveling, let's say, from one end of the country--from Mohawk country to Seneca country--could always find a relative, a brother or a sister in that clan. So even today

this is true. People travel, and, when they find a clan-person, a brother or a sister, the understanding is that you take care of the people from your clan even if they have a different nation. That's part of the structure of the League, to recognize how we were all related to each other. We were related in terms of brothers and sisters. We were related in terms of older and younger.

The women within the League had tremendous power. They could stop war. They could veto war, because they were the people who brought forth the warriors and who knew the children. They were the ones who agreed whether captives would be adopted. Often the women had to decide. The clan mothers decided who would be adopted. They were the people who chose leaders, because they had raised the children. They knew if someone would be a good leader. And in terms of our leadership, we often have looked for people who didn't want to be leaders. You're a little suspicious of someone who wants to be a leader. You look for someone who might not want to be a leader, but looks like a very good, responsible person. So, women had a lot of power. One of the things that happened then over the period of years when the European countries started coming to Oneida and Mohawk and to Longhouse territory was that they really wanted to destroy the power of the women. They wanted to shift it over into a patriarchal system. So we have had that tension

between matriarchy and patriarchy within our own culture. The establishment of the League was one of those things that helped us to retain the peace, but we also tried to encourage other Indian nations.

And, of course, there were wars that resulted from this. In the process of extending the League there were wars. Some of the wars were with Ojibwa people. So when Europeans landed and started pushing people westward, fighting went on between the Ojibwas and the Longhouse people, or the Iroquois people. That kind of process is one reason why we're called Iroquois. Because Iroquois is a French derivative. It means "greater snake." You know, we weren't fondly called that by the French and their Algonquin allies. The same is true with the word "Sioux," which is derived from a word meaning "lesser snake."

The relationship between the British and the Longhouse people was one of friendship, what we called a covenant chain. You know, we were friends when the British landed and took some of them in as relatives. Sir William Johnson was recognized among the leaders among some of the--I think he lived among some of the Mohawks--Mohawk family, Mohawk wife. So there were some of these relationships that started to form that were part of the covenant chain of friendship, and the Longhouse people looked at themselves as brothers to the King. Their relationship was one of

brotherhood and of sharing with one another. Now what started to happen then at the beginning of the revolutionary period is that, although our lands were recognized, there were so many people coming in from Europe and wanting the land that there were struggles going on. Some of these struggles erupted in the War of 1812, but some of the struggles started before that. One of those struggles was when the New York governor told the Oneidas that he could not stop the influx of white people. He told us, "It's like your land is going under water with white people--I cannot stop them, they will come and just bury you and wash over you." And so the leader of the Oneidas at the time, who was named Goodpeter, signed a lease agreement with the New York people saying that since our land is under water we'll agree to lease it for a while until the water recedes and goes away. And once he signed this agreement the story goes that he heard the birds in all the woods crying, "You have lost your country, you have lost your country, you have lost your country." He heard all these birds shouting this. They were very worried about the fact that this agreement had caused them to lose the country.

There was intense struggle over the land. If you know some other revolutionary history, you know the struggles led to many Indians being Christianized, even though they did not want to be Christianized. There was a Mohawk man by the

name of Elly-aayzer Williams who came to live among the Oneidas at the turn of the century into the eighteen hundreds. He was half Mohawk, and he had been part of the militia. But then suddenly he became "enlightened" and became a Christian. He decided to live among the Oneidas and Christianize Oneidas. The chiefs were very upset with this man who had come along and Christianized Oneidas. They tried to get him to leave the community, but what happened was he would Christianize Oneidas and move them across the river to establish their own community. In a while he had a group of what he called Christian Oneidas. His plan was to create an empire for himself in Wisconsin. And so what he did was to convince what's called a first Christian party to move to Wisconsin to the land right outside Green Bay and to buy land from the Menominees. We did this. And so in 1822, the first Christian party of Oneidas moved to Wisconsin, which was a densely forested area. They set out to establish themselves. There were other parties that came. They were Episcopalian. The second Christian party was led also by a Mohawk man, by the name of Daniel Adams. So the connection between Mohawks and Oneidas was still one of closeness. People shared with one another. It wasn't the Mohawks and the Oneidas living separately. There was interaction among them all. So they established their community at Oneida, and they were Christians. They were

adapting, but they had their land in common. They held their lands in common, and they helped one another. And they were recognized in that community as doing quite well. They established schools having several thousand acres, you know, plants and fields and things growing. They were doing quite well.

But at that time, the fort at Green Bay also started to grow into a city. And, of course, they wanted to get a hold of the land. From 1850, the Oneidas were pressured to allot their land, and many of them had their lands allotted. This was before the Dawes Act. The particular land that my family is on was allotted to us during the Dawes Act. But many other land parcels were allotted earlier in different areas of the reservation. Our reservation had 64,000 acres when the Oneidas came. It is now only six by ten miles, and even that is checker-boarded. Much of the land was lost not only during the Dawes Act but also in 1924 when Oneidas were told that they were to become citizens of the United States. And many of them said citizenship is a kick in the ass. They didn't want it. They wanted to be Oneidas. They were not told how citizenship would affect their landholdings, but it did. After they became citizens in 1924, they forgot about it and didn't worry about it. A year or two later they were told that their land was no longer theirs. It was up for sale because it had been taxed. They didn't even

know at the time that citizenship would have this way of taking their land away from them. And so many of them were actually thrown off of their own land. The police would come in and throw them off the land and tell them they didn't own it anymore. Of course, then large timber barons and people who had a lot of money from the city would come in and buy the land up. By the 1930s, the average Oneida farmer had maybe 15 to 20 acres of land, sometimes maybe 90 if they held onto the original allotment. Whereas the white farmer in the same area had much larger acreage, 200-300 acres. That situation is still a tension within the community today, because we know as people that there are people in the Oneida area who have land and who do not have the free title to it. In other words, they drove someone off in order to get it. And those are one of the reasons why there's so much tension between the Oneidas and the larger city of Green Bay. Green Bay has never really appreciated and understood the power that Oneida people have.

The relationship of Oneidas to green Bay has always been tense. Green Bay is the border town. It's a very large metropolis, but it's also a border town. They have sued us fairly recently to claim we no longer exist. There we are, but they say we don't exist. They tried to get our reservation terminated several times. We still are there.

And part of the irony is that if you travel through the city, and you're Oneida, you know part of the city is actually within the reservation boundaries. The city of Green Bay can't move east because there's a bay there. They can't move north because there's a swamp there. They can't move south because there's a river and a very large industrial complex that's growing there. So actually the only way they can grow is southwest right toward us, which is what they've been doing.

In 1950 a man by the name of Ritzenthaller from the University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee--came up and investigated us and wrote us up. He said, "Oh, in a matter of ten years these people are going to be assimilated, and they won't be around anymore." He could not have understood the dramatic change that happened. You know, from 1950 to 1980, it has been just a tremendous turn-around. It started to happen in the early 60s. We were up to be terminated in 1952. My father worked on the committee to try to resist termination, but they wanted to terminate us when they terminated the Menominees. At that time people were really still struggling, you know. Oneidas could not get jobs in Green Bay. If they could get jobs, they could get jobs as domestics, low-paying jobs. There was a real struggle going on as far as how to make a life for yourself. My father went into World War II, and, when he came back, we lived

near the reservation. But we did not live on the reservation. The unemployment rate was and is very high. It has been very high on the reservation. He didn't think that he could really find a good way to live there.

So, I lived in the city. If I think about my position, in this long history of people, I'm one of the first urban Indians. The Indian people who came back after World War II, the soldiers who came back after World War II, many of them settled in the cities. And so I can think of my experience as being very common to many people who were born after World War II. My father worked with the Oneidas as a treasurer. He was a very educated man. He had a master's in math. He wanted to teach at high schools, but they would not hire him because he was Oneida. So he ended up working at a prison, a maximum security prison right outside of the city. He worked with what he called "his boys." He formed real relationships with the young men that were in prison, teaching them math. We lived in the city and experienced the kind of institutional racism that the city had. So, for example, we could not live where my father had wanted us to live, because they would not sell him the house that he wanted to buy. I mean it was a city where there was a lot of racism but it was very subtle. It was, "Well, we'd love to sell you this house but unfortunately somebody came in this morning and just put in a bid for it and your bid....

Well, we hope you find another house." It was that kind of a situation. And speaking with other Oneidas you knew it existed. If you asked people, they would not tell you that racism was the reason for their actions, but it is there.

The tribe, the people the generation ahead of me, really began then to try to turn the tribe around. They realized that although we have had all these experiences that have forced assimilation on us, still we had a real strong tradition and a very good way of life. We needed to recover it and to keep it. And so some of the elders within the community have been amazing people. They are the people of my father's generation who returned and started to walk and talk to people of my generation and younger. They told us, "There are things that you could do." There was one elder who I often think of who worked with my uncle. My uncle's name is Norbert Hill, and her name is Anna John. She's now in her eighties. But one of the things they used to do is to sit together and look at the federal government program book. This grandmother would look through these programs like she was looking at a Sears catalog, "Oh, I think we could get one of these. You know, we need a housing program, and we need a health care program, and we need a program for the elders." So, people started to get together and talk about the kinds of things they could do. And so now, I think there are a lot of things that Oneida

people have done that have changed our economy.

Now, it's kind of frightening. We have a very large bingo process. We've bought a hotel, a Roadway Inn or a Ramada. We have our own laboratory that tests soil and water. We're trying to diversify and develop other kinds of businesses, buying our own office buildings, because we still have land rights within the city limits. So, we've been trying to build office buildings. We've been trying to diversify our economy away from bingo, but at the same time, there are certain other people in the tribe who want to build a casino-resort. There's tensions in the community over the change in terms of the development that's been going on, because we were not a class system society. We did not have classes, and people fear that now with all of this money coming in and the development going on that we may indeed begin to form classes. And so, there's tension trying to make sure that the community still considers itself a community of people working together, helping each other.

One of the things that has helped us deal with this issue of class has been the resurgence of the traditional religion. People have come from other Oneida communities. There are two others, one in New York and one in Canada. People have come down from Canada and from New York. Other Longhouse people have come from other Longhouse nations.

We've had Mohawk speakers come. We've had different people come in and share their knowledge with the community. There's been a real strong resurgence of the traditional religion, that way of looking at things and understanding things.

The language has undergone a change. When I was growing up, people were afraid that it would die out. But in 1979 we established our own school. The school has had a major impact in trying to recover the language, the language spoken within the community. So, the community has gone quite a ways to reincorporate the language within the community. You hear it now. When I was growing up you hardly ever heard it. But now you hear people speaking, and they speak to you in the language. There's plans for developing a college, developing a high school. We are in the process of reestablishing our traditions and the vision that we have of who we are. But, of course, in any kind of situation where people are growing, where things are changing, there's all kinds of chaos at times and tensions among people. It isn't like we all get together and say, "yeah, let's do it." There's tensions, and people argue, but, you know, even though we argue, we still know that we all are trying to reestablish things.

Now, I went to a public school. I saw a few other Oneidas there, and we clung together off and on, got to know

each other. I went to the university. My father wanted me to be a physician like my grandmother was. I was terrible with math and measuring, so it's very lucky that I didn't become a physician. I probably would have poisoned somebody. But, I always loved words, I loved language. My grandmother loved language and would recite poems to me. My father loved to tell stories. My father loved music, even though he was a mathematician, he loved music. There was a real artistic interest in my family in language. I always thought language had such a power to it because it could comfort me when I encountered bad situations. I found some help within language.

The Oneida community had that kind of interest also in language, especially the grandmothers. You know, they could really make all kinds of wonderful jokes. They had a love of puns and played with language a lot and told stories. So that was one influence that people had in the way that I was raised. I think language truly is how we become who we are. I think N. Scott Momaday has been an influence on me. He says in The Way to Rainy Mountain that language provides an image of who we are. I truly believe that. Language has that tremendous power to make us see, to make us understand. I grew up understanding this power of language, but never really thinking of being a writer until I failed miserably to become a physician. And then, I began through the

training that I received and the poets that I encountered. I worked with Peter Cooley as an undergraduate and with Richard Hugo as a graduate student. I came to understand that poetry is what I love to do and that's what I'll keep on doing. Writing is what I love to do. There are more writers now at Oneida. People are interested in writing. They're interested not only in writing but also in recovering the language.

The one reason why there was such emphasis placed on destroying our language is because it's a language of relationships. Within the language itself you can create certain kinds of relationships and understandings that you simply cannot in English.

So, that's where I am. I love words. I am a word lover. And I don't care if they're spoken or written.

Susan Stevens: Well, my dad was in World War II also. He wasn't able to come back and just lead a constructive life like your father did. I was wondering if maybe your dad went through some ceremonies or anything like that to help him heal from being in the War.

Roberta Hill Whiteman: Well, my dad really didn't heal totally. He didn't go through any ceremonies, and he didn't always maintain a constructive life. He had a lot of difficulties, and he would never speak of the War. It wasn't until the night before he died that he ever told me

some of the things that happened in the War. It was one of those very deeply hidden hurts. He was a second lieutenant who commanded a group. He had a group of black soldiers who were under his command. So, he struggled a lot trying to get the company in safe situations. He was also a gooney bird. Do you know what a gooney bird is? They're for surveillance. They sit in the back of a glider. He was in charge of making pictures, you know, looking over the edge of the glider and taking surveillance pictures. They would send them over into enemy territory. They would fly around and fall out of the sky and try to get back. Those were some of the things that he did. He had a hard life, you know, he really struggled.

Susan Stevens: I'm Tlingit. Last semester I did a paper comparing the Iroquois and the Tlingits and I saw a lot of similarities. For example, in the oratory speakers, I was wondering if you've ever heard any of the condolence ceremonies.

Roberta Hill Whiteman: Well, those have taken place over in New York, but they have not taken place at Oneida, so I've never had the opportunity to see a condolence ceremony. It would have to be one of those things that, you know, you were right there when that person died, and you were part of that community. The Longhouse communities are from my understanding, what can I say, quiet about ceremony. I mean

they're quiet. They don't say, "HEY, IT'S TIME FOR A CEREMONY!" We've had so many years of oppression and of people trying to take these things from us. Even within my own community when ceremonies are going on it's always spread by word of mouth, and you may never know. You could go there and you're never sure, you know. It's done according to events in the community and tied to the community so much you really have to be there. They have to know you. So, I've never really had that opportunity, although I've read about it. I never had that opportunity.

Chad Galts: You mention that there's a division of the Oneida tribe in Canada, how do you look at that division?

Roberta Hill Whiteman: Well, in some ways, you know, it doesn't make a lot of sense. Longhouse people travel a lot. So, the Longhouse people in New York often come out to Oneida. Even at the turn of the century there are stories about how people traveled back and forth. So people have been traveling back and forth. But then again, these are communities also. So, when you go there, it takes a while for people to get used to you being there. You're still a Wisconsin Oneida. When they come down they're still Canadian Oneidas. There's a lot of intermarriage that's gone on and a lot of shared recovery of language. Native speakers share.

There are people who come to teach, but there are still

differences. The older speakers within our community will say, "Well, we don't know if they're speaking right. They speak kind of odd at times." So there are tensions every now and then, like there are among many human beings. But we feel very good that those people are there, and that they shared with us. And we share with them as well, because we have land claims going on. We're the recognized people to deal with the federal government, so we go back and forth with Oneida Canada and Oneida New York trying to make an agreement that we can all as Oneidas agree on in terms of our land.

Larry Evers: How do all these concerns that you've shared with us and all this background that you've shared with us this morning, how does that translate when you participate in an M.F.A. program?

Roberta Hill Whiteman: Well, when I went to Montana, I had never been in an area where there were so many Indian people. I mean Montana's got a lot of Indian people. So I was blown away. I mean, I'd been in Wisconsin, and there's Indian people in Wisconsin, but not like there are in Montana, and in a university setting, at the University of Montana. They had an Indian club with two or three hundred students in it. Madison had thirteen. So, you know, I thought, "Wow--this is wonderful!"

Richard Hugo was very supportive as far as the kinds of

experiences and the kinds of concerns that I wanted to work out. I had an opportunity to meet Jim Welch, who also became a good friend. They were some of the first people, Jim and Lois, were some of the first people that I met there. And so it was really a rewarding experience.

I do have to admit that I struggled along here and there with different kinds of things, personal issues. For example, the community, the Indian people in the community that I had met, always wanted me to travel somewhere or go somewhere or do something. It was at the time Wounded Knee was going on, so people had these ideas of going here and going there. I was torn. Stay in the graduate program and listen to the workshop, or go study Russian literature, or get in a car and drive to South Dakota? What should I do?

I struggled back and forth with some of those issues while going to school. I must say that I forced myself sometimes just to continue with schooling. My father really wanted me to go on to school, and so I had to think of his influence on me, and to continue in that decision that I had made to go to the university.

What I learned there was, I guess, how much the creation of poetry is actually tied to one's ear. That it's your ear that hears language. Each person hears language in a unique way. And it's trying to capture the way that you hear the words and allowing the music of the language to

lead you to discover things. I had kind of known that, but no one had really shown me how it can work for you when writing. And I still go by that. I still listen to the words, and speak the words and hear them again and again in the process of composing a poem or writing a story or writing an essay. I've got to hear it. When I hear it, things start to happen. I come up with more ideas.

Hugo would often talk about primary and secondary poems. Sometimes there are poems that just come to you. You're very fortunate to have them come to you. Then he would talk about secondary poems. You're not quite sure how you feel, but in the process of composing the poem you discover a way to feel about something. And so that's what I've found as well. He also said we write the same poem over and over again in our lives. I don't like to think that. I want to do other things.

Larry Evers: Would it be useful to talk about "Waterfall in Como Park" in terms of what you've just been saying?

Roberta Hill Whiteman: One of the greatest disappointments in my life was to discover in going to school, in all my years of American schooling, to discover that some people in the world do not believe that the world is alive. I mean when I was told in high school that rocks were dead and water was dead, it was just a very disappointing experience for me. So part of the writing has always been to reaffirm,

and to say to myself that the world is really alive.

There's a water fall in a park near where I live. It's a very little dinky waterfall. It's a tiny waterfall. Whenever I get very upset, I go and sit there. It was one of the things that my uncle always taught me. Whenever you're upset, you need to find some space to go and calm yourself down. Whatever will come to you in that space will help you. So the waterfall has helped me. One of those times when I was there I thought, "Well, you know I really ought to thank her." And so I wrote a poem. I'll read it.

WATERFALL IN COMO PARK

She's always walking off the edge,
allowing the wellspring of herself
to fall away without worry.

Even in a furious wind, she's out here,
shaking her glinting spray across the sand stone.
Through thick August afternoons,

she gazes at the sky and stays
poised enough to welcome sparrows.
Both structure and flux, she trembles

as she collects pebbles and leaves, while
her basin grows deeper, more substantial.
Those days when love is distant,

I return to her and learn how she sinks,
climbs, and leaps into abundant moments
where she gives without purpose

or boundary. She teaches me to believe
in this--it's best we're blind
to that which moving, moves us

In her great-hearted leaps, she's my anchor,
gathering shadow and sun
without once stopping her song.

I've always loved water, a lot of water. I find that the water teaches us things. We live our lives not on a rational level where we always make choices, but things just happen sometimes. You know, we don't know why they happen. Maybe it's best that we just try to create some kind of meaning for ourselves, that we ask ourselves what does this mean in my life, what might it mean to other people in their lives as well. So, the way water moves is just something that I refer to again and again.

Poetics and Politics

Linda Bolton: I wanted to ask if form was an issue for you during the time that you were in the MFA program? Do you feel that you're working towards creating new forms, or where do you position yourself in terms of classical forms of poetry, and the kind of energy that you bring to your poetry?

Roberta Hill Whiteman: Well, I am in some ways a formalist. My training, both from the early undergraduate years and in the program at Missoula, was to try to figure out what form the poem wanted when you began. Do you have a long line, do you have a short line, do you have a three line stanza...I guess part of the reason for the form is that it allows me to take bigger leaps. If I know, for example, that I have to fit into a three line stanza certain things, I can shape it because I don't have to worry about every line, where every line ought to be. I already know I've got three lines, I've already got so many beats in a line, and I can play around with it more.

Now I've grown at times very frustrated with that process. You know once you start working at a process, and you're accustomed to it, you know, you get frustrated and you think there must be other ways to do this. So I'm working on trying to break away from my obsession with formality, and open up lines. Some of the recent poems I've written work toward allowing the lines to move anywhere on

the page. I want to see what things start to happen. I'm trying to just investigate forms that I think are indigenous to this country, this continent, and see how they might work, if I were to try to use them. I'm interested in looking at Oneida stories, and the way that those kinds of stories might show me some things about form. It's very hard to move from that to English, because English is so different. But I guess I just have to admit I'm a formalist. I don't think that's so terrible, but sometimes I think it is. Ye gads, I've been assimilated! Help! Simon, save me! I've admired Simon Ortiz and some of the writers like Simon and Joy Harjo and Leslie Silko who are just able to use whatever comes.

Elaine Tietjen: I did find it a little surprising for you to say that you were urban after reading your work, because so much of the content seems based in the land and natural objects. Do you find yourself not having much to say about urban situations in the poetry?

Roberta Hill Whiteman: The Oneida community, being a community right on the urban edge, was a community removed from the city. It was always where we would go when we wanted to be who we are. Even now, I can't think of moving to that area and living in Green Bay. The urban city of Green Bay horrifies me, frankly. I wouldn't want to live there. But living at Oneida is very different, because it's

very rural. Trees, there's trees, and the people there have a different kind of relationship to one another. So that there's a real intensity of connection between the people and the land of the reservation, what it looks like.

When I've moved to cities, I've tried to live on the boundaries, on the edge of the city. Unfortunately, the last four years I haven't been able to do that. I live right in St. Paul. I find it's very difficult. I've tried to write more urban poems about living or encountering cities. But I just find I like the land. I have a hard time writing about banks and sidewalks. I've tried it recently. But it's not as easy for me.

Cathy Young: You've written some intriguing and moving poems about your mother. And I was wondering if you could share a little bit with us about the role she's played or the influence she's had on some of your work.

Robert Hill Whiteman: My mother was from Louisiana, from a place called Flatwoods, which is a little farming town, in north/central Louisiana. And, she was Choctaw and white, and lived in this farming community. She was the oldest daughter of a large family and joined the army in the war and met my father. And so my parents throughout their lives had this north/south battle going on. Where would they live? My father did not like to go into the south. My mother had a great difficulty living in the north.

Because of her early years when she was malnourished, she had cirrhosis of the liver, and died quite suddenly. She'd had liver trouble for a number of years. When I was about eight or nine she decided finally to go see a physician. She was a nurse, trained as a nurse. I think she knew that she was dying, and wanted to hold it off as long as possible. So when I was nine she went in to have some surgery, and they said that she was already beyond any help that they could offer her. And so she died quite quickly.

She was a storyteller. And from my earliest memories of her she really would make us be late for school because we had to sit and listen to stories before we left. We had to have a story in the morning before we left to help us get through school. She was very much a fighter. You know, she didn't understand the north at all. And so any little problem that we would run into at school, she was down there. I mean this was first, second, third grade. She was down there to set them straight as to what needed to be done.

And her loss was something that was very difficult for me. I never really understood until I wrote the poem about that experience how much rage had been part of my growing up, because of her going. It was like she planned to leave me. And left us. But, it's one of those gratuitous

experiences that life gives you,that you just have to deal with, and learn from.

I never had much contact with her people. When I was in my early twenties I went down to Louisiana and talked to them. They were of a completely different world than I was. And we just didn't have a lot in common. So I haven't kept in touch with them.

Sharon Harrow: In "Summer Girl," the short story you published in Talking Leaves, I was a little disturbed by the figure of the father. He was so blind to his daughter. I was wondering what you had in mind when you were writing that story, where that experience came from.

Roberta Hill Whiteman: The father wants the daughter to be on her own. To recognize that she has choices she can make, and that she can ask for things. She could say, "I want to come home." But the daughter never says that. She wants the father to intuit where she is and what she needs. And the father cannot do that. He doesn't know where she is. So there is this gap between the father and the daughter. He's there and he's interested and he's supportive of her, but at the same time he has no idea of the kind of situation in which she finds herself. And she is unable really to explain it to him, because he's got expectations of his own for her. He's got dreams of his own of what she's supposed to be about. So she's caught in this situation where she's

got to learn to speak out for herself, and to tell people things. In the story, finding her friend gives her that courage to decide. Well, I'll just take my own life, you know, and do this.

In terms of my own life, I think that my father had three daughters. I have two sisters. He never really quite understood where we were coming from. He tried, but he just didn't understand what it was like to be a young woman. He would tease us about it and try to see what it was like, but he never really could. And I know that's true with my husband and our daughters. There are points where they try to talk, but sometimes you just can't quite find how to speak to each other. I think a lot of that has to do with expectations on the part of both. Your father's supposed to tell you what to do in a patriarchal culture, but of course he doesn't receive enough to understand what a young woman has as far as her own life expectations. I was raised in a place without a mother. A mother is able to make that kind of connection, help provide that kind of bridge. That is what Phoebe in my story doesn't have. She doesn't have that kind of bridge.

I know there were some questions raised about Native American poetics, and different tribal poetics. I think these are just in the process of evolving, starting. They start, I think, within the community. So the people at

Oneida are just beginning to think about and formulate what this process of writing means. Especially since they started the school in 1979, there's more and more writers in the community. The language is becoming much more important. That's part of it. I think once we have those Navajo poetics and Oneida poetics, and Acoma Pueblo poetics, you know, we'll be able to more clearly understand what Native American poetics are about. I think there are commonalities among all those various peoples.

Larry Evers: Do you want to talk about some of the commonalities you see?

Roberta Hill Whiteman: Part of the commonality, I think, is the challenge to the languages that we have. The languages for a long time were under assault, and in some ways still are. The assault on those languages, the oppression from speaking them, changed and altered the way that people spoke English. So there are characteristic phrases and ways of speaking in Oneida and in the community that you don't hear in other communities. If you go to Rosebud, South Dakota, you hear certain ways of speaking English that you don't always hear in other communities that are non-Indian communities. There are certain kinds of ways that language translated into English, sometimes in terms of its structure, sometimes in terms of the kind of puns or the kind of humor, the kind of dialogue that people would create

with one another. So I think that these are some of the commonalities. And then the love of language itself, the interest in it, the willingness to take risks in it. I've found that in a lot of different Indian communities. Because some of it was lost, we treasure that ability for people.

Linda Bolton: Does the issue of audience come up in your conception of a Native American poetics? Could you talk about that?

Roberta Hill Whiteman: I write things not only to understand myself, but also to create a dialogue with Oneida people or with Indian people. So my primary audience is Indian people. But to think of an Indian person who is able to follow me, you know, I mean it's not just any Indian person, but an Indian person who'd be willing to follow me in the kinds of things I notice when I'm writing a poem. What I'd like to share with somebody who's open-minded.

I got very upset in the seventies and eighties, you know, because there were all these anthologies coming out. They'd want Indian poems. You know, you put a bead in there and you got it. They'll take it. You put a feather in, hey, we'll take it. But my life is so much bigger. I have so many other things. The lives of other Indian people are so much bigger. That's the kind of readership I want: somebody who will say, "Hey, my life is big. Even though

I'm recovering traditions, my life takes in the world. And part of my traditions encompass the world and the relationships to the world."

So that's the kind of audience that I hope for. But, interestingly enough, there are non-Indians as well who understand, and who are interested, who can follow it. And if you sail out from Oneida, from the earth, and start sailing out, out, out far into the stars, you look down and strangely enough the whole world has had this experience of colonialism. There are people all over the world who start to say, "Hey, I know that poem and here's one that we did over here in China, and here's one that we've done over here in Latin America, and here's one that's come out in Nigeria. And so there's discussion on a global way. Gerald Vizenor has an interesting comment that I heard him make. He said Indian literature is really a global literature. And I really believe that there are global literatures that are starting to be created.

<u>Larry Evers</u>: Did you experience this when you visited China as a visiting writer? Did you experience that kind of connection with Chinese writers when you were over there?

<u>Roberta Hill Whitehead</u>: Yes. Yes, I did. In different ways. For example, there was a man there by the name of Lieu, who's quite a well-known poet, an older man, very esteemed and revered in his country, who was greatly

interested in the Indian people and had read as much as he possibly could about Indians. And so he would tease me, and say, "Well it wasn't so very long ago that you people left." And my husband and I would tease him back and say, "Well, you know, of course, we were going both ways." You know, the Bering Strait theory, we were going both ways.

So they had a real sense of connectedness that we shared and understood. And a feeling of really--what can I say--they had a similarity of values of time. They take their time to get to know people, and take their time to share, and to talk. We found that we had similar stories about different things, like turtles. They believe that language comes from turtles. And in my clan, I'm a turtle clan person, so in my clan it's the turtles who are the orators, who speak. Many of them are turtle clan people. So there were similarities that we found that were really kind of fun.

They often mistook us for Chinese or Mongolian people. So when we were walking along the street one time this man and woman were really looking at me, and started talking about me. And I was with the interpreter, and I asked her, "What is he saying?" And she said, "He's saying, 'At last, there's a woman taller than you.'"