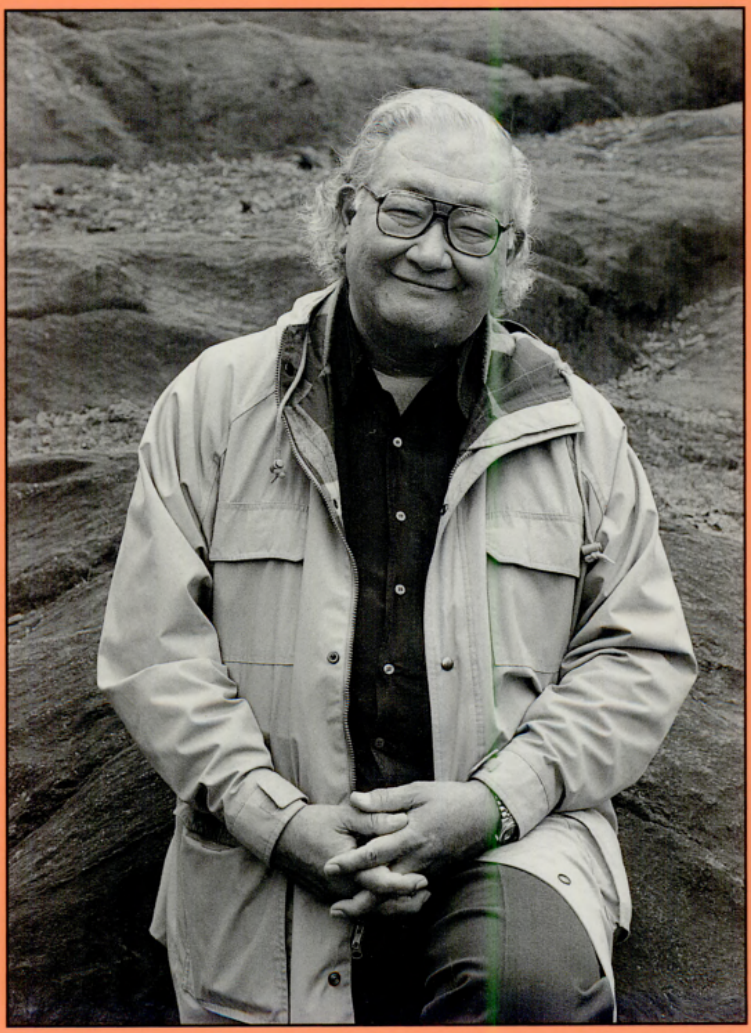
Conversations with

N. SCOTT MOMADAY



Edited by Matthias Schubnell

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Introduction

N. Scott Momaday has made himself readily available for interviews throughout his career. Among the recurrent issues raised in these conversations are Momaday's multi-ethnic experience, his view of the Indian's place in American society, his synthesis of native oral traditions and the Western literary canon, his concern for ecology and conservation, his theories of language and the imagination, the influences on his academic and artistic development, his work as a teacher and painter, and, of course, his own comments on specific works. Through the years, Momaday's responses to queries on these topics are remarkably consistent.

Momaday makes his perhaps most revealing comment on interviews as a medium for intellectual discourse in his conversation with Lee Abbott, where he asserts that they constitute "Heap Big Medicine, to put it in indigenous terms." This statement acknowledges not only the ceremonial nature of the interviewing process, but its potential for engendering a deeper vision of the writer's work. Momaday is clearly at ease with the questions posed to him, and many of his conversation partners comment on his remarkable voice. Bettye Givens recalls that "Momaday speaks with a deep resonance using cultivated speech, for he cares as much about how language sounds as how his words look on the page." Joseph Bruchac, too, appears mesmerized by Momaday's voice: "The voice with which he greeted me was warm and deep, and the words spoken in a way which gave weight to every syllable. It was a voice which one might expect from a man who wrote and continues to write of the magical nature and power of language." And the students who interviewed him for *Persona* describe him as "a large, impressive man who speaks in a deep, rich voice that immediately makes you feel comfortable and aware that words are valuable things." But the interviews also reveal a side to Momaday which is not always apparent in his published work, namely his exquisite sense of humor.

Among the priceless episodes in these interviews is this response

to Givens on how he would rate *House Made of Dawn:* "I think it's a terrific novel. I like it a lot. Pleased to have written it." His account of Georgia O'Keeffe's effort to serve the Momadays a drink on the occasion of their visit to her house at Abiquiu is a delightful example of Momaday's storytelling. The painter, then in her eighties, was without her maid and without the key to the liquor cabinet, which was in the possession of the maid. Refusing to let adversity come between her and her guests' well-being, she eventually took the hinges off the cabinet (Schubnell). Equally amusing is Momaday's story about his diligent efforts to settle his telephone bill before his departure from Russia in 1974: "I thought, 'They can't let me out of the country without the phone money.' And, you know, I thought as I packed and departed for the airport that it's going to happen at the airport: that's where they'll get me. And then I went through customs and got on the plane and then I thought that out over the Baltic, MIGs are going to appear and force us down and say, 'Mr. Momaday, what about the phone bill?' " (Weiler). While these examples illustrate Momaday's delight in capturing life's humorous side, the interviews also offer much insight into his experience as a writer.

When asked about the craft of writing, Momaday frequently speaks to his need for a fixed schedule to ensure a routine of sustained composition. This is important to him not only because, as he puts it to Lee Abbott, his work habits are "lousy," but because he experiences writing as "an isolated and lonely business." Referring to the frustrations of writing, Momaday says in the *Persona* interview that "the machine in my garden is that damn typewriter; it becomes your enemy, and you exorcise all your evil spirits by pounding away at it. The harder you hit the keys, the better. The more pain you inflict on it, the better." What sustains Momaday in the creative process are the workings of the unconscious and the power of inspiration.

In his interview with Gretchen Bataille in 1977, Momaday comments on his delight in having critics point out to him a reading of his work he himself was quite unaware of: "You write out of the subconscious to such a degree that you're not always aware of what the implications and consequent meanings of your expression are. That's one of the most exciting things about writing." To Givens he confesses that only through inspiration can the drudgery of writing be overcome. For Momaday, the creative process is slow and deliberate, requiring

much patience and perseverance: "You just live with [poems and novels] as seeds in the mind and then eventually they take shape and that's when you can begin to work them out on the page. But for a thing to germinate it takes a long time, thinking about it, sleeping on it" *(Persona)*. As a result, Momaday reminds his interviewers of a guiding motto that Yvor Winters impressed upon him at Stanford: "Write little and write well" (Abbott).

Numerous interviewers have asked Momaday whether he writes with a mission. On one occasion he claims that his only mission is to satisfy himself as a writer (Bonetti). In his talk with Gaetano Prampolini, he offers a more subtle response by quoting William Gass: "I don't write for an audience, that would be pandering; and I don't write for myself, that would be self-serving. I write for the thing that is trying to be born." On a lighter note, he added, "Wonderful answer. I wish I had said that! I will always hold it against Gass that he said it before I did."

In response to questions as to whether he sees himself as a representative of native peoples, he tells Abbott that he does not view himself as an Indian writer, nor as a writer interested in reform, and he reiterates this point in his conversation with Wm. T. Morgan by saying, "I don't identify with any group of writers, and I don't think of myself as being a spokesman for the Indian people. That would be presumptuous, it seems to me." His creative purpose is perhaps best summed up in this declaration, "This is why I paint and write: I want to astonish God" (Prampolini).

As to the participation of the writer in the process of defining a social consciousness, he assures Louis Owens that he does not intend his readings as political statements, even though they may be read as such, and he shares with Givens that he is not interested in changing attitudes, nor in having his work read as social comment. However, many remarks in Momaday's interviews (and his numerous essays on nature conservation) suggest that his expressions of concern for conservation and interest in ecology are indeed aimed at bringing about change. As early as 1970, in his discussion of "The Man Made of Words," he advocates the development of a land ethic to halt the increasing degradation of the global ecology. He tells Owens in his 1983 interview that "man's relation to the earth" is one of his great themes. When Owens quotes from "The Man Made of Words" essay

that "ecology is perhaps the most important subject of our time," Momaday reaffirms his conviction that "not nearly enough is being done to protect the earth from exploitation," and that the Indian can serve as an example of ecological responsibility. Responding to Lawrence J. Evers's question about the idea of an American land ethic, Momaday argues that in the Indian world the relationship to the land is inevitably moral: "Man understands that he is obligated in certain ways to the landscape, that he is responsible for it, that he shares in the spirit of place." Finally, Momaday explains that he pursues his interest in the natural world around him as "a kind of amateur naturalist" (Abbott), capturing landscape and animals in precise, descriptive prose. Yet he is not satisfied with exploring nature's surfaces alone. As he puts it to Morgan, the landscape must finally be imagined, for "one's idea of the self involves the environment."

Over the years, Momaday's concern for environmental protection has led to his active involvement in several causes. In 1981, he declares to Matthias Schubnell, "Now I think of myself as a conservationist. I have great sympathy for the Sierra Club and such organizations." In 1993, Momaday tells Camille Adkins about his involvement as a board member of the Grand Canyon Trust, which advocates the preservation of the Colorado Plateau, and his plan to set up the Buffalo Trust, "an institute for the preservation of the sacred in Native American life." This project will include the restoration of the prairie and the reintroduction of buffalo. These comments indicate that over the years Momaday's engagement in the cause of conservation has gone well beyond his role as nature writer and advocate for a new land ethic modeled on native American precepts.

While Momaday eschews the role of spokesman for Indian people, his answers to questions on the native presence in modern American culture reveal a deeply held conviction that Americans, in order to define their cultural identity, must take the Indian into account. In 1970, having deplored that not much attention has been paid to traditional Indian values, he asserts that "acculturation means a two-way, a reciprocal kind of thing in which there is a realization of one world that is composed of both elements," and he adds that the Indian "ought to educate the white man. We ought to reconstruct our institutions within the dominant society, so that the Indian values are available to the dominant society" (Costo). As to the Indian's chal-

lenge in this reciprocal exchange, Momaday urges Native Americans to discover who they are on a comparative basis. To avoid becoming an anachronism, the Indian "has to venture out, I think, beyond the traditional world. . . . But it is possible for him to make that adventure without sacrificing his being and identity" (Costo).

In his conversations with Abbott and Owens, Momaday also points to the Indians' attachment to the land as a model for other Americans to strengthen their cultural identity. He views the land as "a repository of heritage" (Abbott) from which they can draw strength, but he is also aware that his frequent departures from his homeland may have loosened his connection to the Southwest. "I sometimes wonder. In one sense I have driven a kind of wedge between myself and the ancestral land, but in another I've fulfilled the nomadic instincts of that culture [the Kiowas], and I'm not sure what it all means" (Owens). Momaday sees the uprooting of humans from their respective landscapes as "one of the great afflictions of our time, this conviction of alienation, separation, isolation" (Bruchac). While this phenomenon is prevalent in both the Indian and non-Indian context, the Indian appears to be better equipped to overcome this fracture, for "the whole world view of the Indian is predicated upon the principle of harmony in the universe" (Bruchac).

With regard to the native American contribution to American literature, Momaday points to the Indian writer's advantage of having "a very rich spiritual experience." While conceding that this may also be true of writers from other ethnic groups, he claims that in general "the non-Indian writers of today are culturally deprived, I think, in the sense that they don't have the same sense of heritage that the Indian has" (Bruchac). As to the continuing influence of the Indian on American culture, Momaday is optimistic. "The American Indian is indispensable to the soil and the dream and the destiny of America. . . . He always was and always will be a central figure in the American imagination, a central figure in American literature. We can't very well do without him" (Bruchac).

Momaday has frequently been asked how he feels about literary critics. He makes this wry comment to Abbott, "I've been treated very well by the critics. I don't have a great prejudice against them. There are an awful lot of silly critics around." Momaday clearly appreciates those critics who help bring to the surface those meanings

the writer unconsciously incorporates into the text, but he deplores the fact that these critics are far and few between. Yet he is philosophical about the writer's relationship to the critic: "So the writer and the painter, I think, had best ignore the critics as far as they can. Too much praise is bad . . . , and certainly negative reception of their work is an impairment, too" (Coltelli).

Momaday also makes no bones about his lack of interest in modern critical theory. Asked what he thought about "Derrida-ism" and other current schools of criticism, Momaday replies: "I do not see it as something that will be taken very seriously by very many people very long" (*Persona*). In response to Owens's question whether the experimental form of *The Ancient Child* suggested an awareness of fictional experimentation by writers such as Robbe-Grillet, Momaday confesses: "Not at all. Every time I hear contemporary critics talking about fiction I'm completely confused." And with respect to deconstruction, which Momaday recalls from a Salzburg Seminar in American Studies in 1985, he frankly states, "I wasn't understanding what was said. I'm not a critic" (Owens). This last statement also applies to Momaday's own commentaries on his work.

On the whole, Momaday is reluctant to help with specific interpretations of his writings. He believes that the writer is not a reliable source of insight into the text because so much of the creative process is unconscious. As he puts it to Kay Bonetti, "The author is the least trustworthy person to ask about his work." He often cautions against overinterpreting his work. For example, he responds to explications of the protagonist's name in *House Made of Dawn,* Abel, in terms of biblical allusion by saying: "The name is more suggestive than I meant it to be" (Bataille 1977 interview). Confronted with questions concerning the ultimate fate of his fictional characters, he argues that they take on a life of their own, beyond the control and understanding of their creator. With respect to Abel's condition at the end of *House Made of Dawn,* Momaday emphasizes the ambiguity of the final scene: "That's the question: can he recover his voice? There is no answer to that" (Bonetti). To Dagmar Weiler, he explains, "The question of whether or not he makes it is open. I mean a lot of people want to know what happens after the last page, and I don't know. . . . I don't want to know." While such comments return the interpretative challenge to the critic, Momaday provides a host of valuable informa-

tion on the background and genesis of his works, particularly on *House Made of Dawn* and *The Ancient Child*. The entire conversation with the Italian scholar Gaetano Prampolini, for example, is dedicated to the exploration of Momaday's latest novel [*The Ancient Child*].

One of the most frequently addressed issues in the interviews with Momaday is the question of literary influence on his writings. He tells Bonetti, "I don't know who has been an influence on my writing," but adds that "if those people whose work I admire most have been the influence, [Emily Dickinson] would certainly be one of them." On another occasion, Momaday answers the same question by saying, "I can't point to anyone specifically" (Morgan), but then refers to Wallace Stevens and, again, Emily Dickinson, as writers who have had an impact on his work: "I think I have tried here and there to emulate them in certain ways, because I think that's what a writer should do. If he sees something he likes he should try to benefit from being in its presence" (Morgan). In his conversation with Schubnell, he credits Dickinson with teaching him "a little something about the mystery and miracle of language." Other names of writers and works appear in a number of interviews: Faulkner, Hemingway, Joyce's "The Dead" and Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (Abbott); D.H. Lawrence (Owens); André Gide and Albert Camus (*Persona*); and Hart Crane (Schubnell). These references are important clues for scholars interested in placing Momaday into a broader literary context.

Equally important, however, for a balanced understanding of Momaday's writing is his philosophy of language and the imagination. The single most significant statement in this regard is his essay entitled "The Man Made of Words," but many of his statements in the following interviews give the reader and critic further insight into Momaday's appreciation of the power of words. First and foremost, Momaday sees himself as a storyteller who fulfills a sacred duty, since "storytelling is the life's blood of the society" (Morgan). For that reason, "a writer should have that sense of wonder in the presence of words" (Morgan). Emphasizing his roots in the oral tradition, he tells Bruchac that his works are all parts of the same story, an idea he elaborates on in another interview: "It's as if you were writing one story over your lifetime. . . . I think of what I do as telling one story; it's a long one and I can't do it all at once. I can't get it all into one book. So what I do is I write a chapter at a time, as it were, and I

publish it as a book. But it's all one story" (Bonetti). This story, composed of elements of the oral tradition, Native American myths and legends, and the themes and techniques of modern literature, is uniquely Momaday's own. He is keenly aware of the significance of such literary expression to human existence: "We do not know what we can do with words. But as long as there are those among us who try to find out, literature will be secure; literature will remain a thing worthy of our highest level of human being" (Bruchac). In his own particular case, writing is a way to create an understanding of self and history through language.

To explain this idea, Momaday has acknowledged the profound impact of the following statement by his Stanford mentor, Yvor Winters: "Unless we understand the history which produced us, we are determined by that history; we may be determined in any event, but the understanding gives us a chance" (Schubnell). Not surprisingly, then, Momaday explains in the *Persona* interview that his writing represents "an invention of history as I see it." This pertains both to Momaday's tribal and racial identity, which he explores in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *The Names: A Memoir,* and to his personal sense of self. In his conversation with Schubnell, he notes, "I believe that I fashion my own life out of words and images, and that's how I get by. . . . Writing, giving expression to my spirit and to my mind, that's a way of surviving, of ordering one's life." In the same interview, he adds, "You grow up into an understanding of language and through that to an understanding of yourself. That's how it has to happen. We are determined by our language; it holds the limits of our development. . . . The more deeply you can become involved in language, the more fully we can exist." Statements like these help the reader appreciate that Momaday's work manifests not art for art's sake, but proceeds "out of a tremendous urge" (Abbott) to articulate his sense of self and express his humanity to its fullest extent.

Many of the interviews explore two other aspects of Momaday's work: his teaching and his painting. He is skeptical as to the efficacy of creative writing courses: "One can be taught how to write technically, and one can be taught how to appreciate good writing, but finally it becomes a matter . . . of having the aptitude, or the genius, or the gift of God, whatever it is" (*Persona*). Without that, "a creative

writing class is [not] especially useful'' (Abbott). His teaching of literature provides Momaday with an intellectual stimulus and an incentive to write, as well as the necessary time to accomplish it (Abbott). His teaching philosophy centers on student involvement and active learning through discussion. He defines his own role as that of facilitator and mentor. Interestingly, another aspect of effective teaching, according to Momaday, represents a link to his writing. ''I also think of myself as a storyteller. . . . That's what teachers should be, in one sense . . . one learns from stories. We invest ourselves and all our experiences in stories. A class can be taught as if it were a story, and that's good'' (Morgan).

Momaday's painting and drawing have increasingly become an integral part of his artistic expression. Starting with a few drawings accompanying *The Gourd Dancer* and *The Names: A Memoir,* Momaday's visual images constitute an important dimension in his recent works, *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday, In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961–1991,* and, perhaps most impressively, in the hand-colored, limited edition of *In the Presence of the Sun: A Gathering of Shields,* published by Rydal Press, where the illustrations of the shields gloriously complement the written text.

Not surprisingly, Momaday's painting has drawn numerous questions from interviewers. He explains to Schubnell that the origin of his artistic talent can be traced to his childhood when he was ''watching his father at work on his knees or his drafting board.'' It was during his stay in Russia in 1974 that he began sketching, and this enthusiasm was reinforced by an art class with Leonard Baskin at Stanford in 1976 (Schubnell).

Momaday sees painting as a logical extension of his literary expression, given ''the proximity of the image and the word to things'' (Coltelli). He believes that ''words are artificial in the way that paint on canvas is artificial; it's not the real world, and in some ways the reflection is truer than the things it represents as it passes through the intelligence of the writer or of the painter'' (Coltelli). The relation between Momaday's dual talents is undoubtedly an area for future critical examination.

The reader who joins in the following conversations will find Momaday to be a careful listener and engaging talker, generous in spirit and

eager to share his ideas. What emerges from these dialogues is a deeper vision of Momaday, the man and the artist, and, it is hoped, a more precise understanding of the nature and purpose of his work. This introduction, however, would not be complete without the mention of Charles Woodard's book-length dialogue with Momaday, entitled *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday*. This work is essential reading for anyone seeking access to Momaday, the writer and artist, through his own comments. While Woodard's text represents a sustained exchange between Momaday and a single interviewer, the present collection offers a chronological survey of conversations between Momaday and a variety of questioners over a span of a quarter century.

It is the policy of the Literary Conversations series to italicize book titles and reprint interviews uncut and unedited, except where obvious errors require silent editing. As a result, these interviews inevitably contain a certain amount of repetition, which in itself is a measure of what critics and readers of Momaday's work have been most interested in.

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Chronology

1934	Born N(avarre) Scott Momaday, 27 February 1934, in Lawton, Oklahoma, to Kiowa artist Al Momaday and writer-artist Natachee Scott
1946	Attends Franciscan Mission School at Jemez
1947	Attends Leah Harvey Junior High School in Santa Fe
1948–51	Attends Our Lady of Sorrow School in Bernalillo, Saint Mary's in Albuquerque and Bernalillo Public High School
1951–52	Attends Augustus Military Academy, Fort Defiance, Virginia
1952–56	Undergraduate studies in political science with minors in English and speech at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque
1956–57	Studies law at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville
1958–59	Graduates with B.A. from the University of New Mexico; Teaches at the Dulce Independent School on the Jicarilla Apache Reservation
1959	Awarded Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship at Stanford University; Marries Gaye Mangold
1959–63	Graduate and doctoral studies in English at Stanford University M.A. (1960) Ph.D. (1963) Thesis: *The Complete Poems of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman.*
1962	Academy of American Poets prize for "The Bear"
1963–69	Assistant/Associate Professor of English, University of California, Santa Barbara
1965	*The Complete Poems of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman,* published by Oxford University Press
1966	Guggenheim Fellowship; studies Emily Dickinson and transcendental literature in Amherst, Massachusetts

1967	*The Journey of Tai-me*
1968	*House Made of Dawn*
1969	Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *House Made of Dawn; The Way to Rainy Mountain*; Initiation into Gourd Dance Society
1969–72	Associate professor of English and Comparative Literature University of California, Berkeley
1970	National Institute of Letters grant
1972	Distinguished Visiting Professor of Humanities at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces
1973–81	Professor of English, Stanford University
1973	*Colorado: Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring*
1974	*Angle of Geese and Other Poems;* Shares Western Heritage Award with David Muench for *Colorado: Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring;* Visiting professor at the University of Moscow
1976	*The Gourd Dancer* and *The Names: A Memoir;* art classes with Leonard Baskin
1978	Marries Regina Heitzer
1979	First one-man show of drawings and paintings at the University of North Dakota; Premio Letterario Internazionale Mondelo, Italy's highest literary award
1981	Father dies
1981–89	Professor of English, University of Arizona, Tucson; *The Ancient Child; Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday,* by Charles L. Woodard, with 23 illustrations by N. Scott Momaday; Native American Literature Prize
1992	*In the Presence of the Sun: A Gathering of Shields;* Returning the Gift Lifetime Achievement Award
1993	*In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961–1991;* Twenty-year retrospective of drawings and paintings at Santa Fe's Wheelwright Museum
1994	Premiere of *The Indolent Boys,* Momaday's first play, at the Syracuse Stage, New York

Conversations with N. Scott Momaday

Discussion: The Man Made of Words

Rupert Costo / 1970

From *Indian Voices: The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars*. Ed. Rupert Costo. San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1970. 62–75.

A Speaker: Would you deal more with the oral tradition?

Scott Momaday: The tendency is to regard things in the oral tradition as dead, but they are not. They are very much alive, and it's important to see the way in which they are alive, the way in which they are relevant to what we are doing. And what is being done to us.

A Speaker: What difficulties were there to try to get Kiowa translated?

Scott Momaday: Many difficulties. And I had to rely to a great extent on people who were much more conversant with the language than I am. My father speaks it very well. He did some of the interpreting for me.

A Speaker: I am interested in terminology. Such terms are being used, as "literature, American Indian, oral tradition, or oral history." There is this differentiation made between literature and history. We do have a literature, you know. What do you consider the definition of the word "literature" to be?

Scott Momaday: These terms, I think are only useful as conveniences. People talk about oral literature, but sometimes it's convenient to distinguish between the tradition that is created by word of mouth and one that is set down in writing. If you consider literature, we ought to take that word to indicate writing.

A Speaker: But what you have described is literature, if even oral literature. You would not object to the term?

Scott Momaday: Not at all.

A Speaker: The body of literature of the American Indian.

Scott Momaday: I use that term, yes. It is important to realize that there is a great body of oral literature among the various tribes. It constitutes an incredible wealth of material, and it is being lost at a

very great rate. It should be preserved, I think, as much as we can, for its own sake. It is eminently worth preservation. And I became convinced of that several years ago, and since that time, have done something about it. I hope that those of you who have access to oral traditions and bodies of literature will try to preserve them. The time is now. A great deal remains and I hope I can interest the people in preserving it.

A Speaker: I have listened to a lot of people from various parts of the country. One of the things that I have noted, both in your talk and others, is the topic of ecology. I think that what we are talking about in ecology does not really describe the concept of what our Indian people are talking about when they use similar words. Particularly now, many of our people from different parts of the country have said that the end of the world is now in sight. It could be sometime within the next thousand years or sooner. So, I then tried to explain that American people are becoming aware of ecology, and the things of which you are speaking. But we have difficulty separating that which is truth, and that which is just words. I think what they are saying is that the word ecology is being used in a monetary or political sense, just like so many other words in the white society. And they say, you know, that the end of the world is imminent. I was wondering if you have any further insight into this, which I haven't been able to gain.

Scott Momaday: I do firmly believe that the extinction of life as we know it on this planet is threatened. I don't know about the word "imminent." I am not sure what that means, but I think we have polluted our atmosphere and spoiled our land to the extent that survival itself is necessarily brought into question. And unless we become aware of that danger, unless we change our style of life, we are on a disaster course.

A Speaker: My understanding is that it's too late.

Scott Momaday: I have heard that too. And I am in no position to judge. I certainly want to believe that it isn't so. The thing that I wanted to stress was that I think one begins to change his style of life by changing his frame of mind, to begin with. And this is one way in which I think the Indian has set an example that the rest of the world can benefit from. The Indian has always lived on the best of terms with the natural world. Western man and Western European civiliza-

tion have always been at odds with nature. We are reaping now the consequences of that tradition, if that's what it is. We have to change our attitude towards the land. We have to develop, I think, an ethic—a land ethic.

A Speaker: One of the main hang-ups that most of us have is the restriction that the English language places on the attempt of native authors to translate. To a certain extent, each individual author will have to make his own decisions on how to overcome this. But I wonder if you had this difficulty.

Scott Momaday: Well, I think the question you are asking is a very complicated one. If you mean that there are intrinsic difficulties in the English language, I am not sure whether I would agree. Or to put it another way, I am sure there are limitations, but I don't think we have begun to exhaust the possibilities. If you mean that a man who has grown up speaking a native language, the use of English as the language which he's using to write a book certainly presents grave problems. Not only do you have to change languages, but you have to change the mentality which brought each language into being. And that, of course, is a difficulty which depends upon the nature of the two languages . . . English on the one hand, and whatever the other language may be. That's a complicated question. There is no ready answer.

A Speaker: Scott, there has been, I think many of us know, a program instituted by Navajo where they have taped and gathered together all their old historians, and I think Carl was one who did a lot in taping much of this oral history. I believe that Mr. Cassadore, who is here, has also worked among the Papago, and some of the Sioux also, and other people. There has been some work done among our people, and we still have our ceremonies at certain times of the year, when the history of our people is still being told. Sometimes it takes all of it and parts of another language to tell the whole story of creation, and it's still available. It is being worked upon in many areas. We are not losing, as a matter of fact, we are reactivating it, which is good. Because in answer to the gentlemen here on the question of translation, we may lose some of our story in translation. But the main body of what we wish to express is still available.

A Speaker: In your book, *The Way to Rainy Mountain,* and in relation to the destroying of the insects, and pesticides and insecti-

cides, you wrote a very beautiful passage where you relate how the moon appeared in the night and the insect came towards your vision. Would you recall that to mind and talk a little bit about that?

Scott Momaday: That happened when I retraced the migration route. My grandmother, who lived just outside of Mountainview, Oklahoma, near Rainy Mountain, had just died. She had died in the Spring, on my trip. And when I visited her grave at Rainy Mountain, it was quite a touching experience for me. The first time I went back to the house in which she lived, was at night. I remember sitting on the porch outside the house, and it was a beautiful moon-lit night. The moon was full. And it was casting that moonlight upon the whole landscape. And I sat there full of mourning, and memory. I was sitting on the steps of the porch and there was a handrail to my left, and I happened to glance in that direction, and there was a cricket perched up, as it happened, in my angle of vision. The cricket was perfectly framed by the full moon. And I wrote about that in the introduction to Rainy Mountain.

Harold Driver: I am from Indiana University, and I want to tell you about certain archives we have there that may be of interest to some of you. We have the largest archives of tradition, one of the largest in the world, and the largest of music. It's accessible to any scholar, and if you are looking for a safe place to store a copy of anything you have, whether it's analyzed or not, we will take it.

Scott Momaday: To resume our discussion about oral tradition and its relevancy to our time and place, I would repeat that I think there is a certain urgency to our consideration of preserving American Indian literature. I know for a fact that very few young Kiowas, to name but one tribe, are learning to speak Kiowa. It is a language that is dying very quickly. And it's very sad to contemplate that, because so much will be lost in terms of human imagination, as it is brought to bear upon a long history, and a very rich experience.

The only way that this experience has been reported is in terms of an oral tradition. And when the language goes, a lot of the experience itself will have been lost to us. I can't help thinking that the more time we can spend in convincing young people, particularly, that they have access to this material, and they had better make the most of that, the better off we will be, not only as Indians, but as human beings. I know that the oral literature of the Kiowas is very valuable in terms

of human wisdom, the passing on of enlightening wisdom, the benefit of experience to future generations. I am sure that what is true of the Kiowas, is true of other tribes as well. And so we stand to benefit a great deal by looking into the oral tradition, into the various literatures and preserving as much of that as we can.

There are ways in which to go about it. It costs very little in terms of resources. Any one of you can arm yourself with a tape recorder and a box of tapes and do an inestimable amount in preserving tradition. If the Indian is to be defined in terms of his tradition, then it becomes a matter of asserting one's self and preserving one's identity. And that, I think, particularly now in this technological society, is worth doing.

Charles Loloma: Since you brought up the question of convincing the youth of our people that it is necessary to preserve our oral traditions, and to learn their language, can you give us an idea of *how* to convince young people of this? I really think that we just have to do it, and immediately. Because youth is demanding to know just what are we talking about in oral literature. I really appreciate that a person like yourself is here to discuss this. Not because I am in the arts. Because you too are in the arts, if you please. There are many art forms that can say a lot. We need to find different ways of communicating. For instance, your words ring a lot of bells, and I can't help thinking, when you said that a person who tells a story is not much in white society. But he is to me, a dignified person in his own native society.

These things touched you inside. And also, you mention that if in a story you brought forth the sorrow, and if it is projected effectively, the storyteller can really make you see it. And if a story is told in laughter, then, of course, you can laugh. And other forces are used effectively. All this is done in a verbal sense, not written. Which to me is very related to life itself, and how I think and feel and react. It is a whole system of profound and effective communication. And, also, if the storyteller gets stuck at times and some part of his story is weak, in a long storytelling, and if he catches himself doing it (mind you, he's not a trained professional man in this society), he acts this one out. How marvelous that is! He is acting in such a way that he could make you see it and feel it and taste it. Behold, he now tones down his voice; now he makes a hollow sound; now he makes

whatever sound that animals may perhaps make. And if you are an intelligent listener, you know he's using the art of pantomime.

I cannot help but recollect and compare with the Kiowa situation, also experiencing somebody whom I greatly appreciated meeting. And he is really good. He was portraying a mask scene, and that ties into our discussion of myths. I heard about this man, and saw him in his own home, his own theater. His name is Marcelle Marceaux. This was in Paris, France. Seeing him doing what he did, you say to yourself, ha ha, he's a perfect clown. Saying nothing, but using his hands to make you laugh, to make you cry, to make you mad. I thought this is a great indication that we Indians have done as well, and that this, our native art, is not dead.

Scott Momaday: No, it is not dead.

Charles Loloma: The clowns perform. In this case, it is not necessarily the mask, but this guy is doing it with his hands. When they perform, they portray everything as to what the people in reality might be. Having met this man, I realized this is *communication* that really could be colorful to a fellow. In the pantomime, I sometimes do it in the Kiva, because I was chosen to do it; it's something that we Hopi take pride in.

Many forces are alive today for us to use in our Indian way. We have not analyzed all parts of it, certainly. I am sure the youth could develop ideas and techniques in this part of the art area. I know that the force of words, communication, is enormous. I believe a young Indian could possibly with this rich heritage become so great, beyond other people in this art. Because the source is very rich. At least where I come from this is alive.

Scott Momaday: I think that's true. I think that it is alive in more places than we realize. The native traditions are very widespread, and they are vital. We think of them as being lost. And there is no doubt that a great part of that wealth has been lost, but so much remains that it really is an inconceivable kind of wealth. I sometimes think that everybody is required at some point in his life to manifest his spirit, to express his spirit as he understands it. And for the Indian, I think that's one thing, as opposed to what it is for other people. He does that by keeping alive his traditions, by returning to them, by continually expressing them over and over again. He works within the

verbal dimension, but there are other ways, which you have touched upon, Charles. He does it by dancing, painting.

Charles Loloma: This is what I'm getting at.

Scott Momaday: And certainly, all of those expressions are valid, and I wouldn't put one above the other, so long as you know you express the spirit.

Charles Loloma: What you get back to then are the forces of communication that you could examine and use in such a way that you don't lose your tradition. Really you can't talk to anybody. How can you communicate? I maintain that we act all the time, because whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, it is a matter of how well you express yourself.

Scott Momaday: The question you asked about young people, about how you convince the young people of the necessity or action at this point is a difficult one to answer. I think there are many aspects to that. In my experience, I would say that a great many young Indian people now as never before are becoming aware of their native tradition, and they're seeing it for what it is. They are recognizing the value of it. And I think it's fair to say that there is a growing kind of tribalism. A sense of tribalism that we have not had before. There are many implications in this. It would seem that there is a real chance for unification now.

Charles Loloma: Do you know of an immediate way of convincing young Indians to think in such a way that they would choose sort of immediately; because if they don't, we are going to have young kids crying. And they are already.

Scott Momaday: I think you have to tell them. I think that each of us who realizes that the native traditional values are important has a great obligation to convince the young of that, who may be wavering with alternatives. I think that a number of young people are coming to that realization on their own. They simply see what's going on around them, and they look at the world and look at the dominant society which is destroying the world in which it lives. I think it doesn't take a great deal of experience or intelligence to see that, as an alternative, it's a very bad one. Surely there is a better destiny available to man. I don't think they have to look much further than that to see that they have one at their fingertips, and it's the one in which they've grown up and have a blood interest. But beyond that, I

think it's really up to the older people. Those on the reservations, and those who are not on the reservations. You know, there is, of course, an intrinsic and primary obligation on the part of the parents for their children. I think that this business of becoming aware of this, the danger of superficial existence in the modern world, is not lost upon the older people, even the elders on the reservation, who have had relatively very little experience with the outside world. I think they have a sense of the kind of dangers that exist out there in that smog-filled horizon. They have a primary obligation to tell their children and grandchildren about the traditional world, and try to show them by example and tell them explicitly that there is an option available to them, and that they're damn fools if they don't avail themselves of it.

For a long time, the Indian culture, the traditional values in the Indian world, have not been valued in the terms of the modern dominant society. We've always, I think, thought of acculturation as a kind of one-way process in which the Indian ceases to be an Indian and becomes a white man. That's been an objective, whether we want to admit it or not, in historical diplomacy. I think, for the first time, that it is not a one-way process at all. Acculturation means a two-way, a reciprocal kind of thing in which there is a realization of one world that is composed of both elements, or many for that matter. I think many young people are aware of this. I think certain others are completely lost, because there are so many alternatives on the horizon. But I think more and more we ought to educate the white man. We ought to reconstruct the institutions within the dominant society, so that the Indian values are available to the dominant society. This could be done in many ways.

I teach at the University of California on the Berkeley campus, and I am working now on the institution of a program in American Indian literature within the Department of Comparative Literature there. This has not been done before, as far as I know. It's the only program of its kind. The only one that has this kind of literary focus which is very, very tight, very narrow, if you will. To deal with literature, and the oral tradition and the way in which it works in the academic framework. The more that can be done in this way, the more we can include within the existing academic framework things that are peculiarly native, and unique, the more we are making the horizon of opportunity for young Indian people wider, and all others as well.

At the University of California, the academic world stands to gain in this venture, just as much as the Indian does. The contribution accrues to both sides, and that's exactly the way it should be. But I would like to see many more programs of this kind. Not only in literature, but in art, history, sociology, economics, philosophy, religion. There is room for all kinds of experiments in education. They ought to be made. I sat in a panel yesterday in which the whole business of Indian studies programs came under discussion. But, you know, we talked about what could an Indian studies program be, and I think there is no single answer. I think there are a great many alternatives. We have a terrific opportunity at this point. And I think the more directions we can take, the better off we are.

A Speaker: There seems to me to be a small contradiction here. It may be I do not understand. One of the problems is mainly between making traditional ways more available; as opposed to going to school with, say, white college kids. Education, for what? It is a big problem. If you have that problem, that's one thing. But then you just said a very interesting thing about the Indian's teaching the more dominant culture; and if they stay in Oklahoma, how are they really going to do that. I think that white kids now are really open to that.

A Speaker: Two days ago I said I wanted to hear about Indian philosophy. And someone pointed out to me that people have been explaining about Indian philosophy for a long time, for example, Red Jacket. But now, some people are actually listening among the whites. San Francisco is a good example of that; Berkeley, too, I would think. But I would be deeply saddened to think that you have to lose who you are to become educated, because I don't think that needs to be true at all.

A Speaker: I don't think you have to stop being who you are. Your talk today was very beautiful. I thought it really got to the question of becoming a man, becoming who you are by birthright. And I don't really think that when you leave a place you have been in all your life, that you have to 'become' the place you're going to. If you can recognize that there are certain bad elements say in Princeton or Columbia or Radcliffe, that doesn't mean you have to "become" that bad element. As a matter of fact, you must be strong enough not to do that. Actually, you have the advantage over people. I would be insulted to think that getting a college education now means that a

person simply takes what is offered, without giving what is *in* him. I think it would be an advantage to go to school, but you have to know who you are before you leave for school. I don't know about art. But you see the kind of contradiction I am worried about. How are you going to get this learning without giving up who you really are?

Scott Momaday: Well, I think that it is good to go into the enemies' camp. I think that's part of the educational process.

A Speaker: It is an educational process?

Scott Momaday: Yes, I don't think this is necessarily a contradiction. The Indian, in order to discover who he is, must do that on a comparative basis. It does him no good to know who he is, so long as that knowledge isolates him . . . alienates and shuts him off from the possibilities that are available to him in the world. No. He must take advantage of the possibilities, recognizing the opportunities and taking advantage of them, retain his identity. We don't want to "freeze" the Indian in time, to cut him off at a certain point in his development. We don't want to end up with a 19th century man in the 20th century. He doesn't want that, and neither do any of us. It's just simply not among the available and desirable possibilities. He has to venture out, I think, beyond his traditional world, because there is another very real world. And there are more worlds coming, in rapid succession. But it is possible for him to make that adventure without sacrificing his being and identity.

A very good point was made about the fact that the world at large is ready to listen to what the Indian has to say. It is ready to appreciate the traditions and the values, as it has never been before. Berkeley is a prime example of that. I have students in my classes who would give their left arm to be Indians. To be an Indian on the Berkeley campus now, is to be *somebody*. Everybody listens to you. They are curious about you, and they look at you with a great deal of respect. That's not necessarily good, in the long run, but it is an opportunity of which the Indian should avail himself. And I think that's not limited to Berkeley. Alcatraz is good as an example. I had very little hope for it at first. I was very skeptical about it, because I thought it was going to be terminated very quickly, and that the Indian would be left holding the bag, and simply the scapegoat in that whole venture. It turned into something rather more serious than that, and there is no way at this point to realize just what it's going to be. But *symbolically,*

it's very important at this moment, and the kind of sympathy for the Indian that has been generated in the Bay Area is really quite remarkable and quite impressive. It's a sign of the times.

Mr. Lyons: I am a member of one of the Six Nations Confederacy. The question that arose here about how do you teach your children is very real to us. We are very traditional people. And yet, at the same time, we have managed to coexist. We go out and we come back. The thing that we have had to be very careful of was the dominance of this larger society which has a great deal of pressure and power so that it can bring to bear the way of the dollar bill and its values: Material values as opposed to what you said earlier this morning about the value of your land; your heritage is in the land. It's always the land.

We base our whole Confederacy, our whole religion around this. And how we teach is by example: You set an example and they will learn. You can't tell somebody what to do. If you don't do it yourself, they are not going to listen to you. So you teach by example.

A Speaker: And they believe in it?

Mr. Lyons: They believe in it. How many times do you do it a day? After awhile they don't think. They do it along with you. And you bring *this* up, and you bring *this* through. Simple things really. For example, you just don't interrupt other people. Yet we do operate in the outside world very well. I myself have been working in New York for ten years, and yet, I am a Chief of the Confederacy. I believe in it whole-heartedly, and I find that all the things that I have learned are nothing but fictions. I know we are right. Now, the people are turning back, as you might say, and looking for somebody to tell them what to do. Show us the way, they say. They don't know particularly if it is going to be an Indian. It could be anybody. But it so happens that we *do* have the way, and we should show them. It's for the benefit of mankind. There are two hundred million people here and we are very small in comparison. Yet, we have maintained our identity up to this point. And it's really because our basis is the land. I mean, if the economic values of this United States should disappear, how many people are going to disappear with it? What else do they have? That's why they are searching for something stronger and more lasting. We have it. You have the land under your feet. And it's your duty to subsist on this land. If something is going to happen, and you can raise your own food, then you are not going to have to worry about

N. Scott Momaday says

I don't see myself as an Indian writer. I don't know what that means. I am an Indian, and I am a writer, but I don't just want to say "Indian writer" or talk about Indian literature.

I want to astonish God. And when I have the sense that I have done that, ah! It's my whole reason for being. I can't do better than that.

I still think of myself as having deep roots in the Southwest, and belonging in that landscape.... I come and go. I get into it now and then, but I've traveled widely.... In one sense I have driven a kind of wedge between myself and the ancestral land, but in another I've fulfilled the nomadic instincts of that culture.

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