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Growing Up Native American

Patricia Riley

GROWING UP NATIVE AMERICAN

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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*This book is dedicated
to the Native American children
of the past, present, and future*

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FOREWORD: REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY AND CULTURE

*[My grandfather] and the grandmothers and grandfathers before him thought about us as they lived, confirmed in their belief of a continuing life.... [T]hey brought our present beings into existence by the beliefs they held (Simon Ortiz).**

I am a Nimipu (Nez Perce) woman on my mom's side, and a woman of Mexican Indian descent on my dad's. As an educator, a scholar, a poet, and a human being, I identify as a native woman of this hemisphere. I am honored to write an introduction to this collection. I begin with the words of Acoma writer Simon Ortiz because the passage raises questions that I believe are addressed throughout the selections in this book. To begin with, what does Ortiz mean when he says that the grandmothers and grandfathers "thought about us"? How did they think about us? What is "a continuing life"? How did they bring us into existence by their beliefs? Is what Ortiz says common to all peoples? Maybe so, maybe not. The answer reveals itself as the selections herein shed light on the distinctiveness of Native American belief systems, and Native American cultural responses to historical experience. Given the current interest in "diversity" and "multiculturalism," as well as the changing demographics of this nation, it may very well be that many people of many ethnicities, including recent immigrants from

* Passages cited within this introduction may be found in the selections in this anthology.

throughout the Americas as well as other parts of the world, will find something in this collection that will speak to them with respect to issues of identity, culture, community, and representation.

I cannot assume, however, nor should anyone, that the readership of this book will be completely non-Indian. I would hope that this book falls into the hands of many Native American readers who will see the text as a respectful opening into the multilayered and intricate worlds from which they (we) come. I sense that they will find themselves in some selections more than others (which is not a judgment on the selections but a comment on the heterogeneity of “the” Native American experience in relation to U.S. society), depending upon what their own personal experience has been, and what they have been told, if anything, about the experience of their families and their people. There are stories told with the certainty of being brought up as an “Indian.” There are other stories where the contours and distinctions have become fuzzy, sometimes through outright denial of a heritage. As Joe Bruchac says:

In the face of those denials I felt, at times, like one who looks into a mirror and sees a blur over part of his own face. No matter how he shifts, changes the light, cleans the glass, that area which cannot be clearly seen remains. And its very uncertainty becomes more important than that which is clear and defined in his vision.

And yet, in Bruchac’s very writing of these lines, *he* provides a mirror for those who have undergone the same experience. His words, like the words of the other native people represented here, form the mirrors by which the images, of native people come into sharper focus for all of us.

Native people know that the term “Indian” is a misnomer, but we have made it our own, just as we have made “American Indian” and more recently “Native American” our own, even though in our original languages, each of our peoples had (and have) their own name for themselves and for this part of the earth that is now known as “America.” We refer to each other by the tribe or nation that we are from—that is one of the first questions we ask each other, “Who are your people?” and

"Where are you from?" I am Nimipu; in my mother's language Nimipu means "We, the people." It is our name for ourselves as human beings. This is so for most other native peoples, as is evidenced by the recent exhibit (August 26—October 19, 1992) of contemporary Native American art at the College of Wooster Art Museum in Wooster, Ohio, which was entitled "We, the Human Beings." The labels "Native American" or "American Indian" are in the end simplistic generalizations, generic terms, that at best acknowledge the fact that indeed indigenous peoples in this hemisphere did and do have something in common. This book serves to demonstrate some of the ways that we come together, in variation, around themes that are central to our experience.

What we have most in common today might be called the two major components of our identity. One is our identification with this hemisphere as our original land base, articulated through the oral tradition in the sacred stories of our beginnings, as well as in the stories (or "teachings") about our sacred principles, our relationship to the earth and all of life. One of the beliefs that all the writers convey is the importance of memory. Ortiz says, "I can't remember a world without memory. Memory, immediate and far away in the past, something in the sinew, blood, ageless cell." In remembrance we find continuance; native peoples know this. And as N. Scott Momaday says, the spirit informs the memory^{*} and the one memory is of the land.[§] Ortiz writes of "the ageless mother pueblo of Acoma." Ignatia Broker tells us of the "grandfathers and grandmothers who were the dust of the forests." My own grandfather Ukshanat (Thomas Andrews) used to say that at one time we were all one people, from the north to the south of this hemisphere, which is not to say that we all spoke the same language or practiced exactly the same "culture." What he meant was that we were (and I would say we are still) all related in our *relationship* to this

* N. Scott Momaday, "The Magic of Words," in *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets*, ed. Joseph Bruchac (Tucson: Sun Tracks and University of Arizona Press, 1987).

§ N. Scott Momaday, "Man Made of Words," in *Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1975).

particular land base that has always been our homeland. Each distinct “culture” learned (and learns) its form and expression from the particular sacred places or land base that its people are from. And so we have desert peoples, mountain peoples, coastal peoples, plains peoples, lake peoples. These peoples traveled and knew each other; they had established trade routes and complex networks of communication and social relations. That is not to say they did not sometimes go to war with each other, but they also made peace with each other.

The other common denominator is the historical experience of colonization that began to be imposed on us over five hundred years ago, and that is marked by the arrival on the shores of this hemisphere of a man named Columbus who was lost. Columbus, under orders of the Spanish Crown, quickly turned his “mistake” into a colossal feat of Empire, paving the way as he and his men did for what has come to be known as the “Conquest” of the Americas. Simon Ortiz’s essay properly frames this collection, because in it he reminds us to place his own and the other narratives within the context of both the colonial experience, and the resistance movements that were (and are) seeking “decolonization,” including those of “present-day Indians in Central and South America with whom we must identify.” In the main, these selections remember what the guiding principles of the original cultures were as they interrogate and oppose the “right of conquest,” genocide, colonialism, “Manifest Destiny,” the missionization campaigns, cultural genocide, imperialism, stereotyping, and the imposition on ourselves of who we are from the “conqueror’s” perspective. The infamous “Conquest” is not a *fait accompli*; many native peoples have designated the arrival of Europeans—call them colonizers, agents of colonial (and imperial) rule, settlers, or immigrants—as the “Invasion.” The experience of indigenous peoples at the hands of those who came and “conquered” in this hemisphere is regarded as the “continuing Invasion.” I cannot say this strongly enough. What we have in this collection, in many cases, are stories by or about “prisoners of war”—this is not a statement meant to alarm anyone, or to arouse feelings of guilt in anyone. It is simply a matter of fact.

We were the enemy. It is one thing to read about this inter-

change from the perspective of the “victors,” quite another to read about it from the perspective of those who were defeated militarily and then subjected to indoctrination programs that were meant to “defeat” them in every other way as well. The United States in its westward expansion, justified by the notion of a “Manifest Destiny,” defeated Native American peoples with its superior military technology and seemingly limitless armies. For indigenous people of the U.S. Southwest, Mexico had previously played out its own role as “conqueror” and colonizer. But as Ortiz says, “Aacquu did not die in 1598 when it was burned and razed by European conquerors, nor did the people become hopeless when their children were taken away to U.S. schools far from home and new ways were imposed upon them.” “Forced acculturation”—“brainwashing”—“reprogramming”—whatever the process is called that was imposed at Indian schools, they were, in Lane Deer’s words, “like jails and run along military lines.” But he, like many other Indian youth, refused “to cooperate in the remaking of [him]self.” I would venture to say that he and all of the rest of us who have survived have called on every ounce of our originality to give us the strength and inspiration for what Ortiz calls our “fightback.” This originality is found in the original cultural teachings that honor our humanity, our dignity, and our spirits as necessary components of our identity.

Momaday says that “[n]otions of the past and future are essentially notions of the present. In the same way an idea of one’s ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self.” I have heard many elders say that we that walk the earth now are the link between our ancestors and our unborn generations—the past and the future come together in us. Is this idea particularly and only Native American? Of course not, and yet perhaps its particular manifestation is. I know that I am not the only Native American person who relates to the story of Waterlily’s being given the gift of her own personal history. When I read how her memory is nurtured by the “recitals of her early doings and sayings” (Deloria), how indeed her very being in the world is of significance for others as well as for her, I am reminded of my own mother, and of how she was (and is) with me, with my sons, and with my grandchildren. I understand how “having

one's senses" means growing in awareness and responsibility for one's self and one's words and actions in relation to all things. For those native people who have been fortunate enough to receive some or all of their cultural understandings, I believe that we would agree that children are sacred and honored members of our communities, as are the good grandmothers and the good grandfathers. There is an intimate, special bond between the youngest and the oldest members of the community. It is common among Indian people to hear children being referred to as "little grammas and little grampas." When you call a child a "little gramma" you give her a sense of the importance of her place over the generations, just as you acknowledge her ability to teach you right now from the wisdom of her little person's perspective. Children learn to be attentive because we are attentive to them, as several of the selections in this collection demonstrate so beautifully.

There are other stories, too, however, that show us the consequences of war, capture, surrender, relocation, and conversion. In Sarah Winnemucca's story, we see the terror of the children as the whites approach. From the game of "playing buried" in Waterlily's story, we move to the reality of being "buried alive" in Sarah's story. And in most cases the transition was just that quick. From the family's "planting sage bushes over [the] faces [of the children]" (Winnemucca) to hide them from the usurpers, we come to "Joe" being brutally beaten in Francis La Flesche's story of the Omaha children in boarding school. We also see that even in the midst of their own despair, and their own infrequent but joyous reunions with their families, the young boys know when to be quiet and show respect, as when they come upon the woman who is in mourning. It is a delicate balance that they are keeping, negotiating for their lives in an alien setting that was meant to bring them into line and to destroy every shred of self-esteem that their own culture had given them. These are the stories of subversion and insubordination—what would today be praised as admirable and even heroic if any U.S. soldiers were to become prisoners of war. Boarding schools were (and are) simultaneously sites of indoctrination and resistance. As Lane Deer said, "I came out more Indian than when I went in." There is something to be said for

determination and the ability to be creative in the most repressive of situations. Lame Deer learns “some good fox songs” in the basement that is a place of solitary confinement. In the same manner, just this last year, in 1992, Paiute/Pit River artist Jean LaMarr created a piece entitled *We Danced and Sang Until the Matrons Came*, which is her own commentary on the subversiveness of children who are placed in boarding schools.

What is crucial to remember regarding Native American peoples who live within the United States is that in over three hundred cases, the U.S. government entered into treaty agreements with Indian peoples on a nation-to-nation basis. The fact that all of these treaties have been broken and dishonored by the U.S. government is directly related to the fact that the “unfortunately ordinary” problems that Ortiz speaks of—poverty, battered self-esteem, alcoholism, and personal and cultural disintegration—are still with us. These problems do not constitute Native American “culture.” It is not the fault of our “culture” that our communities are suffering as they are today. Our communities are still contending with and contesting the intentional and systematic pattern of unjust treatment that is at the core of our historical relationship with the U.S. government. Worst of all, Native Americans are still denied religious freedom in this society, and for native people, spirituality and culture are inextricably interwoven, so the denial of religious freedom is a direct attack on the culture. Knowing how “to live beautifully from day to day” (Walters) and how to ensure a “continuing life” (Ortiz) have as much to do with spirituality as they have to do with culture. They both have to do with ethical understandings of how to be in the world in relation to all that lives, to all that is.

What part does language play in the formulation of the idea of the self? Everything. We always come back to language. N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1969, for his novel *House Made of Dawn* demonstrating his command of the English language in all its beauty. In 1992, Rigoberta Menchú, a thirty-three-year-old Mayan woman and revolutionary leader, won the Nobel Peace Prize for her dedicated work toward a peaceful ending of the repression against indigenous people in Guatemala, and for her conscious articulation of the

struggle her people are waging. Menchú, in her own autobiography, states that she learned how to speak Spanish in order to defend her people. The voices in this collection come to us in English, in one of the invaders' languages. Sometimes, the command of English has cost the very high price of the original native language. And yet, learning the system that is oppressing us, Ortiz reminds us, gives us "the motive of a fightback," and a major aspect of the system is the language. After all, language has been used against us—the language that ridiculed our naming of the world. The language that has misrepresented us and distorted our faces so that we would not recognize ourselves—the racist language that called (and calls) us "savage," "heathen," "drunkard," "squaw," or "chief." The duplicitous language that betrays us in the courts, and tries to keep us fighting among ourselves along bloodlines. The entitled "conquerors'" languages that even tried to erase from us the memory of our own names, replacing them with names in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. In many Native American communities our languages are being resuscitated (many were never completely lost). As they are revived, we are revived. This does not mean that we will no longer speak "the invaders' languages." We have made them our own, too, and in that sense, we are, like Bruchac, "able to understand the language of both [or all] sides, to help them understand each other."

Patricia Riley has carefully selected and woven together these "growing up" stories, which give us a sense of the commonality and diversity of experience (in terms of historical moment, gender, full or mixed bloodness, reservation or urban background) within the Native American community. I hope readers of this book will understand the fallacy of trying to use only "a few ill-chosen words...to encapsulate an entire human life!" (Bruchac) In matters of identity, labels are generally imprecise and problematic in their "lumping together" of peoples who do identify with each other culturally and by ethnicity. Often, unfortunately, people can become quite rigid in their notions, especially if they have unquestioningly accepted restrictive (and prescriptive) stereotyping. Recently I had a non-Indian student in a Native American literature class become indignant when a guest speaker (who curates Native American art exhibits)

showed us images by contemporary Native American artists that made use of irony, highlighted contradiction, and otherwise manifested “Indian humor.” In response to the presentation, the student wrote furiously (and with an assumed authority that was quite startling) that the “true” images of Indians are those that depict still and solemn faces. He insisted that the artists were catering to and appeasing non-Indian audiences. There were just too many smiles, and the subjects (and the artists) were just having too much fun! *That* couldn’t be “Indian.” Indeed, humor is very much a part of living and “fighting back” as an Indian in today’s world.

I hope readers will get a sense also of the “strong positive view of our collective Indianness” (Ortiz), and “the integrity and dignity of an Indian identity” (Ortiz), as well as the intense struggle that is involved in “being human” from a Native American perspective in contemporary society. I am happy that Patricia Riley has dedicated this book to young Native Americans; they deserve to come first in a collection that is about growing up Native American. If they come to read these stories that are about people like them, maybe they won’t feel as “distant as the stars” (Johnston) from their own people, wherever they might be. Maybe the question and declaration from the little girl in Anna Lee Walters’s story will ring true for them, too, “You Indian, ain’t you? We your people!” And in the end this book is also for all young people everywhere, for their just hearts and spirits, and for their own “belief in a continuing life.”

Inés Hernandez

NOTE

For those readers who would like more information on Native American literature, here are a few titles of the many available: *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*, ed. Paula Gunn Allen (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1983); *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literature*, ed. Gerald Vizenor; and *Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets*, ed. Joseph Bruchac. For a focus on the diversity of Native American Women writers, Beth Brant’s *A Gathering of Spirit*

and Rayna Green's *That's What She Said: Contemporary Poetry and Fiction by Native American Women* are good introductions. *The Rights of Indians and Tribes*, by Stephen L. Pevar, and *American Indian Federal Policy*, ed. Vine Deloria, Jr., are important for providing the legal, legislative, and political explanations of the status of Native Americans in the United States. *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest*, by Robert A. Williams, Jr., and *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization and Resistance*, ed. Annette Jaimes, both provide a hemispheric and global perspective to the status and struggles of indigenous peoples today. *The Sacred: Paths of Knowledge/Sources of Life*, Anna Lee Waters, Peggy Beck, and Nia Francisco, which is published by Navajo Community College Press, focuses on Native American spiritual foundations, and the journal *Wicazo Sa [Red Pencil] Review*, ed. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, offers perspectives on Native American Studies as a discipline, and on issues of critical importance to the Native American community today, such as the current struggles for Native American religious freedom.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to grow up Native American? There are as many answers to that question as there are Native American people. Certainly, there are as many stories. Stories of oppression and survival, of people who grew up surrounded by tradition, and people who did not. Stories of the pressures of forced assimilation and stories of resistance, of heritage denied and of heritage reclaimed. A multiplicity of stories. When I began to choose narratives to exemplify both the commonality and diversity of Native American experience, I also began a backward journey through my childhood to examine my own growing up Native American.

I remembered a conversation that took place between my mother and my great-aunt Avorilla one hot and humid summer afternoon during a visit to my father's family in Jackson, Tennessee. My mother mentioned that my paternal grandmother had always attributed the black hair and brown skin that she and her sister shared as coming from their Black Irish ancestors. My great-aunt got a real look on her face and said, "Oh, she did, did she? So that's what she tells people." I was a young girl then, maybe seven or eight years old, and did not yet understand the practice of "passing" or the historical factors and racial prejudice that brought it into being. Nor did I understand the internal conflict and anguish of those who attempted to be what they were not.

This same grandmother, who took such pains to disguise her Cherokee blood, woke me up very early one morning that summer. The dew had been heavy the night before and still

glistened on the grass as she led me by the hand into the piney woods to show me the place where the little people danced at night. She said she often heard their music and their voices. I thought she was talking about leprechauns, though she never once said that was who they were. Leprechauns were Irish and I knew all about them from my mother's side of the family. Many years later, after I had searched out and reclaimed my Cherokee heritage, I came to understand who my grandmother had been really talking about: the Cherokee little people, the Yunwi Tsunsdi. Especially fond of lost children, these protective guides helped them to find their way home again. My grandmother, this woman who had lived her entire life in denial of her Indianness, blessed me in the only way she knew how, with a memory and a story that would eventually enable me to find my way home again to my Cherokee roots. I can't help but wonder if that was what she had intended all along.

I also thought about the fact that, as a child growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I was completely unaware that books written about Native American people by Native American people existed. I never got a chance to read John Joseph Mathews's *Sundown* or Sara Winnemucca Hopkins's *Life Among the Piutes* until I was a grown woman because they were shelved in the anthropology section of the downtown library. I would never have thought to look there. At the time I didn't know about anthropology or the way that tribal people were objectified. It was an inappropriate place to house Native American literature and it continues to amaze me that Native American autobiographies and novels are still shelved in the anthropology sections of many bookstores today.

As I thought back on what I had missed, I also contemplated the history books I studied in school and the numerous books about Indians that did line the shelves of the bookmobile that serviced the eastern edge of Fort Worth, Texas, where I grew up. Most of those books had been written by men and women who, for the most part, had never even seen an Indian, much less known one. As a child, I didn't pause to think about that. I think a great deal about it today because the lives depicted in the books I read then bore absolutely no resemblance to the lives of my neighbors or friends. I was a ten-book-a-week book-

mobile reader, but I never came across an account of a Cherokee family that ran a small grocery store in the black part of town—like the people who lived in the big white house on the hill next to where I lived. I never saw a novel about an Osage boy who tended his mother's goats and knew how to make cheese, as well as number one, grade A slingshots out of old tree branches and pieces of inner tube—like the boy who lived in the woods across the street from me. I never read a short story about a teenage Cheyenne girl, adopted by Mormons, taught to despise herself and her tribal religion, but promised that if she were good and followed all the rules she would be white when she died. I went to school with a girl who had experienced these things.

In the books available to me as a child, Native Americans were usually exotic, cultural artifacts from the past, the stereotypical "Vanishing Americans," sometimes portrayed as romantic or noble, but always backward savages on their way out, and soon to be no more. The truth is, we have not vanished, though we have often "disappeared" from the minds and hearts of America, even as we continue to be romanticized and exploited by various "New Age" philosophers who appropriate and distort Native American spiritual traditions, but never look for nourishment in their own ancient European tribal traditions.

Thinking about all these things, I decided to use the opportunity of putting together this anthology as a chance to rectify, in some small way, the situation of my childhood, not only for myself and my own children, but for anyone, Indian or non-Indian, interested in the real-life experiences of Native American people. One of the most enjoyable aspects of this task is being able to include some of my favorite authors, such as Leslie Silko, Louise Erdrich, Michael Dorris, N. Scott Momaday, and Simon Ortiz. These writers have had an enormous impact on the way I have come to see myself and the world around me.

Many of the stories I have chosen resonate for me on a deeply personal level as well. Joe Bruchac's telling about his Abenaki grandfather who claimed to be French reminds me very much of my own grandmother. I'm especially fond of Geary Hobson's "The Talking That Trees Does." Each time I read it, I find myself transported all the way home to the moist southern air,

the pungent earth smells, and the people that I still dream about almost every night. The young female protagonist in Vicki Sears's story, "Grace," brings to mind the Cheyenne girl I mentioned earlier, and makes me wonder if she was ever able to find her own personal "grace" to make it through. I hope she did and that she has been able to find her way home again as I have.

Growing Up Native American is made up of the works of twenty-two Native American writers, women and men, from fifteen nations across the United States and Canada. I have included selections from Canada because the imaginary boundaries laid down between these two countries are nonexistent in the minds and hearts of tribal peoples.

The anthology is divided into four sections with a brief introduction to each section. The stories in the first three sections are in chronological order. In most cases, I have enclosed the author's tribal affiliation in parentheses. In the instances where I have not done this, references to tribal affiliation can be found either in the title or the biographical information preceding the story. Authors listed as Ojibway or Chippewa are members of the same nation. I have used whichever name the author herself or himself has chosen to use as a means of identification.

**GOING
FORWARD,
LOOKING
BACK**

The languages and oral traditions of Native American peoples have carried the thoughts and beliefs of their ancestors forward to their descendants in contemporary America. Passed from generation to generation through storytelling, oral traditions represent living libraries containing thousands of years of knowledge and history about the world and how to be in it.

From their first intervention, the United States government and Christian missionaries worked together to create a system of tribal education. This new system was designed to eradicate by force the use of native languages and to replace tribal stories with those drawn from Christianity in an effort to remake Native American people in the Euroamerican image.

The cultural extirpation these policies inflicted has had a devastating effect on many Native Americans. However, there has always been resistance. Though numerous languages are no longer spoken, many do still remain in use, and others are experiencing a revival as more and more young people are moving to reclaim them. Countless oral traditions still flourish and continue to evolve as new Native American storytellers add their voices to those of their ancestors, making the transition from the spoken word to the printed page.

THE LANGUAGE WE KNOW

Simon Ortiz

In this autobiographical essay, Simon Ortiz addresses the relationship between language and culture. He examines how the Acoma language and oral tradition he learned as a child nurtured him and shaped him into a poet and a writer.

One of the finest contemporary Native American poets, Simon Ortiz (Acoma) was born in 1941 at Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. He is a prolific writer whose book *From Sand Creek* won the Pushcart Prize for Poetry. His most recent publication is a collection of three of his earlier works entitled *Woven Stone*.

I DON'T REMEMBER A WORLD WITHOUT LANGUAGE. FROM THE TIME of my earliest childhood, there was language. Always language, and imagination, speculation, utters of sound. Words, beginnings of words. What would I be without language? My existence has been determined by language, not only the spoken but the unspoken, the language of speech and the language of motion. I can't remember a world without memory. Memory, immediate and far away in the past, something in the sinew, blood, ageless cell. Although I don't recall the exact moment I spoke or tried to speak, I know the feeling of something tugging at the core of the mind, something unutterable uttered into existence. It is language that brings us into being in order to know life.

My childhood was the oral tradition of the Acoma Pueblo people—Aaquumeh hano—which included my immediate family

of three older sisters, two younger sisters, two younger brothers, and my mother and father. My world was our world of the Aaquumeh in McCartys, one of the two villages descended from the ageless mother pueblo of Acoma. My world was our Eagle clan-people among other clans. I grew up in Deetziyamah, which is the Aaquumeh name for McCartys, which is posted at the exit off the present interstate highway in western New Mexico. I grew up within a people who farmed small garden plots and fields, who were mostly poor and not well schooled in the American system's education. The language I spoke was that of a struggling people who held ferociously to a heritage, culture, language, and land despite the odds posed them by the forces surrounding them since 1540 A.D., the advent of EuroAmerican colonization. When I began school in 1948 at the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) day school in our village, I was armed with the basic ABC's and the phrases "Good morning, Miss Oleman" and "May I please be excused to go to the bathroom," but it was an older language that was my fundamental strength.

In my childhood, the language we all spoke was Acoma, and it was a struggle to maintain it against the outright threats of corporal punishment, ostracism, and the invocation that it would impede our progress towards Americanization. Children in school were punished and looked upon with disdain if they did not speak and learn English quickly and smoothly, and so I learned it. It has occurred to me that I learned English simply because I was forced to, as so many other Indian children were. But I know, also, there was another reason, and this was that I loved language, the sound, meaning, and magic of language. Language opened up vistas of the world around me, and it allowed me to discover knowledge that would not be possible for me to know without the use of language. Later, when I began to experiment with and explore language in poetry and fiction, I allowed that a portion of that impetus was because I had come to know English through forceful acculturation. Nevertheless, the underlying force was the beauty and poetic power of language in its many forms that instilled in me the desire to become a user of language as a writer, singer, and storyteller. Significantly, it was the Acoma language, which I

don't use enough of today, that inspired me to become a writer. The concepts, values, and philosophy contained in my original language and the struggle it has faced have determined my life and vision as a writer.

In Deetziyamah, I discovered the world of the Acoma land and people firsthand through my parents, sisters and brothers, and my own perceptions, voiced through all that encompasses the oral tradition, which is ageless for any culture. It is a small village, even smaller years ago, and like other Indian communities it is wealthy with its knowledge of daily event, history, and social system, all that make up a people who have a many-dimensional heritage. Our family lived in a two-room home (built by my grandfather some years after he and my grandmother moved with their daughters from Old Acoma), which my father added rooms to later. I remember my father's work at enlarging our home for our growing family. He was a skilled stoneworker, like many other men of an older Pueblo generation who worked with sandstone and mud mortar to build their homes and pueblos. It takes time, persistence, patience, and the belief that the walls that come to stand will do so for a long, long time, perhaps even forever. I like to think that by helping to mix mud and carry stone for my father and other elders I managed to bring that influence into my consciousness as a writer.

Both my mother and my father were good storytellers and singers (as my mother is to this day—my father died in 1978), and for their generation, which was born soon after the turn of the century, they were relatively educated in the American system. Catholic missionaries had taken both of them as children to a parochial boarding school far from Acoma, and they imparted their discipline for study and quest for education to us children when we started school. But it was their indigenous sense of gaining knowledge that was most meaningful to me. Acquiring knowledge about life was above all the most important item; it was a value that one had to have in order to be fulfilled personally and on behalf of his community. And this they insisted upon imparting through the oral tradition as they

told their children about our native history and our community and culture and our “stories.” These stories were common knowledge of act, event, and behavior in a close-knit pueblo. It was knowledge about how one was to make a living through work that benefited his family and everyone else.

Because we were a subsistence farming people, or at least tried to be, I learned to plant, hoe weeds, irrigate and cultivate corn, chili, pumpkins, beans. Through counsel and advice I came to know that the rain which provided water was a blessing, gift, and symbol and that it was the land which provided for our lives. It was the stories and songs which provided the knowledge that I was woven into the intricate web that was my Acoma life. In our garden and our cornfields I learned about the seasons, growth cycles of cultivated plants, what one had to think and feel about the land; and at home I became aware of how we must care for each other: all of this was encompassed in an intricate relationship which had to be maintained in order that life continue. After supper on many occasions my father would bring out his drum and sing as we, the children, danced to themes about the rain, hunting, land, and people. It was all that is contained within the language of oral tradition that made me explicitly aware of a yet unarticulated urge to write, to tell what I had learned and was learning and what it all meant to me.

My grandfather was old already when I came to know him. I was only one of his many grandchildren, but I would go with him to get wood for our households, to the garden to chop weeds, and to his sheep camp to help care for his sheep. I don't remember his exact words, but I know they were about how we must sacredly concern ourselves with the people and the holy earth. I know his words were about how we must regard ourselves and others with compassion and love; I know that his knowledge was vast, as a medicine man and an elder of his kiva, and I listened as a boy should. My grandfather represented for me a link to the past that is important for me to hold in my memory because it is not only memory but knowledge that substantiates my present existence. He and the grandmothers and grandfathers before him thought about us as they lived, confirmed in their belief of a continuing life, and they brought

our present beings into existence by the beliefs they held. The consciousness of that belief is what informs my present concerns with language, poetry, and fiction.

My first poem was for Mother's Day when I was in the fifth grade, and it was the first poem that was ever published, too, in the Skull Valley School newsletter. Of course I don't remember how the juvenile poem went, but it must have been certain in its expression of love and reverence for the woman who was the most important person in my young life. The poem didn't signal any prophecy of my future as a poet, but it must have come from the forming idea that there were things one could do with language and writing. My mother, years later, remembers how I was a child who always told stories—that is, tall tales—who always had explanations for things probably better left unspoken, and she says that I also liked to perform in school plays. In remembering, I do know that I was coming to that age when the emotions and thoughts in me began to moil to the surface. There was much to experience and express in that age when youth has a precociousness that is broken easily or made to flourish. We were a poor family, always on the verge of financial disaster, though our parents always managed to feed us and keep us in clothing. We had the problems, unfortunately ordinary, of many Indian families who face poverty on a daily basis, never enough of anything, the feeling of a denigrating self-consciousness, alcoholism in the family and community, the feeling that something was falling apart though we tried desperately to hold it all together.

My father worked for the railroad for many years as a laborer and later as a welder. We moved to Skull Valley, Arizona, for one year in the early 1950s, and it was then that I first came in touch with a non-Indian, non-Acoma world. Skull Valley was a farming and ranching community, and my younger brothers and sisters and I went to a one-room school. I had never really had much contact with white people except from a careful and suspicious distance, but now here I was, totally surrounded by them, and there was nothing to do but bear the experience and learn from it. Although I perceived there was not much

difference between *them* and *us* in certain respects, there was a distinct feeling that we were not the same either. This thought had been inculcated in me, especially by an Acoma expression—*Gaimuu Mericano*—that spoke of the “fortune” of being an American. In later years as a social activist and committed writer, I would try to offer a strong positive view of our collective Indianness through my writing. Nevertheless, my father was an inadequately paid laborer, and we were far from our home land for economic-social reasons, and my feelings and thoughts about that experience during that time would become a part of how I became a writer.

Soon after, I went away from my home and family to go to boarding school, first in Santa Fe and then in Albuquerque. This was in the 1950s, and this had been the case for the past half-century for Indians: we had to leave home in order to become truly American by joining the mainstream, which was deemed to be the proper course of our lives. On top of this was termination, a U.S. government policy which dictated that Indians sever their relationship to the federal government and remove themselves from their lands and go to American cities for jobs and education. It was an era which bespoke the intent of U.S. public policy that Indians were no longer to be Indians. Naturally, I did not perceive this in any analytical or purposeful sense; rather, I felt an unspoken anxiety and resentment against unseen forces that determined our destiny to be un-Indian, embarrassed and uncomfortable with our grandparents’ customs and strictly held values. We were to set our goals as American working men and women, singlemindedly industrious, patriotic, and unquestioning, building for a future which ensured that the U.S. was the greatest nation in the world. I felt fearfully uneasy with this, for by then I felt the loneliness, alienation, and isolation imposed upon me by the separation from my family, home, and community.

Something was happening; I could see that in my years at Catholic school and the U.S. Indian school. I remembered my grandparents’ and parents’ words: educate yourself in order to help your people. In that era and the generation who had the same experience I had, there was an unspoken vow: we were caught in a system inexorably, and we had to learn that system

well in order to fight back. Without the motive of a fight-back we would not be able to survive as the people our heritage had lovingly bequeathed us. My diaries and notebooks began then, and though none have survived to the present, I know they contained the varied moods of a youth filled with loneliness, anger, and discomfort that seemed to have unknown causes. Yet at the same time, I realize now, I was coming to know myself clearly in a way that I would later articulate in writing. My love of language, which allowed me to deal with the world, to delve into it, to experiment and discover, held for me a vision of awe and wonder, and by then grammar teachers had noticed I was a good speller, used verbs and tenses correctly, and wrote complete sentences. Although I imagine that they might have surmised this as unusual for an Indian student whose original language was not English, I am grateful for their perception and attention.

During the latter part of that era in the 1950s of Indian termination and the Cold War, a portion of which still exists today, there were the beginnings of a bolder and more vocalized resistance against the current U.S. public policies of repression, racism, and cultural ethnocide. It seemed to be inspired by the civil rights movement led by black people in the U.S. and by decolonization and liberation struggles worldwide. Indian people were being relocated from their rural homelands at an astonishingly devastating rate, yet at the same time they resisted the U.S. effort by maintaining determined ties with their heritage, returning often to their native communities and establishing Indian centers in the cities they were removed to. Indian rural communities, such as Acoma Pueblo, insisted on their land claims and began to initiate legal battles in the areas of natural and social, political and economic human rights. By the retention and the inspiration of our native heritage, values, philosophies, and language, we would know ourselves as a strong and enduring people. Having a modest and latent consciousness of this as a teenager, I began to write about the experience of being Indian in America. Although I had only a romanticized image of what a writer was, which came from the pulp rendered by

American popular literature, and I really didn't know anything about writing, I sincerely felt a need to say things, to speak, to release the energy of the impulse to help my people.

My writing in my late teens and early adulthood was fashioned after the American short stories and poetry taught in the high schools of the 1940s and 1950s, but by the 1960s, after I had gone to college and dropped out and served in the military, I began to develop topics and themes from my Indian back-ground. The experience in my village of Deetziyamah and Acoma Pueblo was readily accessible. I had grown up within the oral tradition of speech, social and religious ritual, elders' counsel and advice, countless and endless stories, everyday event, and the visual art that was symbolically representative of life all around. My mother was a potter of the well-known Acoma clayware, a traditional art form that had been passed to her from her mother and the generations of mothers before. My father carved figures from wood and did beadwork. This was not unusual, as Indian people know; there was always some kind of artistic endeavor that people set themselves to, although they did not necessarily articulate it as "Art" in the sense of Western civilization. One lived and expressed an artful life, whether it was in ceremonial singing and dancing, architecture, painting, speaking, or in the way one's social-cultural life was structured. When I turned my attention to my own heritage, I did so because this was my identity, the substance of who I was, and I wanted to write about what that meant. My desire was to write about the integrity and dignity of an Indian identity, and at the same time I wanted to look at what this was within the context of an America that had too often denied its Indian heritage.

To a great extent my writing has a natural political-cultural bent simply because I was nurtured intellectually and emotionally within an atmosphere of Indian resistance. Aacquu did not die in 1598 when it was burned and razed by European conquerors, nor did the people become hopeless when their children were taken away to U.S. schools far from home and new ways were imposed upon them. The Aaquumeh hano, despite losing much of their land and surrounded by a foreign civilization, have not lost sight of their native heritage. This is the factual

case with most other Indian peoples, and the clear explanation for this has been the fight-back we have found it necessary to wage. At times, in the past, it was outright armed struggle, like that of present-day Indians in Central and South America with whom we must identify; currently, it is often in the legal arena, and it is in the field of literature. In 1981, when I was invited to the White House for an event celebrating American poets and poetry, I did not immediately accept the invitation. I questioned myself about the possibility that I was merely being exploited as an Indian, and I hedged against accepting. But then I recalled the elders going among our people in the poor days of the 1950s, asking for donations—a dollar here and there, a sheep, perhaps a piece of pottery—in order to finance a trip to the nation's capital. They were to make another countless appeal on behalf of our people, to demand justice, to reclaim lost land even though there was only spare hope they would be successful. I went to the White House realizing that I was to do no less than they and those who had fought in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, and I read my poems and sang songs that were later described as “guttural” by a Washington, D.C., newspaper. I suppose it is more or less understandable why such a view of Indian literature is held by many, and it is also clear why there should be a political stand taken in my writing and those of my sister and brother Indian writers.

The 1960s and afterward have been an invigorating and liberating period for Indian people. It has been only a little more than twenty years since Indian writers began to write and publish extensively, but we are writing and publishing more and more; we can only go forward. We come from an ageless, continuing oral tradition that informs us of our values, concepts, and notions as native people, and it is amazing how much of this tradition is ingrained so deeply in our contemporary writing, considering the brutal efforts of cultural repression that was not long ago outright U.S. policy. We were not to speak our languages, practice our spiritual beliefs, or accept the values of our past generations; and we were discouraged from pressing for our natural rights as Indian human beings. In spite of the

fact that there is to some extent the same repression today, we persist and insist in living, believing, hoping, loving, speaking, and writing as Indians. This is embodied in the language we know and share in our writing. We have always had this language, and it is the language, spoken and unspoken, that determines our existence, that brought our grandmothers and grandfathers and ourselves into being in order that there be a continuing life.