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On the boundaries of cultures: a dialogue on indigenous literatures

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WIGET: Do you realize that we've known each other twenty-seven years now?

VASHCHENKO: That's unbelievable. As we say in Russia, "People rarely live that long."

WIGET: So, I'll tell you what. I'll tell you my story, if you tell me your story first. How did you get started with Native American Literature?

VASHCHENKO:Well, first of all I thought that there must be some general beginning to this conversation, and in this case, since the main theme is cross-cultural boundaries, sometimes, and quite often, we see them as obvious, but there are some cross-cultural boundaries that are rarely seen physically but they are nonetheless there and you can feel them very profoundly. And so this,

I understand, is something we are also very much interested in. Now, to answer your question is a very difficult thing to do, because I have been asked this many times since time immemorial an each time the answer is as difficult as you can think of, because I have tried to ask the same thing of myself, and could not give an answer. Apparently (Fennimore) Cooper was important. Of course, he romanticized, idealized Native culture, but at least he opened it up for the first time for the public and has shown them some of its attractive side. That was a discovery.

WIGET: Um-hm. And you read Cooper when you were a youth, right?

VASHCHENKO: Right, at school, as everybody does, but some things stayed, you know, some people go away and start doing other things, but this attractive side of Native American culture stayed for me.

WIGET: What was there in Cooper, in his Chingachcook, his Uncas, his characters, or in Natty Bumppo that somehow appealed to you as a young man?

VASHCHENKO: Everything, a lot of different emphases about it. And of course, we had *Derzu Usala*, so there was some background that could bring me closer and I could compare, but again, it's hard to say because I could rationalize it only later. And the second thing is a saying by Walt Whitman, after he had seen a group of Native American chiefs who had come to Washington, he said, "Well, there is something in them that dimly reminds me of our European ideal." So, maybe the freedom, a lot of aetheticism in the figure of a rider with feathers, who combines earth and sky dimensions with the midworld. It's deep inside of us. We may not even be able to rationalize it, but it's there somehow. Also, even now, the attention given to the prairie nomads is much greater than to any other cultures for various reasons. And, I guess, the Indian Wars, too, the fighting for freedom that also appeals to many people in Russia as well as outside. That's a bad answer to your question.

WIGET: Well, no, because it is a complex question. I can tell you that in my own case, I didn't begin as a student of Native American literature. I didn't really read Cooper as a kid; I read *The Last of the Mohicans*, that's all. I was raised as an American on Westerns, films in which Indians were almost always the villains. And when I was at the university, I was interested in American literature and very interested in poetry, my Bachelor's degree was in Philosophy and English and my Master's in English, and when I was looking for a topic for my Master's

Thesis, I had been studying Mark Twain, Henry James, I had a wonderful professor of Melville, and while I was doing all of this, I picked up this book, which, you know, is a classic Margot Astrov's *The Winged Serpent*-ah, there it is, you have it. (Vashchenko gives Wiget the book) I opened it up to this wonderful poem by an Eskimo woman, and it just shook me right to the core. I had been reading so much of these things-yeas here it is, page 295-and it just, well, you know the story behind it-the Fifth Thule Expedition, led by Knud Rasmussen, which was a five-year expedition that went all across the Arctic from Greenland to Alaska to collect data on Eskimo cultures they arrived in the middle of winter with their sledges in Iglulik, which now I think is part of Nunavut Territory in Canada, and they came to this igloo in the middle of their journey and inside was this poor old woman, a widow living by herself, which is pretty unusual in Inuit culture, and they came in and like good guests they put some tea on the table and biscuits, and she starting boiling water and immediately broke out into this song (Wiget reads):

"The lands around my dwelling
Are more beautiful
From the day
When it is given me to see
Faces I have never seen before.
All is more beautiful,
All is more beautiful,
And life is thankfulness.
These guests of mine
Make my house grand."

I read that, and I thought, my God, I've been living in some other world. This was a woman who immediately, from the depths of her being, burst out into song, a spontaneous poem of her own creation. And that was the start of it. I said I better learn more about this tradition, so I began learning as much as I could about Inuit (Eskimo) poetry, which is really where I started. And I was very much interested in poetry, more than Native American mythology or legends and one thing led to the next and that's what I wound up writing my Master's Thesis on. That was way back in 1972, and nobody at my university even knew that Indians wrote anything (though by then they had written a lot but even I didn't know that) or that they had such magnificent oral literatures. So that's how I got started. And I was hooked. I was absolutely hooked.

VASHCHENKO: Same here.

WIGET: So, have you had any personal experiences that have been important for your understanding of Native American literature? I know that Scott

(Momaday, the PulitserPrize-winning American Indian author) came.

VASHCHENKO: Yes, though that happened a little bit later. He came here, although it was God's will. How could dream of it? I was a post-graduate student then, writing my thesis (WIGET: What year was that?) He came as the first Fulbright scholar, can you believe it, back in 1974. I think he stayed for a semester, maybe, and I could talk to him quite often then. I met him at the airport, to begin with, and the first question he asked me was, How come in Russia they are so interested in Native Americans? (Both laughing) I didn't know how to answer him, but that was the question.

WIGET: Well,you know, in 1974 in America notmany people knew (about American Indian literature). It had all just begun, so that was a natural surprise on his part.

VASHCHENKO: Sure. And I remember every lecture he started-he was lecturing on American literature-and nevertheless, whether it was Faulkner or Hemingway, he would start with his own new poem. That was unforgiveable.

WIGET: Well, I think any writer would somehow try to shape the other person's experience through the lens of his own experience, right? And you said there was something that happened a little bit later...

VASHCHENKO: Oh, I meant that that meeting, and even his novel, *House Made of Dawn*, which came out earlier in 1968, even that came later than my interest in Native American literature was forming, because I remember that in the third year at the university, I was already dreaming of writing my diploma paper on Native American literature, and they said, well, it's quite risky, nobody has done that, where would you get the materials, and that was true (WIGET: You had difficulty). Yeah, no computers, no internet, nothing, to get the sources was a great problem.

WIGET: How did you do that? Where did you find them?

VASHCHENKO: By hook or by crook. Going all the time, every month, twice a month, to old bookstores. Of course, you could not order books, so you'd ask people, those who came from the U.S. – and some of the critics did come – they brought some stuff, or mentioned new books that had come out, so sometimes I'd ask them to bring a book for me. Scott brought a few. And so little by little I could develop a body of books. Of course, the ones that are 100% necessary, they are always obvious, on the surface, so to speak, so these I was lucky to get, though a little bit later than in the U.S.

WIGET: I want to come back to this question of personal experience, but, before that, I want to say that people of our generation were pioneers in doing this work, and today people can look at the bibliographies and materials that we have produced, but back then this was almost impossible. I mean, I would read one book and then look in the back of the book or the notes, the references, and try to find those books, and then go from the bibliographies of those books to other books because nobody had produced anything.

VASHCHENKO: You know, it's funny, paradoxically, but then the difficulty was that there were no sources and now there's a sea of sources.

WIGET: Well, I remember you saying you had a wonderful experience with Scott's visit, was it shortly after that you wrote your diploma paper on Native American literature?

VASHCHENKO: Yes, and I had to try to build out the whole evolution of native American literature and I had to deal somewhat with the roots before I came to Scott, and then I had a chapter on Scott, on *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *House Made of Dawn*, and I had to bring in someone else, sorry to say it was Hyemeyohsts Storm.

WIGET: That was back in the early to mid-Seventies, right, and I remember I had then my own kind of isolation. Your isolation, because you were over here, meant you couldn't have ready access to sources, but I was in a big eastern U.S. city so, while I could eventually find sources, I couldn't find Indians! And it's very important to have that personal connection, like you had with Scott, because they bring a perspective on the literature that's different from what we have simply as scholars, the perspective of lived experience. I was thinking about this, and I thinkI have had about three really memorable experiences in this respect. The first one was back in Cleveland, Ohio where I was working on my Master's Thesis in Native American poetry, in which one of the central texts was a long Zuni ritual poem, and there was an exhibition of folk crafts or something, and there was a Zuni man, I talked to him, just briefly, to say I knew a little about Zuni and I asked how he was finding it here, and we talked just a little, and I was shy and, of course, it was the wrong context to really go into anything, but I had made a connection, you see, there was a person and behind him was a whole community of people, and it all became very actual, very real for me. Then when I was working on my Ph.D. at the University of Utah I had the good fortune to work with some Navajo

medicine men to learn their stories of how the Navajo came to be, the connection between the stories they tell about themselves and their history. And of course, I was in the Southwest in a landscape I had only dreamed about working with people I had only read about, and that was unbelievable. And the third time was later on, after I had finished my Ph. D. , I went to Canada to do some summer research work among the Cree Indians in northern Quebec, and i had gone there because I was specifically interested in some Cree stories. I kept asking around, Who should I talk to? and everyone kept pointing me to this one man. Finally I went to his house and discovered that he had converted to some evangelical Christian religion, I forget which one, and he said, "I won't tell those stories any more. They're from the Devil." And he was the only person in the whole community who could tell the stories, and he just wouldn't tell the stories anymore. And it was like, you know, like he burned down the library. That was the end, it was the end. And i began to realize how fragile these things were. You know, they go on for thousands of years, and all of a sudden somebody says I won't do it anymore, and that's it, that's the end of it. Those were kinds of experiences that made me appreciate the value of these texts to the communities of people who produce them, that they are not just texts, they're not just stories, they're the map by which these people find their way in the world. These were the important experiences for me, though I wasn;t able to meet any important Indian author until 1977 when I met Joy Harjo and Leslie Silko and then later when I met Scott, I was with you

VASHCHENKO: I introduced you. That was at his house in Tucson.

WIGET: That's right, that's right, you brought us together. Thank you so much for that. We've been talking about oral tradition. That really does seem to be the root of Native American literature, doesn't it?

VASHCHENKO: The oral realm of the word, which, as you said, is very fragile, and we find more and more evidence to that. The paradox for me, again, is that it is also very powerful, and some people over estimate its likelihood to die out, and then you come, and you see it is still there. And we get shocked again. We had an Irish storyteller a few days ago, who right now has been recording people about 100 years old, who were telling him about faeries and those sorts of things....

WIGET: Well, you know, we have this idea, and part of our conversa-

tion here has to do with the boundaries of culture, we have this idea that when people become formally educated, when they become literate, (VASHCHENKO: when they have computers) and write books, that somehow the oral tradition dies, but in fact it doesn't. It continues along as a kind of separate channel of communication, and depending on other circumstances, it can continue strongly or it can be weakened, in the same way that literacy, the ability to read and write, can continue on, or be weakened. Some peoplemake the argument that we are returning to an earlier oral phase becausethe vocabulary, sentence structure, the literary forms that come with an advanced literary culture, are disappearing, and people are returning to a smaller lexicon, simpler syntax and so forth. That may be, I don't know, but I do know that the oral culture and oral literary forms persist vigorously, and one of the examples of this for me actually came in Russia. You see it here in the whole bard culture, and the singing, which except for the initial impetus to write these authored songs, is entirely an oral cultural phenomenon, or the tradition of telling anecdotes, which are a minor genre, of course, but a very thick and well-developed layer of oral tradition. These things connect the groups of people among whom they circulate, and it's an important part of the social life.

VASHCHENKO: ...and in Siberia there is a much older layer.

WIGET: Yes, when we went to Siberia and were working among the Khanty, basically to collect folklore, that was our first interest, and it was wonderful to discover that not only wasthe storytelling tradition alive and well, that people there shared with us different genres of narrative and song, but they were also involving their children. So, for example, a father would tell a story in Khanty and then ask his child to retell to us in Russian the spoken Khanty she had heard, and since the father was bilingual, he would once in a while correct them saying that this Khanty word is translated this way into Russian.

VASHCHENKO: So it was passing through the boundaries between cultures and between languages in a harmonious way...

WIGET: Yes, and i had another interesting moment. I discovered that a good way to keep a storytelling session going was to share stories from Native America, so he would tell a story, and then he would say, "Well, why don't you tell something?" And so I would tell a story, and he would say, Well, that reminds me of this, and so we would go

back forth, and tehre was one evening I rembmer,abck in 1995, somewhere back in the middle Nineties, and it went on for three or four hours, and it was really mutually stimulating, and we would ask questions of each other. this is really where the cultures live, in the stories and in the languages.

VASHCHENKO: That's the basis.

WIGET: Yes, you know, Scott talks about The Man Made of Words, right, and that's quite true. I think people understand their lives through the stories they tell about themselves, and peoples understand themselves the same way. The Khanty tell stories about themselves, about neighboring peoples, about the Russians. The stories locate them in relation to the Russians, in relation to the Forest Nenets, in relation to the Mansi. They have stories about wars, stories about marriages, and the stories become the connections.

But speaking of origins and roots, we should probably also consider how Native American literature emerged as an academic field. That seems to me fairly clear in your case...it emerged from you! You are, as we say in America, the Founding Father, right?

VASHCHENKO: It's funny because when I was well-established as a scholar in that field, someone asked me, "Well, if you are so good at that, who was your teacher?" (They both laugh).

WIGET: Yeah, they would probably have asked that of the first bird who learned how to fly, and he would say, I just jumped out of the nest, and I flew! So, you started with your research and writing. Did you begin teaching this subject right away?

VASHCHENKO: I tried from time to time in various places, and I still do from time to time, but I must tell you that unless people are interested it is a difficult field for them to master, because they must know the texts, at least a few. When I was doing that work and trying to get into the core of it, I remember that for one book of native literature, I had to read three books of ethnology and anthropology to understand what it is all about.

WIGET: And this brings us again to this question of the boundaries of culture, because we recognize that when we read this, it is to us an alien literature, let's be honest, necessarily alien because it's from another language translated into our own, from another cultural context entirely, from people who values, practices and beliefs in some ways quite different from our own, and if you don't understand those things, the literature doesn't make much sense. This would

also be true, of course, if I knew nothing of India and picked up the *Ramayana*. So I think we become aware that so much of what passes for universal knowledge, is really our own cultural knowledge that we bring to bear on the texts we read. And as a result, there is an awful lot of work we have to do with Native American literature or Native Siberian literature to make it accessible to people without any background in those cultures. Did you find some that some texts were easier for your students to work with than others?

VASHCHENKO: I tried to choose things that are deeper, more dramatic, easier to understand. Sometimes we used tales, and folklore of course, and short stories, because they are easier to handle than novels. I should stay I started to use more material in Russian from Siberia, plus somefrom Mexican Americans, as well as Native Americans It gets to the point after doing a lot of thinking that one sees cross-cultural relations and wants to make them known.

WIGET: When did you have your first aspirant in Native American literature?

VASHCHENKO: There haven't been too many, you know, though I didn't count them. I guess all in all over the course of my career there might have been five or six. Because we do not have an organ or center for studying Native American literature that could produce them. What usually happened is that somebody would approach me, especially if they knew of my work. Who was the first? That's a good question. Somebody very early wrote a dissertation on Native American journalists; she herself was a journalist. Then quite recently, several years back now, somebody wrote a piece on pictographic winter counts among Indians, making them known. That was Gleb Borisov. I was so sorry he didn't publish a book, because he used all the sources available nowadays. When he started, what was known or at least what circulated in academic was nine or ten pieces in all, and when he finished, including the appendix and all, there were 150 or so, just an abundance of work he described there. So you see it was a shame he didn't publish it.

WIGET: Well, let's talk a little bit about publishing and teaching. You said there in no center here for the study of Native literature, and I suppose what that means is that there are also no teaching places for that subject either, right?

VASHCHENKO: There is one, very far away in Siberia, in Chita. The ground there geographically is good because there is a mixture of peoples who are neighbors, the Evenk are one of these,

and China is nearby, so there is a person there working on a Center, and every now and then a dissertation comes out of there. Other than that, here in Moscow there is a huge metropolis and Native Americans are just a tiny part of the curriculum.

WIGET: Is it possible to integrate the study of Native American literature into the study of American literature, and is this customarily done or is it unusual.

VASHCHENKO: No, I was trying to do that if I had time, but Faulkner comes first, as you understand, which brings us to the problem of the canon or mainstream vs. marginal literature.

WIGET: Yes, and i was thinking too, that the whole process was necessarily quite different in our country, because the process of establishing Native American literature as an academic field really began with political activity. The entire 1960s in America was about breaking up the sense of the Anglo-Saxon cultural monopoly-what some people have called the 'master narrative' of America expanding from the east coast westward, bringing the English language and democracy and all the manifest destiny things-and saying that there was a tremendous price to pay for that narrative, and that price was the suppression of other voices, including Native American voices. So the political activity, which was real political activity-the occupation of Alcatraz, the march on Washington and occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices, and of course, the confrontation at Wounded Knee – all of that political activity, which followed upon Chicano (Mexican-American) political activity, Black political activity, and feminist political activity, was a way of getting at that (master narrative of Anglo-Saxon hegemony). And so that gave real political energy to the study of Native literatures that you really didn't have. You had to come at it on your own. In the United States this was a very broad and deep wave of activity, you were over here working singularly.

VASHCHENKO: That is true, but interestingly enough, and it's a great historical and cultural enigma to me, why the Sixties? Because you see, it seems that in the Sixties I think we began to have something similar here. Aipin (Yeremei Danilovich) started in the Sixities. Chingiz Aitmatov started in the Sixties. There's a year between Scott (Momaday)and Garcia Marquez. And then some other people, (Anna) Nerkagi and people like that, native Siberians, started to do their stuff. If people didn't know Native Americans, at least they could read these authors. And their values were of their cultures yet to a great degree universal,

because the appeal is the same, you see, Where is our humanity? How do we go forward now that we are aware that we are neighbors and we are equals?

WIGET: Would you say, then, that by the mid-Sixties or so, the Soviet Union had developed its own master narrative that had marginalized these other voices now emerging?

VASHCHENKO: There was an ideology that welcomed a certain kind of literature that advocated this ideology, and it was pretty narrow, so to speak, more political and ideological than others. It was a culture in itself, and couldn't cover that that was there, it's a huge country, especially those native kinds of things. Besides, because of this ideology, take the whole process of Russification-on the one hand, to make it all in Russian is not good for the native languages. On the other hand, I think it was (Nenets poet Yuri) Vella who told me, or I read it somewhere in relation to Native Siberian literati, that it is important that they all pass through the Herzen Institute in Petersburg, which is a literary institute and a training ground for us, and they did, and Vella did and Aipin did too, that made them get acquainted together, that's one thing, and secondly, to have a mirror of the Russian language to get their identity. So it's a complicated matter.

WIGET: Yes, and in that sense it sounds very similar to some experiences American Indians had in state-sponsored schools in the United States, where they learned what literature was through studying American examples, they learned literary style by studying British examples. There are some wonderful in the nineteenth century by native writers like Alexander Posey and John Rollin Ridge. These were people who learned what it meant to be a writer by studying Anglo and Western styles, and yet somehow still managed to address the issues that were important to them as American Indians. There's always this kind of compromise when your working in a foreign language and writing to another audience...

VASHCHENKO: that cross-cultural boundary...

WIGET: Yes, they had to try to transcend that limitation in order to reach others. And I suppose they probably learned how to write "native", that is, how to create a native voice, because they had to position themselves to be native enough to be recognized by their Anglo audience as native, yet do it all in forms, like the novel or the sonnet or the short story, and in language, literary English, that was alien to the cultures they were from. So it provides a real tension

within them, while creating at the same time a kind of literary resource that an English or American writer doesn't have. i think that's part of the richness of native literature.

So, what do you think are the key works in Native American literature, the canonical things that people simply must read?

VASHCHENKO: Obviously (Momaday's)*House Made of Dawn*, and I'm always hesitating between this and (his)*Way to Rainy Mountain*, because they are both important. They are different genres but they are to be read side by side...

WIGET: I agree with, actually I agree on both of those, as absolutely essential, and not just because they were first, in a lot of ways, but because of what they do. What do you see in *House Made of Dawn*, which many students find to be a difficult text?

VASHCHENKO: I understand. It must be difficult. It is difficult for us, because there are so many connotations, and elements of aboriginal cultures woven together-Navajo, Jemez,Kiowa and Pueblo is in it. I don't know what else but that's enough, because they are all very different, and the European is there too. Well, it's interesting in many ways. It was the first novel that wasn't lamenting the destiny of the aborigines, but rather being proud and giving hope that it will continue.

WIGET: There's that wonderful running scene at the end, where he can somehow, to quote Faulkner, "not only endure but prevail", and continue beyond...

VASHCHENKO: And even if we do not know what will happen to him, he may die-Scott said (to me), "I don't know what will happen. He may die. He may join his tribe again."-he may go back to where he came from, but his people will live. You get that sense from the novel. And actually a collective hero-like the people, here-is something new, so in many ways it's innovative, I think. And again, it has four parts like four directions, a ritual kind of thing, a novel that is a ritual of healing.

WIGET: That's absolutely true, and that's one of the things that links it to a book I would add to your list, and that's Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*...

VASHCHENKO: Even before you said so, I knew it...

WIGET: Yes, but another thing I'd add before we talk about *Ceremony* is that *House Made of Dawn* is the first novel that really treats an Indian's alienation that comes from leaving the reservation and going to the city, this strange

new social environment where you don't belong to your community. You are in a community of displaced persons. All of these Indians that one finds there are happy just to meet someone from back home. In some ways they are internal immigrants in an alien situation, and very distressing when you read the book, which makes you feel that sense of being a stranger in your own country, because you don't belong to this urban, industrial, capitalist community that's out there.

And of course, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is genius...

VASHCHENKO: Nobody else has done anything similar...

WIGET: To this day, actually.(49:54)

VASHCHENKO: And he did it all on foot, you know, he went there

WIGET: It's one of the most poetic books in American literature. I think it's a genuine classic because for most Americans the journey to where they are has been a journey from somewhere else to this place, but for him, it's a journey from this place to this place. He too emerges out of the earth with the Kiowa people, and he traces that journey (from Wyoming to Oklahoma), so he plays upon this emigration/journey theme, but then he weaves together the oral tradition with the historical-anthropological-scientific discourse, with his own personal experience, which is wonderful. I think that is how we locate our own voice, in relationship to other voices: all these other people who have talked about Indians, what my people have said, what my family has told me, who I am, all this converges.

VASHCHENKO: And *Ceremony* is a great book, a hugely important book...

WIGET: I think it's the first book that so thoroughly immerses one in a mythic vision. in other books,the mythic vision is a kind of subtext or set of allusions, but in *Ceremony* you have this sense, (the protagonist) Tayo has this sense that he is living this myth. It is not apart from his life, but a part of his life. It's what gives meaning to his life. and that's something, I think, that has made the book very attractive.

VASHCHENKO: Also, indirectly it says that unless you go back to the myths, you are gone.

WIGET: Yes, yes, and I think this goes back to why you and I like Native American literature. Its attraction for urbanized, Anglo-European people is this sense of reconnection, wouldn't you say so?

VASHCHENKO: I certainly would. I think it's important for the U.S.

because, as you said, you didn't have that. People came there. And something aboriginal emerges only with Native American literature, something that American lacked, and now it didn't, so that made America more whole, so to speak. But for us, as for the rest of the world, beginning from the Sixties onwards, the second half of the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first, there are several reasons why it is important. One, obviously, is to remind us of what we have forgotten about ourselves, values that are more humane and basic. But also, today I see only two areas where there is a very active process of experimentation taking place in literary discourse, postmodernist and Native American, well, indigenous literatures. That's where it's happening. All the rest just goes along.

WIGET: Let's talk about those values, and indigenous literatures more broadly, because you have this book, *The Way of Kinship,* which is wonderful and hugely important contribution you have made to bridging cultures. What values can readers derive from Native American or indigenous literatures?

VASHCHENKO: One, perhaps the most important, is that these native, indigenous literatures reflect their cultures' attitudes towards nature and the natural world, because what we are doing, in the civilized world today, is just like a military campaign: today we do it, tomorrow we destroy it, and never think about it, and we do something else. And this goes from election to election. And you know, in the meantime, while nature is dying, and we are dying with it, they are thinking differently, because they are people who for millennia have been depending upon it, so it was sacred. We have lost this. Second, they are most interested in weaving in their interdependence upon each other and the community. And again, in Western, and now in Russian, practice, this is something that has been discarded in favor of egoism, individualism, money, that sort of thing, which is being held up as the norm for everybody as if there were no alternatives. These are the two things I would-mention first. Now the importance of the oral word. It's probably...you know, Chinua Achebe has died...

WIGET: I know, I know, I saw that. It's just devastating news.

VASHCHENKO: Yes, yes, it is, but from Chinua Achebe to Scott Momaday, who has a three or four pages dedicated the importance of the oral word as contrasted to the written civilization, as it were, to Anna Nerkagi, but especially African writers, all had a special interest in talking about that.

WIGET: Actually, I had been thinking of these things in relation to Achebe's death, but listening to you reminded me of some things. Scott (Momaday) has this wonderful story about the Arrowmaker, who hears a noise outside his tent, and while he is working on straightening an arrow, has to discern whether the noise outside the tent was made by an enemy or a friend, so he begins speaking in Kiowa, saying "If you are a Kiowa, you will understand my language." Tom me the virtue of the oral tradition is not in orality itself, but in the fact of what we are doing here and now, talking face to face. And I must be in some kind of relationship with you to talk with you face to face, and the more complex our relationship the richer and more complex our discourse and our conversation. whereas if you look at most relationships in the world today, they are based on a single facet of your existence. I will talk to my dentist about my teeth, my teacher about my studies, my mechanic about my automobile, but I will not talk to my mechanic about my studies or my dentist about my automobile. In some ways, that individualism, which is built into our culture today, enters into our literature, because even though we talk of literature connecting us, in fact, I can't talk to Wordsworth, I can't talk to Tolstoy – they're gone – I can only talk to my understandings of them. So books take the person and his voice out of context, and that's what we do in the West today, we take everything out of context. And then we bring that attitude to culture, so we think, Let's preserve this culture. So we set out to "preserve" folkdancing, but the dancing has to go with something else, but those other dimensions we don't want to preserve. And this comes back to the very first point you made about nature and land. These peoples live on a very particular piece of land. It's not simply the earth beneath their feet. It is their home, their land. There's this wonderful life from Silko's *Ceremony* where she writes that "Christianity divided us. It saved us one soul at a time." And the problem is that Christianity, like capitalism, is global. It's portable, it's not connected to a place. In the same way that you'll get the same McDonald's hamburger in Thailand as in Ecuador or Scotland, you'll get the same Christianity in those places.

VASHCHENKO: That's it's virtue, or considered to be..

WIGET: Yes, but also its weakness. Think about native people and their religion. Their religion is part of their land. It's not an abstract relationship to Mother Earth; this earth is their mother because they were born into this place-like Scott was talking about, hav-

ing emerged from the earth-*this* place, not *that* place,*this* place, and if we ruin these places, we ruin those peoples. So the voices of this indigenous literature are trying to tell us something hugely important about our sense of disconnection, and I think readers and our students recognize that.

VASHCHENKO: Yes, both consciously and subconsciously we do.

WIGET: And when you were putting together your recent book, *The Way of Kinship*-and I remember this was a project you began a long time ago with *In Nature's Heartbeat*, which was also Native Siberian and Native American writers-so from the beginning you could see these connections.

VASHCHENKO: Yes, Native Siberians and Native Americans are very close in their values, their concern for the land, and even in their literatures, so that a kind of a dialogue has started now, by that anthology *The Way of Kinship*, by the relationship between Scott Momaday and YuriVella, their poetic dialogue, by the (2012) visit of Siberian writers to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico they were invited for, that's a very good tendency.

WIGET: Do you see this indigenous writing as somehow related to the writing of other marginalized groups?

VASHCHENKO: In a way because they have similar issues. Take Chicanos (Mexican-Americans), they are also a communal people. They are mestizo (mixed blood, part Indian and part Spanish), but nevertheless there was a lot of aboriginal intermarriage, but don't speak of them as Spanish newcomers because they will kill you (laughing) because they think of themselves as Mexicans who have always been there. And it is a folk culture, you know. I talked to some U.S. officials who came here and I said, "Look, in America you have mass culture and with Chicanos you have folk culture. Now that they are becoming numerous, this is something you will have to deal with. It's something new for America."

WIGET: Earlier we were talking a bit about the difficulties you had here with trying to build Native American literature and Chicano literature as academic fields, and building a readership for that material in Russia. I imagine there's also a similar difficulty in building a readership for Native Siberian literature.

VASHCHENKO: I think so. You also have it in the U.S., though our countries are different in a lot of ways, because the books you can get in Chicago are sometimes not the books you can

get in New York, though both are huge metropolitan areas, well, maybe not Chicago, let's say Alaska. The same is here: what's published in Siberia doesn't get to Moscow, so you may live your whole life without knowing that Aipin (Yeremei Danilovich, Khanty author) is there writing and publishing his work.

WIGET: That's true. I think that some things have made a difference to the publishing in the US though. The first is the political interest that was generated initially, and which you just hinted at by saying that America is a changing country-we really are-and very soon we will be a "minority majority" country, which means that white people of not only Anglo-Saxon but European immigrant background will be a minority in the United States, compared to the other minorities of color – Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans and others-which, taken altogether, will outnumber them, though even of these minorities of color, Native Americans will still be the smallest group. This kind of diversity, which was stirred up in the Sixties, has meant there was a lot of interest in these other voices. And then we institutionalized this interest, not only in publishing, but these people were entering the universities to read and teach this literature, and there were critics who evaluated this literature and brought it to the level of a general public discussion. And that is really difficult to do in Russia, (VASHCHENKO: I agree) to bring this kind of literature to the level of general discussion.

VASHCHENKO: It's a question of values...

WIGET: Values, yes, and experiences...There is a fundamental valuein America in this kind of diversity, but if there had not been this political agitation in the 1960s, that value would never have come into the foreground. There were good Native American writers in the Twenties and Thirties, but nobody paid attention to them very much, and there were good Native writers at the end of the nineteenth century, and nobody paid much attention, and part of the reason is that we were still dominated by the Anglo-Saxon master narrative and the Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony that it supported.

VASHCHENKO: "Civilization", that was called...

WIGET: Right, and everything everybody else had was part of "wilderness". Perhaps there's some truth to the idea that European peoples, Russia too, would see minority peoples as part of "wilderness", something that needs to be civilized, something that needs to

be transformed, and as a result, not pay attention to what they have to say until there is some agitation.

VASHCHENKO: This misunderstanding, this gap, between traditional cultures and civilization is everywhere, all the time...

WIGET: And so, while we've had the good fortune to institutionalize these subjects, there is no one person in America who is your exact counterpart, you see, because there were two dozen such people in my generation who were part of the foundation of the field. Here, in Russia, the whole foundation has rested on your shoulders, it's not too much to say, singly, entirely on your shoulders, and that's an entirely different model of how change happens in academia and in the field of literary history. And it's absolutely amazing to me how much you've been able to accomplish in terms of bringing certain people to attention.

VASHCHENKO: It is a difficult thing, really. It goes slowly. From time to time, something eventful happens. You do some things, and then, as if in the ocean, you have a few little boats, and then...then the ocean swallows them up!

WIGET: Yes,I thinkwe sometimes feel that way about all our human endeavors, our works as human beings, that it's difficult to understand what if anything has been accomplished, because so often we are like Sisyphus, pushing that boulder to the top of the hill only to watch it roll back down again. And yet, the proof is here, right here, in the very fact that we are having this conversation, in the fact that Scott and other Indian writers have come here, in the fact that we have not only a personal but a textual bridge of your translations of Native American literature into Russian and Native Siberian literature into English. And I think your *Way of Kinship,* which is your translation of Native Siberian literature into English, will be a foundational work in a broader field which is emerging, called Indigenous Studies, in which people are beginning to make the kinds of broader comparisons that you are making in this book and which you've been doing for a very long time. This field, Indigenous Studies, which does things like look at the broader experiences, such as the experience of colonialism, whether among the Maori of New Zealand or among Indians in the United States, or the comparative role of formal education or Christianization and other assimilationist activities among indigenous peoples, will also come to the place where we start doing cross-cultural readings of indigenous literature, and you have already set that up, going all the way back to *Nature's Heartbeat*,

though they don't have access to that, but now they do have access to *The Way of Kinship*, and that will make a hugely important contribution.

VASHCHENKO: So our meeting was predestined...(both laugh)

WIGET: Yeah, that was a great moment...I still have a photograph.

VASHCHENKO: Yeah, and I have a few.

WIGET: Two young men working on strange things... that was 1985 in Philadelphia, but you know at that time, I could not even imagine that there was someone working on American Indian literature in the Soviet Union because even by 1985 there were not that many places in the United States where Native American literature was institutionally established. And I was there working on a monograph on (American Indian poet) Simon Ortiz at the time, and you and colleagues from IMLI came and presented a very interesting panel of papers – not just yours but all of the – on multicultural American literature. That was the start of so much for me.

VASHCHENKO: And it was a feast for me, because it was the first time that we ever discussed ethnic cultures at such a meeting. We never did it before.

WIGET: And we did some things in those first few years, joint conferences and so on, when you and IMLI were beginning work on that multi-volume Academic History of American Literature.

VASHCHENKO: ..and, you know, now every volume has an essay on Native American literature.

WIGET: Yes, that's a real, tangible accomplishment.

Well, we started out talking about "boundaries of culture", but here we are in the end talking about bridges, because for every river that is a boundary there is a bridge across the river, bridges between cultures.