Ronald Craig: Dr. Brown when did you come to the University of Montana to teach, and why did you choose this university?

Joseph Brown: I came here in the fall of 1970-71. Before that I had been teaching at Indiana University in Bloomington. At Bloomington, I initiated a program of courses dealing with Native American traditions and these courses were presented within the context of Department of Religious Studies. I taught at Bloomington for two years. During those years I was developing new kinds of courses dealing with this particular area. I’d approached study of Native American cultures and traditions that combines the disciplines of anthropology and also history of religions, which was a kind of program I got my doctorate in at the University of Stockholm in Sweden. My professor Ake Hultkrantz, who was one of the leading scholar in bringing together certain elements of cultural anthropology and also history of religions, and bringing those two disciplines to bear on primal traditions in general and Native Americans traditions in particular. So that is the approached I used, and it worked very well in Bloomington, but my only problem in Bloomington was that it got a little bit out of hand in terms of the size of the classes which were to 600-800 students to a class. Also in classes I had no Native American students that troubled me a good deal because I thought it was important that one works with Native American peoples in order to keep things straight. So when I had an offer to come to the University of Montana and to teach in part in the early Native American traditions. I gladly accepted because I wanted very much to work, not just with the dis-enchanted kind of students in the late sixties, students looking for alternate kinds of values. But I wanted the opportunity to work more closely with Native American students. It was a very good opportunity for me and so I immediately decided I would come here.

RC: When you arrived at the University of Montana, what was the status of the Native American Studies at that time on the campus here?

JB: As I understood, the Native American Studies Program, it was primarily a service type of organization. I’m sure there was some teaching components in the program, but and I may be mistaken, but I thought the major emphasis was helping Native American students to adapt to a completely new and very difficult environment in which the academic community certainly is. So there, at that time, there seemed to me that there would an appropriate way to try and teach it in the Native American Studies Program.

RC: When you began teaching the Native American traditions courses, what was your goal and that time?
JB: Well, one of the goals was to work to develop a methodology which would work well in teaching in this particular area, and as I’ve suggested, that methodology involved essentially bringing together selected elements out of the discipline history of religions, and interrelating that, with certain aspects which are core to cultural anthropology. In fact my degrees were my master’s degree was in anthropology, cultural anthropology from Stanford University, doctorate was from Western Stockholm, as I’ve suggested.

RC: Besides your degrees and your education, educational background, what were the other experience that you had that qualified you to teach these Native American traditions classes?

JB: Well it has always been a lifelong concern of mine ever since I was a very small child, and I was brought up in part in the Northeastern woodland areas of Maine. Well I had contact with the Algonquian speaking, Eastern Algonquian speaking peoples, the Abenaki, and so on. I had very good friends among the elders of those groups when I was very small boy and that opened up to me a whole new world that, I felt a very strong empathy for and so it’s always been a major interest of mine. Also a little bit later in my life, when I was still in my teens, I had the pleasure to live with my family in New Mexico for several years, and there I was able to have closer contact with representatives of the Pregoan (?) groups and also with the Dine, the Navajo people with the Southwest.

RC: Didn’t you also live in South Dakota with the Black Elk or for a short period of time?

JB: That was a little bit later after I had finished, after an interruption of five years during war years, that I finished my undergraduate degree at Haverford University in Pennsylvania. It was when I was there that I became aware of the old Lakota Sioux elder, Black Elk. In part through the book of John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, and so I wrote to Neihardt and asked if the old man was still living and he said he was and he said, “But there is no sense you going to find him because he won’t talk to you, you better come and see me and I’ll tell you about these things.” So I didn’t go to Neihardt. I went directly to Black Elk and found him and then which I think was the wise thing to do because when I first met with him, he asked me, he said “Why have you taken so long to here, I’ve been expecting you,” and he then even asked if I would come home with him to spend the winter with him, that he had things he had wanted to tell me. So that ended up with living very close to the old man for a period of about five years till he died. And I think that was perhaps the most important educational experience in my life those years.

RC: How had this, the total of your experiences in education changed your opinion toward oral traditions in general and particularly, toward oral traditions related to Native Americans?

JB: Well I’ve always been interested in tribal types of traditions that is, those that are rooted into the oral traditions. I don’t know maybe it was a reaction to my father, who was a professor of English Literature at Princeton University for many years. That in any case I, I always had a

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keen interest in the positive aspects of non-literacy, not illiteracy that’s an interectum, but non-literacy those who choose to, to not to learn reading, writing and that is a possibility where they still have a hold on their oral, their traditions which are transmitted orally. I was always intrigued from many, many years ago that there were positive elements there that the contemporary world completely rejected because of the emphasis on literacy as if it were an ultimate kind of virtue. Through my living experience with some of the elders who couldn’t read or write, I began to understand that the enormous importance of having ones law contained within side oneself and not having access to information outside of oneself. As it seemed that in these kinds of traditions, this is something that is great value, that is had been completely not just neglected by the contemporary society and contemporary education, but even it is considered almost a sin to not be literate in our world. I thought this was a serious kind of prejudice that didn’t have identity, one reason it seems to me that if you preserve within yourself all your sacred law and culture that’s much more affective in the spiritual self than having access to materials that is outside of yourself. So I’ve always tried to be a champion for non-literacy.

RC: When was the traditions curriculum begun here at the University, and how did it expand to its present size?

JB: The Native American traditions?

RC: Yes.

JB: Sequence of courses?

JB: Well I think we started at, at least by the second year, the first year I was here, we were kind of experimenting as to the approaches and what I would do or should do and also there was a problem since I came in on only a half line within Religious Studies and shared a half line in the Art Department. So when I first came, I worked part time at Bruce Barton’s program in Native American art, which I enjoyed and part-time also in Religious Studies. Then the second year, when I was able to be put on a full line with Religious Studies. I started to develop my own courses which became the sequence of the 236 course which is an introductory course to Native American traditions, then the 336 which is a course exclusively on Plains cultures and 237 course in the spring quarter which is on the traditions of the peoples of the Southwest.

RC: What successes have you seen with this program as related to your goals that you had initially when you came here?

JB: I don’t know about success. If you want to learn about that you can talk to the students and see how have been able to use the materials. In terms of success, I don’t know what the term really means but it was a kind of pioneering effort especially to situate these kinds of studies within a religious studies department. I think it did start a precedent in religious studies in

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general around the country. For example, when this was first initiated when I first came here, it was also the occasion an international conference of literacy societies that was held in Los Angeles. In discussion with my colleagues in the Department here, we decided that it would a very good time to launch this as a legitimate program within the whole field of religious studies academia, as an academic field. So on the occasion of that conference, I put together a section on Native American religious traditions, as they called it, and we brought together a number of scholars from other universities who were interested in this approach. We had some very good meetings on that occasion in which we spelled out a little bit more in detail what this program really was, what it represented and what could be done with it. Also I should mention, to launch off this new approach, we invited to that international conference as a primary speaker, N. Scott Momaday who gave an absolutely splendid address which was titled “Man, Native Words” and members of that congress told me at that time, which pleased me very much, was that address was perhaps the most meaningful one they had heard at the conference. Which is not at all to downgrade the excellent addresses that were concerned with Old Testament studies or Biblical Studies at all.

RC: How do you, how do you perceive that these courses have helped Native Americans on campus?

JB: That would be hard for me say, that would have to be spoken to by those who, Native Americans who have taken my courses. It seems to me, this is of course objective, that for one thing, there have been quite a few Native American students who have come to my courses, who have told me that they did not have at home the occasion to learn about their own traditions. So they very much affirmed what I was trying to do. I think over the years that we’ve had a very good relationship with Native American students and I like to think that they have found things that have helped to them. Made a lot of very good friends over the years and I’m certainly pleased that these have not been courses that are designed primarily for non-Native American students. I should also perhaps add that over the years, this has been a new kind of approach that has taken hold in many, many universities around the country and so there has been job opportunities opening for students and indeed students of the higher training in this area. So it’s not just something that is idiosyncratic or too special, it is something I think and a purpose in the general university curriculum.

RC: Do you foresee a further expansion of the program here at the University?

JB: Well I’m afraid at this particular point in history for this University; it doesn’t look very good for any kind of expansion in any department in any direction at all. So I don’t think that I could answer that very positively.

RC: When were the Indian arts courses added and what was the purpose?

JB: You mean my own arts courses?

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RC: Yes sir, the one you’re teaching.

JB: I’ve forgotten when those were started, but I’ve been doing it really in the context of my courses from the very beginning. That is, instead of just talking about beliefs and customs and practices, rites and ceremonies and such in the abstract, I’ve always put a great deal of attention to presenting these things in a graphic manner and that is through films and slides and so on. Also through music, I always like to interject into my courses different musical styles that come out different tribal groups and different types of music that, specifically different occasions and lives of the people and such. I think this is very important; I think we tend to make things a bit too abstract and too theoretical, but this is something that ties the study to very realities of the cultures.

RC: You mentioned earlier about working part time with Religious Studies and part time with Native Americans art program. Can you expand any on that?

JB: Well that art program was essentially Bruce Barton’s program. I came into it a little bit late; he was very, very hospitable in a sense that he took me into his program. I’m not quite sure exactly what useful role I played there but at least it served as a start for my work in this University.

RC: What successes did you see while you were with the program, in this arts program?

JB: Well it seemed to me that out of that program there came some very, there were very good students there and the program helped along a large number of these students who became significant, great artists. I think it was a program that insisted or that encouraged the students to be who they are and to paint as they would and not try to imitate any other kinds of styles which wouldn’t be really honest. Barton’s was very good at that. Unfortunate thing is that the program was well started and did some very significant things, but then budgetary restraints and such it had to be dropped.

RC: What do you believe should be added to the Native American Studies at the University at this time and why?

JB: I think probably the most important thing would be to enlarge the teaching of the languages which are represented by the different tribal groups who are students here at the University. I don’t think that we do enough with Native languages; there are a number of groups who are in very serious danger of losing their languages completely. Recent studies demonstrated that only three very, very old Arapaho’s, for example, who still know their language because of the emphasis of the school systems had to wean them away from their own languages and to concentrate just on English. I think that is criminal. I think that a little bit of that is going on reservations in Montana and around Montana, although I noticed over the years that the

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people are making an effort on the reservations to bring back their studies and own languages which I think is very important. If you don’t have your language, you don’t have your culture. If you don’t have your language, you don’t have those values which your culture does; it is a tragedy to let that go. I think it should be a top priority here at this University. I think that whole question of teaching of the languages which are indigenous to this area should be developed, expanded.

RC: Okay, thank you very much Dr. Brown.

[Break in audio]

JB: I think also in terms of offerings in Native American studies, I should of course make it clear I am not in a position to say what they should offer, what they should not, that is not my provenance. But I also think that it is very important to, to develop perhaps in greater detail programs which will better help the Native American students to adapt to a university environment. Sometimes it’s a very traumatic experience to come into a new situation such as this and I think that many of the students need a great deal of help. I’m not in a position to say they are not getting that help but I would have found that they need all the help they can. That should be certainly a major thrust of the Native American Studies Program.

[End of Interview]