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Native American Literature, SP 2022

Persistence: Resiliency in Salli M. Kawennotakie Benedict's "Sweetgrass Is Around Her"

Native American art production varies by tribe and geographical region, offering viewers a myriad of views and experiences on both historical and contemporary Native existence. These sentiments and experiences concurrently subsist within Native American poetry, though experiencing the expansive body of work has, historically, been difficult. W. W. Norton & Company's recent anthology of Native poetry, titled *When the Light of the World was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through*, and edited by Joy Harjo, Leanne Howe, and Jennifer Elise Forester, among other scholars, gives much-needed attention to the long history of Native poetry, whether it is through oral storytelling, song, or written text. Within the first section of the book, titled "Northeast and Midwest," lies Salli M. Kawennotakie Benedict's (Awkwesasne Mohawk) poem "Sweetgrass Is Around Her." Benedict's "Sweetgrass" speaks upon resiliency of both her own people and Native populations as a whole, materializing through continued use and revitalization of Mohawk language through the elder's Mohawk name, the making and consuming of frybread with the protagonist, and the use of a sharp knife for cutting sweetgrass, which acts as a symbol for traditional ecological knowledge and practices and their continued use.

This paper will use ideas from ecology, namely Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), literary studies, American Studies, and Indigenous studies to create both a theoretical base and embed historical context for and within Benedict's poem. These ideas help form the base that is needed for my argument, as the poem—and all of those included in the

anthology—“include allusive gestures to [the] many layers of history, to the embedded knowledge of place, and to the material culture of the individual tribes” (Blaeser 16).

Though my argument will be fleshed out through close readings of the poem, a theoretical background that helps contextualize my line of thinking is helpful. In particular, my argument will be grounded in historicism, as I believe historical context will be beneficial in explaining Benedict’s writing style and poetic decision-making. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) supplements historicism, adding to it the concepts of reciprocity and respect for all beings, human or non-human. TEK is not a static body of knowledge and is specific to the particular peoples in certain places (Nelson 190); knowledge is tied to place, as each geographical area will depend on ever-changing knowledge and adaptation (190). The basis of how the land is treated stems from spiritual connection and indigenous cosmology, with particular focus on what are called the Original Instructions. These instructions call on humans to treat the land with respect and gratitude, focusing on how reciprocity leads to a more sustainable existence (Kimmerer 263). This treatment of the land can be relayed through stories and ceremonies, where younger generations are taught the importance of the Original Instructions. There is a moral aspect to the teaching of these practices, and the stories and ceremonies help promote group cohesion and shared cultural values (263).

This general understanding of TEK will strengthen how I, and readers, look at Benedict’s poem because this theoretical background, focused on justice, is a form of resiliency itself. Alongside TEK, explanations of Native history and culture—namely, the conversation around frybread and the importance of picking sweetgrass for basket-weaving in Native cultures—will help demonstrate why certain actions and occurrences in the poem should get more attention. My aim is not to generalize or stereotype all Native literary works; rather, I aim to showcase how

close readings of these works can open up inquiry into larger histories and problems that should be tackled by a myriad of scholars and disciplines alike.

Readers make acquaintance with this resiliency in the beginning of the poem, where an elderly woman is introduced. This elder is identified as Teiohontasen, a basket maker whose name means “sweetgrass is all around her” (line 14), who is also the great aunt of the protagonist. Though not a prominent example from the text, the continuation of native language names exemplifies resiliency, albeit on a smaller scale than the examples detailed later in this paper. Without native language names being used, tribal identity can be erased, which, in turn, can lead to the erasure of the tribe itself. Benedict seems to consciously introduce the reader into a world where language acts as a form of rebellion against imperialism; English instruction was/is used as a catalyst for colonization, and this elder’s name opposes this forced assimilation and erasure of culture.

A second example of resiliency comes in the second stanza, when the elder sits down and makes lunch for both her and the protagonist: “She brought her lunch/ in a paper bag;/ a canning jar of cold tea/ fried bread,/ sliced meat,/ and some butter” (lines 40-45). All foods can be found on the reservations Native Americans were forced into, but one food sticks out in particular: frybread. Though it is a highly controversial food item, frybread, in this poem, represents indigenous resilience because it is made with ingredients that were introduced by Europeans and provided by the US government—wheat flour, lard, and baking powder— as a part of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) (Vanatrease 59). Frybread has not always been a part of Native culinary traditions and was introduced around 150 years ago (55). The dish was used as a form of sustenance, since Native foodways were generally disrupted.

The practices used in these foodways did not fall in line with the European idea of private property, and frybread consumption helped “keep Indian people alive in times of starvation” (58). Frybread was not the only item that became tied to Native life, as other processed and non-perishable foods such as coffee, sugar, ginger snaps, deviled ham, tobacco, popcorn, and canned fruit became commonplace in reservation households starting in the early 20th century (Mihesuah 48); these food items became known as commodity food and generally did not meet health standards set out by the USDA and FDPIR (Vanatrease 64). As the 20th century progressed, Native diets became Americanized, with widespread consumption of “pizza, cheeseburgers, bacon and mutton fat, sausage, canned meats, mutton sandwiches, sodas, desserts, and fried flour [resulting] in an obesity explosion” (Mihesuah 49). These foods were, of course, not wanted or desired, but they were forced upon Natives who lived on the reservations—commodity food items were historically poor people’s food, embodying the continued subjugation and displacement of Indian culture (Vanatrease 62).

These health-related consequences, and the historical context of colonization, are what make this food so controversial. It is not my place to say whether or not frybread should be a part of traditional Native food culture, but it is difficult to say that it is not significant in the survival of Native populations. Frybread continues to persist, and play a vital role, within Native cultural practices, becoming a “traditional culture-specific food” (59) for many Native populations. (This is most apparent when looking at how South Dakota’s legislature declared frybread to be the state bread in 2005 (59, 65). This declaration acknowledges that traditions, and opinions regarding these traditions, are dynamic, constantly shifting and changing as time progresses.) While the use of frybread in Native traditions is controversial, it is also woven into the fabric of both historical and contemporary Native life.

The final example I will flesh out also stems from the second stanza, where Teiohontasen takes out her knife to make two sandwiches for her and the protagonist. The knife is the main focus of this close reading, which has less to do with its use for sandwich making and more to do with its symbolic importance. The protagonist describes that “[the elder] reached for her/ pocket knife./ Basket makers always/ have a good knife” (lines 57-60). Being a basket maker, the elder understands that her relationship with the earth is reciprocal, and she must respect the plant being picked. This respect, in basket-making in particular, materializes in “the rule of not taking more than half [of what is being picked], of not overgrazing” (Kimmerer 164); it is no surprise, then, that the plants used for baskets (and specifically sweetgrass) thrive “around Native communities, particularly those known for their sweetgrass basketry” (165). This references the Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) described earlier in this paper, where this reciprocal and respectful relationship is paramount.

Teiohontasen’s answer to what she thinks heaven would be like at the end of the poem showcases her commitment to this knowledge:

One time,
my mother asked her
what she thought
Heaven would be like.
She said
that there was sweetgrass everywhere
and people made
the most beautiful
baskets. (lines 102-110)

The elder envisions a place where sweetgrass grows in abundance, meaning that those who pick the grass for baskets follow this traditional knowledge. The “good knife” (line 60) that she uses—implying that it is sharp and will precisely cut the sweetgrass—symbolizes that these practices will continue to persist, even in a world run by Western epistemologies. No matter how much the West tries to suppress traditional knowledge and practices, Native populations will continue to pass down these ways of being and knowing. Without that knife—and its use as a symbol of resiliency—Native populations are one step closer to being erased. Benedict’s inclusion of it in “Sweetgrass” acts as a stopgap for that erasure.

Resiliency is shown both through the continued practicing of TEK and the tradition of basket-making among Native populations. Benedict’s citizenship with the Awkwesasne Mohawk nation is also important, as they have a rich history of basket-making. Typically, Awkwesasne Mohawk baskets are made with black ash splint and sweetgrass, and basket-making is a defining feature of the nation’s identity (“Mohawk & Awkwesasne Basketmaking”). The tradition is speculated to have lasted for over 3,000 years and were used as bags, fish traps, containers to store and wash corn, and laundry hampers; later, they had mainly decorative purposes, though these baskets are known as fancy baskets (“Mohawk & Awkwesasne Basketmaking”). Sweetgrass baskets in particular are prized for their “pleasant aroma, pale color, and pliability” (“Mohawk & Awkwesasne Basketmaking”). Knowing that basket-making, both in the Awkwesasne Mohawk nation and other tribes alike, has substantial cultural importance—as well economic importance, since it allowed makers to contribute financially to the tribe while using resources that their ancestors had relied on for centuries (Mt. Pleasant 416)—its inclusion in the poem showcases how continued traditional practices keep Native culture alive and thriving.

Native populations refuse to let attempted assimilation tear apart cultural staples, though its success is due to a restructuring to a capitalist economic system.

Resiliency is seen through Salli M. Kawennotakie Benedict's "Sweetgrass Is Around Her" through the continued use of traditional language/names, frybread, and traditional ecological practices. Ultimately, these practices are consciously followed and rely on elders teaching younger generations traditional knowledge; without passing down the information, the culture can be lost, meaning that centuries-long desires of Native erasure would be successful. Resiliency is not a choice; rather, it is the unfortunate reality of Native peoples all over the United States—even in contemporary life, Native populations continue to fight for respect, land rights, and reparations. Though I am showcasing resiliency in Benedict's poem, this idea is not isolated to literature; it permeates everyday existence for Native populations, and I suggest that it is long overdue that we listen to them.

Critiques of this argument can materialize through my position as a non-Native scholar and the importance of Native poetry in general. My goal is not to showcase that I am an "expert" of Native poetry; rather, I am using the poem to speak about ongoing issues both within academia and greater society. There are more Native scholars within academia today than there were 50 years ago, but there is still a lack of Native representation in both teaching positions and academic journals. This argument is both a close reading of a specific poem and a suggestion that more of this type of scholarship be presented. W.W. Norton & Company publishing *When the Light of the World was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through*—as well as its editing being done by Joy Harjo and other Native writers and scholars—is a promising step in the right direction. This progress does not mean that the fight has been won; analysis of Native literature, and the publishing of Native works, should continue, and it should be presented by more Native scholars.

Another critique of my argument resides in my analysis of poetry over another medium. It can be said that looking at history, sociology, or legislation would be more beneficial in granting more respect to Native populations. This critique depends upon Western epistemologies, which favor logic and fact (which is thought to be found *only* in non-creative disciplines like history or sociology) over lived experience within story, song, and performance, which are essential to indigenous self and cultural understanding. By looking at Native poetry—and Native creative expression in general—we get Native history and culture from the perspective of a member/members who partake in Native life and culture everyday. A non-Native artist will never be able to represent Native life correctly, as they do not have experience with whichever culture is being described.

Benedict invites readers into Native history and culture—and specifically the history and culture of the Awkwesasne Mohawk nation—in a way that cannot be replicated through historical or legislative analysis. Native poetry is a catalyst for non-Natives to *finally understand* Native history and culture, without the option to question or rebuke because the experiences are uncomfortable to read and consider. This type of creative work seemingly welcomes discomfort, but, I argue, this is the point. Without uncomfortable, and somewhat embarrassing, realization of Native mistreatment, change will never materialize. Benedict clearly depicts a world, though seemingly care-free and blissful, where resiliency is the only option, instead of a personal and collective characteristic. She is showing us a path forward, but we have to be willing to take it.

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