

“When the Light of the World was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through” Discussion Questions for April 24, 2021

1. Place
 - a. Did you notice that there is a different understanding of place in indigenous American poetry in which there are reflections above and below or inside and outside?
 - i. “Sweetgrass is Around Her” by Salli M. Kawennotakie Benedict (p. 63)
2. Language and song
 - a. Many early indigenous American poems were transcriptions of ritual songs containing repeating rhythms and words from an oral tradition going back thousands of years. How do contemporary indigenous poets turn this ancient technique into new songs? What was the impact on the poem?
 - i. “She Had Some Horses” by Joy Harjo (p. 401)
 - b. Indigenous Americans were “educated” that their nation’s language was wrong. Even though we cannot understand the language in some of the poems, how does the use of native language affect the meaning and structure of the poems?
 - i. “This Is How They Were Placed For Us” by Luci Tapahonso (p. 312)
3. Ancestors and culture
 - a. How do the poems show the importance of family unity and how every new generation is tied to ancestors?
 - i. Excerpts from a speech by Chief Seattle (p. 183)
 - ii. “There is No Word for Goodbye” by Mary Tallmountain (p. 188)
 - b. Is there a sense of cultural loss or disruption in poems throughout the anthology?
 - i. “Indian Education Blues” by Ed Edmo (p. 202)
 - ii. “At the Door of the Native Studies Director” by Robert Davis Hoffman (p. 228)
4. Cycles
 - a. The anthology is constructed in a geographic circle, starting in the Eastern United States, turning north, then west, then south, then east again. Did the structure of the anthology affect your progress through the book?
 - b. How are seasonal cycles represented in these poems?
 - i. “Prodigal Daughter” by Kimberly Wensault (p. 90)
5. Land
 - a. Do the poems in this volume present a common theme that language and power come from the land (and nature)?
 - i. “Delight Song” by N. Scott Momaday (p. 111)
 - ii. “Casualties” by M.L. Smoker (p. 161)
 - iii. “The Summer of Black Widows” by Sherman Alexie (p. 231)

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- b. Is there a common theme in these poems expressing that native nation poets view ownership of land and man-made boundaries differently?
 - i. “The Old Man’s Lazy” by Peter Blue Cloud (p. 33)
 - ii. “Trespassing” by Marianne Aweagon Broyles (p. 402)
 - c. How do the poems emphasize that what happens to the land, happens to us?
 - i. “Diablo Canyon” by John Trudell” (p. 123)
 - d. Did you notice any difference between the poems from Alaskan poets, some of whom stayed on tribal land, vs. those poets in the rest of the country whose people were removed from their land?
6. Stereotypes
- a. What did you think about the way some of the poems play with stereotypes about indigenous Americans?
 - i. “What’s an Indian Woman To Do” by Marcie Rendon (p. 55)
 - ii. “99 Things To Do Before You Die” by Nila Northsun (p. 126)
 - b. Many films and books in popular culture depict indigenous Americans as drunks. How did some of the poems play with this stereotype? What does alcohol represent for indigenous Americans?
 - i. “Indian Guys at the Bar” by Simon Ortiz (p. 282)
 - ii. “Skinology” by Adrian C. Louis (p. 286)
7. History
- a. How do the poems present different viewpoints than non-indigenous American populations in understanding history? Did you learn something new about American history from this book?
 - i. “38” by Layli Long Soldier (p. 149)
 - ii. “Wi-Gi-E” by Elise Peschen (p. 138)
 - Side note: to learn more about the subject of this poem, check out “Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI” by David Grann