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Book Review

Eating the Landscape: American Indian Stories of Food, Identity, and Resilience

Enrique Salmón. 2012. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. 160 pp.. $17.95 (paperback). ISBN: 978-0-8165-3011-3.

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As an Indigenous woman living away from her ceremonial home, language, culture, and original people while I (Stevens) attend school, I sometimes find myself lost in this big world. When you are away from the things that have helped define you since your youth, it is easy to forget who you are and what you stand for. When this happens people sometimes turn to their language, ceremonial/social songs, or to the stories of their people in order to reconnect them to their culture. I am different, however.

When I (Stevens) feel like I am losing who I am, as a Hotinoshonni woman, I turn to food. I grew up with white corn and wild berries as a staple to my diet. They were served at every ceremony and social gathering. So this is where I find solace. When I eat these and other foods I have grown up with, I am returned to those moments in the Longhouse; hearing the songs, the feeling of the floorboards jumping beneath my feet from the passionate dancing, the laughter of my elders as they tell jokes too fast in the language for the children to understand, the smell of wood burning under the huge pot of corn soup, watching my chiefs and faithkeepers close their eyes and retell the stories of our people and thanking the Creator for all that we have. Those are the moments I miss, those are the moments that remind me who I am, and as odd as it may sound, the food I eat evokes those moments.

While many people overlook the connection that food has to your identity, Enrique Salmón exemplifies the art of storytelling while reinforcing that very idea. In *Eating the Landscape: American Indian Stories of Food, Identity, and Resilience*, Salmón takes you through a world of Indigenous food and how it is tied directly to the culture of the people and the mutual respect they have for the environment that surrounds them. His knack for telling a story is so strong that my (Stevens') 4-year-old-daughter enjoyed listening to me read it, and asked for his stories rather than her usual bedtime stories of Cinderella and Snow White. This ability to reach a child is important in the retention of our many Indigenous cultures. Her unusual request for reading material brought me back to the times when I would rather listen to my grandmother tell a story than go play games with my friends.

As an Indigenous scholar with deep roots in his home community, Enrique Salmón has become one of the most important voices in the renaissance of Traditional Knowledge of Indigenous peoples and the significance of this knowledge in allowing us to understand the world. Salmón opens the book with the chapter, "In My Grandmother's Kitchen," in which he paints a strong and personal picture by providing intimate details about his family and the many social gatherings where food was the center of the interactions. This chapter connects the reader to the book with stories that define the author, while opening up a dialogue with the reader, and providing a basic model for the rest of the book. Many Indigenous people have gained their cultural knowledge from their grandparents, so the opening chapter helps Indigenous people relate to the book and lets non-Indigenous readers see where his story begins. As an example, his account of families competing for who makes the best tamales is a concept that I am sure many families share, whether it is tamales or some other type of food. For my family and community, it is corn soup.

I (Stevens) remember when my mother, who was working on revitalizing her traditional self after being away from it for so long, made her first pot of corn soup for one of the ceremonies. The entire Longhouse community was going to have this soup and she had overcooked the corn to the point where the kernels popped, in a way. She was devastated and embarrassed to bring it to the Longhouse; however, she held her head high and brought it in even though she knew she would get teased. Most of her peers and I ended up loving the soup, and although she still got teased, it was all in good faith. It is stories like these and many others that bring communities together. My mother was trying to reaffirm her place in the traditional community and was embarrassed by her attempt, but the community leaders reminded her that it is not about how good she made the food, but about how much feeling she put into it. Many Indigenous people have gained their cultural knowledge from their grandparents or community elders in a similar manner, so this opening chapter helps Indigenous people relate to the book and lets non-Indigenous readers see where his story begins.

Continuing through his narrative, Salmón brings the reader smoothly through the examples of how food is connected to various aspects of a culture, using examples from the U.S. Southwest, as well as northwest Mexico. He stresses the idea that a sustainable future full of good and safe food is dependent on the knowledge of small farmers such as the ones he describes in his book. There are traditional Indigenous methods that have sustained our people for years before this creation of mass-produced agriculture came along. Salmón tells us how Indigenous groups today are working to continue these practices within the modern frame and encourages the idea of more communities engaging in the idea for the betterment of our People and the planet.

There is an unhealthy relationship between politics, economics, and our modern food system. Salmón's intention with this book is to debunk this economic relationship and to instead tell stories of interconnected relationships among the landscape and the food we eat along with how we perceive our own identities. Until we acknowledge this connection, we will be stuck in this unhealthy relationship with our food and our communities.

A theme Salmón develops early in the text is the importance of stories, which provide metaphors and cultural models that can be employed to interpret and understand interactions between the human and nonhuman elements of the community. This theme was also developed by Pierotti (2011), who emphasized the similarity between the stories of Indigenous peoples and theoretical models employed in Western science. Both traditions employ metaphor as a means of understanding basic principles that can then be used to interpret specific interactions and phenomena.

An important difference between these traditions emphasized by Salmón is that Western cultural history tends to focus upon heroes, i.e., human figures that dominate action. In contrast, in Salmón's Rarámuri culture, history is focused on the landscape, or place, and the "heroes" are plants, nonhuman animals and children, who share the landscape rather than dominating it. Given this premise, it is obvious why this approach appeals to children, even though it represents profound and complex concepts.

To illustrate this theme, Salmón points out that the Rarámuri classification scheme includes the concept of gendered plants, which can be nourishing and sustaining, such as corn, assume the role of a mother-in-law such as tobacco, or represent "quarrelsome" species, such as the Brazil wood (*Haematoxylon brasiletto* Karst. Leguminosae), a plant with strongly antimicrobial and antibacterial properties, whose antagonistic chemical actions exemplify its personality. In contrast, male plants include conifers, oaks, beans, squash, peyote, and datura.

Overall the Rarámuri are part of an extended ecological family tied together by the concept of *iwígara*, or shared spirit, which implies ancestry and origins in common. This makes this worldview inherently both evolutionary in concept and ecological in spirit (see also Pierotti 2011). At its root, *iwigá* means soul, life force, and breath, and everything that breathes (respires) is considered to have a soul and to share the same breath, a metaphor that is literally true if we consider the relationship between photosynthesis and respiration and the role these processes have had in shaping the world and all of the life within it.

Moving to other cultures, Salmón discusses the Puebloan peoples and their ability to deal with drought. This is an important theme because these peoples have developed a thriving culture in a climate that is not conducive to agriculture by developing their own forms of drip irrigation and soil development such that, rather than being depleted, the areas where they grow crops have higher soil quality than

surrounding areas rather than lower soil quality, as is typically observed in US large scale agriculture.

Salmón concentrates on a case study of the Hopi, who, because of their truly wise use of the land, regard the superficially arid landscape of the Colorado Plateau, as being a place that cares for and protects the people. They believe that they emerged from the land and that the land models responsible behavior, so that to lose the land is the same as losing one's own flesh and sense of well being. This discussion puts flesh on the bones of Vine Deloria's metaphor of indigenous people being spatially (locally) oriented, in contrast to the temporal orientation of Western Civilizations (Deloria 1982).

The next group discussed by Salmón is the Yaqui of the Sonora Desert, where Salmón continues to explore the theme of relationships among human and nonhuman. He argues that Indigenous paradigms suggest that the human-nature relationship requires mutual participation in the "dance of life," in contrast to the western concept of the natural world as an inert mass of chemical compounds, which reflects the idea of plant personality being expressed through chemically driven physiological interactions above. The Yaqui Deer dances and songs are used to illustrate this theme. He continues his theme of the importance of metaphors and their importance to understanding how land-based cultural traditions enhance diversity, through interpreting the daily realities of landscapes. To Salmón, metaphors offer glimpses into the most fundamental aspects of a culture, including its language, which he sees as a reflection of the landscape in which it develops. He links loss of languages on a global scale to concurrent losses in biodiversity, and explores this theme by discussing how humans can enhance their landscapes and increase local diversity rather than reduce it. Thus deer songs are thus seen as being conversations between the singer, the deer, and the nonhuman world, because the singer must maintain a constant connection with this world in order to sing the songs properly. This is a crucial component of the oral tradition, because when texts "transform nature into silent and static symbols void of being-ness and vitality…nature ceases to breathe and loses its color and dynamic, un-resting personality" (p. 76).

The next to last chapter provides an account of the Seri (Comcaac) people of Sonora and the importance of song in their culture, a theme also emphasized by Gary Nabhan in his book *Singing the Turtles to Sea* (Nabhan 2003). A Seri singer Salmón met on the Hopi Reservation at an event organized by Nabhan told Salmón he had been expecting him and needed to impart some songs to him, but these songs could only be learned in the country where the Seri live. The Seri regularly break into song, and their performances were featured at the International Ethnobiology Congress in Montpellier, France. This compliments the theme in the chapter on the Yaqui, by emphasizing the importance of song and language in cultural relationships with their local environments.

The final chapter, "The Whole Enchilada" points out that the human mind can verbalize only that which it has experienced, and that when our inner self begins its journey it becomes aware of a world that we eventually come to reflect. Experiences become knowledge, and both are inseparable from our bodies, language, and way of life. This provides insight into the statement that "(traditional knowledge) is not really 'knowledge' at all; it's more a way of life" (Kluane First Nation member quoted in Nadasdy 2003:63). The issue that Nadasdy (and his Kluane colleagues) seem to want emphasized is that to the Kluane people, hunting is a way of life, and that hunting consists of everything from the first thoughts about when to start, through the kill and the ultimate preparation, on to ultimate allotment of the "meat" that is gathered as a part of the hunting process (Pierotti 2011). Salmón is making a similar argument by contending that our foods, our language, and our ways of understanding are closely tied to the places where we live and the experiences we have in those places.

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