

The Sweetgrass Meaning of Solidarity

Four hundred ninety-nine years and a few days after the invasion began, I light a stalk of sage and watch the fast way it burns. The burning sage glows red. A cloud of smoke burns my eyes, blurring my vision. Smoke enters my nostrils. The burning smell clears my head. For a moment, the blurring, burning cloud hides the other cloud. "The stink hiding the sun," Cree poet Joy Harjo calls it.

500 Years of Resistance

Under the sage cloud, I smell strength. I breathe clear, clean air. I touch five centuries of invisibility that refuses to vanish. Sage gives me power – for a moment. Then the cloud is gone and the other smell returns. My smudge pot is black from the ashes of the sage stalk now consumed.

I reach for a braid of sweetgrass, the medicine that does not light easily nor burn fast. The sweetgrass smell works slowly, moving from my nostrils into my mind, arriving before announcing itself. In it, I see a wisp, not quite invisible. And I smell a different strength – a patient strength. The smell lingers amid other smells, 499 years and a few days after the invasion.

Soon, 499 will be 500. The US Quincentenary Jubilee Commission will spend \$80 million dollars to celebrate five centuries of attempted genocide and cultural imperialism.

Countries around the world will celebrate five centuries in which Europeans first

exploited native peoples' land and labour, then violated the dignity of humans around the globe, exploiting them as slaves, then cheap labour, to fuel arrogant greed.

The sage calls me to respond, to organize people to express indignation, to stand and say, "500 years and we are still

here. We have never given up and never will!" The sage makes me want to tell others to organize protests, anything to disrupt this self-congratulatory party. Then I smell the sweetgrass and sense that other strength.

Its lingering smell reminds me that the celebration is one moment in a 500-year party that Indian people have hosted, a party for which Indian people have done all the work. That longer party will continue long after the celebration is over. Sweetgrass patience tells me to balance my indignation with the kind of work that will give us all something to celebrate the next time one of these anniversaries comes along. When 1992 is over, what will we have done to bring an end to the longer party?

That is the question I smell when I burn sweetgrass. This 500th anniversary has been an opportunity for American Indian people from North, South and Central America and the Caribbean to ask questions about our future, and it has been an opportunity to celebrate our survival and our resistance. It has been an opportunity for us to acknowledge that ours is not the only story of survival and resistance.

Amid talk of coalitions, movements and solidarity, we have hoped that people will stand with us as the original people whose story is the beginning point of five cen-

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turies of resistance to oppression in these Americas, able to speak for ourselves and to articulate our own agenda for a just and peaceful future. Yet we are always in danger of being nothing more than a symbolic presence – the “poster children” of 1992.

As we make our plans and try to work together sweetgrass is an invitation to reflect on what solidarity with American Indian people means in 1992 and beyond. But, I should warn you, sweetgrass demands patience.

This summer, I was one of approximately 350 Indian people – including Yanomamis, Mapuches, Kumas, Quechuas, Caribs, Navajos, Hopis, Lummis, Lumbees, Osages, Inuits, Crees, and Seminoles – from North, South and Central America and the Caribbean who met in Ecuador for the first ever intercontinental encounter of American Indians. The theme was “500 Years of Indigenous Resistance.”

Working commissions developed statements concerning human rights, self-determination, and land claims. We heard a lot of speeches, wrote a lot of statements and manifestoes, and drove a couple dozen translators to exhaustion. In our final statement, “The Declaration of Quito,” we committed ourselves to international indigenous solidarity in confronting the quincentenary.

Our coming together was a fulfilment of prophecy. The Runa people of Mexico believe that the indigenous people of the Americas were divided long ago in two groups – people of the Eagle (those of the north) and people of the Condor (those of the South). When the Eagle and the Condor rejoin their tears, the Runa story goes, a new era of life and spirit will begin for American Indian people.

We fulfilled the prophecy at dawn of the first morning when Rose Augér and Ed Burnstick, Cree people from North America, led us in a pipe ceremony. We gathered around a blazing fire in cold, mountain air. Some Peruvians offered coca leaves to the fire to symbolize our unity. Rose and Ed passed a lighted braid of sweetgrass to people to come forward to offer prayers.

The local press attended the ceremony and called it a pagan rite that “evoked many gods.” The Baptist owners of the campsite were more than a little dismayed that their name would be linked with something pagan. Conference organizers discussed discontinuing the ceremonies due to the negative reactions.

But as Burnstick said, “We don’t just decide on our own. Rose is guided by the grandfathers. I think we have to follow our spiritual leaders and be willing to come out and do the ceremonies for our people and for the conference.” We continued the ceremony and kept the fire burning until the meeting was over.

In Quito, and in a North American follow-up meeting over the Columbus Day holiday weekend in Minneapolis, we

committed ourselves to two things. First, whatever else happens, we want 1992 primarily to be an opportunity to mobilize American Indian communities for long-range, constructive political action.

For instance, we were told at the Minneapolis meeting how Anishinabe organizers at White Earth in Minnesota are raising funds, pursuing legal strategies, and employing media in their campaign to recover tribal land that federal, state and county governments now hold. The year 1992 is an opportunity for them to bring increased public attention to their efforts and make land recovery a major state issue. Others discussed plans to organize in local communities around issues of religious freedom, protection of sacred sites and economic development.

We also discussed events and protests that will draw attention to American Indian issues. The International Indian Treaty Council will have its annual gathering in the Black Hills of South Dakota in June 1992. Indian organizations in San Francisco, New York and Minneapolis will coordinate responses to major quincentenary celebrations.

In the United States and Canada many groups see the quincentenary as an opportunity to create new movement toward fundamental social change. In South and Central America, the various popular movements are planning to stage major disruptions of government celebrations.

The second commitment made in Quito and Minneapolis was to resist non-Indian groups that attempt to exploit Indian people in 1992. In Latin America, Indian people have historically been a major factor in popular movements. They have laid down their lives on the front lines of revolutionary struggles but have benefited least when revolutions were successful. Their demands for self-determination and land rights have been dismissed, ignored or forgotten.

In the last 25 years, Indian people in the South have started their own political organizations out of their suspicions of popular movements, including liberation theology. In Nicaragua, for instance, the Miskito people have worked toward autonomous status. In Quito a Miskito delegate said, “Because of the Sandinistas we achieved autonomy, but our autonomy is in danger because of the new government. They are creating government offices that obstruct our work. But we are clear about our destiny and we will only take political positions that support our people. We won’t be a tool of someone else.”

Tensions between indigenous and popular movements are not keeping Indians and non-Indians from working together in the South in response to the quincentenary. Important work has come from unified analyses of racism by indigenous people and African people of the Americas. The tensions remain, though, presenting the popular movement with new demands from Indian people for cultural and political autonomy. “We should never commit ourselves to powers that will endanger our identity,” one Guatemalan del-

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The situation in the United States and Canada differs from that in the South insofar as many groups see 1992 as an opportunity to initiate some kind of broad based movement for fundamental social change. As Philip Tatjitsu Nash said in a recent Clergy and Laity Concerned newsletter, "This Quincentenary possibly provides progressives with our best opportunity since the Vietnam war to come together in a forward-looking, broad-based coalition. This is an issue that has something for everyone."

Working in coalitions like Nash describes is easy for no one, but it has always presented Indian people with special difficulties, both in the North and the South. Our primary focus as Indian people must be on establishing our right to a land base and a cultural and political status distinct from non-natives. As Ed Burnstick said in Quito, "We (the Cree) see ourselves as a nation with our own culture, government, and we won't allow Canada to call us ethnic, a minority or a class."

To realize our greatest hopes, fundamental change will have to take place, but Indian people have neither the numbers nor the resources to influence coalitions like our sisters and brothers in the South. As 1992 approaches, Indian people are finding our own power and our own voices. The quincentenary is a rare opportunity to speak for ourselves and bring the issues most important to us to the attention of people around the world.

Since the 16th century, Indian people have been surrounded by paternalistic mythology, getting lost in someone else's agenda. Within a few years of the invasion, Indians were a hot topic of political battles in Europe. People on one side described Indian people as savage brutes who deserved to be exploited, tortured, and exterminated. People on the other side described Indian people in glowing Utopian terms and held Spain in contempt for its cruelty and injustice.

But these battles were always about Europe. The Spanish had finally expelled the last of the Muslims in 1492 and found in the Americas a way to reassert themselves through discovery and conquest. The English, on the other hand, published accounts of Spanish cruelty and injustice to fuel their anti-Spain propaganda machine. The church in Rome used New World evangelism as a way to divert attention away from its crumbling European authority. Protestants and reformers, on the other hand, pointed to the conquest as evidence of papist evil and decadence.

The same kind of battles have continued ever since — in Puritan New England, the winning of the West, Hollywood westerns, the environmental movement, and New Age spirituality. Indian people are forever being discovered and rediscovered, being surrounded by thicker and thicker layers of mythology. And every generation predicts our inevitable and tragic disappearance.

After five centuries, Indian people are still here, resisting and surviving in whatever ways we can. We have been joined in that story by non-native people, such as 16th century priest and historian Bartolomé de las Casas, who spent their lives doing what they could to stand with the Indian people in protecting land, culture, and human dignity. Las Casas and his comrades renounced their economic and evangelistic privilege in order to prove to themselves and to Indian people that they could live peacefully and respectfully.

The year 1992 can be a time for all of us to begin learning how to be in solidarity with each other, mutually empowering our struggles for justice and peace. If we can stand together in defiance of the self-congratulatory celebrations, perhaps we will see the way toward standing together in constructive praxis, respect and hope for all humanity.

Within the informal network of Indians in North America, we are working hard to find ways out of the mythological nightmare. At the same time, we are committed to keeping any individual or group from using the quincentenary as a way of exclusively advancing their own agenda or ideology. Many of us are also committed to finding ways to be inclusive of others, especially African Americans, whose middle-passage of slavery and resistance began not long after ours. As one person at the Minneapolis meeting said: "No one owns 1992."

At the closing session of the Quito *encuentro*, Rose Augér spoke for the North American delegation, saying, "I am glad we can come together, North and South. It is in our prophecies. We are strong people. We are going to continue coming together in a strong way. People need to learn how to live again and help each other so we won't die at the hands of what has been oppressing us for 500 years. I plead with you that all of us learn to live in a harmonious way. I bless all of you who are here in a sacred manner. All my relations!"

When the encuentro was over, Indian people at a village called Huaycopungo feasted our coming together. From paper bags, we ate a dinner of goat, roasted corn, potatoes and salsa. We walked together to a hacienda Indians recently took over for themselves. We laughed across languages. We gathered in a public field for speeches, our numbers having grown to 3,000 or so, raising our fists and yelling "Viva!" whenever appropriate and sometimes when it wasn't.

All night long we danced. Terengo bands from around the continent played songs of love and heartbreak. Even when I awoke the next morning, frozen to the bone at 6 a.m., three bands were still playing and people were still dancing.

In the midst of the speeches and the dancing, some of us from North America borrowed a drum and got permission to

sing. We stood on the crowded stage of orators and musicians, waiting for our turn. Someone had lit some sage to bless the drum and our singing, and I knew then we would be doing an honour song. We passed the burning sage around, clearing our minds in its cloud.

Soon, we stepped forward to sing. The drummers began the slow, persistent beat of a Plains honour song that I did not know. Eugene Hasgood, a Diné (Navajo) man who lives on Big Mountain in Arizona, stretched his throat, tilted his head and sang the first phrase, alone, in a face-contorting high pitch. "Way yah hey way yah hi yah." Two more men joined him at his pitch, and then all of us joined them in whatever octave was comfortable. Some of the women added high-pitched trills — we call it *lu-lu-ing* on the southern plains.

When the beginning came around again, I tilted my head, stretched my throat, and added my voice after Eugene's first phrase. We sang through the song more times than I remember, each time gaining power and strength. I stood mesmerized by the sight of strong hands and muscular forearms beating drumsticks against the drum, beating out the earth's pulse.

After the song, I left the stage and walked to the back of the crowd. I saw a non-Indian friend and asked how people had responded to the honour song. Most Indians from the south had never heard our music. My friend told me that they seemed to enjoy it a lot. I mentioned what a great job Eugene had done leading the song. She agreed and said the men who joined him on the second phrase were also very good. I smiled. She didn't know I was one of the people she was complimenting, but she had heard my voice.

Before 1492 and every year since, Indian people have been singing songs and burning sage and sweetgrass, whether people hear their voices or not. After the quincentenary, Indian people will be singing songs and burning sage and sweetgrass, hearing and seeing what is on the other side of "the stink hiding the sun."

As 1992 approaches, clouds of sage smoke will be visible wherever people gather to crash the colonial party. The sweetgrass will not be so easy to find. The sweetgrass is what will linger after the countercelebrations and protests are over.

And if you listen closely, you will hear the music — the slow patient drumbeat and the stretched-neck strains. When you do, join the circle, listen to the sounds, and smell the smells. And if someone invites you to add your voice, by all means sing. ♦

Robert Allen Warrior is a member of the Osage nation and a doctoral candidate at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

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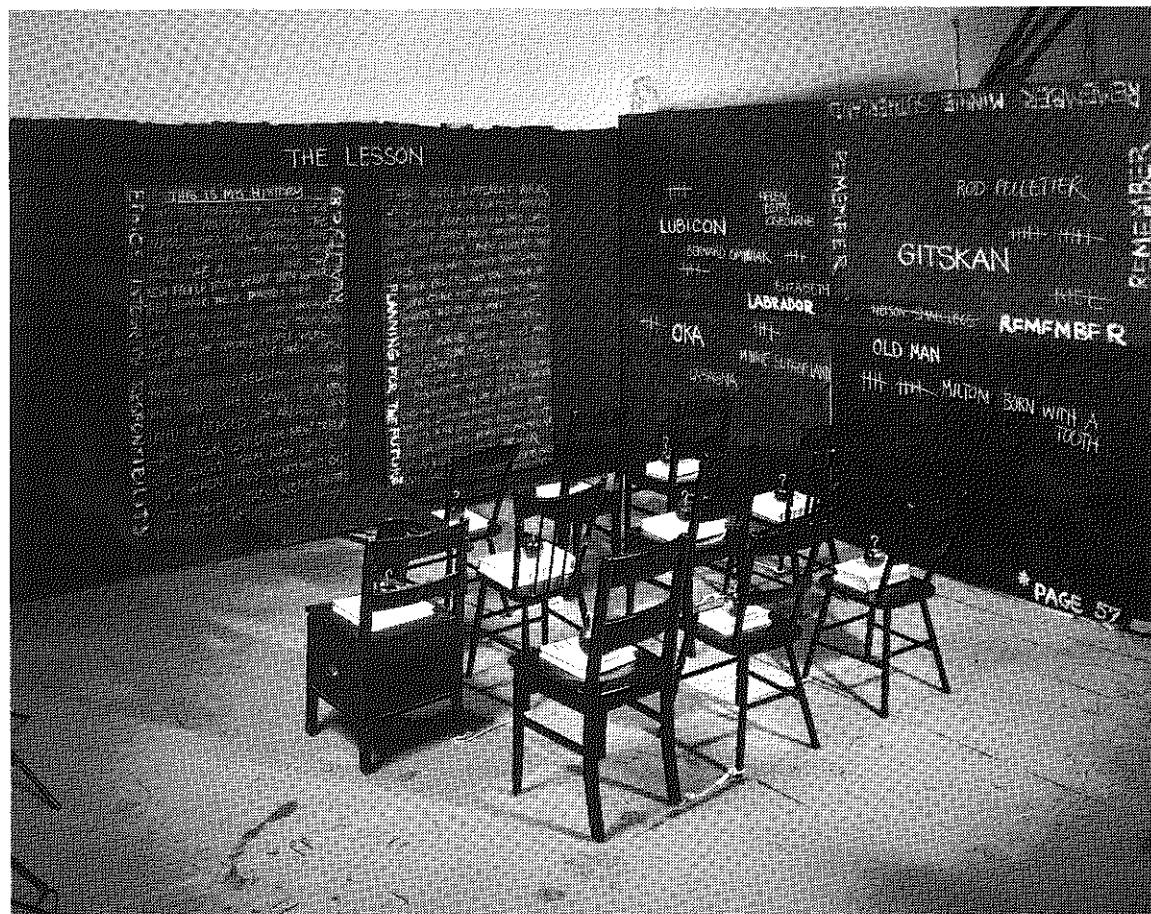
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Joane Cardinal-Schubert
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