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# Unlocking the Songs: Marcie Rendon's Indigenous Critique of Frances Densmore's Native Music Collecting

Gretchen Peters

Marcie Rendon's play *SongCatcher: A Native Interpretation of the Story of Frances Densmore* resists ethnographer Frances Densmore's appropriation of and intervention in the transmission of hundreds of traditional American Indian songs.<sup>1</sup> Densmore (1867–1957) believed that “preservation” of these songs through recordings and transcriptions would be meaningful for Native people in a future time when they would not be so busy “with the new life.”<sup>2</sup> *SongCatcher* critiques Densmore's attempt to be the keeper of these songs for both the indigenous and academic worlds, and denies the value of her nonindigenous voice in the transmission of Native culture. Through experiences and perspectives of characters both historical and fictional, the theatrical medium allows the characters' traditional indigenous belief systems to directly confront and envelop Densmore's perspectives and working methods, with the result that the audience encounters the personal impact of Densmore's work on indigenous individuals and communities. By creating an indigenous framework with the focus on individual experience, Rendon's *SongCatcher* serves as a strong antidote to Densmore's work and to the strong praise it has received in the academic community.

The purpose of this article is to identify the indigenous critique of Frances Densmore's work in *SongCatcher* and, closely examining how Rendon's theatrical techniques structure the play's multifaceted critique, contextualize it by citing related writings of Densmore as historical sources.<sup>3</sup> After offering background on Rendon, Densmore, and *SongCatcher*, I address various aspects of Rendon's critique of Densmore, in particular how integrating physical and spiritual realities, incorporating

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musical performances, and focusing on the multifaceted impact on Native individuals all combine to deny the importance of Frances Densmore's work in the preservation of these songs.

Marcie Rendon is a freelance creative writer originally from White Earth Anishinaabe Nation in Minnesota, a community in which Frances Densmore did some of her most extensive song collecting. Rendon's writings have been recognized with diverse awards, and include numerous plays, poems, and children's stories, as well as journalism.<sup>4</sup> At the community level she encourages the creation of Native theater by providing workshops.<sup>5</sup> In part by giving "voice to characters often silenced," many of her works approach "art as social activism," in which Native-centered issues such as identity appropriation are developed.<sup>6</sup> Rendon's writing references the theater's potential to offer visibility to silenced communities when she asks, "Can you believe you exist if you look in a mirror and see no reflection?"<sup>7</sup> In preparing to write *SongCatcher*, Rendon reviewed extensive materials concerning Densmore, and chose to challenge a common perspective of Densmore as a hero.<sup>8</sup> Rendon notes, "While much has been written about Frances Densmore, there are few, if any, written accounts of the impact Frances's work had on Native people of the continent."<sup>9</sup>

Frances Densmore spent most of her life recording, transcribing, and studying songs from Native communities throughout North America and remains one of the most prolific collectors of American Indian music. Densmore had a strong grounding in Western music, as she studied piano, organ, and harmony at the prestigious Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Perhaps influenced by her periodic exposure to American Indian song while growing up in Red Wing, Minnesota, after graduation she immersed herself in reports on American Indian music, including the seminal work *A Study of Omaha Indian Music* by Alice Fletcher, who became a major influence on Densmore's career.<sup>10</sup> Relying solely on secondary readings, Densmore began lecturing on American Indian music before conducting field work, which she began in 1901 near Red Wing. With her 1905 visit to White Earth and Grand Portage in Minnesota, Densmore embarked on what would become one of her most extensive and respected studies, *Chippewa Music*, which focused on the music of the Ojibwe in Wisconsin and Minnesota and included nearly five hundred songs from forty-five singers on six reservations.<sup>11</sup> Although the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology never hired Densmore as a regular staff member, the BAE did offer her grants, the title of Collaborator, and an office. They also published thirteen monographs by Densmore on music of the "Chippewa, Teton Sioux, Ute, Mandan, Pawnee, Menominee, Yaqui, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Nootka" as well as many other smaller studies.<sup>12</sup> By the end of her career, Densmore had recorded 3,500 songs on wax cylinder and transcribed 2,500 of them.

The voluminous and comprehensive nature of Densmore's work has received extensive praise in the academic world for its value in preserving large repertoires for use by both musicologists and people with a personal interest in Native music. At the time of her death in 1957, many academics shared Densmore's perspective that she was preserving a disappearing culture. Gertrude Kurath, for example, wrote, "Musicians, ethnologists, and ethnomusicologists owe her a great debt for her full

records of a vanishing culture.”<sup>13</sup> A generation later, Thomas Vennum, an ethnomusicologist attached to the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage who has published extensively on Ojibwe culture and music, praised the vast size of her recording collection, noting that it saved songs “from certain oblivion” and has allowed for extensive comparative and historical studies.<sup>14</sup> Academics continue to emphasize the practical value of her large body of recordings. Stephen Smith, the author of Minnesota Public Radio’s 1994 documentary *Frances Densmore: Song Catcher*—which Rendon clearly references—hails her “preservation” of such a large repertoire as a “remarkable legacy.”<sup>15</sup> Emphasizing the value of Densmore’s work for Natives, Joan Jensen, an historian who taught at the University of New Mexico, concludes, “Native people realized that such a collaborator could help them retain what they needed and wanted as they faced long odds against maintaining their traditions.”<sup>16</sup>

Set in a contemporary inner city in Minnesota, *SongCatcher* revolves around a young Ojibwe man, Jack, who is on a quest to learn traditional Ojibwe songs. At the beginning of the play, Jack has turned to the recordings and writings of Densmore to learn traditional songs, as Jack’s family had been separated from its Ojibwe traditions. Jack’s girlfriend Chris, who grew up surrounded by Native ways, works to convince Jack that Densmore’s recordings are not an appropriate way to learn music. Throughout the play, the character of Spirit Woman tries “to reach through to Jack to give him ‘his song,’” but he is unable to hear it. In the first act, for example, Jack is aware of Spirit Woman’s presence, but yet cannot hear her over his parents’ encouragement to focus on his homework and football. In the second act, tensions rise as figures from past and present physical and spiritual worlds collide with greater confrontation.

Frances Densmore herself becomes a prominent figure in the play: at the beginning of act II, Densmore’s dress is hanging over the door of the couple’s apartment as the ethnographer comes in and condescendingly informs Chris that she could instruct her on Ojibwe culture. As Chris becomes more uncomfortable with Densmore’s intrusion into their home and lives, Jack bristles under Chris’s criticisms and their relationship becomes increasingly tense. Spirit Woman, striving harder to connect with Jack, appears behind a casino counter, at the corner store, and everywhere that Jack goes. Despite Spirit Woman’s efforts, by the end of the act Jack is playing Densmore’s transcriptions of Indian melodies on a keyboard. In the final act, an elder, Bill, performs a ceremony in the apartment to help Jack remember Spirit Woman’s song and to help Chris restore order in their lives. Tensions resolve as Jack plans to return Densmore’s book to the library and pay his overdue fine.

Throughout *SongCatcher*, Rendon interweaves spiritual and physical realities in historical and contemporary settings to create an indigenous framework that directly counters the value of Densmore’s work. As Rendon explains, “Almost all of what I write involves the interweaving of Native people’s spiritual reality coexisting alongside present-time physical reality. This concept is based on the real-life belief systems of indigenous people that exist as vibrantly today as in the past.”<sup>17</sup> The play’s interconnections between physical and spiritual worlds are created by various means. In the opening vignette, set in the nineteenth century, the centrality of the spirit world is immediately emphasized with Spirit Woman singing songs to people as they sleep

in an Ojibwe encampment. In Chris and Jack's contemporary home, an open copy of Densmore's *Chippewa Music* is the gateway that allows Frances and her sister Maggie to become disruptive physical presences. As Jack sings "old songs" from Densmore's recordings, images of the original singers are projected on the theater walls to juxtapose these two worlds. Additionally, Rendon's casting directions specify that actors play multiple characters, which form further interconnections. The actor portraying Bill also plays "an elder from the past," and the actor playing Jack also plays an Ojibwe man who sings a sacred song to Densmore and the Apache chief, Geronimo. Some scenes are staged simultaneously, emphasizing the interconnectedness of people, places, and times.

By means of this theatrical interweaving of spiritual and physical realities, Rendon rejects the common scholarly assertion that books and recordings are important sources for Native songs, contending that such collection only interferes with the oral tradition. Jack is certain during much of *SongCatcher* that *Chippewa Music* will serve him well in acquiring a greater knowledge of traditional Ojibwe music. When Chris suggests that Jack should learn from Bill, a friend and elder, he responds, "Well, I'm glad she wrote these things down. I try to learn and no one will even talk to me. If they do talk, it's just in riddles. Even though Bill speaks English, sometimes I can't understand a thing he says. Or else he tells me I'll dream about it when I'm ready to know it. I'd have to sleep ten years in order to learn what I've already learned from this book."<sup>18</sup> Chris retorts, "It's not Instant Culture, Jack, you can't pour it out of a box, add water, and poof!—Instant Indian. There's traditional ways you learn these things."<sup>19</sup> As Jack continues to read the book, Densmore's work distracts him from hearing Spirit Woman's songs and from seeking out Bill's knowledge. Densmore's ethnographic work has interfered with the formation of communal bonds and the connection to the spiritual realm, which are essential for Jack to overcome alienation from Ojibwe culture.

*SongCatcher* incorporates performances of diverse music, including old traditional Ojibwe songs, contemporary 49 songs, and a traditional Dakota love song on the wooden flute. In a further critique of Densmore's work, Rendon's indigenous framework embeds the music into the unfolding drama, which challenges the value of music collected and extracted from its broader context. For example, the opening of act I begins in a Dakota encampment as it celebrates a hunting party's return with music, dance, and storytelling, followed by Bill and Jack singing 49 songs together. Moreover, Spirit Woman encourages children to listen for songs carried by the wind, emphasizing the close integration of music into the broader environment, and Old Man Spirit directly questions, "What good is the wind if caught in a box?"<sup>20</sup> In part of the commentary on the play, Rendon explains, "Historically our storytellers sang, danced, and mimed the history of our peoples in the center of the village. I strive as creator and writer for the same integration my ancestors had of dialogue, music and movement by using the modern stage and tools of the playwright."<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, Densmore developed a working method that, in focusing on transcribing, analyzing, and describing the melodic content of songs, extracted the music from its original context. Indeed, in advice to a novice collector, Densmore insists on the importance of extracting music from its original context and placing tight controls

on the performance, which often took place at the office of a government official. Her advice begins, “The psychology of managing the Indians so as to secure the best songs, sung in the desired manner, is the most important factor in the work, in my opinion. I will take pleasure in giving you the benefit of my experience in this regard.”<sup>22</sup> She continues, “The singer must never be allowed to think that he is in charge of the work. A strict hold must be kept on him.” Her recording process likely contributed to the detached descriptions of the music: the heavy wax cylinder recording equipment required frequent winding-up, and placement of the horn directly in front of the singer prevented songs from being recorded in their usual performance context.<sup>23</sup> Limited by the recording equipment and motivated by her desire to capture the melody, Densmore asserted broad control over the singers and performance environment.<sup>24</sup>

Her recording and transcribing did not strive to capture the song realistically, but rather to preserve the melody.<sup>25</sup> To this end, instruments and group performances were not allowed in her recordings; articulations, musical gestures, and final pitches were omitted from her transcriptions; and rhythms and pitches were altered to conform to Western systems of notation.

Likewise, Densmore’s narratives provide an empirical description of the melodic content and function for each collected song, but only rarely include commentary about the recording process or insight into the singer’s life, experiences, or character. As Bruce White writes in a recent essay on Densmore’s photographs, “Densmore’s work shares many of the strengths and weaknesses of some of the era’s anthropology, which is rich in the record of cultural traditions but thin when it comes to the individual stories of the people who informed her account of those traditions.”<sup>26</sup>

*SongCatcher’s* theatrical context allows for a focus on the experiences of individuals, and specifically the impact of Densmore’s work on these individuals. Jack’s personal struggles with cultural identity and its complex relationship to Densmore’s work is a central theme. As Jaye Darby puts it, Jack undergoes an “epistemological and spiritual struggle” throughout the play.<sup>27</sup> Struggling to feel accepted and comfortable as a Native person, Jack complains to Chris, “Every time I turn around, I gotta prove how Indian I am.”<sup>28</sup> Jack turns to *Chippewa Music* with its hundreds of traditional songs, including sacred Midé songs, dream songs, war songs, love songs, moccasin-game songs, woman’s dance songs, and others. He quickly becomes enamored with the idea of learning these old songs and feels that he has found what he has been missing. In the opening scene, Jack says to Bill, “I was thinkin it might be cool to learn this older version—show up them boys from Ponemah. Crank out the really old version up at Leech Lake powwow.”<sup>29</sup> Bill tells Jack to leave those songs alone and instead to look for a song within himself. Jack doubts whether this is possible, as he grew up with his family listening to Hank Williams and Charlie Pride. Describing this negative legacy of Densmore’s work, Rendon wrote in the introduction to the play, “The underlying message is that the real songs are locked up in Washington D.C., instead of in the hearts and spirits of Native people themselves. It is a systematic erosion of a people’s belief in themselves, their own history, and their very existence as a living, breathing, modern people.”<sup>30</sup>

The play explores the ramifications of assimilation policies for later generations and Densmore's connections to them. In part Jack struggles to reconnect with his Ojibwe background because his grandparents "were beat in boarding school to forget this stuff."<sup>31</sup> When Spirit Woman is discouraged by her inability to connect with Jack, Old Man Spirit consoles her by emphasizing the strength of indigenous people in the face of assimilation policies. Indirectly, Old Man Spirit implicates Densmore in "locking up" Jack's soul: "They took our teachings and locked them up. They took our people away from the natural world. Boarding schools. Prisons, adoptive families. They try to lock up the souls of our people."<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Rendon emphasizes Densmore's adherence to assimilation policies' underlying ideologies. For example, Densmore's character refers to American Indian culture in a condescending manner, dismissing musical traditions as "most primitive sounds" and harshly denigrates Native spiritual beliefs, saying, "These Indians are nothing but a bunch of schizophrenic . . . crazies—with all their mystical . . . spirit . . . magic."<sup>33</sup>

In real life, as in the play, Densmore's rhetoric characterized Native Americans as children who needed her protection and often revealed a patronizing attitude toward the communities with which she worked. For example, Densmore's tone both romanticizes and patronizes White Earth when she describes the community after a celebration: "yet in forgetfulness of the past and without fear of the future the little village slept."<sup>34</sup> Densmore's own writings emphasize her loyalty to the government and insist that Natives benefited greatly from its policies. Densmore sought to preserve indigenous songs not as cultural elements integral to the preservation of active communities, but rather as historical artifacts. Explaining why she was recording songs that the Office of Indian Affairs had forbidden, Densmore wrote, "I want to keep these things for you, just as you keep valuable things for a child until he grows up."<sup>35</sup>

Like so much work conducted for the Bureau of American Ethnology in the early-twentieth century, Densmore's work stems from a belief that Native American music reflects an earlier stage of human development. Motivated to gain insights into the evolutionary process of music, Densmore sought to identify similar musical patterns in social groups deemed "uncivilized."<sup>36</sup> She never questioned evolutionary theories to which she was initially exposed by the Bureau of American Ethnology despite a growing body of ethnographic work based on concepts of cultural relativity.<sup>37</sup> At least early in her career, Densmore believed that American Indians preferred the sound of their melodies with full harmonic settings and subconsciously had a sense of "correct harmony," writing, "Intuitively the Indian sought, and was not satisfied, until he was given harmonic progressions not unlike those which delight the highest artistic taste of the white race."<sup>38</sup>

For *SongCatcher's* audience, Jack's efforts to connect with traditional Ojibwe culture become increasingly troubling as we watch Jack engaging in appropriation and pursuing a westernized version of "Indianness" that was taught at boarding schools. The audience can hear the contrast between the original indigenous songs as they are sung by Spirit Woman and elders and Densmore's westernized transcriptions as they are performed by Jack and Densmore. In some scenes a young Frances tries to make the piano sound like the drum and later plays songs at the piano. Jack is heard singing



these transcriptions at various times, but also plays them at the keyboard. These scenes allude to a large body of compositions based on Native melodies that date from the beginning of the twentieth century. The audience is also confronted with Jack's unintentional appropriation of songs, as in the opening scene when Jack wants to perform an old Red Lake song. In another scene, Jack paints Midé drawings from Densmore's *Chippewa Music* on his drum, but Chris insists that Jack remove them as they are not intended for the public. Chris warns Jack, "I don't think it's right that she wrote all this down. And it makes me nervous that you even have it here. Who knows what kind of spirits you're inviting in."<sup>39</sup> In trying to connect with traditional Ojibwe practices, Jack participates in appropriation and false representations of Native culture.

By weaving actual individuals who recorded songs for Densmore into *SongCatcher*, Rendon provides examples of how Densmore's work had negative effects on individual singers, their families, and communities. One briefly mentioned individual, Odjib'we from White Earth, was eighty-nine years old when he recorded more than seventy songs; he died while Densmore was working on *Chippewa Music*. Densmore clearly respected Odjib'we. She described him in her book as "the last great warrior of the Mississippi Band of Chippewa in Minnesota" and noted that he still possessed "a voice of unusual strength and sweetness." She wrote, "Many of the songs herein preserved were known only to him. He stood alone, his preeminence unquestioned by his tribe throughout northern Minnesota. . . . May he rest in peace."<sup>40</sup> Most of the songs that Odjib'we sang for Densmore were tied to the customs of warfare, though one song was a dream song, a personal song given to an individual by a spirit which holds great personal significance and power.

The "elder from the past" in Rendon's play, a part she assigns to the actor who plays the modern character of Bill, warns that singing sacred songs for Densmore places the individual and the whole community in danger. This elder points out that Odjib'we was buried "a year to the day after he gave up his most sacred possession, his song. To her."<sup>41</sup> In *Chippewa Music's* description of this particular dream song, Densmore added some rare commentary that offers insights into the man's misgivings: "After recording of this song on the phonograph the aged warrior bowed his head and said tremulously that he feared he would not live long, as he had given away his most sacred possession."<sup>42</sup> Despite this acknowledgment of Odjib'we's reaction, Densmore treats it like all other songs in her study and provides both a transcription and a description of it.

In the play's brief reference to Odjib'we, Rendon frames Densmore's work as being in tension with customs surrounding the private and sacred nature of the dream song and raises issues of appropriation, as well as questioning Densmore's impact on this respected elder. Densmore was aware of the importance placed upon music in the Native communities in which she worked and was also aware some Natives expressed "deep foreboding" about recording sacred songs, but still chose to pursue this repertoire.<sup>43</sup> Densmore would offer as much as seven dollars for a sacred song—significantly more than her typical payment of only twenty-five cents per song. She specifically sought out sacred music when working on *Chippewa Music*; the book contains over one hundred and fifty Midé and dream songs.



In a scene set in an Ojibwe encampment, a character named Main'gans appears, at the end of the play. Main'gans, another actual Ojibwe man who recorded two songs for Densmore's *Chippewa Music* when living at White Earth, is identified in the play as a "Midé man who sings his songs for Frances and as a consequence is banned from the Midé lodge and his wife dies."<sup>44</sup> Rendon's stage directions assign the parts of both Jack and Main'gans to the same actor, which emphasizes the characters' similar, receptive attitudes towards Densmore's work. Rendon then deploys this casting technique in order to emphasize an opposing indigenous view: the actor playing Bill again appears as an elder from the past, but this time to warn Main'gans. Reminding Main'gans that the sacred songs from the Midé ceremonies were intended to be kept secret, the elder warns him that if he sings them for Densmore, he will not be able to enter the lodge again.<sup>45</sup> In the play's staging of the recording session, after Main'gans sings one song Densmore pressures him to sing more—specifically, a Midé song. After he acquiesces, in an act of protest the elders one by one turn their backs on him. By the end of this scene, time has elapsed; Main'gans' wife has now died, and Midé elders are preparing her body for burial. Main'gans confronts Densmore's character, saying, "You! I let you take my songs and now the spirits have taken my wife. My songs, my wife, my religion. You took them all."<sup>46</sup>

Typically, in *Chippewa Music* Densmore offers analytical descriptions of both the love song and Midé song that Main'gans sang for her, but includes nothing about their interactions surrounding the recording session. However, approximately thirty years later she provides an account of her interaction with Main'gans in the *Smithsonian Annual Report* of 1941. She indicates that Main'gans was banned from entering the lodge for Midé meetings at White Earth, not because he recorded songs for her, but rather because he had performed Midé songs for people in Washington, DC. She insists, "The Indians did not blame me, and the responsibility was placed entirely upon him and the other Chippewa who took part, but the regret remained." Then, in a statement that seems to contradict the large number of Midé songs in the book, she writes, "For that reason I have often refused to take material that is surrounded by superstition. I tell the Indians that I am trying to preserve the material so their children will understand the old customs, and that I do not want them to worry or be unhappy after I have gone. Sometimes this allays their fears and they are willing to talk freely, but I would rather miss some information than cause such distress as that of my old friend, Maingans, the Chippewa."<sup>47</sup>

Near the end of act II, a brief vignette builds on the rising tensions of a scene in which Densmore has been confronted by Windgrow, a Dakota man who is critical of both her professional intentions and working methods. In the vignette that follows that confrontation, another Native voice challenges the value of Densmore's work as "preserving" a vanishing culture—that of Geronimo, the famous Apache chief. As a prisoner of war from 1886 until his death in 1909, Geronimo opted to be showcased at fairs and parades where he would sell autographs and photographs, such as the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. This scene takes place during the fair in Chris and Jack's Chicago apartment, where Geronimo is busy working with his hands and singing the song that Spirit Woman has been singing to Jack. Geronimo's singing clearly alludes to

*SongCatcher's* opening scene, in which Chris asked Jack to turn off the tape player with Densmore's recordings because she disliked "the idea of some dead guy singing in my living room."<sup>48</sup> As the stage directions describe, Densmore now attempts to intervene in the transmission of Geronimo's sacred song: "Frances looks, acts fearful of him at first, but then secretly steps behind him and begins writing his song in a notebook she is carrying." Geronimo stands and responds, "How dare you try to steal my soul?"<sup>49</sup> Geronimo's voice openly resists Densmore as he emphasizes the spiritual nature of the song and the inappropriateness of her actions. Because Spirit Woman repeatedly offers the same song to Jack in the play, and the audience now sees Geronimo transmitting it to Jack, Densmore's collecting is noticeably unnecessary to preserve the song. Rather, her interference prevents Jack from hearing it.

An account by Densmore published in the *Indian School Journal* in April, 1906, describes such an interaction with Geronimo and confirms both his reluctance to sing her a song and her willingness to defy his wishes. As in the play, Densmore became afraid of Geronimo after requesting to hear him sing: "There was a flash in the old eyes behind the steel-rimmed spectacles, a slight drawing up of the aged figure and I confess to a feeling of relief when the crowd swallowed me up." In a rare display of her thinking process, she reveals

"Nevertheless," said I, "He Geronimo shall be conquered by my craft." At last my day came. He was humming to himself as he worked at an arrow, measuring it carefully by putting it in the crook of his elbow to see if it exactly reached to the tip of his idle finger. Perhaps it was an especially satisfactory arrow and the feeling of it brought back his old life. Whatever may have been the inspiration he was actually singing a song. I slipped into ambush behind him where I would not attract his attention, and noted down his song. He sang it softly but with a particular swing, beating the time with his foot.<sup>50</sup>

Densmore's choice of the word "ambush" acknowledges the aggressive and unwelcome nature of her actions. Nonetheless, Densmore published a transcription of Geronimo's song along with this account. This episode in the play, while brief, effectively reframes the common portrayal of Densmore's work as valuable preservation: through Geronimo's resistant perspective, it is revealed to be obtrusive and disruptive.

Throughout *SongCatcher* Rendon stages diverse resistant reactions on the part of Native American individuals—not only to Densmore's work, but also to assimilation policies. An indirect act of resistance involves a Dakota man, Mr. Windgrow, who fabricates a "healing ceremony" for Densmore in order to receive payment.<sup>51</sup> He tells her, "The song I sold you—it was meaningless." In another scene, which concerns the ongoing performance of prohibited music, Rendon draws attention both to the oppressive nature of the assimilation policies and to resistance to them. Responding to Chris's anger at him for painting his drum with Midé drawings he had copied from Densmore's book, Jack says, "It's just a book, Chris. They're just drawings." Chris then explains, "All this stuff had to go underground. People kept these teachings secret for a long long time because it was dangerous to practice them."<sup>52</sup> Rendon's play further cites the continuing, contemporary resistance to Densmore's work, referring to elders

who want to go to Washington, DC to bring back the recordings, and one particular elder who wants to bury them. Chris suggests that perhaps Jim Northrup, an Ojibwe writer of a humorous political column known as the *Fond du Lac Follies*, should bring them back one by one. After all, Chris says, "He's always talking in his column about bringing pieces of the Smithsonian back in his pockets."<sup>53</sup>

Densmore's writings evidence this resistance from the diverse indigenous communities with which she worked.<sup>54</sup> When describing her working methods in 1943, she fully acknowledges how she purposely anticipated and avoided the concerns of the individuals with whom she worked. She writes, for example, "I always put importance on *quick work*. Often I get my heaviest work done in about four days, before the inevitable opposition has time to organize"; and further, that she needed to immediately demonstrate she was "fully master of the situation."<sup>55</sup> Only after establishing control could she relax a bit. She encountered particular resistance when she tried to record ceremonial songs. She wrote, "I have met with much opposition in securing such songs as these [important ceremonial songs], some of the old men insisting that it were better to let the songs die than to sing them for any fee less than the value of a horse, which was their value in the old days."<sup>56</sup>

Towards the beginning of the play, Chris wonders, "I think those songs are sacred. I don't understand why they let some white women record them."<sup>57</sup> *SongCatcher's* critique of Densmore draws attention to the various reasons why Native individuals chose to perform for her, staging what Densmore's own writings support—that her working methods were manipulative. Rendon offers direct and indirect explanations for why some did choose to sing. A HoChunk man in the play, Mr. Williams, believes the spirits had sent Densmore, and he seems to find value in sharing the songs with people in Washington, DC.<sup>58</sup> Densmore's practice of providing monetary compensation to the singers is pointed out as problematic. In response to Windgrow's criticism, Densmore's character retorts that he did not have to sing and that she paid him well. Windgrow asserts that he did not have much choice, because his family had to eat and the soldiers had killed the buffalo.<sup>59</sup> The play not only characterizes Densmore's bribery, flattery, and cajoling as inappropriate, but further points out that her behavior does not match Native generosity in sharing knowledge: on one occasion, Densmore does not explain the nature of the wax cylinder when a woman asks how the machine learned the song so quickly.<sup>60</sup>

In one example of manipulation evident in Densmore's own writings, her notes show that she recorded a Sun Dance prayer without confirming permission from the singer: "The foregoing prayer was uttered in so low a voice that the phonogram was read with difficulty. It is uncertain whether the aged man, intended that it should be recorded, but as he had seated himself before the phonograph preparatory to singing, it was possible to put the machine in motion without attracting his attention."<sup>61</sup> In another example, in 1914 Densmore met considerable opposition when she went to work with the Uintah and Whiteriver bands of the Northern Utes, and she revealed herself as quite proud of her ability to nullify the resistance. She countered their disapproval of her intentions by playing what she called her "highest trump card," telling them that she was an adopted daughter of Red Fox, a chief at the Lakota Standing

Rock Reservation. Densmore recalls that her words to members of the community were, "My father [Red Fox] would not like the way your men are treating me."<sup>62</sup>

Rendon makes multiple references to Densmore's choice to stay at the mission or close to the agency, but does not directly identify this as a reason why she was able to collect so many songs. Densmore's decision to associate with government officials and other people of power was indeed not only very intentional, but was seen as essential to her success. Describing her thought process in 1943, Densmore wrote, "I always make myself solid with the Agents, the missionary, and the trader as soon as I arrive, the Indians know this, and these are the highest people at the agency. They naturally want to stand well with them, which is an incentive to stand well with me."<sup>63</sup>

Frances Densmore's prolific work, and especially her "preservation" of songs in recordings, continues to receive praise in the academic world.<sup>64</sup> The theatrical medium of Rendon's *SongCatcher* allows for the creation of an indigenous framework from which a powerful critique and statement of resistance to her work can be staged. The integration of physical and spiritual realities, as well as contemporary and historic settings, denies the belief, commonly held in the academic world, that Densmore preserved large repertoires. *SongCatcher's* message is that instead of preserving music, Densmore interfered with its transmission. To stage the play's numerous musical performances so that they remain intact within their broader context calls into question the value of Densmore's isolated and distorted recordings and transcriptions. In this theatrical context the audience can hear for themselves the transformation of music from its original form to a highly distorted westernized aural image of the "Indian." While Frances Densmore's analytical working method marginalizes the Native individual experience and perspective, allowing any individual struggles to remain outside of her historical narrative and the reader to remain unaware of negative ramifications of her work, Rendon's critique foregrounds Native experiences and, in examining Densmore's work through its impact on Native individuals and communities in the past and present, resonates at a powerful level.

## NOTES

As a non-indigenous musicologist who addresses American Indian music in the college classroom, Rendon's *SongCatcher* has provided me with a very welcome text that highlights indigenous voices. The play not only raises a number of important ideas, issues, and examples, but it also provides a framework around which to organize the course. The impact of non-indigenous historical discourse regarding Native communities is an important issue in college classrooms where many instructors are nonindigenous. Rendon's play prompts valuable classroom discussions on the history of ongoing systems of privilege in the academic environment.

1. Marcie Rendon, "SongCatcher: A Native Interpretation of the Story of Frances Densmore," in *Keepers of the Morning Star: An Anthology of Native Women's Theater*, ed. Jaye Darby and Stephanie Fitzgerald (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2003), 2–75. The play premiered in 1998 and was commissioned by The Great American History Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, which has a special interest in exploring diverse experiences in Minnesota's past.

2. John Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879–1934* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 159.

3. To offer multiple indigenous perspectives on Densmore's work is not within the scope of this article. Many indigenous people supported Densmore's work and found value in recording songs and having them sent to Washington, DC. While working on her book *Chippewa Music*, Densmore was greatly aided by members of the prominent Warren family of White Earth who were of French, English, and Ojibwe ancestry. Densmore's principal translator for more than ten years was Mary Warren, the sister of William Warren, author of *History of the Ojibway People* (1885; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1984). Many Native Americans continue to find great value in her work when turning to her recordings to learn songs of past relatives.
4. Jaye T. Darby, "Into the Sacred Circle, Out of the Melting Pot: Re/Locations and Homecomings in Native Women's Theater," in *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom*, ed. Christa Davis Acampora and Angela L. Cotten (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 250.
5. Marcie Rendon, "Theatre in the House/Raving Native Productions," in *Performing Worlds into Being: Native American Women's Theater*, ed. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong, Kelli Lyon Johnson, and William A. Wortman (Oxford, OH: Miami University Press, 2009), 138–42.
6. "Marcie Rendon Feels Compelled to Write; She Aims to Fight Stereotypes," *Star Tribune* (April 22, 1998), 11E; Rendon, "Artist's Statement," *SongCatcher*, 2.
7. Rendon, "Theatre in the House," 138.
8. Janice Command, "Playing It her Way: Marcie Rendon Brings a Native Perspective to the Stage," *The Circle: News from an American Indian Perspective* (April 30, 1998), 12.
9. Rendon, "Playwright's Note," *SongCatcher*, 5.
10. Alice Fletcher, aided by Francis La Flesche, *A Study of Omaha Indian Music* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, 1893).
11. Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Music*, 2 vols. (1910 and 1913; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1973).
12. Charlotte Frisbie, "Women and the Society for Ethnomusicology: Roles and Contributions from Formation through Incorporation (1952/53–1961)," in *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music*, ed. Bruno Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 248; Joan Jensen, "Frances Densmore Gets the Depression Blues," *Minnesota History* 62, no. 6 (2011): 216–27. Examples of Densmore's major studies include *Teton Sioux Music*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 61 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1918); *Pawnee Music*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 93 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1929); *Seminole Music*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 161 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1956).
13. Gertrude P. Kurath, "Memorial to Frances Densmore," *Ethnomusicology* 2, no. 2 (1958): 71.
14. Thomas Vennum, "A History of Ojibwa Song Form," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 3, no. 2 (1980): 44; Vennum, Introduction to *Chippewa Music*, I, Densmore, iv.
15. Stephen Smith, writer and producer, "Frances Densmore: Song Catcher," Minnesota Public Radio News Department, [news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/199702/01\\_smiths\\_densmore/docs/](http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/199702/01_smiths_densmore/docs/).
16. Jensen, "Frances Densmore Gets the Depression Blues," 226.
17. Rendon, "Artist's Statement," *SongCatcher*, 2.
18. *SongCatcher*, 22.
19. *Ibid.*, 64.
20. *Ibid.*, 39.
21. Rendon, "Artist's Statement," *SongCatcher*, 2.
22. Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 90–91.

23. Thomas Vennum, Introduction to Densmore, *Chippewa Music*, I, 11.
24. Densmore also worked to keep her personal experiences outside the narrative, and she destroyed her personal documents towards the end of her life. Jensen and Patterson noted in a recent collection of essays that the writers all hit a block when trying to flesh out Densmore as an individual. They wrote, "We did not know how firmly Densmore had placed a period, had the last word, had created a wall around her amazingly productive life." (Jensen and Patterson, "Introduction: Traveling with Frances Densmore," in *Travels with Frances Densmore*, 2.) Rendon not only develops individual indigenous perspectives and experiences in the play, but also develops Densmore's personal character.
25. Charles Hofmann, *Frances Densmore and American Indian Music: A Memorial Volume Compiled and Edited by Charles Hofmann*, Contributions from the Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, Vol. 22 (New York: Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, 1968), 105.
26. Bruce White, "Familiar Faces: Densmore's Minnesota Photographs," in *Travels with Frances Densmore: Her Life, Work, and Legacy in Native America*, ed. Joan M. Jensen and Michelle Wick Patterson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 316.
27. Darby, "Into the Sacred Circle," 251.
28. *SongCatcher*, 14.
29. *Ibid.*, 9.
30. Rendon, "Playwright's Note," *SongCatcher*, 7.
31. *SongCatcher*, 25.
32. *Ibid.*, 25–26.
33. *Ibid.*, 31, 45.
34. Densmore, *Chippewa Music*, I, 173.
35. Judith Gray, "Documenting Native America with Sound Recordings: The First 100 Years of Federal Involvement," *Folklife Center News* 12, no. 1 (1990): 7.
36. Densmore, *Chippewa Music*, II, 7.
37. Helen Carr, *Inventing the American Primitive: Politics, Gender and the Representation of Native American Literary Traditions, 1789–1936* (New York University Press, 1996), 186.
38. Frances Densmore, "The Music of the American Indians," *Overland Monthly* 45 (1905): 230–31.
39. Rendon, *SongCatcher*, 22.
40. Densmore, *Chippewa Music*, II, 59–60.
41. Rendon, *SongCatcher*, 71.
42. Densmore, *Chippewa Music*, II, 59–60.
43. Hofmann, *Frances Densmore*, 78; Densmore, *Teton Sioux*, 6.
44. Rendon, *SongCatcher*, 4.
45. *Ibid.*, 70.
46. *Ibid.*, 73.
47. Hofmann, *Frances Densmore*, 102.
48. Rendon, *SongCatcher*, 11.
49. *Ibid.*, 55.
50. Hofmann, *Frances Densmore*, 20.
51. Rendon, *SongCatcher*, 54.
52. *Ibid.*, 21.
53. *Ibid.*, 46–47.
54. Bruce White has recently referenced the perceived lack of resistance in the academic world: "Today members of the Midéwiwin would likely object to the photographs used in Densmore's book and her account of the ceremonies, but it appears that at the time people did not blame Densmore

and apparently had no objections to her publishing material about the Midéwiwin in her book." Bruce White, "Familiar Faces," 323.

55. Minnesota Public Radio, *Frances Densmore: Song Catcher*, "The Densmore-Hofmann Letters."

56. Frances Densmore, "The Study of Indian Music," *Musical Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1915): 190.

57. Rendon, *SongCatcher*, 13.

58. *Ibid.*, 34.

59. *Ibid.*, 54.

60. *Ibid.*, 72. Densmore notes this reaction by a woman. Minnesota Public Radio, *Frances Densmore: Song Catcher*, "Audio Narration."

61. Densmore, *Teton Sioux*, 95.

62. Hofmann, *Frances Densmore*, 40.

63. Minnesota Public Radio, *Frances Densmore: Song Catcher*, "The Densmore-Hofmann Letters."

64. Specific criticisms have been directed at her work, such as its ethnocentric analytical approach or its development of racist theories, but the basic assumption that her recordings, as well as elements of the transcriptions and descriptive materials, are valuable for both Indian and non-Indian communities, tends not to be challenged in academic writings. Krystyn Moon has provided one of the most extensive critiques of her work, placing it in context to theories of evolutionary racism and colonialism. Moon, "The Quest for Music's Origin at the St. Louis World's Fair: Frances Densmore and the Racialization of Music," *American Music* 28, no. 2 (2010): 191–210, doi: 10.5406/american-music.28.2.0191. Densmore's working method is characterized as being inflexible and controlling in Erika Brady's *A Spiral Way*, which focuses on the emerging use of the phonograph for ethnographic collection. While only brief attention is directed towards Densmore, Michael Brown specifically criticized the manner in which she engaged with Native Americans, indicating "that Densmore alternately charmed, badgered and bribed Ojibwe informants to perform songs that were in some cases sacred and secret." Michael Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 25. In his recent book *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879–1934*, John Troutman establishes the complex relationship between Densmore's work and the policies of the Office of Indian Affairs, as well as the music curricula at boarding schools. John Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879–1934* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009). David Beck highlights Densmore's inappropriate acquisition of a photograph without permission in his critique of ethnographic work with the Menomoni in Wisconsin, which he refers to as "cultural assault." David Beck, "Collecting among the Menomoni: Cultural Assault in Twentieth-Century Wisconsin," *American Indian Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2010): 157–93, doi: 10.5250/amerindiquar.34.2.157.