

Oneida Nation Citizen and Stockbridge-Munsee Descendant Heather Bruegl Speaks at John Burroughs's Woodchuck Lodge

The July 2, 2002 Wild Saturday speaker at John Burroughs's Woodchuck Lodge was Heather Bruegl. Bruegl is a historian-activist, lecturer, museum consultant and citizen of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin and first-line descendent Stockbridge Munsee who remain connected with this site as part of their cultural area with contemporary relevance.

Some twenty attendees sat shaded under a pavilion-tent on the lawn of the historic Roxbury farmhouse. Here, writer Burroughs (1837-1921) spent his last summers. Dr. Julianne Lutz Warren – former president, vice president, long time board member, and a niece of Burroughs – introduced Bruegl. Warren acknowledged how the Burroughs family and other settler-colonizers did not establish their town of Roxbury in an “empty” country but in Lands inhabited for time immemorial by sovereign Indigenous Nations.

Bruegl began by alerting attendees that her presentation might make some listeners uncomfortable. She encouraged this gathering as a safe space to learn about relevant consequences of historic and ongoing Indigenous removals while unlearning a cultural habit of looking away. Truth is truth, not an offense.

Bruegl, a riveting story-teller, covered a lot of ground. She shared about everyday Indigenous life whether urban and/or on reservation. She discussed historic and ongoing colonialist forces of Indigenous assimilation into dominating culture and relegation off their Lands undermining Indigenous sovereignty. Bruegl touched the U.S. legacy of broken treaties, the American Indian Movement, and ongoing Lakota (Sioux) resistance to the desecration of He Sapa so-called Mount Rushmore. She spotlighted the living history of Indigenous children forced into English-only boarding schools wrenching apart bodies, lands and cultures with intergenerational consequences. Bruegl also shared stories and statistics pertaining to Missing and/or Murdered Indigenous Women (#MMIW).

Bruegl stressed, for instance, how pipelines produce not only climate-wrecking oil and gas but also men in worker camp conditions brutalizing women. This underscores how, for better or worse, as Burroughs understood, relations between Land and Humans are of a whole. After confirming that most of those gathered knew the name of Gabby Petito a non-Indigenous woman missing and murdered in Bridger-Teton, Wyoming Bruegl shared a statistic that felt all the more brutal: In the same state, between 2011 and 2020, seven-hundred-and-ten Indigenous persons became missing and/or murdered--710. No one gathered knew any of their names. Why is that?

Bruegl ended her talk with the recent announcement of the U.S. Supreme Court to hear a case involving the U.S. 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act. This case again threatens to undermine Indigenous sovereignty. Bruegl expertly made Indigenous Land removal history consequential throughout her talk.

Burroughs writes about people whose “sharp eyes” were “commissioned” to find “Indian relics...in every field.” Bruegl helps settlers’ commission their eyes to see Indigenous persons and Nations – Stockbridge-Munsee, Mohican and Oneida – who were and are still here and to take responsibility toward justice. She encouraged listening for how to be better relations with entangled histories, geographies, and desired futures. What happens when Burroughs’s legacy, for instance, becomes part of rather than the center of a place-based story?