

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emily Benedek. *Wind Won't Know Me: A History of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute.* New York: Vintage Books, 1993. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-679-74386-6.



Reviewed by Sandra K. Mathews-Benham (Nebraska Wesleyan University)

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"The Wind won't know me there. The Holy People won't know me. And I won't know the Holy People. And there's no one left who can tell me." –An Old Navajo Woman

This woman's statement explains the Navajo perspective of this 113-year old disagreement between the Navajo and Hopi. The issue, however, is much more complex. Emily Benedek tells a convincing story about how the United States government became involved in Hopi and Navajo internal affairs, causing this dispute to take on a more desperate form.

The Wind Won't Know Me, as Benedek writes, "grew out of a story I reported for *Newsweek*, 'Two Tribes, One Land', in 1985" (np). A journalist by trade, Benedek has a knack for organizing interviews, oral histories, and primary research together in a coherent and interesting narrative. Organized chronologically from interviews and research she did between the summer of 1985 and the spring of 1986, Benedek consolidates these disparate sources into a story of persistence, discouragement, and power. She introduces the reader to Navajo families that are being forced to move (Hatahlihs and Tsos), Hopi traditionalists that oppose the forced migrations, the Hopi Tribal Council who support Navajo removal, and a myriad of government officials and lawyers who played a significant role in the dispute. She uses individual and per-

sonal stories to illustrate how various court cases, public laws, and Hopi/Navajo enforcement affected the many people involved. The story is a tangled web of relationships, power, and religious ties to land and life ways.

Benedek illustrates this complexity with the help of a brief but comprehensive background of the migration and establishment of the Hopi and Navajo into north-eastern Arizona, correctly adding that the Hopi inhabited the area long before the Navajo. Expansion of the successful Navajo sheep raising industry made movement into uninhabited areas of Hopi traditional land necessary in the nineteenth century. As the Hopi tried to assert their ownership of the disputed area, they discovered that since they had never fought against or made treaties with the United States, the US government did not recognize their title to the land. The 1882 Executive Order officially established the Hopi Reservation. But many problems would be associated with this decree. Benedek's extensive survey of federal documentation and litigation adds a much needed dimension to her work.

The Navajo story is one of suffering and poverty, brought on by forced reduction in sheep and other livestock, as ordered by the federal government to alleviate the environmental strain on the Hopi Partition Lands (HPL). Unable to rebuild or maintain their homes due to restrictive federal regulations, they found themselves liv-

ing in dilapidated homes. According to Benedek's interviews, the Navajo chose to remain because this was their home and had been for generations. Their gods told them to live there. Benedek's comprehensive narrative illustrates beautifully the Navajo's close ties to the land, but also reminds the reader that the Hopi as well have the same religious connection to the land. This discrepancy caused tensions to rise between two tribes which, according to Benedek's interviews with both Hopi and Navajo, had lived side by side harmoniously for generations but were prodded into disagreement by US involvement in internal affairs.

"We call them foxes" (167), one Hopi woman describes her dealings with a Navajo who sold her bad meat. But there is more to the story of distrust than rotten meat. Benedek carefully documents the resentment that the Navajo (and traditional Hopi) have toward the Hopi Tribal Council—a government that was set up by the US. Through her meticulous use of interviews, Benedek helps the reader understand the complexities of relationships between Hopi and Navajo, and between the Hopi Tribal Council and the traditionalists.

Benedek argues that the strained relationship between the Council and traditionalists is a consequence of US government interference in Hopi internal affairs. As is typical of US-Tribal relations, she asserts, the federal government often chose to negotiate with those most willing to placate the federal government. Benedek certainly does not heed John McCain's advice (then an Arizona Representative, now a US Senator) when he said, "No one should know how their laws or sausages are made" (241). Instead, she offers a personal look at the complicated decision-making process, as well as the individuals involved.

One of Benedek's strengths is tying oral tradition and federal policies to form her narrative. Most convincingly, however, Benedek tells the story of two peoples who lived in relative harmony before the instigation of the 1882 Executive Order. Although the author focuses mostly on Navajo attempts to remain on the land, as well as the hardships they face daily, Benedek does treat this politically-charged subject with a fairly balanced pen.

This reviewer would like to know, however, at what point do we stop history and declare land ownership? The author of *The Wind Won't Know Me* chose to stop the clock after the arrival of the Navajo into Hopi lands. But there is much more to the story than this. By reading this work the complexity of the issue can be understood. It is a welcomed addition to the few up-to-date monographs

about the Hopi-Navajo dispute.

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PART III

The Wind Won't Know Me

PUBLISHER'S COMMENTS AND OTHER REVIEWS

Sweeping, comprehensive perspective ..this is history with a human face." – Boston Globe

"The wind won't know me there. The Holy People won't know me. And I won't know the Holy People." – an old Navajo woman, on the prospect of moving away from her ancestral home

The Wind Won't Know Me is a brilliantly told analysis of the Navajo-Hopi Big Mountain land dispute, that illuminates how an already complicated, centuries-old tribal

relationship was turned into total disaster through the intervention of the U.S. government. While the struggle over rights to two million acres of Arizona land has been covered on the front pages of national newspapers Emily Benedek goes beyond the specific circumstances to examine relations between different Native American tribes, and between those tribes and the U.S. government. Vintage Books will publish this powerful analysis of contrasting cultures, for the first time in trade paperback on November 18. It will include a postscript by the author with commentary on events that have occurred since last year's hardcover publication.

Until November 1992, our country's last Indian war was still raging in the territory near Big Mountain, Arizona. The Navajos have been fighting their Hopi neighbors – as well as the United States government, that had arbitrarily divided the land between the two tribes and decreed that all who lived on the “wrong” side of the mountain would have to move. *The Wind Won't Know Me* recounts the history of that struggle, with its byzantine politics, broken promises, and devastated cultures, a powerful metaphor for the experience of American Indians since the first white Europeans “discovered” America

for themselves.

With the narrative sweep and emotional depth of a novel, *The Wind Won't Know Me* tracks the legal and personal progress of the Big Mountain dispute, and portrays the lives caught up in its history. A new postscript, written especially for the Vintage edition, describes the historic agreement between the Navajos and the Hopis which, if passed by Congress, will serve as a model for more enlightened future relations between the U.S. government and the diverse peoples that comprise what is known as Native America. “An exhaustive, engrossing account...fascinating...full of discomfiting truths.” (*Newsweek*)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Benedek grew up in Belmont, Massachusetts. She graduated magna cum laude from Harvard College in 1981. Her stories have appeared in *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Washington Post*, *Redbook*, and others.

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