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Mary Mahoney [00:00:00] From Trinity College. This is Hidden Literacies.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:18] Hello and welcome to Hidden Literacies, the podcast. On this show, we'll hear from contributors to the Hidden Literacies Anthology on the sources they've selected, how they became hidden, the lessons we can learn from them, and what they reveal about the stakes of each contributor's scholarship.

Mary Mahoney [00:00:36] My name is Mary Mahoney and I'm the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Trinity College. On this episode, it's my privilege to bring you a conversation with contributor Margaret Noodin. Professor Noodin contributed a collection of stories of places, as recalled in nineteen hundred that offer significance for its time and our own. To begin, I've asked Margaret to introduce herself.

Margaret Noodin [00:00:59] I typically introduce myself in Anishinaabemowin because what I'm doing is making the point that we use it today. So doing that, I would say [speaking Anishinaabemowin] just basically stating that my name, in Anishinaabemowin, Margaret Noodin is my name that I use in English and I work in and around the Great Lakes, which we also call Anishinaabe or sort of Anishinaabe country. Anishinaabe are known as the Odawa, Ojibway, and Pottawatomie people. It's an old confederacy between the Confederacy to the east of us and the rest of us. So that's what my project was about, was contributing to the way people can understand that space in the past.

Mary Mahoney [00:01:48] I asked Margaret to tell us a bit about the piece she's contributing.

Margaret Noodin [00:01:52] The title of my project was [anishinaabemowin] Nineteen hundred stories of Popoff places as recalled in nineteen hundred. So the main author that I'm looking at is Simon Pokagan, who is obviously a Pottawatomie. There is now a federally recognized band of Pottawatomie, which makes his community fairly obvious. It was named for Leopold who would be his father and he wrote in the nineteen hundreds, several items that were sometimes hand printed, distributed in very limited quantities and are held in a couple of different locations. Now, the three that I specifically was looking at in this project are Algonquin Legends of Lake Algonquin, Legends of South Haven and the Pottawattamie Book of Genesis. Those all have a mixture of English with a little bit of Pottawatomie language sprinkled in there. And what I was looking for in them specifically was the science, not necessarily the storytelling, because a lot of people have looked at native texts for story and narrative, which is important. But what I wanted to do was find in these stories where he was preserving actual knowledge about climate change, how to live in a certain space along the Eastern Shore line of what is now known as Lake Michigan and how the people there were very clearly aware of the watershed and how it changed.

Mary Mahoney [00:03:37] So the hidden nature of the text Margaret explores is this engagement with memory and the knowledge keeping of science, not just the storytelling elements that often receive more attention. I asked Margaret to describe some of the scientific knowledge in these stories.

Margaret Noodin [00:03:52] So the particular texts tell the story of a moment in time when a flood occurred. And it also shows knowledge about lakes, watershed, the way spaces interact, the way people live in spaces. So right now, we would call that the science of climatology and climate change and sustainability. It's clear that one role of these stories

when they were told was to preserve the understanding that cataclysmic change can happen and that one should remember where and when it does happen, because there are cycles that might repeat.

Margaret Noodin [00:04:37] There are things about land that is not necessarily obvious when you're simply observing it. So when and where you might build in a space where communities might know, they can set up systems of agriculture, how they might work with the waterways, you need a pretty deep knowledge of all of that. And the more history you have about the space, the more able you are to form a sustainable relationship with a place. So to me, it's really important history that these nations knew at one time and were obviously making decisions about in this case, where to live and what's now called the St. Joe Valley, just a little north of Notre Dame University, kind of on the edge of Michigan and Indiana. It's clear that the United States as a nation had a different idea about landscape and space, and when the Army Corps of Engineers took action throughout the nineteen hundreds, this type of knowledge would have been important for them to have. And now, as people are making decisions about how to live differently in the place, I think going back to some of these texts can help us see the landscape very differently and how to live in a place.

Mary Mahoney [00:05:49] Margaret illustrates the value of revisiting stories and thinking with what they show us about science by sharing a quotation from one of the stories she's studying.

Margaret Noodin [00:05:59] Long, long ago, Debone Ogo Kishimoto, who held dominion over Michigan and the surrounding countries, selected [Hello no place at the old days of Balcatta] as his seat of government. His royal throne was located on the highest point of that neck of land line between the river and Lake Michigan. This high point of land was called Ishpeming, meaning a high place. Here tt was that [fisherman] worked out the grand conceptions of his soul. So we could look at that as how these Pottawatomie understood hierarchies of spirituality, references to where they felt knowledge originated. There's lots of things that we could find in there.

Mary Mahoney [00:06:44] She pairs this quotation with a topography of the St. Joseph watershed to explore what this quotation and these stories reveal about knowledge of the environment and indigenous understandings of how to live in a place.

Margaret Noodin [00:06:57] But we also just see that they were very clear on where was the high point and where were the low points and where might people focus when they are settling. So when you look at this map, you can see that really Lake Michigan has some edges there that to build in those spaces, probably not the wisest, right. So you go a little farther inland up the river, and that's a safer space to be setting up a community. It could be that you create a narrative around that saying this is the seat of our prime manito who we consider God. This is where we would worship him. So let's focus on this place. It could also be that is the safest place for people to live as they move in and out of seasonal camping spaces.

Margaret Noodin [00:07:43] So knowing where high points are and connecting them to social infrastructure, I think that's what I was pointing out in the story. So that's one the same thing. I don't necessarily need to read you the quote, but what you can see is that even though he's telling this narrative, what he's also doing is recalling instance of cataclysmic flooding. And so he's talking about in the quote, immediate and extreme change that should be remembered when you go to interact in the space going forward.

So that was really the crux of what I was trying to show in these stories, is that sometimes in these archives, it's not just like, oh, and remember the little story as an Indian myth, but let's look at the science, because frankly, by no chance, I'm sure, Notre Dame is in a space that probably they got to know the local people pretty well and they built in a space that was a burial ground and was significant to people. And so not only were they perhaps trying to embrace one culture and put their own culture there, they also found the most sacred and safe space, and that's where they built.

Mary Mahoney [00:08:59] The knowledge of environmental science hidden in these stories suggest the value of approaching stories like these as sites of multiple literacies.

Margaret Noodin [00:09:08] But I think that sometimes we think we're going to find something in the archives and we're looking for a certain thing and then we find that or we don't. And I think we need to be open to different knowledge systems that the past, recent past, has not necessarily told us to look for. So my students are often blown away by "what he's got science knowledge. He's got fresh water knowledge in his Indian story". And I don't think anybody at the time would have said that's why these stories were saved. Frankly, I would say arguably even Simon himself would not be focusing on the fact that that's what he was saving. But Simon was saving stories that were important to his people. And you find in some of those stories a lot of things that would be really significant.

Mary Mahoney [00:10:01] The lesson Margaret thinks we can take away from these texts and the approach to science they demonstrate, is an investment in how people interacted with lands before colonialism. Nation building, she argues, should not be the only motivation for thinking about land use. That kind of reframing could have a big impact on how we interact with the environment.

Margaret Noodin [00:10:21] So I would say politically, it's very important to teach us right now in the present that we can't simply erase and rewrite history based on our own political reality. So in some ways, the decisions about resources in the United States have been made based on the needs of nation building in the context of Canada and the US primarily. And what this shows is sometimes in the past, when people moved into a space, they had knowledge of the civilizations that lived in that space before them. In this case, the mound builders and people living there previously.

Margaret Noodin [00:10:57] So if the lakes were formed on this continent about twelve thousand years ago, having knowledge about where the land is more solid, when the watershed has changed, where there are deep and impactful underwater systems that make the surface less stable, that's pretty important. You can't just come in as a new nation and say, we will now do this because it's right for us and fill in, say, for example, the Kankakee Swamp, which is exactly what the US did and then caused mass extinctions. And so if you Google Kankakee Swamp, you will be stunned. But some of these things might not have had to happen if we allowed our knowledge of a space to expand beyond our current nation.

Mary Mahoney [00:11:40] The complex politics of archives and preservation have presented barriers to raising awareness about the value of this knowledge, Margaret explains. As she notes, some groups held back in their early interactions with ethnographers intent on documenting their culture.

Margaret Noodin [00:11:56] If you look at what just speaking about my own language group here, the work of Francis Densmore, people often say, oh, well, she went to

ceremonies and the guys in those ceremonies told her songs that were healing songs. But many people looking at what was recorded on those wax cylinders said they think the people stopped at a certain point and really didn't give her everything. Whether that was because they had an issue with transferring across cultures or whether they just had a process by which you needed to apprentice to that body of knowledge before they really could understand it, I think there would have been maybe a little bit of both.

Mary Mahoney [00:12:33] Complicating preservation of these stories further were laws determined to erase native language and literature.

Margaret Noodin [00:12:40] And then, of course, when you have a nation where native languages were not legal to publish and native languages were not supported in any way, in fact, quite the opposite. They were outlawed until nineteen ninety one with the Native Languages Act.

Margaret Noodin [00:12:55] You can see why a lot of people might have adopted the "let's just pretend this stuff is not to be". I honestly don't think that if we had a functional system there would be any need. Why would we need to hide the fact that flood occurred here? So many, many times there's stories that get a romanticized status as a ceremony when in fact, if we know one thing that can alleviate smallpox or something that might help reverse tumor growth in certain cancers or where to build so you don't cause extinction or damage to homes on a regular or kind of cyclical basis. Why would we not share that? Right. I mean, of course we would. I think what happens is the two cultures, the colonizing or settlement perspective is one where the knowledge is perceived as dangerous and kind of outlawed and then you have problems there. So there are issues where in the archives in the past, many people would say, no, that's just ours. It's proprietary knowledge. We're not sharing because you haven't shown the ability to understand it fully. And I think that is more at the heart of it. It comes out as a sort of racist ethnic impulse on either side, the people that are not understanding it and the people that are trying sometimes to hold on to it. And really what they're trying to articulate is you really need to sort of apprentice to this culture, this language, this base here on the globe. And when you've done that, then you are in the right to know some of these things.

Mary Mahoney [00:14:39] For Margaret, an appreciation for and knowledge of language is central to understanding larger ideas about culture and environment and affects how we think about place.

Margaret Noodin [00:14:48] Now in Milwaukee there are a lot of people that have native names and words about them all the time, and they have no idea what they mean. And it really can just transform something as simple as your drive to and from work each day. If you know you are driving through Waukesah, Milwaukee, Kinnikinnick Avenue, and then you see that as driving through the place of the foxes and the fireflies on a road that the name of it means to mix things together to the shores of Lake Michigan, which is a kind of animate entity with its own presence and agency. It just changes the way you feel about water, the way you feel about diversity, the way you feel about connection to place.

Margaret Noodin [00:15:30] And I think we rob ourselves of that when it's erased. So sometimes just teaching the language allows people to see their environment, whether they're native people or not. The whole space is just viewed differently.

Mary Mahoney [00:15:46] Margaret Noodin is an American poet, Anishinaabemowin language teacher. She is a professor of English and American Indian Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Mary Mahoney [00:15:58] Hidden Literacies is a production of Trinity College, edited by Hilary Wyss and Christopher Hager with support from the English Department and Information Services with technical support by Mary Mahoney, Joelle Thomas, and Cait Kennedy. This podcast was produced by me, Mary Mahoney, with the support and permission of the contributors to Hidden Literacies. For more information on Hidden Literacies and to explore the text and commentaries described here, please visit www.hiddenliteracies.org.