

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.¹ 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."² *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.³ 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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