

Educate Those “Ignorant Savages”

by Ruben Cu:k Ba’ak, Tohono O’odham

Arrogance emits from words
contaminated with apologetic letters,
assimilating an historical plume of
eloquent excuses to entertain the resilient.

Entitlement vindicates the violation of
rock, soil, plant life, water life,
and all connected to Earthly Life.

Tattered and defeated
my degree floats helpless in the yellowish rhetoric of
a gold mind.

Foreign intelligence dismisses any tribal knowledge of
true balance, forging savages inferior.

Deception fills the thousandth
generation of mirrors
with the illusion of I, me, mine.

Cowardly
my degree floats helpless in the yellowish rhetoric of
a gold mine.

Hungry is all life that feed
on the Snake,
even now their mouths
continue to fill
of old metals fresh
from our Mother Earth’s bowels.

Choking on the brilliance of greed
the hungry clearly see
my degree float helpless in the yellowish rhetoric of
all gold mines.

Thirsty is all Life that live with Snake,
today Snake cannot share the bounty of Life,
today Snake is sick,
today Snake and all Life upon her,
all Life in her,
watch all the well intended
BA’s, MA’s, and PhD’s of the Indigenous float helpless
in the yellowish rhetoric of one gold mine.

Imprisoned,
Sitting there with Snake
in the freshness of new poverty
the hungry and thirsty can only see
these degrees bleed out the ink of arrogance that
solely
serves the educated dead Indian saved man called
I, me, mine.



Ruben Cu:k Ba’ak sitting in the SWEHSC office working on a project with outreach staff (Photograph by Dr. Lindsey)

I was raised on the Tohono O’odham Nation away from my traditions, well until I was 14 years old. I was introduced to my People’s ways at that point in my life and remain traditional in my life today. As an O’odham man I hold a responsibility to Mother Earth and my People, whom I deem “all Native People”. I got my degree in Interdisciplinary Studies (BIS) with concentrations in Economics and Sustainability. And now work for the Tohono O’odham Nation’s (my tribe) Environmental Protection Office as the Air Quality Specialist.

I wrote “Educate Those Ignorant Savages” due to the release of the acid mine drainage from the Gold King Mine that contaminated the Snake River and Animals River back in August 2015. As I watched the yellowish plume contaminate the river on CNN I felt sick and helpless. I mean here I am a Native American with a degree, an “educated Native American,” yet I could do nothing realistically but watch and fight back tears.

When I was in school I saw so many awesome Natives get their degrees, BA’s, MA’s, and PhD’s, it was a beautiful thing to witness. However none of us did anything to stop what was happening to the river and all the ecosystems it supports in every moment of those ecosystems existence, it was a tragedy.

Every year I and so many other Natives from all tribes attend ceremonies where we pray for all life and all existence here on Mother Earth, the Universe, and all of our Creator’s creations. Being from the desert, well that’s what Tohono means – desert; and Tohono O’odham means simply, Desert People. So we pray for rain so that all life including Mother Earth herself is replenished and will have the means to continue existing. Water is Our Gold in a sense, yet there is no greed involved we understand that it is an innate right as a life form. And that includes all life not just humans, the ways of this society where everything is bordered and those borders are ruled by man is purely comical. Because it frowns on sustainable ways of existence and only serves profit.

The poem depicts the cost of education thus far to Native America, where we have compromised the integrity of our traditional ways to inhabit a form of strength that these degrees suggest, we certainly attain an advantage with these degrees, economically and to a degree (pun intended) socially.

My hope is that we will keep our core values as Native Americans and incorporate our ways into higher learning, where the very things that sustain Life are what we as natural Stewarts of the land, life, and all existence hold dear to our hearts as our ancestors held dear to their hearts, think in terms of seven generations, why, because it was what was done for us.