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An Interview with Black Ash Basket Makers Kelly Church and Renée Wasson Dillard

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Art making and teaching go hand in hand for Native American basket makers Kelly Church (Ottawa/Pottawatomi) and Renée Wasson Dillard (Anishinaabe). In June 2021, I spoke with the women to learn more about how teaching is integral to their creative processes.¹ According to Renée, “Basket making is not a hobby. It’s a way of life”²—a concept that becomes apparent after just a few minutes of talking with either artist. In our conversations, Kelly and Renée discuss how they became basket makers and teachers, how their approach to teaching varies by audience, and how cultural appropriation has affected their pedagogy. Moreover, they address the environmental impact of the emerald ash borer, an invasive species first identified in Michigan in 2002. The insect has decimated old-growth black ash forests and significantly impacted their artmaking.



Figs. 1, 2. Above: Kelly Church, member of Match-e-be-nash-she-wish Band of Pottawatomi and Grand Traverse Band Ottawa and Chippewa descent, full-time artist, and activist. Photo courtesy of the artist; © Kelly Church. Right: Renée Wasson Dillard, Anishinaabe natural fiber artist and teacher. Photo courtesy of the artist; © Renée

Melynda Seaton (MS): Will you share a bit about your art and how you became an artist and a teacher?

Kelly Church (KC): I make baskets from the black ash tree that grows in swamps here in Michigan. We have a photo from 1919 of my great-grandmother and extended family making baskets, which shows six generations of basket makers. My grandma once said, “We

made baskets before they made cameras," and we wove for centuries before. I make work that is more relevant to my life today in today's world.

I became a basket maker by just growing up around baskets, and then when I got older, I went to college for painting. . . . I started making baskets because of my grandfather. I was caring for him, and he always wanted to make someone a basket to thank them. So I went to my dad one day and said, "Hey dad, grandpa wants to make baskets for people to thank them," and my dad's like, "Okay, let's go look for a tree." So, we hopped in the truck in literally two minutes, we did not plan a day or a time, and he's like, "Let's go," so we went right then. He showed me what it was like to harvest a good basket tree. He chopped it down and showed me how to do it. Then I tried to show my daughter, and I realized you need a lot of practice. This is where my teaching experience and learning experience came together. My dad, Bill Church, and my cousin, John Pigeon, were my black ash teachers and mentors who taught me everything I know. My cousin John would do demonstrations for people on black ash, and as he was teaching me to learn all there was about black ash, he was also teaching me to teach the next generation. The first time I taught was because of him. He had a program at the Grand Rapids Art Museum, and one day he just showed up where we were making baskets, and [John] basically said, "I have a program to put on today. I'm not going, I'm sending you, and you're going to tell them you're there in place of me. You're going to teach today and share and present. I think you're ready." That is how I began presenting, sharing, and teaching. He built up my confidence and skills, and between him and my father, [they] showed me how important it was to share everything that I was taught with the next generation (fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Kelly Church, *Sustaining Traditions—Digital Memories*, 2018. Black ash, sweetgrass, rit, copper, vial EAB, flashdrive, 9 1/2 × 4 1/2 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, purchase through the Decorative Arts and Crafts Endowment, 2020.49A-B. Photo courtesy of the artist, by Richard Church, Odawa-Pottawatomi; © 2018, Kelly Church

René Wasson Dillard (RWD): With everything that is passed on, the line of traditional knowledge must never be broken. Every time we share with another, we always talk about who our teachers were and who they learned from. . . . That traditional knowledge gets passed down from woman to woman. . . . Of course, I learned from my mom. . . . I'm a natural fiber artist, so I weave bullrush mats, basswood bags, cedar mats and bags, and finger woven sashes. I work with anything that's natural fiber. [. . .]

I started weaving when I was nine. I watched my mom for a couple years and detangled her threads when she was finger weaving. She learned initially from a fella named William Thatcher, who was Chippewa. . . . [For] finger weaving, it's just your fingers doing the weaving; that's the mechanical device. I watched her slender fingers working . . . it always looked like her fingers were tickling it because she was moving so fast. It was really fascinating . . . then one day, I said, "Hey, I think I can do that," and she set me up one, and I whipped through it, so she gave me another one. There weren't a lot of outwardly affectionate responses from my mother, and just the fact that it made her happy made me

want to do it more. So that’s how my passion was born; I wanted to make my mom proud. [...]

I’m the youngest, and my father had convinced me that everyone was born to do something special. While my one sister was excelling at ribbon applique, I sneezed on it, and you can’t sneeze on the sashes. My other sister was excelling really well at beadwork; of course, I spilled the beads . . . I’m really grateful for it now. I’m lucky that I found my niche, the one thing that I’m really good at. So, when I started to do the finger weaving, mom was really appreciative. William Thatcher wasn’t able to teach her any more designs, and there was very little documentation at that time. So, I grew up visiting museums. . . . We saw her first assumption sash on the Iroquois mannequin at the Chicago Field Museum. I remember as a little kid going there lots and lots. [...]



Fig. 4. René Wasson Dillard, *Untitled*, 2019. Small hamper with bird beaks design, black ash, lid woven with sweetgrass with interlooped nob handle. Courtesy of the artist; © René Wasson Dillard

The stuff that I make doesn’t have any influence of colonialism, and to me, that’s really important because you have to know where you come from in order to know where you’re going. So we must understand that relationship with the Earth and continue to utilize the gifts that she offers us to continue these ways. [We are] in a restoration stage where the young people are coming forward. . . . I have a studio that was donated to me, it’s called *enjinaabiigigeying*, it means “the place where we weave,” and it’s pretty busy (fig. 4).

MS: In many Native cultures, the different aspects of art making align with gender roles. Is that true for your family?

KC: We do it that way; we like to say that even for the old days. The men, of course, would be the harvesters and pounders, and that’s just because of strength. But if you have some strong women, believe me, they’ll be doing it too. I have a few cousins who are girls that are really strong, and they do a lot of pounding. I will pound too, but my husband’s so good at it, so I let him do it more. In the old days, I use to carry trees out as well. You have to steady the middle of the log on your shoulder, then pick it up, and literally walk out of the woods with the log on your shoulder. It sounds really hard to do, but you can do it as a woman if you have it steadied exactly. I could do it, but one time I stopped, and I was really tired. I said, “Oh, you guys, I don’t know if I can start moving again,” and my cousins all looked at me and said, “We’ll always know you can carry your tree out, Kelly, we’ll get it for you.” So I

think the men are just kind about taking on some of the stronger roles. Men and women both weave baskets. My cousin John Pigeon makes the best utilitarian baskets, the ones that have good runners for baby baskets or gathering baskets. . . . I think women tend to make more fancy, beautiful baskets for selling. That’s what my great-grandmother used to do, make fancy baskets to sell to tourists to get money to buy food.

RWD: There was always a community of people we call culture bearers—people who know a certain technique or ceremony or language that surrounds a particular thing. Those people were tapped into by my parents to come and teach us all these different things. . . . The end process isn’t the gift; the real gift is the process of finding. Every time I went in the woods, looking carefully, stepping carefully, observing—I call it introducing yourself back to your mother. That’s the way I teach when people come to the studio. They don’t get handed all of the material and told, “Now do this technique.” The process starts by going out into the woods to introduce yourself and let them [the trees] know what you’re there for.

It’s a very matriarchal thing to teach, because the women were in charge of everything they made. We made the house, we made clothes, we made all of the implements in the house, and we grew the vegetables. Men grew tobacco, and they hunted and protected us. They were not around a lot; we [women] were pretty much running the show. Historically, little boys would be at their mothers’ hips until around nine or so, and then they would wander off with uncles and daddies to go do man stuff. But the boys learned all of the work that women do and did it with them; it builds respect.

MS: Does the way you teach depend on your audience? For instance, does teaching in your own communities differ from when you are at non-Native institutions?

KC: The way that we teach in our Native way is never going to be the way that will be taught academically. I taught for a semester at [St. Mary’s College in Omaha, Nebraska]. There I tried to incorporate my Native teachings into teaching those girls. All of them were studying to be nurses. When some of them knew how to do baskets better than the others—some of them were naturals, and some of them needed more assistance—the ones that just got it naturally would be done and would ask, “Well, can I go now?” They wanted to leave class because they were done with their assignment for the day. So, I told them nobody can leave when they’re finished [explaining to them], “Because you understand it so well, I want you to ask who in the class needs help, and I want you to help them, so they understand it as well as you.” What I was trying to teach those girls is that when you’re a nurse, sometimes one of you is going to know something more and can be there for each other. It’s not all about just nursing, [but] helping each other in life. You might be the one that has more knowledge in one area, so help others in the areas that they struggle in. I tried to teach these girls in our Native way that we’re to be there for each other, to work together, and patience. Patience was a big one, because you’re starting from the materials, and you’re building it up; ideas of working hard for your materials. Of course, they didn’t have to pound for their ash when they made an ash basket, but I made them watch how I worked for it. . . . I made it very clear how hard that material was worked for because they weren’t able to work for it themselves. [. . .]

Audiences definitely are different. . . . Black ash to us is really sacred. If you’re not a black ash basket maker like me and Renée, a Native person, Anishinaabe in particular or all of us in the Northeast—the Wabanaki, Haudenosaunee— [a black ash basket] is the biggest way of saying thank you. So, when my grandfather said, “I want to thank these people, I want to

give them a basket," he was literally thinking of the biggest way that he could tell someone, "I appreciate what you're doing for me." The way that we see the basket is with these traditions. Teaching it to those girls at the school, they were doing it for a grade. . . . I don't know if they knew the significance of how hard I worked for it or if it mattered to them as much. The value of that ash to them was different. In the way that we are brought up culturally, that is part of who we are. When you're teaching in an institution to non-Native people, it's not part of who they are, how they grew up, or an important part of their life, so that's the key difference.

RWD: It's not about the finished product; it's all about the process. Most of the time, I only teach Native people. I do one educational outreach to a non-Native institution a year—maybe a university or museum or something like that. That presentation and sharing are quite different because they want to know about the finished product. While I'm teaching Native people, it's more about the process because we want to create more weavers. So, it's teaching them to fish, not givin' them the fish. . . . [At non-Native institutions] I do not teach technique. I don't teach them particulars. But I do tell them what I call it, and I can show them differences. . . . Part of the main reason is like all the recordings that I did at NMAI [National Museum of the American Indian]. I asked them not to release [the tapes], except to my own Anishinaabe people, until after my death because of cultural appropriation. . . . It's not to be selfish, but to be protected. We need to protect what things that we have because with every generation that has passed on, and after the boarding schools, we lost so much. So, we need to protect what we have. At some point, the person perpetrating cultural appropriation turns from being an advocate for us to a profiteer out of us. I don't know exactly when that transition may be because for the sake of education, many times [they say], "I'm helping you, I'm supporting you," but then it doesn't turn out so good in the long run. It's harmful, and it creates shame within our Native people when you have non-Native people that know more about things that belong to them than they do. It may be an unforeseen outcome, but it does a lot of damage, and we're still healing from the boarding schools.

MS: Kelly, to connect to what Renée mentioned, information related to her family or the tribe is not shared with non-Native students. Do you find yourself doing the same?

KC: I definitely do. [To put it] in context, our people immigrated from the East Coast, where the Wabanaki are from. Wabanaki just means the "people of the dawn"—where the sun comes up. We, the Anishinaabe people, came down the St. Lawrence River to where we are today. The Wabanaki people sent away half of their people a long time ago to keep the traditions, culture, and language safe. They had a prophecy that there were people coming, and we would lose our tradition. When you look at it that way, it is part of us, who we are, and always have been. It's not just a tradition.

The Wabanaki believe that their creation story has the black ash tree. The black ash tree is not just a tree; it is so much more than just a tree. It's very spiritual; that is why we protect some things. When I teach people, maybe a demonstration of how we get a tree and the materials, I don't show every single step because it's not a how-to for you to go cut down the trees. It is a demonstration of how we do it. There are things we don't record. When we talk to the tree, when we're praying or offering our tobacco, we're not recording. Those kinds of things are personal, just like prayers that people have in churches. . . . I would never show anybody all the steps of what to do because I would be afraid that they would exploit the tradition for money. I think this is where some of the protection comes from. People

appreciate what we're doing, and then they start looking at it and saying, "Well, these guys have never recorded this. They have never written it down. Wow, I wonder why they never did? I'll be the first one to do it." Non-Native people literally think that we are not capable enough, smart enough, or haven't thought of writing down our traditions and recording them. We have, but they're not meant to be done in that way. We are a storytelling people. This is how we do things: we tell people orally, and we show them visually. We do it this way for a very good reason because if you do not continue to share and teach in the way that me and Renée do to the rest of our people, then you will forget. Once people start recording and start writing it down, they feel comfortable that it is always there, then they do not practice it, and then they forget. So, as Native people, we continue to do our teachings orally and visually so [others] continue to teach it and share it and do not forget that it is there.

MS: How has teaching basketry impacted your own creative process?

KC: It impacts it a lot because you never stop learning. There's one thing, what I'm teaching them to do is to make a basket, but not to make *my* basket. I don't show people baskets when I start a class because everybody wants to make what you're making. They think that that is the final project, and what I want them to do is make a basket that's coming from them. I teach people to use their imaginations to think about what they want to do. When we do the embellishment part on our black ash baskets, we will plait our baskets up—which means over under over under until they're woven up to the top—and then we add the embellishments on the outside. You can do curlicues, points, loops, and all different kinds of beautiful things. It's at that point that I see people get creative. They take that embellishment instead of doing the curlicue or the point or whatever I taught them, and they make it their own. Sometimes I might learn a new little design. No matter what you're teaching—Native arts, any arts, or anything—just know that you've never learned everything that there is to learn. You can learn from your students; as much as you give to them, they can give to you. I love that about teaching.

RWD: Yes, it's an evolution. . . . The more that you teach someone, the more that you learn. Someone else will have a different rhythm; weaving is about a rhythm. It's surrounded by numbers, mathematics, geometry, and all of these things that you have to consider that couple along with the techniques. Different individuals have a different rhythm, so they understand the weaving differently through their hands. I can explain to their mind what's going on, but when the blood memory starts and they start their techniques, I may learn a whole different process of doing what they teach me. . . . I thank my students first, because teachers get really smart by sharing ideas and through the didactic stuff going back and forth . . . and I hope that they understand that that's happening as well.

MS: How are environmental concerns and activism tied to your teaching and art making practice? I'm thinking about the black ash trees and the emerald ash borer [EAB].

KC: Environmental issues such as the emerald ash borer have greatly impacted this part of our culture. A black ash tree seeds every five to seven years. The seeds take two years to germinate, and EAB can wipe out a stand in three to five years. Seeds are critical. It is very difficult to find live black ash trees that are suitable basket size, as the EAB has been decimating Michigan since 1992 (it wasn't discovered until 2002). At first, the adjustments we have had to make were taking all good basket trees out of an infected stand in the first two years of discovery before EAB killed them. Unless there is a tree that seeds in the stand that we know about. Even if it is the last basket tree left, the seeds are more important and

sustainable than baskets. Before, we only harvested what we needed and replanted seeds each time. Now we save seeds for future replanting’s as EAB will decimate our seedlings as well. I save half of each tree I harvest to ensure I am able to pass on teachings to others. This will normally be tribes at this point, but I try to do a few for the public as well.

We have had to learn to work past the EAB and with trees that are half dead. We are able to recognize infestations earlier; we are able to share what we learn with other tribes of the Northeast who are experiencing the same issues now and help them adapt faster. Our gatherings have become more important when we weave, as we are all aware of this cultural mishap, and we share more “I remembers.” We continue to make black ash memories and will as long as we can. As I write this, I have discovered a week ago that another stand is dead, but I see seedlings and have hope. Hope that they will gain resistance to EAB as the trees in Asia did. Until then, we will collect seeds and weave and make memories. We learn as we go and adapt to our circumstances as we have for thousands of years, and we are still here, so something is working. EAB has made me focus on the more forgotten teachings to continue my way of life—birch bitings, cedar mats and bags, birchbark work, and basswood work.

RWD: It made a huge impact; it changed everything . . . because that happened, I knew the life of basket making might come to an end, so I dedicated myself to making as many baskets as I could because I know these trees are going to die, and it’s better that they are utilized in this way. . . . I made around 340-some baskets a year for several years. . . . I ended up moving to my home reservation, where I reside now, and continued basket making along with my position for the tribe, [where] I sit on a natural resources commission. I was doing a lot of presentations, telling everyone, “Do as many [baskets] as you can, save as much as you can.” [. . .]

When I went to my favorite spot up here along the Maple River, the entire place was dead. Nothing but the small young ones were there . . . when I got out [of the car], an EAB landed on my shoulder . . . and I just cried; it was just terrible. It was acres and acres of a floodplain there, and it was full of black ash, and all the grandpas were gone. So, I said, “Well, if I can’t harvest in my own area within my own tribal boundaries, then there must not be enough for me to continue doing this.” That’s when I turned my attention to cedar and Russian basswood . . . Kelly shares with me, [but] my basket making days as commerce are pretty much over.

Notes

¹ I interviewed the artists separately. However, for each question, their responses have been organized together and edited for clarity.

² “Renée Dillard—Anishinaabe Fibre Artist,” accessed July 19, 2021, <http://reneedillard.passthefeather.org>.