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Navajo Transformative Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century

Lloyd L. Lee

On multiple levels, from within communities to the academy, indigenous peoples are reclaiming their intellectual traditions. Important critiques of existing scholarship have revealed Western scholarship to be simply another kind of imperialism that reinscribes existing structures of power. Responding to larger calls that our research be transformative, Diné scholars are reclaiming the right to raise questions about the ways in which our people have been represented, and in the process they are theorizing and researching in ways that revalue Diné philosophy. Significantly, they also assert that our intellectual work should uphold Diné sovereignty, as leaders like Manuelito had envisioned.

—Jennifer Nez Denetdale, *Reclaiming
Diné History*

Navajo historian Jennifer Denetdale is reclaiming and transforming how Diné (people) history is written. She critically analyzes Western perspectives of Diné history and promotes a research methodology that reclaims Diné intellectual tradition, revalues Diné philosophy,

and advocates for Diné sovereignty. She and other Navajo scholars are employing Diné philosophy in their theories and using oral narratives in their research; thereby, their scholarship is commending Diné thought and valuing Indigenous methods. Their work is also reviving the positive aspects Navajo people once possessed prior to their incarceration at Bosque Redondo from 1864 to 1868—the emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical well-being of the people. Denetdale and other Diné scholars are developing and adding to a distinct Diné transformative scholarship. This transformative scholarship is a critique of existing scholarship on Navajo people and culture and promotes a research methodology that revalues Diné philosophy and advances Navajo self-determination.

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, articulates the desire and need by Indigenous peoples to *rewrite* and *reright* their position in history. This desire and necessity are the cornerstones of Diné transformative scholarship. Diné transformative scholarship is privileging Diné intellectual tradition. Smith describes this type of scholarship when she discusses the history discipline:

This is inextricably bound to a recovery of our language and epistemological foundations. It is also about reconciling and reprioritizing what is really important about the past with what is important about the present. These issues raise significant questions for indigenous communities who are not only beginning to fight back against the invasion of their communities by academic, corporate and populist researchers, but to think about, and carry out research, on their own concerns. One of the problems discussed in this first section of this book is that the methodologies and methods of research, the theories that inform them, the questions which they generate and the writing styles they employ, all become significant acts which need to be considered carefully and critically before being applied. In other words, they need to be “decolonized.” Decolonization, however, does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes.¹

Diné transformative scholarship is moving and fulfilling Smith's contention. This type of scholarship is conducive to Navajo society and distinct to the academy.

This essay is a critical discussion on the scholarship of Dr. Jennifer Denetdale, Dr. AnCita Benally, Dr. Laura Tohe, Luci Tapahonso, and

Dr. Tiffany Lee. These scholars are writing on, advocating for, and visualizing solutions to pertinent concerns affecting Diné history and language. They are producing valuable works of Diné thought. They are contributing to a rich history of Diné intellectual tradition; their thoughts, ideas, and words are helping to transform how Diné people have been represented and imagining how Diné people can decolonize the past, present, and future.

These Diné women scholars are part of a long history of strong Diné women. These women are intellectual warriors who value Diné worldviews and who uphold the ability of the Diné people to self-determine their way of life. They are contributing to an Indigenous paradigm, where the central concepts are reflected in the meanings of Indigeness, sovereignty, colonization, and decolonization. Dr. Susan Miller discusses these concepts in her article "Native America Writes Back: The Origin of the Indigenous Paradigm in Historiography." Indigenous scholars today are constructing and authoring a distinct Indigenous paradigm where the major goal is a discourse upholding Indigenous rights. In other words, Indigenous scholars are advocating for Indigenous worldviews to be acknowledged and respected in the world generally and, specifically, in the academy.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Dr. Jennifer Denetdale's critique of the existing body of Navajo history lays a base for Diné transformative scholarship. Dr. Denetdale is an associate professor of history at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. She is the foremost Western-trained Navajo historian. She has written two books on Diné history, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* and *The Long Walk: The Forced Navajo Exile*, and several articles on Indigenous research methodologies and contemporary Diné issues. Numerous volumes have been written on Navajo history, predominantly from a white American perspective.² Dr. Denetdale is the first Western-trained Navajo female historian to write on the history of the people.

Reclaiming Diné History chronicles the histories of Manuelito and his less known wife Juanita. Denetdale argues that white American historians advance the notion that Navajos are cultural borrowers or aggressive and warlike people. By examining Manuelito and Juanita, she shows how Navajos continue to appreciate both of them. By analyzing how white American perspectives construct a certain perception of Navajo history and life, Denetdale references the history of colonization and the brutal and disturbing truth for the people. Through her written text, Denetdale sanctions the people can think, reason, and write intelligently about their own histories. For instance, Denetdale scrutinizes primary and secondary sources on Manuelito's life and incorporates clan family narratives about the lives of Juanita and Manuelito. By using both the typical Western historiography methodology and the non-Western

Indigenous approach of oral tradition to discuss Manuelito and Juanita, she demonstrates how contemporary Diné scholars can discuss, interpret, and analyze Navajo history for both the people and the general American public.

Along with writing the truth about Manuelito and Juanita, Denetdale's usage of oral tradition raises an important discussion on the usage of oral tradition in academic research, particularly in the history discipline. Her wanting to incorporate family stories of Juanita indicates that her research methodology is different from a typical historiography. It demonstrates a thorough approach to Navajo history and how research should be conducted on and in all Indigenous societies.

Indigenous researchers have been trying to explain to non-Indigenous scholars the importance of interacting with the community and respecting the values and beliefs of a people who have been colonized and continue to live in a colonized state. Dr. Denetdale advocates this perspective:

My ongoing research projects acknowledge the nature of colonialism and its consequences for our society, and at the same time reaffirm the value of our traditions and practices. By critiquing works that refuse to acknowledge the colonial nature in which we continue to live and then advancing studies that privilege a Diné worldview I hope to contribute to the betterment of our communities, for the Diné believe in the power of stories to transform, to move mountains. . . . Utilizing oral traditions to write Diné history requires changes in our approaches so that we become cognizant of community involvement and sensitive to Navajo needs. As Salish scholar Luana Ross notes, conducting research in our own communities leads to a personalized methodology that differs across tribal cultures.³

Denetdale personalizes her research methodology and in doing so privileges transformative Diné scholarship. Invoking Diné cultural knowledge along with Western historiography methodology enables Denetdale to decolonize Navajo thought and in turn the Navajo Nation.

Denetdale's analysis of the impact of American colonialism on the people enables her to remedy misconceptions of Navajo history. In chapter three, Denetdale tells the story of Manuelito and his fight to ensure the survival of the people during the 1860s, when more than a thousand Diné died at the prison internment camp at Fort Sumner in eastern New Mexico. Her account of Manuelito's tenacity counters the general American narrative in which Native men in

the nineteenth century are portrayed as defeated savages who could not live in a civilized society. Dr. Denetdale links the narratives and images of Manuelito to the political message of resistance and cultural continuity. She discusses the horrors and traumas of the period and how Manuelito and Juanita worked extremely hard to combat and repair the horrors of the Long Walk for the people.

The lack of Juanita's portrayal in the American narrative exemplifies ignorance or more likely the paternalistic nature of the academy where history resides in "men making real history." Denetdale counters this paradigm when she discusses Juanita's life and her leadership qualities. Juanita was a highly regarded community leader, countering the notion that Navajo men were predominantly the leaders of communities when, in fact, many Navajo women were central political figures. Denetdale's inclusion of the traditional narratives of Juanita discloses the continuing vitality of creation narratives and the centrality of women:

Importantly, creation narratives feature prominent female deities who provide the foundation from which Navajo women continue to define their traditional roles as grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. These maternal roles are positions of power for Navajo women. Also, the fact that Juanita and her daughters are remembered as grandmothers who were benevolent, generous, and loving is a testament to the centrality that Changing Woman holds for the Diné. Our stories of our grandmothers and grandfathers serve to renew our faith in the strength of the old ways.⁴

Discussing Juanita and Diné women in general reiterates an important fact about the Navajo worldview: women are an integral component of the continuation of Diné thought and way of life.

Denetdale's article "Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition" in *Wicazo Sa Review* critically reviews the lack of presence of women in Navajo polity and how Navajo society views gender roles based on white American concepts of men and women. She argues that Diné women today have to confront an additional oppression besides colonialism, that of Diné men using "custom and tradition" to impose Western democratic principles on women in Navajo government. She contextualizes Navajo government and discusses how Diné women are denied full participation in Navajo politics but are allowed to represent the Navajo Nation based on values and attitudes set forth by a paternalistic Western society. She illustrates this practice:

Although Navajo women are discouraged from full participation in the Navajo polity, Miss Navajo Nation represents ideal Navajo womanhood to Navajos and the

outside world. To illuminate how women are involved in the Navajo nationalist project, I turn to the Miss Navajo Nation pageant and discuss how the requirements reflect, on the one hand, ideal Navajo womanhood and, on the other, imposed notions of ideal Euro-American womanhood, which draw upon Victorian ideals of purity, chastity, and domesticity.⁵

Denetdale argues that a double standard is present when it comes to gender roles and responsibilities in the twenty-first century. Navajo men are allowed and encouraged to participate in politics but women are relegated to behind the scenes. She writes:

If Miss Navajo Nation is accused of misconduct or violations of the ethical laws and/or codes of conduct, she must answer to the Government Services Committee of the Navajo Nation to address the allegations and clear her name. If found guilty, she must relinquish her crown. Ironically, while Miss Navajo Nation must be virtuous and have impeccable morals, every other week or so, the *Navajo Times* reports with relish the infractions of Navajo male leaders, including embezzlements, adultery, and domestic violence. They are rarely brought before any committee of the Navajo Nation, although sometimes public airings of leaders' ethical violations bring about changes.⁶

Her scrutiny of the Miss Navajo Nation pageant requirements and how Diné women are not full participants in Navajo government explains how American colonialism has impacted how Navajo society conducts itself today. Her research also shows the consequences of American colonialism in Navajo thought where there are few women in the political and academic world of the Navajo Nation. Denetdale's overall work strives to reclaim a Navajo society that critically evaluates itself in order to correct the wrongs and revitalize ancestral Diné thought and action. Her work promotes transformative research in the academy and advances the notion of a decolonized Navajo history and Navajo Nation.

Dr. Laura Tohe, an associate professor in the English department at Arizona State University, is an established Diné writer and poet. Dr. Tohe has written and edited books such as *No Parole Today* and *Tséyi': Deep in the Rock: Reflections on Canyon De Chelly* and several articles. She expresses her thoughts through her poetry and storytelling approach. Along with Denetdale, Tohe's work encourages the people to learn, remember, and tell the histories of the Diné people. In her

short piece “Hwéeldi Bééháníih: Remembering the Long Walk,” Tohe tells how she learned of Hwéeldi.

When I got to college, I came across a book of transcribed narratives of Diné people telling stories about the Long Walk and *Hwéeldi*, the place the soldiers named Fort Sumner in south-central New Mexico. All the stories came from the elders who remembered what they had heard from their families. I had never heard or been told any of these *Hwéeldi* stories by my family or read it in my history textbooks. The history I was taught exalted American imperialism and nationalism. Not one mention was made of the other –ism, colonialism. The Long Walk and other death marches of indigenous peoples in the United States were omitted in all my history textbooks.⁷

Learning and remembering the histories of the Diné people and telling the stories are fundamental to Diné intellectual tradition. Tohe confirms this notion:

*Shimásání told me another story: Back then the people were trying to escape the soldiers. They used to hide wherever they could. It was really bad. Sometimes the mothers had to smother their babies to make them stop crying so the soldiers wouldn't hear them and get caught. That's how mean the soldiers were to our people. These are the kinds of stories that were omitted in the textbooks but the older people remembered how violent and dangerous that era was.*⁸

She also stresses the need for the people to give testimony on the atrocities of American colonialism:

What is Hwéeldi Bééháníih and why should it be remembered? Although the Long Walk happened more than a hundred years ago, it is still with us. We must know what happened and we must remember. It is part of Diné history, as it is part of American history. The Long Walk, the Trail of Tears, the Dakota incarceration, and other death marches like it are part of America's holocaust, and each deserves a place within the larger story of America. To gloss over or to omit the costs of colonialism is an injustice, not only to those whose ancestors were imprisoned but to the future generations who will want to know the past. To speak of these injustices is a way to heal from these wounds. These stories hold connections to current U.S. foreign policies that have already deeply impacted this country.⁹

Learning, remembering, and telling stories of the Long Walk and other traumatic historical moments in Navajo history condones a methodology where Diné intellectual tradition is included and valued in research. Like Denetdale, Tohe is rewriting and rerighting Diné history.

Luci Tapahonso, a professor in the English department at the University of Arizona, is a prolific Navajo poet. She has written five poetry books, such as *A Radiant Curve*, *Sáanii Dabataat: The Women Are Singing*, and *Blue Horses Rush In*, and one children's book. While many of her stories and poems are about her life on the reservation, her writings reflect the natural process of Navajo memory and storytelling. Her piece "In 1864" in *Sáanii Dabataat: The Women Are Singing* exemplifies the importance of memory among the people.

My aunt always started the story saying, "You are here because of what happened to your great-grandmother long ago." They began rounding up the people in the fall. Some were lured into surrendering by offers of food, clothes, and livestock. So many of us were starving and suffering that year because the bilagáana kept attacking us. Kit Carson and his army had burned all the fields, and they killed our sheep right in front of us. We couldn't believe it. I covered my face and cried. All my life, we had sheep. They were like our family. It was then I knew our lives were in great danger. We were all so afraid of that man, Redshirt, and his army. Some people hid in the foothills of the Chuska Mountains and in Canyon de Chelly. Our family talked it over, and we decided to go to this place. What would our lives be like without sheep, crops, and land? At least, we thought we would be safe from gunfire and our family would not starve.¹⁰

Tapahonso's work contributes to this evolving paradigm of Navajo transformative scholarship. Her knowledge and eloquent writing help to combat the consequences of American colonialism. Tapahonso's poetry also upholds the value of Diné sovereignty and counters the perception that Diné society succumbed to a more powerful entity when, in fact, the people have survived and continued.

Dr. AnCita Benally earned a doctorate in history from Arizona State University. She wrote her dissertation, *Diné Binabat'á': Navajo Government*, on the Pinon Chapter system, the current community governing structure. No other study has comprehensively reviewed the social and political history of one specific chapter community on the Navajo Reservation. Her historical study on the Pinon Chapter community is the first.

She also utilizes oral narratives to retell the history of leadership and governance in the Pinon Chapter community. Benally interviews various individuals within the Pinon community about chapter organization leaders. She explains how Diné women were a fundamental component of historical Navajo governance and planning:

There were women leaders as well who lead in peace and war. Many rose to important positions or were highly influential. A woman named Asdzaa Naat'Ilh was reported to have been a great speaker whose strength of character advanced her to a position of influence. One of the wives of Hastiin Naat'Ilh, Narbona was apparently a person of great power as well. When Hastiin Naat'Ilh and other leaders met with the Americans under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John M. Washington to negotiate a peace agreement, the power of his wife's oratory almost dissuaded the entourage from continuing the meeting. It is common knowledge that there were women warriors and leaders who wielded as much power as the men. Their names have passed from active narrations of history, but the precedence they set is remembered.¹¹

Benally's usage of oral stories sanctions the insider account of Navajo history. Benally, Denetdale, Tohe, and Tapahonso legitimize the relevancy of oral tradition and Diné cultural knowledge when conducting research based on their work and the approach they follow in their scholarship.

Along with her dissertation, Benally contributed to an article with Dr. Peter Iverson titled "Finding History," published in *The Western Historical Quarterly*. The article is written in conversation format and stresses to historians the need to do more complete histories of Native nations and to employ oral narratives, oral histories, cultural teachings, personal observations, and photographs. In the conversation, Benally advocates the recognition of oral stories as history for the Diné people and for historians to not declare oral narratives as myths, legends, or superstitions. She explains:

Outsiders labeled these narratives myths, legends, and even superstitions. Yet these stories were our record. The stories that passed from generation to generation were the most important to the people. They were the stories that had the greatest impact on them. They brought forth historical information that could not be found elsewhere. This was history as seen through the eyes of the people themselves, as they understood it, in a way that had meaning for them.¹²

Oral narratives embody the identity of all Indigenous peoples, and the documentation of these stories validates the people. What Benally and the others are accomplishing by including oral narratives in the writing of history is to provide a complete and respectful perspective of Diné histories.

Dr. Benally also coauthored an article with Dr. Denis Viri of Arizona State University—"Diné Bizaad [Navajo Language] at a Crossroads: Extinction or Renewal?"—in *Bilingual Research Journal*. The article details the changes to the Diné language and how those changes threaten its vitality. Benally and Viri's examination into the viability of the language in an English-dominated Navajo society is a concern for the Navajo Nation. Many Navajo families believe speaking English is better in the long run than teaching their children how to speak fluent Diné.¹³ Educational and linguistic research shows that learning their native language helps Native American children in their self-esteem, self-identity, and competence in cultural and Western knowledge.¹⁴ Benally affirms this notion:

Children who learn their language and social and political history have greater self-esteem and a greater sense of self-identity. They also tend to be more outgoing and display positive social skills. At a workshop in the late 1980s, Kenneth Begishe addressed his home community's parent committee. He spoke about going to Rock Point School and being met by a young boy about 5 years old. The boy, without hesitation, extended his hand and greeted him with "Ya'at'eeb" [hello, greetings]. He went on to introduce himself, giving his name, his clan affiliations, and where he was from. Then, he asked Mr. Begishe about his clan and where he was from. Having finished his greeting, the boy then gave instructions about where the office was. Mr. Begishe compared the boy to Navajo students in other communities. He noted that when these students were addressed, they immediately ducked their heads and withdrew. Mr. Begishe said he was convinced that Rock Point School students were outgoing and showed positive social skills because they were taught through their own history and culture and language. Because they knew who they were, they had confidence in themselves and projected that in everything else they did.¹⁵

Language maintenance and language revitalization are vital issues for the Navajo Nation today. Benally's article on the status of the Diné language shows the urgency to maintain it. Along with historiography,

language is part of Navajo transformative scholarship. Many individuals are making conscientious efforts to maintain and revitalize the Diné language, and one such person is Dr. Tiffany S. Lee.

LANGUAGE

Dr. Tiffany S. Lee, an assistant professor of Native American studies at the University of New Mexico, is emerging as a well-respected Western-trained Navajo educator. Her scholarship centers on Navajo and Indigenous education. Her article "If They Want Navajo to Be Learned, Then They Should Require It in All Schools: Navajo Teenagers' Experiences, Choices, and Demands Regarding Navajo Language" is an insightful and important study on young Navajo language learning experiences and choices. She wants the study to help identify better strategies when it comes to helping Navajo students learn to speak the Diné language at the secondary level. Dr. Lee brings to light the views of Navajo teenagers when it comes to learning and speaking Diné. The students in her study want to learn the language, but they also do not want to be ridiculed by relatives, friends, and the older generation for attempting to speak Diné. She writes:

The interviews provided evidence to support three conclusions about Navajo teenagers' language use. One is that, like in the survey, the students reported in the interviews having strongly negative recollections of being teased when trying to speak Navajo. Second, the school environment has a profound influence over language choices and use. Third, Navajo teenagers tended to associate Navajo language with the elderly and with being outdated. Nevertheless, they hold tremendous value in the language; they just do not know how to incorporate it into their lives.¹⁶

The methods employed by adults today to teach the young appear not to take into account the attitudes and feelings of the students. In the past, teasing was used to help people learn to reinforce the love and support of their relatives, friends, and community members. Teenagers in Dr. Lee's study viewed teasing as a detriment to teaching the language. She asserts:

Particularly when the source of the teasing was an older relative or another adult, the experience made the students feel demeaned, embarrassed, and defensive. The teasing that the students described provides evidence supporting an explanation for the survey result in which the experience of

teasing predicts less fluency in the language. Many students felt they should not be blamed for their limited Navajo.¹⁷

Teasing has also been used as a method in Diné society and many other Indigenous societies as a way to teach the social norms of the culture. Teasing shows the community's love and affection for the individual, but for many younger people today it can be viewed as demeaning and embarrassing. Her study illustrates how schools can re-examine how they teach the language to Navajo students and how to create safe environments for the language to flourish. By working to revitalize the Diné language, Lee is helping to decolonize Diné thought and the Navajo Nation itself.

In another article, "I Came Here to Learn How to Be a Leader: An Intersection of Critical Pedagogy and Indigenous Education," Lee discusses how the Tribal Resource Institute in Business, Engineering, and Science (TRIBES) summer program encourages its students to develop a critical Indigenous consciousness where the students make a commitment to helping their Native nations. She reveals how TRIBES is an example of how critical pedagogy and Indigenous education can help Indigenous students learn about Native America and their peoples' place in this world that is consistent with Indigenous values and world-views. The summer program also stresses how Indigenous students can use higher education tools to serve the goals and needs of Indigenous communities. This article is an example of how Navajo transformative scholarship can be employed by Indigenous programs and institutions to reclaim and restore cultural teachings that will, in effect, decolonize young students' minds. In fact, the TRIBES academic curriculum can be a way to transform Indigenous education experiences today.

Dr. Jennifer Denetdale, Dr. AnCita Benally, Dr. Laura Tohe, Luci Tapahonso, and Dr. Tiffany Lee are constructing and authoring a distinct Diné scholarship. Their research and writings interconnect Navajo worldviews with Western training to create ideas, theories, and solutions to transform Navajo representation and to decolonize the Navajo Nation. These scholars' research and discourse on history and language frame transformative scholarship.

Dr. Denetdale's usage of oral narratives to tell the truth about Manuelito and Juanita is an approach Western historiography has not embraced or respected, yet oral narratives have ensured Diné continuance. Dr. Lee's work on language revitalization helps to develop a critical pedagogy where the Diné language can be taught in a safe environment. Dr. Tohe's learning, remembering, and telling of Diné stories stress the importance of testimony in historical research. Tapahonso's narratives reiterate the fundamental need for memory in historical research. Through their theorizing, writing, and researching on issues pertinent to the Navajo Nation and the academy, the ideas

and thoughts of these women will further develop and contribute to Indigenous knowledge.

As more and more Navajo students attend or complete college and graduate with baccalaureates in history, education, sociology, political science, and other disciplines, the probability of more Navajo individuals graduating with masters and doctorates increases. These individuals will hopefully continue the work Denetdale, Benally, Tohe, Tapahonso, and Lee began.

N O T E S

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- 2 Numerous historians for the past 130 years have written on many aspects of Navajo history. These scholars include but are not limited to Washington Matthews, John Upton Terrell, Garrick A. Bailey, Roberta Glenn Bailey, Frank McNitt, J. Lee Correll, Martha Blue, Peter Iverson, Raymond Friday Locke, and Leopold Ostermann.
- 3 Jennifer Nez Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 45.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 5 Jennifer Nez Denetdale, "Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition," *Wicazo Sa Review* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 17.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 18–19.
- 7 Laura Tohe, "Hwéeldi Bééhániih: Remembering the Long Walk," *Wicazo Sa Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 78.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 82.
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- 17 *Ibid.*, 20–21.