Preface

I have been privileged in my life to interact in meaningful ways with diverse groups of American workers. Since I was a teenager I have worked with those who struggle with the consequences of their lack of economic power at their work sites and in their lives. These workers are often unrecognized and always under-appreciated by contemporary society.

I began in my high school days working in the Cajun country of Louisiana with sugarcane workers who labored in fields and lived in houses inhabited by their ancestors who were held in the inhuman chains of slavery. I joined with pogy boat fishermen in the “Golden Triangle” of southeast Texas who made their living chasing schools of menhaden fish off the Gulf Coast as they struggled to pool their collective strength in order to confront common economic adversaries. Each group was seeking to fashion sustainable and meaningful lives for themselves and their families, given the hand that life had dealt to them. Then, after a stint as a private in the US Army, I worked for several years alongside oil tool workers in the Houston Ship Channel and with postal service workers in a poor southern section of the town.

A few years later, in the 1980s, I embarked on a legal career representing workers and unions in the major American industries in the South and Southwest, struggling to safeguard wages and benefits as the globalized “race to the bottom” intensified its assault on the living standards of the American industrial working class. In the 1990s, as the union movement’s long slow slide continued, representing railroad workers around the country in legal claims resulting from workplace injuries became a growing part of my legal practice.
In 2004, I took an “academic sabbatical” from my life as a lawyer to study at Harvard Divinity School. After over thirty-five years of advocating for and fighting alongside American workers, I felt a need to step back and ponder the meaning and future of the movement of workers and their struggle for economic and social justice. The meteoric rise of a culture of self-centered individualism and the state-sanctioned drive to find the lowest wages and cheapest working conditions on the planet were eviscerating the union movement in this country, and with it, ideas of the nobility of solidarity. It has been my experience that shared work performed by the least advantaged can have a sacred quality; community develops and flows from the makeup of many of these occupations and the struggles of workers within them. Those in these occupations have no choice but to face the reality that they are but a small part of a whole, but a whole that is important to the good of all. Self-centered individualism plays a less corrosive role in this milieu than it does in many others, as the nature of the work and the relationship to power do not allow this poisonous weed to form deep roots. Participation in the common work of the laboring class, especially when one is conscious of the crucial need to unite with those with whom one works, can engender the kinds of powerful bonds that true community needs to survive.

But throughout my life it has become clear that contemporary collective responses are losing their economic efficaciousness in this country. Without the legitimate possibility of success, fewer and fewer people are willing to take the necessary serious risks involved in confronting power to attempt to better their lives and the lives of their coworkers. The result is that

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1 Growing up in Little Rock in the 1960s, I was inspired by Martin Luther King’s efforts in 1968 on behalf of the sanitation workers of Memphis, where he found sacredness in their struggles to build just and liveable lives. The night before he was killed, King implored Americans to develop “a kind of dangerous unselfishness.” Even today, it is difficult to think of a better inspiration for life.
the heritage of community building and deepened understanding
that struggles of the working class can produce also seem to be
receding into the past.

At the divinity school I worked to clarify how people use
various practices, communal as well as individual, to navigate
the difficult economic and emotional shoals that we all encounter
in life and that are especially close to the surface for the industrial
and service workers with whom I had worked. The point
of any collective response to power is to produce a better life
for those involved, their families, and their communities. When
contemporary collective economic responses seem inaccessible
or inadequate, how do the powerless cope? What personal strategies
are employed, what traditional communal responses remain viable, and what new cultural or political forms are possible?
These questions can be approached, of course, in a multitude of
ways. As I explored these questions, I began to think back on my
legal efforts on behalf of Navajo railroad workers and how they
used religious ritual to help them secure the safety and balance
that is so important in their lives. I wondered where such activities fit in the lives of these workers.

Before my academic sabbatical, my legal work on behalf of injured railroad workers had allowed me to represent many
Navajo workers in their injury compensation claims with their
employers, the major western American railroad companies.\(^2\)
Navajo workers have been working for railroad companies
since the beginning of southwestern railroad construction in the
1800s. Railroad work is dangerous in general, and, with very few exceptions, Navajos are offered only the most grueling work on
the major western railroads: maintenance on the tracks that traverse the American Southwest. As far back as the late nineteenth
century, with the initial building of the western railroads, track work “was universally considered a most inferior and arduous

\(^2\) The legal claims are brought pursuant to the Federal Employers’ Liability Act, 35 Stat. 65, as amended, 45 U.S.C. §§ 51–60 (1908), which covers railroad workers throughout the United States.
form of labor.” Work practices for this craft are little changed over the past century, and the military-type management ethos that has always pervaded these work sites continues to this day. Thus, these Navajo railroad workers are often injured and their injuries are often neglected or belittled by railroad management.

Thinking back on my interaction with these men and their families, I remembered a number of instances of the interplay of work life practicalities with religious practices that seemed designed to bring comfort to these workers in this hazardous profession. In my legal practice I had once been asked to sponsor the expenses of a medicine man who accompanied a group of traveling Navajo railroad workers, spiritually supporting their safety and tending to their emotional and religious needs. How did this activity and the practice of Navajo religion square with my search for tools that could be used by the powerless to assist in the development and maintenance of livable lives in the face of a difficult economic and psychic environment? Working with Professors Dudley Rose and Michael Jackson at Harvard, I traveled back to the Navajo Nation and its outskirts to meet with some of these workers and to explore these questions with them.

I began to consider what role religion plays in the lives of these men during their time on the railroad, especially now, when collective responses to workplace dangers and dislocations are particularly problematic. Religion, of course, is multifaceted and has many “uses” for those who practice it; my initial goal was to study its “existential” operation for these Navajo railroad

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4 Collective responses to workplace injuries and indignities have always been difficult for Navajos. Historically, the relationship between trade unions—the classic form of solidarity for industrial workers—and Navajos has been problematic and ambiguous, owing to a number of factors, including the historical reality of oppression and colonialization, cultural differences, geographic isolation, the lack of bargaining power of the union for their craft, and the paternalism of some union leaders.
What tools and strategies, religious or otherwise, do these Navajos use to craft a sustainable and satisfying life? In my contact with Navajo railroad workers and their families, I saw rich patterns and practices in their reactions to the dislocations and dangers posed by their work on the railroads.

In pondering and writing I was and remain especially influenced by the writings of the New Zealand anthropologist Michael Jackson, who writes of the common existential condition—of the necessity and ability we all have to craft a “human way of being-in-the-world through our ever-changing capacity to create conditions of viable existence and coexistence in relation to the environment which we face.” This is true in Africa and Australia, where Jackson did much of his fieldwork; it is also true in the offices, factories, and fields of this country. And it is true for the Navajo men who ventured off their land to work on the railroad.

I began with interviews and with what I had learned in my interactions with these workers in my work life, with knowledge I had gained from books and newspapers, and with academic and governmental archives of papers and correspondence. This book is the result of my experiences and of my many conversations

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5 The uses and attributes of religious practices are many. David McAlles-ter, a writer and employee of the Navajo Nation, has documented social, political, ecological, educational, health-related, bureaucratic, and commercial uses of religion by the Navajo people. See “The Secular Uses of Traditional Religion and Knowledge in Modern Navajo Society,” in Navajo Religion and Culture: Selected Views; Papers in Honor of Leland C. Wyman, ed. David M. Brugge and Charlotte J. Frisbie (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982), 209–18.

6 In order to understand as much as possible about the history of those who ply this craft, and to be sensitive to potential concerns that as a lawyer I was “soliciting” clients, I focused my interviews and discussions for this work with retired workers and the religious men and women who served them.

with Navajo workers, some of whom have become friends. It makes use of previous scholarship and archival records, including an important set of records from the US Railroad Retirement Board that details how large numbers of Navajos came to work for railroads in the twentieth century. The bibliography at the end of this book lists some of the important works that were most useful to me in the canon of literature on Navajos.

Most importantly, I am privileged to have engaged in conversations with these Navajo men and women, many of whom I feature. Each of these people, and others with whom I spoke, have honored me by graciously and patiently agreeing to be interviewed and to teach me some of the ways of their lives. I have learned much from the Navajos who have been my friends, translators, and coworkers over the last twenty years. In addition, my preliminary knowledge came from contact with Navajo clients and their families whom I have been privileged to represent.

Also, like all who write, I have benefited from friends, colleagues, and mentors in the construction and editing of this work. And, in the area of Navajo studies, while academic

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8 In speaking of those who write about the Navajo, the bibliographer Howard M. Bahr accurately perceived that “The observers move, and the Navajo people move, but we professional observers talk of change among the Navajo as if we were anchored, calibrated, stable and therefore able to mark Navajo ‘progress.’ . . . In summary, the literature on the Navajo is a product of changing tools in the hands of changing observers applied to changing communities in the context of ongoing change in the wider societies of both observer and observed.” Howard M. Bahr. Diné Bibliography to the 1990s: A Companion to the Navajo Bibliography of 1969 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999), xxiii. Bahr’s observation applies to my work and to the efforts of the many who came before me.

9 Given the breadth of Navajo scholarship, I apologize for any mistaken omissions.

10 I especially want to thank those who have steadfastly encouraged me in this work, including my wife, Mary Ellen Vogler; my mother, Pat Youngdahl; my daughter, Coleen Youngdahl; and my friends Bill Haymes, Peter Zarifes, Bill Deverell, and Christine Irizarry. My friend and scholar of the English language, David Schiller, has repeatedly buffed and polished my diction, a difficult task indeed. The remaining mistakes are all mine.
disputes are legendary, numerous careful ethnographers have come before me, leaving behind important information and analysis.  

As projects like this often do, my work went in directions unintended at the beginning. Based on my recorded talks with Navajo people, my efforts have driven me down the historical path of Navajo railroad work. I was able to document the history of the tremendous growth in the numbers of Navajo railroad workers after World War II through studying the archives.

Many have helped in the editing and construction of the work, including John Alley and all those at Utah State University Press and my son, Benjamin Youngdahl. Archivists and librarians have been uniformly helpful to me in a number of locations, and I thank them.

The legendary and ongoing disputes among those who work in Navajo studies wax and wane according to the academic fashions of the day. For example, the pioneering work of Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, in many ways the founders of this anthropological field, has been criticized by respected Navajo scholar Gary Witherspoon, who wrote, “The accepted literature, mostly compiled during the Kluckhohn era of Harvard psychoanalytical research projects conducted mainly at Ramah, New Mexico, should, in my opinion, be transferred from the category ‘accepted’ to the category of ‘questionable.’ Many of the culture and personality studies of this era have come under so much unfavorable scrutiny that the whole effort has been largely discounted by many anthropologists.” Gary Witherspoon, Language and Art in the Navajo Universe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 195. Yet, a little over a decade later, Witherspoon’s work was sharply criticized by Thomas Patin, a scholar influenced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Patin argued that Witherspoon ignored issues of power in his work on the Navajo and was part of a Western colonialist mindset “unable to apprehend cultural differences without first circumscribing it with its own desires.” Thomas Patin, “White Mischief: Metaphor and Desire in a Misreading of Navajo Culture,” American Indian Culture and Research Journal 15, no. 4 (1991): 86. “Witherspoon’s work,” Patin wrote, “despite its good intentions, turns out to be another form of estrangement of Native Americans, of the ‘primitive,’ of anything ‘Other,’ produced by white culture.” Patin, 85. Having tried to read all available relevant literature, I am most persuaded by the actual fieldwork of authors and those who move from the fieldwork to the analysis and back. Thus, work such as that of Kluckhohn and Leighton remains extraordinarily important today. Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, The Navajo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 24.
of an obscure federal agency based in Chicago, the United States Railroad Retirement Board. I was the first writer to examine these documents, which show the actions and motivations of those who encouraged the growth in Navajo railroad employment. I gained some of the historical insights herein from a fascinating cache of correspondence regarding Navajo railroad workers in the archives of the Unitarian Universalist Association, located in the library of the Harvard Divinity School. Archives and papers of other institutions and individuals have played an important role as well, especially those from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). In these repositories, the papers and letters from David Brugge, in his work with the Unitarian Service Committee, and Robert W. Young, a former BIA official, have been extraordinarily useful. The archives of the organization of Navajo trading post owners, the United Indian Traders Association, held at Northern Arizona University, were important as well. Finally, I was also able to review documents concerning and prepared by lawyers for the Dinébe’iiná Náhiitna be Agha’diit’ahii (DNA), the legal service agency that has provided free legal aid to Navajo people and others since 1967; these documents were especially important at one stage of this story.

Tensions both creative and difficult can be found in many areas of interaction between native peoples and the surrounding society, and they are sure to be present in this work as well. For a non-Native American to write about the Navajo people and

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12 Robert W. Young was employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1940 to 1971, first as a specialist in Indian languages, and after 1950, in Navajo tribal relations. In 1971, he joined the staff of the Modern Languages Department at the University of New Mexico, where he taught classes in Navajo linguistics for many years. In collaboration with William Morgan Sr., he wrote a bilingual Navajo-English/English-Navajo dictionary and grammar text, which was published in 1980 under the title *The Navajo Language: A Grammar and Colloquial Dictionary.* This work was published again in 1987 in revised form, and this was followed in 1992 by *An Analytical Lexicon of Navajo,* compiled with the assistance of Sally Midgette. Both works were published by the University of New Mexico Press.
their nation is contested terrain.\textsuperscript{13} I have encountered some of this friction in my legal work for Navajo workers, which, while richly rewarding, presented challenges that I had not encountered in other parts of my legal practice: Navajo lifeways and the American legal system do not always mesh well. Similarly, it must be observed that in this work, while I have tried to be precisely faithful to the words of those I interviewed and what was meant by them, some linguistic ambiguity is sure to be present. Further overlaid are the numerous potential pitfalls that any attempt to consider notions of spirituality and religion faces in this time of the politicization, and often marginalization, of faith.

In response, the Navajos place respect at the top of their list of virtues. Being especially cognizant of these complications in writing about the Navajos, I have tried to make it mine as well.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} For one thoughtful view on the tension in this contested area, see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, \textit{Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples} (London: Zed Books, 1999). Smith calls “research” one of the “dirtiest words” in the vocabulary of indigenous peoples and explores the continuing acidic effect of research through “imperial eyes.” As to research involving Navajos, another academic, Jennifer Nez Denetdale, writes that “non-Navajo scholars still dominate the arena of research and publication. As long as this is the case, Navajos will continue to be understood within Western categories of meaning that sustain colonialist discourses and serve to perpetuate ideas of dominance hierarchy, and asymmetry.” Jennifer Nez Denetdale, \textit{Reclaiming Diné History} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007), 6. While Denetdale goes significantly too far in this statement, I agree with those who argue that in areas like anthropology and ethnography, knowledge is being extracted from the lives of native people just as Peabody Coal or the uranium companies extract mineral wealth from Navajo land. To control this extraction, native nations, including the Navajo, have established bureaucracies to oversee some of the kind of research that I have done in this book. This is especially important for the Navajo people; it has become a cliché in anthropology that they are the most studied people on Earth. The bulk of these studies have come in the last ninety years. See, e.g., John R. Farella, \textit{The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984), 3.

\textsuperscript{14} In all my interviews, I have attempted to respect the structure that has been erected by the Navajo Nation in this area of scholarship. At the time of this writing, the responsible agency was the Navajo Nation Historic
Even given these complications, the study of another culture can be a transforming experience for those who think deeply about their place in the world. In his book *Existential Anthropology*, Michael Jackson quotes the pioneering anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who wrote of this issue and its importance:  

15 We cannot possibly reach the final Socratic wisdom of knowing ourselves if we never leave the narrow confinement of the customs, beliefs and prejudices into which every man is born. Nothing can teach us a better lesson in this matter of ultimate importance than the habit of mind which allows us to treat the beliefs and values of another man from his point of view.  

16 Employing a number of different vantage points and a variety of personal discussions and interviews, as well as the writings of others, this book will, I hope, create a coherent picture of how and why these Navajo men have been able to navigate the world into which they are thrown.  

17 So, as the superb ethnographer of

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15 Jackson, *Existential Anthropology*, x.


17 Some of the work of this book has been presented at the Harvard Divinity School in connection with academic requirements, and at the following conferences: “Navajo Railroad Workers: Safety, Culture, and Capitalism” (Native American Labor History Conference, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, October 22, 2009); “Coping on the Track Gang: Religious Practices of Navajo Railroad Workers” (How Class Works—Conference, Center for the Study of Working Class Life, State University of New York, Stony Brook, NY, June 5–7, 2008); “Anchoring and Adaptability:
western American Indians, Keith Basso, has written, the role of the author here means that

sorting through conflicting intuitions, and beset by a host of unanswered questions . . . the ethnographer must somehow fashion a written account that adequately conveys his or her understanding of other people’s understandings.¹⁸

That is my task in this book.

Jemez Springs, New Mexico
