

Article

My Tongue is a Mountain: Land, Belonging and the Politics of Voice

Sandra Yellowhorse

School of Māori and Indigenous Education, Te Puna Wānanga, Epsom Campus, University of Auckland, 74 Epsom Ave, Auckland 1023, New Zealand; s.yellowhorse@auckland.ac.nz

Received: 3 August 2020; Accepted: 13 November 2020; Published: 24 November 2020



Abstract: Indigenous story is about place and our orientation to the place(s) we live through and in. This essay is about Diné (Navajo) identity and its entanglements with the authority of words and the politics of voice within the academy. It is about how voice or narrative are political acts that ground Indigenous peoples in land and territory. In Diné communities, there are ongoing discussions regarding the politics of authority and representation in the erasure of Indigenous voices in academic spaces. Such academic erasure has ripple effects into the ongoing contestation of land and belonging. These ripple effects fuel identity politics among Diné people on the community level. I argue that Diné people themselves are erased and the everyday narrations of our realities and experiences through these normalized academic processes. In addressing those academic processes, I draw attention to another framework for identity politics that encourages and supports not only our voices as Diné people but upholds our intellectual sovereignty and claims to land. I engage narrative to bring forward an understanding that our relationships to words and story extend beyond our tongues.

Keywords: Diné Nation (Navajo Nation); narrative; politics of voice; authority; representation; Diné epistemology; Indigenous story; land; belonging; *k'é*

Introduction

This is a story about identity and how I have come to understand myself as a Diné person. There are collisions of histories, ideologies, institutional influences and subsequent policies that shape the world of Indigenous identity. These sites of impact demonstrate how multidimensional and complex the world(s) of identity politics is for Indigenous people. Entangled with power politics found within academic settings, the discourse of identity impacts the politics of voice for Indigenous people. Who speaks and, more important, who is heard? This is a reality many Indigenous scholars encounter. This article is about stories that explore these tensions and how they have played out in my life as an emerging Diné writer. In mapping how identity formations are historically influenced through academic research and, in turn, how those formations impact authority of voice for Diné people themselves, I convey other modes of thinking about authority through kinship, philosophy, land and social movements. Thinking through the frame of “land-based resurgence” (Wildcat et al. 2014, p. iii), I uphold land as a pedagogy for teaching relationships and kinship and how land as story not only confronts modes of ongoing colonialism but offer pathways forward to rethinking identity, authority politics and voice. My intention is not to resolve the question of authority, but rather explore the limits of current modes of structural authority to place forward new ways to rethink authority through kinship and Diné knowledge grounded in land.

This work is an autobiographical, self-reflective narrative positioned within a transdisciplinary lens. It is underpinned with Indigenous feminist theory and praxis and Diné philosophy.¹ Indigenous feminist frameworks uphold political and material understandings of relationality and interdependency (Yazzie and Baldy 2018) and kinship (Goeman and Denetdale 2009; Yazzie and Baldy 2018; Red Nation 2019), drawing attention to the ways in which “settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy and capitalism corrupt Indigenous values . . . by promoting romanticized ideals of individualism, hierarchical social systems and conditional acceptance” (Red Nation 2019). This orientation calls for critical reflection on how these systems manifest in our own communities and articulations of how we think through concepts such as tradition, culture and identity and from the lens in which they are invoked (Red Nation 2019). This theoretical and political point of departure informs not only the ways in which I think through how Indigenous people continue to be treated in academic spaces but also how we treat one another and how we can enact relationality predicated on land and kinship. This reorientation conveys something different about how we understand identity, authority and the politics of voice both in academic spaces and our communities.

I am living 5000 miles away from Diné lands in Aotearoa, New Zealand, as I write about how I came to think through the points of collision with power politics that impacted my voice as a Diné writer. In pointing toward hopeful possibilities, I utilize stories, both Diné stories of land, activism and educational pedagogy, woven together with my own story of how I came to understand myself in relationship to Diné knowledge systems that impacted the materiality of my life. Narrative is important in this work to place forward the ways I still encounter colonialism in the everyday and how it is “felt” (Millon 2008) as an emerging Diné scholar. Stories are my way of making sense of the reality in which I have thought through Diné identity. According to Māori scholar Joellee Seed-Pihama (2019), “integral to the unraveling of colonization is our own ancestral wisdom, which can be found in stories (in their many forms)” (p. 112). Stories, narrative, words and “language has the power to heal, reimagine and reformulate power relations” (Goeman and Denetdale 2009, para.6). It begins and ends with perhaps one of my most important stories. It is the story of a mountain close to the community I was raised in. I tell this story to demonstrate how multiple ways of knowing and being known are embedded in words, story and place. This story exemplifies the power of how *words* make meaning and life. Words are a political force, and it is through narrative that I demonstrate how story cements me to place history and memory. Story helps me make sense of who I am as Diné, and that story always has orientation.

***Tsoodzil*: Tongue Mountain**

One of my earliest memories as a child is a mountain, and the mountain’s name is *Tsoodzil*. I encountered this mountain many times as a child as I traveled across the long highway through Western New Mexico with my family. We would often travel to Albuquerque, and this mountain witnessed every journey of ours as we headed East. The long highway between my small hometown and the city is scattered with beautiful red cliffs, countless dots of juniper trees and sage under an endless canopy of blue sky that blanketed this mountain as it towered in the middle of a vast plain. *Tsoodzil* is a dormant stratovolcano, whose life and history are written onto the landscape as the freeway is built around basalt at its base. As an observant child, I knew we were halfway to our destination when we came over a long hill and saw the snow-capped top of *Tsoodzil*. Its colonized name is Mt. Taylor, and it was named after the 12th president of the United States, Zachary Taylor (Blake 1999). Sadly enough, he had no direct relationship with this mountain, no history with it. It was merely named after Taylor’s military “exploits” in the Mexican-American War as a symbol of his patriotism

¹ Indigenous feminism was introduced to me by Diné scholar, Jennifer Denetdale whose important work critically focused on intersections of power, tribal politics, tradition and nationhood (2006) to illuminate “multiple colonialisms” rooted in historical processes and policies implanted in emergent legal systems (Goeman and Denetdale 2009) with focus on those systems on the Navajo Nation.

(Blake 1999, p. 492). This type of naming reduced the mountain to a symbol of the U.S. empire and American exceptionalism rooted in conquest. However, *Tsoodzil* is much more than that.

I never knew the mountain's real name, *Tsoodzil*, until I was an adult. One day I sat in a *Diné Bizaad* (Navajo language) class, learning my Native tongue. I learned about the Four Sacred Mountains of *Diné'tah* (Navajo ancestral lands) that marked Diné territories, which extended to the East, South, West and North. I begin learning about the real names of the places I had known all my life and how *words* described them. Words honored the life and character of a place, unlike colonized placenames, which were named after people who presumed to have dominion or control of these places at one point, or even worse, no relationship at all. In learning *Diné bizaad*, I learned the way we used words always presumed a relationship with the things we described. As a relational language, words were not compartmentalized or categorized. They emerged from relationships.

The mountain's very name, *Tsoodzil*, represented a cascade of Diné philosophy wrapped in place. I realized that *Tsoodzil* is the Sacred Mountain to the South of Diné territories and is blessed with its own teachings that reflect Diné worldview(s) (Pearsons-Yazzie and Speas 2007, pp. 274–76). It has status as an intellectual pedagogy, as a focal point for ceremony, and is a foundational part of Diné ontology- how we as Diné people understand the nature of *being* and *existing*. *Tsoodzil* is more than just a mountain. Its stories have lifeways breathed into it, and it holds the philosophical treasures of our cultural and spiritual lives as Diné people. *Tsoodzil* is grounded in Diné pedagogy, which reflects teachings for Diné life (Pearsons-Yazzie and Speas 2007, p. 276). These teachings are “all interrelated ... [and] are organized according to the four directions, the sacred mountains, the important mental concepts, the people around you and the life cycle” (p. 274). Situated to the South, *Tsoodzil* represents '*Alchíníí* (children) (Pearsons-Yazzie and Speas 2007), and its teachings are the praxis for teaching and learning with an emphasis on critical thinking and the value of words (Kee 2011). Learning in this sense is not merely the acquisition of words, but the emotional, spiritual, intellectual and cultural growth that takes place in tandem with the unification of voice, thought and heart (feelings).

Tsoodzil is not only a fundamental part of the “model” of Diné philosophy embedded in the Four Sacred Mountains (Pearsons-Yazzie and Speas 2007, p. 274). It was also the first landmark that Diné people saw that signaled the return to their homelands after their forced removal by the U.S. government to Bosque Redondo, or *Hwéédli*, the place of suffering, from 1864–1868. After being held captive for four years, Diné people signed a treaty and were allowed to return to their ancestral homelands between the four sacred mountains (Link 1973). On their journey back to their homeland, “they were emotionally overcome when they saw the sacred mountain *Tsoodzil*”, documented in the traditional song, *Shí Nashaa* (Cody 2011). The sight of the mountain signaled their belonging to place. This is our home, and we claim and are claimed in return by our relationship to place. Therefore, Diné thinking is embedded in the land, and the land is story. Diné philosophy and our knowledge systems are written into place, and these lands hold the stories of who we are as Diné people. In this way, our words/expressions can be viewed as part of the story belonging to the place.

The power of words is directly tied to the land and the teachings of this sacred mountain, *Tsoodzil*. Of the many things I have already outlined, *Tsoodzil* also represents the human tongue, or, more specifically, the gift and weapon of speaking (Kee 2011). Its very translation, *Tsoodzil*, means Tongue Mountain (Willson and Gene 1995). In relation to Diné pedagogy and the teachings instilled in children, I understand that this mountain is related to words and the invocation of words. It is tied to the importance of words and the numerous ways in which words operate and are expressed. There are numerous modes of language and communication that are not encapsulated in only the verbalization of speech. All of these expressive modes of *communicating* are diverse and represent the spectrum of Diné worldview(s) and should be valid, honored and treasured. They all constitute *Diné voice*.

Just as the mountain is more than a mountain- more than the name of one person without any relationship to it- our *voices* have cascading powers of their own that embody multilayered understandings of how we tie words to place and place to power and belonging. Worldviews are embedded in these expressions, and in my life, through my own words. Relationships and belonging

through relationships are embedded in words. As an adult, I understand that power is more than just words, but how words are tied to memory and memory is tied to story, and story is tied to place. Kiowa poet M. Scott Momaday reminds us that,

“We know who we are (and where we are) only with reference to the things about us, the points of reference in both our immediate and infinite worlds, the places and points among which we are born, grown old, and die. There is in this simple cartology the idea of odyssey. And in odyssey there is story. Nothing is older than story in our human experience.”
(Willson and Gene 1995, p. v)

Story is more than just words. It is memory. It is identity. It is power. My words have an orientation to the place(s) I live through and in. Words uphold my claiming of land and belonging. When I speak, I uphold my authority to place and land through my words. They are the echoing chords that have cemented my belonging to not only people but to the lands that were created for, and that birthed my ancestors from the ground of *Dinétah* (Navajo ancestral lands). Today, when I use my voice, I am reminded of *Tsoodzil* and remember those long car rides with my family and the hundreds of sunsets I have seen glowing on its slopes. I am also reminded of my history with this mountain and my early lack of knowledge of it. I am reminded of how coming *to know*, through stories, through my own experience, gave me the power to understand who I am as a Diné person. I express that understanding through my own voice.

Story gave me the power to understand Diné ontology and how to apply that not only to my life but to the work I do as a Diné scholar. I made sense of the politics of voice in the academic institution through understanding the power of voice, narrative and relationship. In centering the teachings of *Tsoodzil*, I know that voice is place, and place is belonging. Ultimately, belonging orients authority.

I also know that authority is equally met with responsibility and accountability. The teachings of *Tsoodzil* make my words accountable. When I speak, either in love or defense, teachings of this mountain govern my treatment of voice. My words have power. That power is instilled through knowledge of relationships- the various dimensions of relationships I have just described. Relationship shares a symbiotic link to accountability. They enforce and strengthen one another. Words, in this way, both simultaneously make me accountable but also ground my authority through my understanding of their relationship to land and people.

Accountability is vital in authority. The teachings of words and responsibility make me recognize who I am accountable to. The framework for Diné educational pedagogy encapsulated within the teachings of *Tsoodzil* demonstrates how the cascading relationships tied to place are vast. Therefore, the extent of accountability is vast. Accountability is more than a slew of checkmarks for “ethical considerations”. Accountability is a lifeway grounded in place, memory and people. These relationships are precious and contribute to how I know myself as a Diné person. They are foundational to the politics of authority from a Diné perspective.

As a Diné writer, I assert that questions of Diné authority must rely on Diné epistemology itself. They must consider authority grounded in Diné philosophy and based on *k'é* (kinship/relationships). In this way, the politics of voice for Diné, in my view, are guided by relationship: not only to land but to people and kinship. The politics of voice are rooted in the multidimensional modes of accountability embedded in a relationship through diverse and endless connective links that attach philosophy to land, people, ceremony, governance and history. This relationship can be found in the literal belonging to place through the recognition of *k'ei*, our clan systems, which are anchored in place (Aronith 1975). Both the clan system and place are grounded in the teachings of *k'é* (relationships) (Aronith 1975, pp. 78–91). These systems are alive and are found in the context of everyday life (Yazzie 2014; Denetdale 2017) and through activist movements which treat kinship not only as a lifeway, but as a deeply political tool to undo the harm of imposed modes of recognition, identity, and “perpetual violence” experienced by those deemed “unworthy to speak” (Red Nation 2019).

According to Diné scholar [L. Lee \(2020a\)](#), *k'é* (relationships) “reinforces respect, kindness, cooperation, friendliness, reciprocity and love” (p. 70). There is both a philosophical and material understanding of identity through *k'ei* (clans) and land. They are grounded in the practice of *k'é*—the instilling of positive values and relations predicated on responsibility, well-being and accountability in how we conduct ourselves as Diné people ([L. Lee 2020a](#)). Therefore, relationship demands accountability, and that accountability requires an understanding of the complex ways Diné people understand relationships and belonging to land (place), such as the multilayered modes of relationality embedded in *Tsoodzil*. In this way, I position *Tsoodzil* as the lens for understanding not only a framework for identity through relationship(s) but also the reference point to understanding how authority is rooted in land, language, memory and belonging.

Politics of Speaking and Positionality

Words, specifically my story and narrative as a Diné woman, are a political act. The story of *Tsoodzil* frames how I understand authority and accountability. However, in academic institutions and within my own community, my perspective sometimes works in tension with these other sites of power. Although uncomfortable at times, these are the realities that have shaped my own academic experience. I am not interested in compartmentalizing perspectives that collapse into the discourse of what is deemed beneficial research versus non-beneficial research methods, but rather illuminate what happens at the sites of tension that must do with power and how it informs, limits, and shapes the politics of voice, authority and identity for Diné people. Specifically, I am interested in authority and the politics of voice and how they play out in the academy. Utilizing narrative engages not only the everyday politics of ordinary life but also conveys how voice is a deeply political act rooted in various constellations of power ([Yazzie 2014](#)). There are both conflicting and unifying voices in these constellations of power, which shape not only modes of representation and control but the very contestations for land, place and the politics of belonging. The politics of voice have larger consequences on Diné life. These politics trickle down into communities and fuel identity politics among Diné (Navajo) people themselves in very profound ways.

In Diné communities, there are ongoing discussions regarding the politics of authority and representation in the erasure of Indigenous voices in academic spaces ([Yellowhorse 2018](#)). I contend that academic erasure has ripple effects beyond the ongoing contestation of land. Erasure also contributes to difficult politics of voice, which impacts Diné confidence in speaking of their own cultural knowledge or life as a Diné person. The challenges of voice, authority and representation, impact Diné writers and scholars who are struggling to place forward their voices and narratives because of the unequal power relations not only found in academic institutions but within our histories and everyday life. Most work written about Diné people are not from Diné people themselves ([L. Lee 2006](#)). By exploring the parameters in place that govern authority politics, we can see how they are rooted in concealed, colonized frameworks upheld through academic practices. Our very modes of determining authority in terms of writing and publishing about Diné people and knowledge are deeply impacted by historical processes that are not even our own.² I examine these historical processes by looking specifically at how Diné identity is represented, treated and formalized by the imposition of blood quantum and how non-Diné representation has shaped current identity politics for Diné people. I point out how these processes create a legibility politic ([Curley 2014](#)) bound up with the politics of voice. Who gets to speak as Diné? What are the stakes of particular voices rising above

² Drawn from [L. Lee \(2006\)](#) examining tensions of recognition politics, nationhood and implementation of their own legal frameworks while calling for the ways that historical representations and legibility politics ([Curley 2014](#)) formatted the ways Navajo identity was historically conceptualized. I place this in conversation with thinking about the genealogy of Navajo identity, which was largely written about and published by non-Navajo authors ([L. Lee 2006](#)) who deeply influenced the image or authenticity which has influenced how identity is approached in academic spaces as well as in communities themselves ([Red Nation 2019](#); [Emerson 2014](#); [Yellowhorse 2018](#); [Denetdale 2014](#))

others? In this sphere, politics of voice merge, collapse, yield and evolve through power. Identity, therefore, has to do with power.

In the genealogy of Native-led research movements and advancements over the decades, Indigenous scholars over the years have critically engaged in work that takes up questions of (mis)representation, the presence of capitalism in commodifying culture and knowledge, subjective gazes from non-Indigenous people, challenges with access and the mishandling of knowledge systems (Mihesuah 1998). Although work across multiple communities and nations have continually addressed these ongoing challenges through the creation of ethics and review boards and focus on community-led research projects (Mihesuah 1998), there are still gaps in the ways that Indigenous writers, particularly Diné writers, have access and work through the waves of identity politics that deeply influence authority of voice to even speak as Diné (Yellowhorse 2018). From my experience, there are existing institutional structures that uphold unequal power relations and can be found in governing research bodies, which can also work in contrary ways.³ Additionally, this article points to the ways that identity politics are fueled and set ablaze through the violent imposition of blood quantum. These politics work in tandem with the politics of voice to silence Diné people. This must change.

Using narrative brings forward those challenges to theorize my own reality as a Diné writer and academic. Jenny Lee-Morgan is a Māori scholar who encourages the methodological push in identifying ourselves through our own research as Indigenous scholars (2020). Sharing my story is my own process of narrating my journey towards politically and culturally locating myself, my Diné identity, amidst the struggles of imposed legal systems within ongoing sites of colonization (in its many forms). In doing so, I wish to encourage Diné writers and people to share their stories and place forward their orientations as a methodological tool for making sense of who they are as Diné people. The purpose of this work is a call for us to critically think about how we formulate our understanding of who we are and how we politically and culturally locate ourselves (Lee-Morgan 2020) as Indigenous researchers and writers.

This article speaks to Diné people, but its applicability can be shared across Indigenous communities. We must continue to think critically through questions of how research hinders the voices of the people of which the research is about (Smith 2012), including those who are emerging scholars from Indigenous communities. Non-Diné academics and authors continue to justify the ongoing representation of Diné people (Yellowhorse 2018). Furthermore, I often witness Indigenous people's narratives disregarded as unacademic unless they are moderated through researchers or academic processes. When Diné speak through experience, it is sometimes treated as invalid because of the ways academia dictates that we cite bodies of work to represent or prove that something exists in the reality of our lives. This is one example of the politics of voice. Therefore, I offer insights on how Diné people themselves uphold their authority as experts on their lives, without the mediation of academic research practices that hail from outside our communities. Through Diné activism, we can see other ways of thinking of authority through identity framed within kinship practices, relationality, and land. I want to share how this is done through a particular Diné social movement, *Nihígaal bee úina* (Our Journey for Existence). I also reframe such challenges from within the lens of Diné epistemology, to think through how our philosophy and kinship practices orient us to solve these challenges.

Diné people must continue to speak for themselves. The politics that I outline demonstrate how those voices are complicated by identity politics. Therefore, it is vital to note that there is no one

³ One example would be the current COVID-19 vaccine trials approved by the Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board, which has caused public outcry for Diné citizens for not being discussed adequately throughout the community and supported by any chapter or agency resolutions (Curley and Christine 2020). Diné scholar Andrew Curley points out that rigorous oversight is often invoked on academics and community members who are doing research in their respective communities which can be quite challenging. However, this issue highlights questionably unequal treatment when approving bioresearch on Diné people by billion-dollar corporations where ethical considerations are widely contested (Curley and Christine 2020). These issues warrant attention and discussion in the ways we can continue to identify and fight ongoing struggles of research practices and questions of access in Diné communities.

Diné identity or worldview (L. Lee 2014). I stand to affirm that the vast array of Diné voices do indeed represent the diversity of Diné worldviews (L. Lee 2014). Diné scholar L. Lee (2014) utilizes the concept of “matrix” from the late Viola Cordova’s work to demonstrate the diverse perspectives of Diné people in shaping the concept of Diné worldview(s) (p. 3). All Diné worldviews may be different because all our experiences are different. They nonetheless comprise a matrix of “valid” Diné worldviews (L. Lee 2014, p. 4). Furthermore, all these expressions of worldviews bring forward varying interpretations of Diné teachings as applied to the individual lives of people. When I think about Diné *voice*, I am considering the composition of all these worldviews unified through belonging, kinship and land.

In the context of my own life and my daughters’, who experiences what Western medicine designates as a “speech delay”, I also understand *voice* as a range and diverse way of expression. *Words* can easily be expressed through multiple mediums outside the articulations of only human speech. It is important to note this, as the concept of *voice* in this paper does not collapse into a framework of only verbalized speech. When I utilize the terms voice, language, words and speech in this essay, I am referring to that array of expressions that are linked but different for each person. This is the relational power of Diné thinking. In this way, the teachings of Diné educational pedagogy and philosophy are inherently inclusive in applying teachings to the lived realities and experiences of *all* Diné people regardless if they engage in speech, movement, art or a variety of other modes of language. What is important is the bridging of these concepts of voice, critical thinking and feelings to land and philosophy. This is my understanding of agency in what I have learned through my own journey of learning about the teachings of Diné philosophy and how I applied those teachings to my life and the upbringing of my daughter. It is from our own lens and teachings that we can begin to reframe our own orientations of the world outside the power formations that impact and hinder our lives. It is from our own teachings and relationships that we have authority.

Authority Politics, Removal and Accountability

Authority, particularly as it relates to academic research and scholarly encounters, brings to light an array of colliding politics. Who has the authority to speak about and of Diné people and histories? This is an enduring question that is relentlessly battered in academic discourse, particularly in the fields of Critical Indigenous Studies. Story, and the use of story as research, reminds me of the power of words that others have: the power to assert their words over the words of the community. Their power, backed by the centuries of Western logic of authority: to speak for people is another way to conquer them (Simpson 2014; Curley 2014). The power to deny story from the mouths of who the story is about alienates dislocates, and silences the knowledge of the people themselves. It has the potential to rewrite stories and transform them altogether. Again, words or lack of them—through silencing—can also be a weapon.

My experience with the collision of my words against others in speaking of Diné worldviews, philosophy and everyday life, has shown me the extent of how messy authority politics can be, both in academic spaces and in my Diné community. Voice/authority politics are most visible in fields of Indigenous Studies and Anthropology, in which ethnographers and researchers continue the practices of speaking, and therefore asserting authority over representation of Indigenous communities (Simpson 2014). Questions of accountability from researchers outside of the community continue to be an ongoing issue for Diné people, even as decades of “studies” of Diné people continually reveal the extent of these issues. This is incandescently obvious with the creation of the Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board, which provides an ethical accountability framework as a result of rampant unethical research practices carried out predominantly by non-Diné people (Navajo

Nation Human Research Review Board, website).⁴ However, this has not deterred many non-Native researchers from continuing to pour into Navajo land to continue their “study” under more neoliberal logics: allyship, drawing attention to the struggle of documenting history, helping vulnerable minority groups, and giving a platform with Diné voices moderated through their own evidence from the continual publication of ethnographies that continue to surface by non-Diné writers about Diné life, land and philosophy.

These researchers often invoke the safeguard of “consultation”. However, “consultation” is not grounds to claim ethical accountability. Accountability extends beyond that, particularly within the context of Diné philosophy that understands accountability through relationship. In addition, Diné invoke relationship in numerous, simultaneous ways. It is a deeper understanding of relationship than the mere building of contacts, friendships and temporary living on the land and with the community. When I speak of accountability, I am speaking of belonging and the politics of claiming and being claimed in return. I am talking about *k'é* and accountability, not only to certain people but to Diné life, communities, land and ancestors. I am talking about the numerous ways of being claimed, which influence the numerous entities I am accountable to.

The stakes of this argument not only unsettle practices of speaking of and for Indigenous peoples in the name of research but also unsettle the way current discourse in Diné communities both censor and simultaneously give authority to speak. Throughout my academic journey, I have watched authority continually given to those who are not Diné at all. I have witnessed a non-Indigenous academic lead a presentation on the history of boarding schools, Indian education and migration in the Southwest during public protests regarding colonial murals in a well-regarded library. Placing forward a narrative that was widely contested however still selected to speak on these issues, I recognized there were many Indigenous academics from the same institution whose collective voices were overlooked during this time. I was once told my reflection in a presentation on oral histories read more like an op-ed piece rather than a research paper because I had placed my own perspectives and voice in it. The same paper also incited a robust discussion at a history conference, where historians argued that Indigenous histories had not been impeded or erased—even as one historian looked directly at land and the destruction of petroglyphs throughout New Mexico to make way for residential development. History and “words” were literally erased from the land. Yet, there is clearly a substantial disagreement about this in academic realms, specifically whose voice makes *the* narrative. I can recall quite clearly the filled-to-capacity hall of a lecture of a non-Diné author who writes fiction of Diné people and life, and the small rooms of actual Indigenous students presenting their research. I also remember learning about Indigenous communities from non-Indigenous people. Some of it had inspired me to think critically about who I was and the intersectionality of my academic work. Some of it made me strive to see myself and experience in their representations. When I write, I am constantly aware of these politics of voice, and they are in conflict with my own understanding of authority. Because of this, I understand how academic practices can continue to function as a type of removal and alienation of my own authority to speak as Diné.

Removal is a colonizing tactic and can occur in many ways. Diné people have a history of removal from their ancestral lands, their knowledge systems, food sources, water and mineral rights, from their educational institutions, which were primarily in the home and relocated to schoolhouses and boarding schools (Denetdale 2014; Emerson 2014). Through assimilation and ethnic cleansing (Denetdale 2006), Diné were removed from our stories: just as I was removed from my story of place. The mistreatment of Diné land and life are etched into our homelands, but so are our stories. It is our stories that cement our identity and lives to the places we claim and that we emerged from (Aroniñth 1975). As Diné scholar Denetdale (2014) states, “as a person listens to stories relayed, she or he takes on memories

⁴ Navajo Nation Human Research Review Board [PowerPoint slides]. Available online: <https://www.nnhrrb.navajo-nsn.gov/aboutNNHRRB.html> (accessed on 22 September 2020).

of the person who tells the narratives. In this way, our ancestor's memories become our memories" (p. 73). Stories speak to Diné philosophy of belonging and relationship and how it ties our identities to place and memory. Research practices require an understanding of not only the ways we tell stories and produce knowledge but what we do with that knowledge and what it means for us as Diné. Most importantly, how knowledge can continue the removal from our communities, philosophies and place. Stories and narratives are a political force and are not severed from biopolitical undercurrents that shape Diné everyday life evident in our history of colonization.

The stories of *Tsoodzil* did not find me until well into my adult years. Because of my experience, I know that removing stories of place is an attack on the political and cultural life that ties land to people. Learning about this mountain made me realize how I was removed from an entire world of Diné philosophy and kinship practices embedded in the mountain. Removal from the philosophical and intellectual aspects of Diné epistemology erodes the connections to actual land and muddies the complex contestations that are bound up with land, specifically, the claiming of land.

Therefore, in its most basic and violent utility, the removal of story removes relationship to place. Without the relationship, the claiming of and being claimed in return is comprised. It is part of land contestation. Authority of voice is authority of land. It is no surprise that alienation from land and story were key tactics in the U.S. assimilationist policies and the "re-education" of Navajo children that upheld the severance from land and knowledge. Diné educator Anselm Davis Jr. describes this as the "taking away and supplanting model" (Davis 2013). This severance is a form of dispossession that occurs on the intellectual and academic level. It is a process of making "empty lands" by presenting place without story, without history, without lifeways connected to people who held relationships with them since time immemorial (Simpson 2014). It is dispossession. In the world of Western education, teachings are not embedded into land; therefore, people are not embedded into land (Wildcat et al. 2014; Simpson 2014).

These practices of alienation continue to carry on in academic spaces, where the politics of voice still influence the materiality over not only representation but the very claims and authority to speak governed by land itself. There is more than one way to lose land beyond literal dispossession. We lose land with the erosion of the stories that bind us to place. More importantly, we lose the teachings of accountability that ground our relationships to place and people, that govern the consequences or cultivation of how words make life.

Land governs speech and authority beyond philosophical teachings. There are material consequences bound up in representation and control of not only our stories but how these representations shape assumptions of singular conceptions of Indigenous worldviews. The funnel effect erases the diverse body of voices of Diné people themselves. Normalized through imposition, these singular conceptions of identity circulate and impact Diné communities from within and do not account for the diverse spectrum of Diné worldviews (L. Lee 2006). Furthermore, the narratives, experiences, and expressions of how Diné people make sense of their worlds (which is methodology) are often disregarded unless it transits through academic processes that are bound up with countless power relations. This is certainly seen in academic writings of/about Diné people themselves, where authority is often assigned to a researcher, and the wisdom of our community members is disregarded without acknowledging their expertise and multiple ways in which knowledge is produced and circulated on the community level (Yellowhorse 2018).

There are tensions between formalized publications and the important ways that knowledge production takes place in Diné communities. Formalized publications uphold a set of power relations and privilege. That includes this work, as I acknowledge my privilege as a Diné academic who wields certain institutional power. However, what I am trying to illuminate, is how Diné knowledge is shared through relationships; through communities; through oral traditions, art and philosophies that ground words to land. Incredible amounts of activism and knowledge production on *Diné Bikéyah* (Navajo land) takes place in the everyday interactions of the people: over coffee and food, in talking circles, chapterhouse meetings and community centers, drag shows and art performances, film and

media production, through social media and DIY campaigns in self-produced newsletters, blogs and Facebook posts. These types of sharing assert the authority and control of information through cyclic patterns of community building. They do not require large platforms outside the control of the people themselves. The people collectively circulate knowledge through localized, shared spaces where the intimacy of place and connection of people remain intact. More important, through relationships and their life's journey, they learn more about their voice, their expression as a person and their relationship to community voice. Knowledge does not descend from some hierarchal system, such as the academic institution. People are learning from one another and in ways that contest the stagnate formations of identity encapsulated in anthropological writings of Diné people and life. Furthermore, they enact their own authority to do so through the representation of the diverse modes of *voice* we have as Diné people.

Indigenous narrative has the political power to uphold Indigenous self-determination and intellectual sovereignty. According to L. Lee (2014), intellectual sovereignty “embedded in knowledge, both epistemology and ontology [are] grounded in the way of knowing that interconnects thought, speech, experience and land” (p. 4). Story breathes life into the sovereignty of Indigenous people to articulate our thoughts, histories, relationships and theories, as anchored to land. It not only has power to reinforce the multiple ways of understanding but also asserts politics of agency, *voice* and authority beyond the commodity of research. Narrative/story reaffirms our belonging to place and presents a framework for upholding our authority to speak as Diné people. We live through our orientation(s) to place. We live through our stories written in place.

Authority through Land: *Nihígaal bee íina*

In 2018, I was invited to speak to my community on a panel focusing on the release of a new book on the history of resource extraction in the Navajo Nation. The book was written by a non-Diné anthropologist and examined resource colonization on the Navajo Nation. I was eager to participate in a critical discussion of resource colonization, especially since environmental colonization discourse was being taken up by various movements and activists. However, what struck me about this work was the identity politics that grew and spilled over in light of it.

This work brought to light questions of Diné representation, particularly as the author produced this ethnography on the back of ongoing grassroots movements that have pushed forward their narratives for decades. My perspective on that panel was concerned with the politics of representation that influenced authority and, ultimately, the complex politics of voice. The large body of work written about Diné people are from non-Diné people (L. Lee 2006). Even today, there are so few Navajo scholars that many of us all know one another (L. Lee 2020a). It is difficult for me as a Diné writer to produce work about my community and philosophical thinking because of the very identity politics created by the damage of non-Diné authorship through the decades. Many have contributed to homogenous conceptions of identity and have benefited as the measure of authority, backed by powerful institutions. It is hard to see myself in many of the works published by non-Diné authors, and that has had a significant impact on how I came to terms with writing and speaking as a Diné person.

Control over representation begs the never-ending question of who determines that which is knowledge. Academia prizes the moderator, the researcher, as the symbol of knowledge (Simpson 2014). I could look anywhere in my community and recognize knowledge bearers everywhere. People's life journeys are the symbols of knowledge, negotiation, tension, advocacy and shared wisdom. I recognize that everyone in my community has expertise in one realm or another. Yet, their stories and narratives are rarely given attention unless moderated by a “researcher” from an academic institution. This is the disparity and problem I have with the context in which publications by non-Diné “experts” continue to emerge. They follow a trajectory of academic privilege in writing of and about Indigenous people (Yellowhorse 2018).

Where did the politics of voice through relationship to land, and therefore philosophy, tie into the works written about Diné people? How does it help reaffirm their sovereignty of voice and

claim to land? When Diné speak, they are upholding those claims to land. They are upholding their sovereignty. An outside facilitator cannot uphold their sovereignty by speaking for them or telling their stories. Sovereignty, in this sense, is about land and authority we have in relation to land and people (L. Lee 2014, p. 4). It is about philosophy embedded in those relationships, and it is about the relationships that stretch back into our ancestral roots. We enact sovereignty when we speak as Diné.

Reflecting deeper on the politics of voice tied to land and relationship as embedded in the teachings of *Tsoodzil*, a Diné social movement came to mind. *Nihígaal bee íina* (Our Journey for Existence) was a movement that illuminated the rise of Diné youth, connecting their histories to the social conditions they experienced. The individuals who participated in *Nihígaal bee íina* spent over a year walking to each of the sacred mountains on *Diné Bikéyah* to protest resource colonization and connect with the land and people (*Nihígaal bee íina* Facebook page).⁵ Their journey connected them to the resurgence of their identities as Diné people, in not only protecting the land from resource extraction but by (re)forming a relationship with land and people through this movement. Much of the dialog that emerged from this movement was focused on cultural revitalization and spiritual knowledge in the protection of Diné ancestral lands. In doing so, they cultivated philosophical and cultural knowledge: stories of who we are and what our relationships are. They went back to emergence sites of Diné people into this world (*Nihígaal bee íina* Facebook page), the 4th world (Aroniñth 1975).

They traveled to the four sacred mountains on foot and held teach-ins in remote communities, as well as learned the language and practices from communities' members themselves (*Nihígaal bee íina* Facebook page). Upon visiting numerous communities, they brought to the forefront stories and histories of the people they shared their time and space with. They demonstrated that the people were the keepers of knowledge and that their lived experiences were in themselves not only a priceless embodiment of knowledge production but the force in which land and belonging are grounded. Their stories wove together histories of resistance and histories of activism intended to empower Diné people to rise up.

Nihígaal bee íina inspired me to think about (re)clamation through land and the knowledge embedded in land. This movement, along with many others, paved the way for ongoing publications about Diné resource colonization to be received. It was the intellectual and physical labor of Diné people themselves that brought these discussions into the communities that impacted them. They did not sit in academic archives, becoming another piece of theorization of Diné life and struggle. The experience and narratives were theorizations that contributed to the real-life contestations of power that shape Diné society and governance. Their journey inspired countless youth to turn to their communities and Diné epistemological knowledge as a mechanism to not only understand who they were but to understand the collision of ontologies that shaped the irreconcilability (Tuck and Yang 2012; Simpson 2014) with settler colonial capitalism and its inherent need to exploit Diné land and life.

For Diné, the personal is political, and the stories of our lived experiences are political. The stories reflect our lives, and the gaps between what is written about us through policy and history, and what we must say about these things ourselves. These are the politics that make life and death for Indigenous people, and Diné youth have been at the forefront of these discussions in asserting control over their narratives. They live them, and they document them, such as the movement of *Nihígaal bee íina*, which utilized social media, film and art as the platform for representation. They used their presence and relationships they formed with place(s) as their representation. Their narratives were literally "written" on the land as they walked across *Diné Bikéyah*. These writings are legible to Diné people because Diné philosophy of place and belonging understand how knowledge is written onto land and relationship with land. These writings do not work only for the theorization of academic discourse but rather cements Diné people to the lands they were born of and to. They affirm our claims to land and demonstrate how we are claimed in return.

⁵ Nihígaal bee íina Facebook. Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/walkforexistence/> (accessed on 22 September 2020).

Nihígaal bee íina, as well as *Tsoodzil*, represent how story and narrative embedded in land uphold Diné sovereignty and relationship to place. These realities are theories that push back against ongoing dispossession of land, water and knowledge. These lived realities of Diné life are not a playground for the academic elite, who wish to “study” people and histories. Politics of representation and voice have material consequences that Diné people themselves must face. Stories tie us to place, to people, to the past and the future while mapping current modes of violence in ongoing dispossession. They also have power in the rising resistance and contestation over representation, which is not concerned with the replication of capitalist idealism through the prestige of publishing or being ‘the expert’ on a particular subject. For Diné, it is about the protection, love and liberation of Diné people, life and land. That is *k'é*. It is how we enact relationships through responsibility and reciprocity. It is our enduring claims and belonging to place.

It is important to say that valuable work from non-Native academics and authors have helped shaped and informed the archival body of work on Native history, activism and critical theory. The question is: what are the stakes when they are upheld as *the* authority of Indigenous communities and their knowledge systems in the eyes of those who write policy, law and wield institutional power? One recent book review of a non-Native publication about Diné activism demonstrates this problem, as it claims that “no other work has gone so far to provide a ground-level understanding of how individual tribal members experienced development and how those experiences shaped the debates about and ultimate policy toward further projects.” (Allison 2019). One can only ask in response to such a claim, has no one been listening to the decades of powerful work by activists who have articulated their experiences from the grandmothers at Big Mountain to activists of Save the San Francisco Peaks, the protectors of *Nihígaal bee íina*, and the numerous other Diné people who have worked for decades in Diné communities who have not only a multidirectional understanding of Diné customs and history but also a complex understanding of history and current policies?

Diné people are speaking. They are narrating their realities. It is time to listen.

Furthermore, what happens when non-Native researchers continually shape the parameters of authority and contribute to the politics of access that so many Diné people themselves encounter? Non-Diné authors have written extensively about Diné philosophy for decades and dominate the publications of what has been written about Diné people (L. Lee 2006). What does it mean to Diné youth and people to learn about their history and culture from non-Diné academics? I am not saying that non-Native researchers cannot work with Indigenous communities. I am saying there is a complex understanding of accountability that is so often disregarded and unrealized. I am articulating that researchers and people wishing to work with Indigenous communities must understand the consequences of their work beyond the ethical considerations found in review boards. They must consider they have institutional privilege, which continues to enact violence, modes of erasure and contributes to ongoing contestations of voice, which Indigenous communities themselves must determine.

The power to ‘tell’ is bound up with a set of power politics ingrained in academic institutions (Simpson 2014). Academic institutions inherently reward this power dynamic and formalize neoliberalist discourse as a conciliatory practice for capitalist self-gain; to publish, to advance the field, and to continue the unequal power relation of telling communities’ stories for them. In this way, the power of the institution operates as both a means and a weapon. It creates the opportunity for access. It encourages knowledge production that is intended to propel fields of inquiry, to regenerate itself as the authority of knowledge, to be the established keeper of knowledge (Simpson 2014). The more cyclic ways knowledge production is produced on the ground can be observed in the movement of *Nihígaal bee íina*, or in the philosophies of Diné epistemology tied to place, or through the various relationships networked throughout and in our communities.

Access, Identity Politics and the Power of *K'é*

At the heart of the politics of access, Native people are struggling to learn about ourselves, our histories and cultural knowledge (T. Lee 2014). From my own experience, I struggle to speak as Diné because of this system. It creates a mode of authority that I fight to reconcile with my lived experience as a Diné person. What do these politics mean to Diné scholars and researchers who are seeking to establish the validity of their own relationship to their communities and ancestral knowledge in the face of ongoing colonialism and erasure? How do we develop confidence and affirmation in our authority as Diné people to speak and write our own theories and realities as part of the vast scope of Diné worldview(s)?

The politics of voice are just as largely contested in our own Diné communities. Not only are there matters of protocol (Werito 2014), but the scope of identity politics on the Navajo Nation are vast (L. Lee 2006). These politics compound the effects of intergenerational trauma in censoring and policing Diné authors who wish to speak of Diné teachings. In my Diné community, these ongoing discussions are fueled by the U.S. Federal policies and imposition of blood quantum and language loss due to assimilation. Language loss has resulted in blame tactics in which target youth (T. Lee 2014; Emerson 2014). They are presumed to have no interest in our Diné language and are criticized for their lack of knowledge (Emerson 2014). Blame tactics in of themselves are created and imposed modes of violence through colonialism. The movement to contest these assumptions are ongoing as Diné youth continue to assert their desires and decimate Diné history of assimilation and ethnic cleansing to educate and deter these divisive practices (Emerson 2014; Broken Boxes Podcast 2015). One such obvious mode of erasure is the implementation of blood quantum imposed and enacted by tribes in the U.S. in determining Indigenous identity and enrolment (L. Lee 2006).

The Navajo Nation currently employs blood quantum as the tool for enrolment (Navajo Nation Government, Website).⁶ Blood quantum, an assimilative tool designed to erode Indigenous communities (Strum 2002), was introduced to the Navajo Nation in the 1950s by Indian Affairs agents who drafted the proposal for the Navajo Nation Council (Spruhan 2007). It was introduced to protect financial interests and presumed payments from the uranium mining boom, which desecrated Diné land and life (Spruhan 2007). Originally drafted as part of a constitution, it was instead passed as a resolution (Spruhan 2007) and displaced the Diné practice of *k'é*, which formalizes belonging and relationship (Pearsons-Yazzie and Speas 2007).

The challenge with politics of authority is not only the institution of blood quantum but also the binary of “traditional” vs. “urbanized”. These identity formations speak to a singular narrative of being Diné. The “authentic” Native has long dominated the discussions of how Diné people have been spoken of (L. Lee 2006). It was colonial society and predominantly white anthropologists that created the parameters of what constituted an “authentic Native”, and much of this was predicated on performative elements of culture (Red Nation 2019). Appropriated into the minds and practices of Indigenous people, they replicated these visions of authenticity whereby understandings of tradition were weaponized and distorted by Indigenous people to introduce lateral violence against other Indigenous people through identity politics (Red Nation 2019). Such conversations have deeply halted and prevented Diné academics and community members from meaningful engagement with Diné theory. Diné authorship is often complicated by these complex structures of identity politics, recognition and continued competing gazes from academic and institutional endeavors that hail from outside our communities. The various expressions of Diné self-censorship and doubt have long upheld detrimental narratives that Diné people must uphold anthropologically prescribed and performative modes of Indigeneity to claim the authority to speak.

⁶ Navajo Nation Government. Available online: <https://www.navajo-nsn.gov/contact.htm#roots> (accessed on 14 November 2020).

Before the use of blood quantum and the damaging anthropological works that reshaped Diné identity, Diné used *k'é* (relationships) to articulate their genealogy and *k'ei* (their clans) (Pearsons-Yazzie and Speas 2007; L. Lee 2020b). It was through our claiming and being claimed in return through *k'é* that grounded our claims to being Diné. *K'é* tied people directly to land and place and oriented them to a vast network of kinship. It was the original measure of belonging (Pearsons-Yazzie and Speas 2007). *K'é* is belonging to land, and it upholds authority to land through relationship. It is also important to note that *k'é* is not lost to us as Diné. We can see that *k'é* is still used throughout Diné communities through mutual aid efforts, social movements, activism and collectives, grassroots organizations, family practices, and through stories of land and pedagogy. The ongoing presence of *k'é* continues to collide with the institutional practices of blood quantum and how blood quantum still has a strong prevalence in how Diné work through identity.

I know that *k'é* leads me to identify myself in a positive way and fosters love, reciprocity, understanding and in my relationships with my community. I have come to my voice because *k'é* is how I identify myself. My words, narrative and story have power in forming my understanding of who I am as a Diné person. As Joann Archibald (2019) states, “stories [are] part of articulating our world, understanding our knowledge systems, naming our experiences, guiding our relationships and most importantly, identifying ourselves” (p. 5). I recognize my own authority because I am learning the magnitude of relationships and how they are woven through story to land, to place, to memory, to people.

By articulating and working against the history of identity and authority politics, I am attempting to intervene at a critical moment when these politics of identity and authority are both fragile and volatile. I advocate for upholding our ancestral right and intellectual inheritance to our philosophical treasures through our own voices as Indigenous peoples. This work, along with other work that continues to push back against the strong deadlock of authority politics, will contribute in profound ways in determining where we go from here in the reproduction and sharing of our knowledge systems, our stories, our narratives, because all of these are powerful. Our words are powerful.

My work as a Diné writer and academic constantly engages with and against these numerous modes of tension I have outlined. I am constantly working to oust these identity politics and assert my authority to speak as a Diné woman because I draw on *k'é* as the philosophical and political anchor for my own work. *K'é* is a constellation of relationships, and I center these relationships by claiming to the community, my family, *k'ei*, my identity as *Kin'yaa' áanii* (Towering House People), as my authority to speak as a Diné person. I have orientation, relationship and accountability to family, land and place.

Diné Voice on an Island: Aotearoa

My time in Aotearoa, New Zealand, has taught me something about the power of words and my own struggles with identity politics over the years. What does it mean to speak of identity politics at this moment as I am severed from my lands and people at the base of the Southern Hemisphere? This time away from *Diné Bikéyah* and proximity of toxic blood politics have shown me what life can be like without the weight of all those pressures. It allowed me to spend more time thinking about philosophy in direct relation to my own life journey and experience as a Diné person. It may seem ironic how I tie the concept of voice to land and then speak from a place completely distanced from my ancestral lands. Yet, in the last year, I have learned the extent to which *relationships* hold life and meaning.

Through relationship, I have memory, orientation, and self-affirmation in who I am. My identity as a Diné woman is predicated on the ways in which I learned to see relationships and how those relationships make me who I am. Sitting under the shelter of *Maunagwhau* (Mt. Eden) with its own teachings and relationships to *Tangata Whenua* (Indigenous people of the land) (Māori Dictionary), I am aware that this mountain does not have an ancestral relationship to me. I enact *k'e* with this mountain, in gratitude and acknowledgment. However, I know this mountain upholds the identity and land of various Māori *iwi* (kinship, tribe) through their relationship with it (Maori Dictionary 2020). Seeing this mountain, I know it is not my mountain. My relationships extend across the Pacific, and the

connections are philosophical (teachings), material (memory), ancestral (*k'é* and history). I came to voice because I came to identify myself through these frameworks and not the ones that have been imposed through the violence of colonization, blood quantum and (mis)representation by non-Diné. I came to my voice through relationship because I realized the extent of how those heartstrings held me to my past and future. On this island, the only Diné I know are my daughter and myself. Therefore, my orientation to place has never been so obvious to me.

My time with Māori and Pasifika people has also taught me about other ways to shape identity outside the modes of strangulation that occur within identity politics, such as the modes found in the United States. Māori have their own articulations of identity. According to Māori scholar [Mikaere \(2017\)](#), “Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa only became defined as Māori as a means of distinguishing themselves from the newcomers Pākehā. Prior to the arrival of Pākehā . . . there was no such thing as Māori; there were numerous peoples, or *iwi*, each with their own particular *Tikanga*” (p. 23). Māori enact *whakapapa* (genealogy) as the mode of recognition ([Connor 2019](#)). I have seen what it is like to live without the burden of blood quantum, where Māori determine their own modes of recognition. Numerous Māori scholars have written extensively about Māori identity, such as [Webber \(2008\)](#); [Pihama \(2019\)](#); [Smith \(2012, 2017\)](#); [Connor \(2019\)](#) and [Lee-Morgan \(2005\)](#), to name a few. It is not my place to define or even speak about Māori identity. I do so here to share with my Diné people what I have learned from my generous hosts as I learn and share with them on their lands in Aotearoa. Control of representation can be seen clearly with their own television channel, Māori TV, where news, music, interviews, programs and educational material are shared in *Te Reo* (Māori language) by and for Māori people. On this channel, I came across a regional competition, Te Haaro o Te Kaahu Kapa Haka Kura Tuarua ([Te Ao 2016](#)), where a haka was performed by Te Kura Māori o Ngā Tapwae. The message in the haka had to do with misrepresentation and racism towards Māori. Their response echoed across the stage, “no person can bring me down or make me fall to their perception of who I am. Māori as a people will not be divided” ([Iwi 2017](#); [Rangi 2017](#)). This is what I have seen in Aotearoa; the outright refusal of Indigenous peoples to be spoken for and their insistence on standing in unity in the face of ongoing colonialism.

I am continually in awe of what happens when Indigenous peoples speak for themselves and demand accountability on all fronts. It has caused me to think deeply about the power of my own voice. What do I have as an affirmation of my voice? I have a constellation of relationships, and they anchor me to place, to land, to memory, to story, to community. What can come if we as Diné people also move forward to articulate our own conceptions of authority? What would happen, if we too, refused to be divided?

It is absolutely vital to note that lack of censorship is not a lack of accountability. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this article, relationship requires accountability. There is no relationship without accountability. Our teachings of *k'é* ground this principle. *K'é* “bestows upon a Navajo person a sense of unity and of belonging to a family, clan . . . [and] helps us remember that we must respect and care for those around us” ([Pearsons-Yazzie and Speas 2007](#), p. 70). We must be responsible and loving towards one another ([L. Lee 2020b](#)). My relationships make me accountable, and I speak in the spirit of love and *k'é* as a Diné scholar, a Diné mother, a Diné person.

Diné people will continue to be written about by researchers from outside our communities. Our goal is to continue to assert our voices in all spaces. We must support one another and place our narratives front and center. I encourage Diné people to continue to write, speak, dance, illustrate, create and share our worldviews of who we are and how we think through our belonging through our own philosophical frameworks and life experiences. I encourage us all to ground our teachings of *k'é* as a lifeway to refute the colonial logic of identity imposed on us. We were blessed with our own way of being and seeing how the Diné world(s) are made up of relationships and responsibilities. When we live those, there is no one who can take that from us.

Everything I have just written about, I have experienced. I have lived through these tensions and challenges of voice. My experience led me to understand how to live the principles of *k'é* in my life

and my academic work as a writer. That is the power of Diné narrative. It theorizes and makes sense of the complicated and vast modes of power that saturate our lives, how we negotiate it and how we fight it. It also makes sense of how we come to know who we are.

I came to speak as Diné, with over 5000 miles separating me and my homeland. I am an ocean away from *Tsoodzil*. Yet, I came to speak because I finally understand my story, and my story connects me to my home. My story has orientation to place, people and philosophy. *Land is story*. Coming to voice, affirmed my place: affirmed who I am as a *Diné aszdáán* (Navajo woman). I speak because my tongue is a mountain, and the mountain is my home, my family, my ancestors, our songs, our histories, and our stories.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: My profound thanks to my mentor, Lloyd Lee. Ahéhééh for supporting me through my journey in thinking of my identity as Diné. I also extend my gratitude to my grandparents. Generosity and love were the greatest gifts you instilled in me. Thank you for gifting me those modes of *speaking* in abundance.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Allison, James. 2019. Landscapes of Power Politics of Energy in the Navajo Nation Editorial Reiviews. Available online: <https://www.amazon.com/Landscapes-Power-Politics-Ecologies-Twenty-First/dp/082236994X> (accessed on 22 September 2020).
- Archibald, Joe-Ann. 2019. *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind and Spirit*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Aronith, Wilson, Jr. 1975. *Foundations of Navajo Culture*. 1st Draft Published for 1985 edition. Tsalie: Navajo Community College.
- Blake, Kevin. 1999. Sacred and secular landscape symbolism at Mount Taylor, New Mexico. *Journal of the Southwest* 41: 487–509.
- Broken Boxes Podcast. 2015. Nihígaal bee iiná: Journey for Existence [podcast]. Available online: <http://www.brokenboxespodcast.com/podcast/2015/4/13/episode-29-interviews-from-nihgaal-bee-iin-journey-for-existence> (accessed on 12 November 2020).
- Cody, Radmilla. 2011. Shi Naasha [Recorded by Radmilla Cody]. In *Shi Keyah [CD]*. Phoenix: Canyon Records.
- Connor, Helene. 2019. Whakapapa back: Mixed Indigenous Māori and Pākehā genealogy and heritage in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Genealogy* 3. [CrossRef]
- Curley, Andrew. 2014. The origins of legibility: Rethinking colonialism and resistance among Navajo people, 1868–1937". In *Diné Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navaho Thought*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, pp. 129–50.
- Curley, Andrew, and Ami Christine. 2020. Research risks and Diné Vaccine Trials, Soundcloud. Available online: <https://soundcloud.com/din-situation/research-risks-and-dine-vaccine-trials> (accessed on 17 September 2020).
- Davis, Anslem, Jr. 2013. *Native American Oral History Project*. [CD] Interview by Mary Alice Tsosie. Disc 3 of 4. Albuquerque: Center of Southwest Research, University of New Mexico.
- Denetdale, Jennifer. 2006. Chairman, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender and the Politics of Tradition. *Wicazo Sa Review* 21: 9–28. [CrossRef]
- Denetdale, Jennifer. 2014. The value of oral history. In *Dine Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navajo Thought*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, pp. 68–82.
- Denetdale, Jennifer. 2017. Forward. In *Navajo Sovereignty: Understandings and Visions of the Diné People*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Emerson, Larry. 2014. Diné culture, decolonization and the politics of hozho. In *Dine Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navajo Thought*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Goeman, Mishuana, and Jennifer Denetdale. 2009. Native Feminisms: Legaciesm Intervention, and Indigenous Sovereignties. *Wicazo Sa Review* 24: 9–13. Available online: <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/apps/doc/A208588713/AONE?u=learn&sid=AONE&xid=aab0bfe1> (accessed on 22 September 2020).
- Iwi, Atua. 2017. South Auckland Haka, Youtube. Māori Television. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtWDu6Uvan4> (accessed on 1 August 2020).

- Kee, Joe. 2011. *Lecture Beginning Navajo for Non-Native Speakers*. Gallup: University of New Mexico-Gallup.
- Lee, Lloyd. 2006. Navajo cultural identity: What can the Navajo Nation bring to the American Indian identity discussion table? *Wicazo Sa Review* 21: 79–103. [CrossRef]
- Lee, Lloyd. 2014. *Diné Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navajo Thought*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Lee, Lloyd. 2020a. A Conversation with Diné Scholar Lloyd Lee" [video file]. Available online: <https://uapress.arizona.edu/2020/05/a-conversation-with-dine-scholar-lloyd-l-lee> (accessed on 31 May 2020).
- Lee, Lloyd. 2020b. *Diné Identity in a 21st Century World*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Lee, Tiffany. 2014. If I could speak Navajo, I'd definitely speak it 24/7: Diné youth, language consciousness, activism and reclamation of Diné identity. In *Diné Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navajo Thought*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, pp. 158–69.
- Lee-Morgan, Jenny. 2005. Māori cultural regeneration: Pūrākau as pedagogy Māori cultural regeneration: Pūrākau as pedagogy. In *Indigenous (Māori) Pedagogies: Towards Community and Cultural Regeneration, Paper Presented at Symposium Conducted at the Research in Lifelong Learning International Conference, Stirling, Scotland, June 24*. Available online: http://www.rangahau.co.nz/assets/lee_/purakau%20as%20pedagogy.pdf (accessed on 22 September 2020).
- Lee-Morgan, Jenny. 2020. *Lecture, Kaupapa Māori & Postgrad Research*. San Jose: MAI ki Wairaka, Zoom, Seminar.
- Link, Martin. 1973. *The Navajo Treaty-1868*, 2nd ed. Pamphlet: KC Publications.
- Maori Dictionary. 2020. Available online: <https://maoridictionary.co.nz> (accessed on 22 September 2020).
- Mihesuah, Devon. 1998. *Native and Academics: Research and Writing about American Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Millon, Dian. 2008. Felt Theory, *American Quarterly*. vol. 60, pp. 267–72. Available online: https://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/stable/40068534?seq=6#metadata_info_tab_contents (accessed on 22 September 2020).
- Mikaere, Ani. 2017. *The Balance Destroyed*. Te Tākāpū: Te Wānanga o Raukawa.
- Pearsons-Yazzie, Evangeline, and Maragaret Speas. 2007. *Diné Bizaad Bínáhoó'aah: Rediscovering the Navajo Language*. Flagstaff: Salina Bookshelf Publishing.
- Pihama, Leonie. 2019. Merata: How Mum Decolonised the Screen: A Commentary. May 10. Available online: <https://leoniepihama.wordpress.com/?s=how+mum> (accessed on 24 November 2020).
- Rangi, Mark. 2017. Ngā Kapa Haka Kura Tuarua 2016 Finals Te Kura Māori o Ngā Tapuwai, Vimeo [video]. Available online: <https://vimeo.com/231640811> (accessed on 14 November 2020).
- Red Nation. 2019. Indigenous Feminism Does Not Discriminate. September 6. Available online: <http://therednation.org/indigenous-feminism-does-not-discriminate/> (accessed on 1 August 2020).
- Seed-Pihama, Joellee. 2019. Naming our names and telling our stories. In *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology*. London: Zed Books, pp. 107–19.
- Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Border of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Simpson, Leann. 2014. Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. *Decolonizing Indigeneity, Education and Society* 3: 1–40. Available online: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c94b/b59b9bfd1fc5e8d2fde0c959a55a11d8a3e.pdf> (accessed on 22 September 2020).
- Smith, Linda-Tuhiwai. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2nd ed. London: Zed Books.
- Smith, Hinekura. 2017. *Whatuora: Whatu kākahu and Living as Māori Women*. Auckland: The University of Auckland, Available online: <http://hdl.handle.net/2292/36334> (accessed on 14 November 2020).
- Spruhan, Paul. 2007. The origins, current status and future prospects of blood quantum as the definition of membership in the Navajo Nation. *Tribal Law Journal* 8. Available online: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Origins%2C-Current-Status%2C-and-Future-Prospects-Spruhan/ad90c098dc436a21d0893f7b7601301e9093a1c0> (accessed on 14 November 2020).
- Strum, Circe. 2002. *Blood Politics, Culture and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Te Ao. 2016. *Te Haaro o Te Kaahu Kapa Haka Kura Tuarua 2016-Day 3*. July 28. Available online: https://www.teaomaori.news/te-haaro-o-te-kaahu-kapa-haka-kura-tuarua-2016-day-3?_ga=2.255078092.530536693.1596270754-1766736382.1596169041 (accessed on 14 November 2020).

- Tuck, Eve, and Wayne Yang. 2012. Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonizing Indigeneity Education and Society* 3: 1–25. Available online: <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630> (accessed on 14 November 2020).
- Webber, Melinda. 2008. *Walking the spaces between: Identity and Māori/Pākehā*. Wellington: NZCER Press.
- Werito, Vincent. 2014. Understanding Hozho to Achieve Critical Consciousness: A Contemporary Diné Interpretation of the Philosophical Principles of Hozho, Diné. In *Perspectives: Revitalizing and reclaiming Navaho thought*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, pp. 25–38.
- Wildcat, Matthew, McDonald Mandee, Irlbacher-Fox Stephanie, and Coulthard Glen. 2014. Learning from the land: Indigenous land based pedagogy and decolonization. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 3: I–IX. Available online: <https://nycstandswithstandingrock.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/wildcat-et-al-2014.pdf> (accessed on 22 September 2020).
- Willson, Alan, and Dennison Gene. 1995. *Navajo Placenames*. Guilford: Jeffery Norton Publishers.
- Yazzie, Melanie. 2014. Narrating ordinary power. In *Narrating ordinary power, Diné Perspectives Diné Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navajo Thought*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, pp. 83–99.
- Yazzie, Melanie, and Cutcha Risling Baldy. 2018. Introduction: Indigenous peoples and the politics of water. *Decolonization: Indigeneity Education and Society* 7: 1–18.
- Yellowhorse, Sandra. 2018. Critic Meets Author: Landscapes of Power. Paper presented at Diné Studies Conference, Tsalie, Arizona, October 25–27.

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).