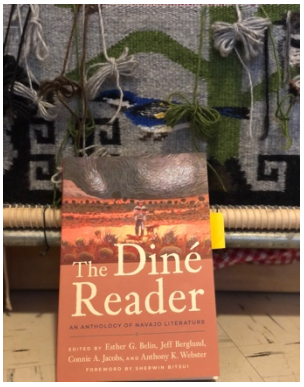
Review Essay: Esther G. Belin, Jeff Berglund, Connie A. Jacobs, Anthony K. Webster, editors. *The Diné Reader: An Anthology of Navajo Literature.* Foreword by Sherwin Bitsui. University of Arizona Press, 2021. 409 pp. ISBN: 9780816540990.
https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/the-dine-reader

Strands of wool hung from my loom –
łighai,
dootł'izh,
łitsoi,
łizhiin
– like unfinished sentences awaiting its final composition.



The arrival of *The Diné Reader* in the mail caught my bluebird's song mid-chorus. My husband handed these voices to me as I wrote another sentence in wool. I paused to receive the words, thoughts, images, histories, and hopes of Navajo writers, young and old, many known to me, some whose homes are still within the Navajo Nation and others who are replanted far from our mountains, ones who were birthed with our language on their tongue and others who dream of it. I then placed them alongside my loom and continued to listen to Dólii's song. Once I finished the woven crest of Dólii's head, I covered my loom with red material, gifted to me at a sing before COVID closed our cage. I turned my attention from my writing in wool to the print on the pages.

Jinii of this compilation of Diné poetry, short stories, essays, and novel excerpts preceded its arrival to our home in Tsaile. The confirming news brought me back to my time as an Associate Instructor teaching Native American Literatures at the University of California, Davis. In 2011, Dr. Inés Hernández Ávila (Nez Perce/Tejana), who led an eager group of Native American Studies graduate students through their first-year experiences teaching composition at the university level, approved my syllabus for a class on Navajo literatures. Commencing that semester, I began introducing undergraduate students from a range of ethnicities to the works of Diné writers like Gracey Boyne, Esther Belin, Della Frank, Sherwin Bitsui, Luci Tapahonso, Roberta D. Joe, Berenice Levchuck, Hershman John, Irvin Morris, and Marley Shebala. More

intimately, I shared chapters written in wool by my Nálí, Ida Mae McCabe, who taught them the metanarratives inherent to our cultural arts. These stories told to our weavings, pottery, baskets, leatherwork, and jewelry as they were given shape still serve as threads holding them together.

łibá łibá ch'ilgo dootł'izh łibá łibá

As I glimpsed over the table of contents, names of those voices from my time teaching Navajo literatures undergraduate courses returned to visit by way of this anthology, forming what could be considered a stalk of the Diné literary cannon. These stalk writers delve into the world of reconciling clashes of cultures, the memories of home, boarding school, and reservation life, the reemergence of traditional philosophies, stories, and songs, and, ultimately, the realities of life, death, and the unseen entities that guide us through this journey.

It is this writing of life and death that caught my attention – not merely for my practices and studies of Diné traditional sheep butchering nor for its clear affront of the Diné "taboo" surrounding discussions of death amongst the living. Rather, this anthology embraces death's integral relationship to our cycle of life—of our corn, sheep, ways of knowing. Grey Cohoe's (Kinłichinii) "The Promised Visit" reveals natural and supernatural levels of death with doorways of cultural teachings, including that of sealed hogans. "Within Dinétah the People's Spirit Remains Strong" by Laura Tohe (Tsé Nahabiłnii) transports stories of near-death to highlight resilience in our existence. Della Frank (Naakai Dine'é), with her imagery of a corralled sheep ready for sale, reminds us of impending deaths of human and non-human alike in "I Hate to See…"

The most prominent overture of death is that of Shonto Begay (Tódich'iinii), whose artwork also provides the cover image of this anthology. In "Darkness at Noon," he canvases a solar eclipse experience from his youth. Akin to many of the pieces in this collection, this story merges with my own memories, in particular that from 2017, sitting mid-day in a deafening silence, curtains closed, with my husband and a hungry newborn. As I read, I re-live the trepidation for the life that my husband and I had just brought into this world which was on the verge of ending. But just as the sun comes back to Begay and to us, *The Diné Reader* reminds us to embrace the day and live with prayer, gratitude, and actions that will see us into the next world.

łitso łibá ch'ilgo dootł'izh łibá łistso

A harvesting of new voices emerges from this stalk. Notably, these new ears find their voices budding through English and Creative Writing M.F.A., M.A., and Ph.D. programs. This demonstration in academic achievement answers the literary call to action made by Joy Harjo (Muscogee) and Gloria Bird (Spokane) to reinvent the enemy's language: "Many of us at the end of the century are using the 'enemy language' with which to tell our truths, to sing, to remember ourselves during these troubled times…But to speak, at whatever the cost, is to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction" (Harjo 1998, 21). The youth included in this compilation attest to that empowerment by way of their dismembering and remembering of the English language into a rain cloud demanding its place in academia.

As this new corn feasts on the rain which both encourages and challenges their growth, I hear the echoes of Native American Studies lectures, I share in their self-realizations of cultural gaps, and I celebrate their daring voices that contest trends in academia. They too speak of death. Bojan Louis ('Áshįįhí) sheds light on the death and violence inherently associated with decolonization. Shinaaí, Byron Aspaas (Táchii'nii) pushes past stagnant roles of victimization to reveal us as our own monsters. Venaya Yazzie (Hooghanłání) calls for the death of feminism's cling to our matriarchal way of understanding the world.

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In addition to the archetypical literary demonstrations within the anthology (poetry, essays, short stories, etc.), the text includes additional resources to assist the readers with cultural references, linear timelines, and analytical suggestions. One example is a re-printing of the "Diné Directional Knowledge and Symbolic Associations" by Harold Carey Jr. that postulates symbolic cultural contextualization present in many of the writings of this anthology. The "Introduction" provides an exemplary demonstration of the literature review academic exercise, addressing key literary productions by Diné people, rationale for this compilation, justification for its Westernized linear format, and statement of Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón's influence to the editing process. Most of the selected 33 authors are introduced through interview excerpts, allowing readers to glimpse their world(s), influences, and words of advice for new generations of Diné writers. *The Diné Reader* concludes with appendix-like "interventions" to address the systemic erasure of nonwhite voices and experiences within national and local curriculum designs (15). Renowned Diné historian, Jennifer Denetdale (Tł'ogi), contributes a chronological portrait of Diné political and literary events for Diné and non-Diné readers alike. Michael Thompson (Myskoke Creek), retired member of the

Navajo Nation Teacher Education Consortium, suggests pedagogical frameworks for instructors and intrigued minds wishing to contemplate the philosophical brilliance within these pages.

Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
Thup

I placed this tremendous exposition of Diné voices aside, removed the red material covering my loom, picked up my baton, and carefully opened pockets of rain. It was time to digest—not only for this book review but also for the growth of my own creative thinking.

"How should I evaluate this work as a Diné academic, teacher, and mother, Dólii?" I asked my bluebird as I started the feet of a flicker with whom Dólii would soon be at war.

"Ah, yes—time to assess. Don't you remember the first time you made me?" Dólii responded. "Nálí hastiin told you I was beautiful, and he was so proud of you. Nálí aszdaan agreed, smiling. And after she finished the dishes, she sat down next to you and told you that I looked like I had eaten a lot and I needed to go on a diet. Then she told you that you needed to learn songs to keep working with birds to protect yourself. We are not mere blessings; we can be dangerous."

dump dump dump dump dump

"Yes, my angry birds with chubby bellies. I remember," I giggled as I patted down a sentence of color with my comb. "How scared I was to bring that rug to their house for that critique! Everyone celebrated my piece, proud that I was continuing the traditions. But I didn't want celebration for mere continuation, I wanted to tell better stories with wool. My Nálí lady, she was a weaver – prolific. Showing her took courage and letting her know it was okay to help me be better made me stronger. With her critique, she provided me with cultural re-orientation and technical skills. And now look at you, Dólii!"

"You know what to do then. Celebrate the accomplishments of this unique compilation of Diné voices bound together by a group of individuals who have dedicated themselves to seeding new Diné writers. What these writer and editors did took

courage, and their own people should make the strongest critique. Consider where they overseeded and underweeded."

"I wonder about accusations of lateral oppression and cultural gate keeping that I may receive … we, as Navajo writers and academics, want to create, publish, be read, we say we want to re-learn, re-member, re-vitalize but … are we ready to be reviewed by our own people in all its celebrations and critical feedback? It's hard, but I learned from my Nálí that not all criticism is a micro- or macroaggression of cultural bullying. More often than not, it is an undoing and rethreading of a misplaced line of wool to reconnect us with our traditional teachings."

"True… people will tell me that I have no place on this stalk nor on this loom. That I am from across the sea, brought here by way of a global market and through the dictation of non-Native traders on the Diné weaving aesthetic. And they are right—partially. But let them feel my songs early in the morning in the winter during Yeii bi cheii. I'm more than just an acculturated style of writing with wool; I am even more than just a model for a flour bag. *You have heard those songs, Christine*. So, embrace the critical feedback you receive and give. Is that not the purpose of the engagement of sih hasin in our way of knowing according to Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón? If we don't honestly self-assess, then how do we know that we have angry birds on our loom? Now be careful, you've made my neighbor, the flicker, a bit heavy."

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I broke our silence by removing the batten from between the wefts.

"*The Diné Reader* presents a formidable stalk of Diné literature albeit without field. While each contribution is testament to re-inventing the enemy's language, the overall text lacks incorporation of Diné epistemological or methodological encompassing. Moving beyond the kitsch, which overspins the living being of Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón into mere stages of 'thinking,' 'planning,' 'living,' and 'reflecting,' literary and cultural devices utilized at the presentation level of these voices may have provided an ontological pathway through which readers could breathe in Diné ways of knowing – like the fourfold inhalation of pollen and air after a long morning's prayer, or of smoke from a pipe during a blessing of our mountain bundles, or of the scent of metal and stone after receiving a new piece of jewelry."

"The editors declare their use of the paradigm of Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón in their individualized processes; just because you don't see it doesn't mean it's not there, Christine."

"Indeed, Dólii. Perhaps I superimpose my desire for a book like this to disorientate the reader like that of a good cleansing from a sweat. Instead, the book opts for a Westernized presentation in both mapping and linear timeline. And I understand; it makes the reader connected in terms of chronological influences, provides direct access to specific Diné authors, and neatly organizes work behind writer interviews."

Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
Thup

"What about the symbolic and physical maps? I felt it was an astute way to coherently taxonomize the imagery that readers will be exposed to in many of the writings."

"Certainly, they do. Predictably, *The Diné Reader* includes a physical map, indicating Native nation borders, state lines, and other significant geographical identifiers. Moreover, it embraces a symbolic map of the natural and supernatural geographies associated with Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón. However, the selected map, 'Diné Directional Knowledge and Symbolic Associations,' is a north-oriented map—a Westernized preference of presenting landscapes stemming from the Age of Exploration when 'discoverers' relied on the magnetic pull to the north to familiarize themselves. This north-oriented map sets a tone for accommodation (dare I say, colonization) through a Westernized mind set—instead of welcoming the readers with a sun-oriented map that moves, breathes, and every winter, threatens to leave us."

"Keep going. I think I am following you."

"For ceremonial practicing Diné people, our 'magnetic pull' is to the sun. Carey Jr.'s diagram, while obliging, warrants a 90-degree rotation left—or if we are going shabikehgo—270 degrees sun-rotation-wise. This re-centering, as I tell my students, is more than turning a page. It changes our perspectives and opens us to the time immemorial ways of knowing that greets the sun and penetrates our prayers. If *The Diné Reader* proposes to engross readers to and by way of Diné thought through creative writing, this would necessitate a change to their centering direction beyond the inclusion of excluded voices."

"Bíigah. In the same manner that baskets, pottery, or rugs are placed in our homes opening to the sun, you hope that this book, when it opens, allows sunbeams to enter us and that our experiences reading pull from that energy."

"Aoo'. In this way, the readers (re)connect not just to the words on those pages but also to our Diné ways of knowing. While the voices brought forth are remarkable and the endeavor embarked upon by the editors is enthralling, I challenge *The Diné Reader* to return to our philosophies of storytelling to engage in what Cherokee storyteller Marilou Awiakta (1993) would refer to as a compass story that connects the stalk and corn to the roots and pollen."

dump dump dump dump dump

"You sing of stalks, corn, and fields. Tell me more about roots and pollen?"

"Dólii, you are paying attention! I thought you distracted by this flicker's wingspan!"

"Wah!"

"Okay, then—the roots. While this text exemplifies re-inventing the enemy's language, I wonder where are our stories written in wool, mud, sand, stars, paint, leather, silver, stones? *The Diné Reader*'s introduction opens with the impact of poetry as a medium for release of our people's 'imprisonment of the language' following our introduction to boarding schools (4). But our stories have always been written. Many of the 33 contributors reference these written forms of Diné storytelling. And though many may no longer understand how to read those stories written in wool, mud, sand, stars, paint, leather, silver, stones, they are still very much alive, telling and receiving stories."

"I get it," Dólii responded. "They are the roots of this anthology."

"The introduction also claims that they wish to unearth forgotten and unrecognized Diné writers, but the anthology itself sets out to pollenate new Diné writers from within English and Creative Writing disciplines. What about other disciplines; what about those outside of academia? How do we hear their voices, which this anthology has weeded out, and plant their corn stalks in this same field? In this same manner, while there is a head nod to comics with Tatum Begay's (Naasht'ézhi Tábąąhí) work at the silk

of the corn, how do Diné fine artists, cultural artists, journalists, blog writers, and script writers break soil in this field?"

"Well, Christine, you are asking for a book that is a long as that flicker's tail!"

"I knew you were watching! Not a long book—but a field of books, Dólii."

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"This field that you sing of, how many kinds of corn do you want to plant?" Dólii asked as I pulled my baton out and prepared another sentence of color.

"Many! Yellow, white, blue, red, and my favorite color of all, sweet corn. The "The" in the title presents a minor hiccup to that variety as *"The" Diné Reader* provides a superlative identifier which implies superiority and singularity. It is much the same read I give to Paul Zolbrod's title: *Diné Bahane': The Navajo Creation Story* (1984) as compared to Irvin Morris' (Tábaahí) title *From the Glittering World: A Navajo Story* (1997). Both are creation stories—but one title demands the ultimate compilation, while the other welcomes its individuality within the field."

"Now you are just nitpicking!"

"Am I? Our words—spoken, written, molded, fired, woven, planted—they have meaning. Our words are our medicine, directions, stories. The selection of the title for this compilation has a story; we just don't know it. I hope that the future of *The Diné Reader* is a field of plurality, reflection, strength, and hope. Just like you, Dólii."

I picked up the strands hanging from my loom
łighai,
dootł'izh,
łitsoi,
łizhiin
and finished my review with writing in wool.

Christine Ami, Diné College

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