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**Centering Diné Literacy in ELA Classrooms:  
Developing Co-Conspiratorship for Indigenous Sovereignty**

Shaadiin King

Special Major in Educational Studies and English Literature

Advised by Andrea Terrero Gabbadon and Peter Schmidt

May 2023

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## NAVAJO INTRODUCTION AND POSITIONALITY

*Ya'at'eeh.*

*Shí ei Shaadiin King yinishye.*

*Adoone'e nishlinigii ei Bitahnii nishli.*

*Kinyaa'aani bashishchiin.*

*Adoo Chippewa Cree dashicheii.*

*Adoo Tl'izi Lichi'i dashinali.*

*Akootego ei asdzani nishli.*

*Shima ei Cindy King wolye. Shizhee ei Jeff King wolye.*

*Tse Bitai dee nasha.*

*Ahe'hee.*

I start my thesis with a traditional Navajo introduction because familial relations and community connections are at the base of the Navajo way of life. In the Navajo way, it is important to state who you are, who your family is, and where you are from. In this way, you can identify your relatives, past and present. While I am stating who I am and where my family is from, this is not reflective of where my immediate family and I reside, nor of other identities and privileges I hold. Outside of being Diné Asdzani (a Navajo woman), I live off-reservation in a rural-suburb outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico, sitting on unceded (read: stolen) Ute (Núu-agma-távra-pǔ) and Pueblos land and I currently attend Swarthmore College, sitting on unceded (again, read: stolen) Lenni-Lenape land. In recognition of my middle-class, suburban, off-reservation upbringing, I want to trace my learning of what it means to be Diné (Navajo). My work in this thesis is built on the thinking of others before me, both familial knowledge and

Indigenous scholars in academia—I do not claim that I know everything about the Diné (Navajo) way of life and its philosophies, and I keep this acknowledgement at the forefront of my work.

My main sources of, and connections to, cultural learning were from my dad, as well as my paternal grandma. It is from these two very important people in my life that my understanding of what it means to be Diné (Navajo) takes root. When I was younger, I was learning more and more about my cultural identity, but due to the systemic racism in the United States, I was also learning more and more about my racial identity—I was learning what it meant to be a brown Native girl in the United States.

From my dad, and frequent visits to Grandma's house on the reservation, I visited the land my family and ancestors resided on. I learned about our connection to the land, I learned about my relatives (I visited them, too) and my ancestors, I learned about the struggles my family and my community struggled through at the hands of the United States government. The memories I have of hearing Diné Bizaad spoken fluently, eloquently, beautifully were from Grandma, her sisters, more extended family, and family friends. I never understood what they were saying, but I always took comfort in hearing their words, listening intently to translations from Grandma, and knowing there was always love and care from these people. As much as I desired to learn the language when I was younger, it was never realized—my education was always at the forefront of my parent's and extended family's minds, lending itself to less time in Shiprock as I grew older. From those visits and connections, my cultural learning began—about the land, the importance of language, and the importance of family and community.

While I had this non-Western learning, I was also learning on my own in the traditional Western way. Outside of school, my dad emphasized the importance of knowing Diné (Navajo) history as well as other Indigenous peoples history. I took to reading like a fish in water, and I

remember both listening to my dad about Indigenous history in this country as well as reading a foundational text in Native/Indigenous studies, Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, alongside some other books (think: Vine Deloria Jr.'s *Custer Died For Your Sins*). Can you imagine a little second-grader reading this book and then presenting on Goyaałé (Geronimo) for her classmates?

I was fortunate enough to be able to continue my cultural learning in the form of language learning. From two separate Diné women, I learned Diné Bizaad (the Navajo language) in the spring of my Junior year and Senior year of high school—both classes being a small community of four students. From my first teacher, she always tried to tie our language lessons to cultural teachings, cultural practices, even traditional games people would play—it was always situated, contextualized. From my second teacher, it was a vastly different experience in that we were doing mostly textbook learning. Both women also taught and spoke different dialects of Diné Bizaad (the Navajo language). Although there was some difficulty and tension with the two teaching styles, I owe the extension of my cultural learning to these two women.

That was who I was, how I grew up, and who I still am—I carry this oral and textual knowledge wherever I go, and it deeply informed my learning as I continued in my district's public schools, and it continued to inform my learning as I stepped foot into the classrooms at Swarthmore. This learning now informs my work in this thesis and I hope I can honor my family, my relatives, and my community with this work.

## **Road Map**

In the sections that follow, I will outline the research problem and the research questions that frame this thesis. Then, I will discuss methods and extant literature related to Navajo

Literacy, ELA (English Language Arts) Curriculum, and Western Literacy, as well as Decolonial and Abolitionist Works. From this, I will then argue my position in the use of Navajo/Diné literacy in ELA classrooms. I conclude my thesis with a discussion and reflections.



## INTRODUCTION

### Research Problem and Research Question

The current socio-political climate of the United States is a white euro-centric, capitalist, racist, patriarchal environment—an established “cultural dominance” (Fenelon, 1995). If there’s a center, then there is a periphery—marginalized peoples such as Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC). These marginalized peoples have faced intentional genocide of their peoples, their languages, their cultures. This systemic erasure has always been the goal of Western colonization, and in the case of Indigenous peoples or Native peoples of the United States, one form of systemic erasure, alongside forced assimilation, has been done through the project of Western education led by the Church (Western religions such as Christianity, Catholicism, Mormonism) and State (Federal Government agencies), often hand in hand (Grande, 2015). This Western education entailed the learning of religious beliefs and practices, reading/writing of English, and the creation of laborers for capitalist projects (Grande). This assimilation and culturicide (Fenelon, 1998) of Native peoples heavily damaged their traditional ways of knowing and being, where there are generations of Native descendants who have little to no cultural knowledge, including the loss of their people’s language. Native peoples in the United States, since the beginnings of culturicide, have enacted forms of resistance and survival by staying hidden on their homelands, enacting violence when confronted by the U.S. military and government, and continuing to enact their sovereign power in the continued teachings and practices of cultural knowledge and language. While this is a step taken towards cultural reconnection and the strengthening of Native peoples, there has to be more done to recognize and empower Native peoples who have faced the immense loss of their cultural homelands and knowledge systems.

Western Education, enacted by religious and federal powers, is always in tension with Native students—these youth have to enter and succeed in a system that has attempted to erase their ancestors and their very being, their very existence to, somehow, try to heal from and undo that erasure. This struggle for existence is inherently tied to sovereignty and self-determination—Native peoples' right to exist and express their cultural knowledge with no interference from other forces. Full recognition of sovereignty and self-determination cannot exist without the return of the traditional homelands of Native peoples (Grande, 2015; Hall and Fenelon, 2009). Knowledge, learning and teaching in the traditional sense come from the land and everything on the land; even from beyond the land, thinking about the spirit that dwells in everything. In Western ways of knowing, teaching and learning, it is about production, labor creation, and the prolonging of the parasitic ways and thinking of capitalism. Western education, in its role in the prolongation of capitalism, has led to reductive and harmful binaries—inside/indoor vs outside/outdoor, mind vs body, Western vs Other, etc.—that work completely against the integrated worldview of Native and Indigenous peoples. This is not just an issue that affects Native and Indigenous peoples, it has socio-racial implications as the United States grapples in a “post”-Black Lives Matter world, as well as a global issue that can be seen in the growing Climate Crisis (Jacobs, 2020). The return of Native and Indigenous homelands (aka “LandBack”) is one step towards reimagining a world that can healthily sustain seven generations—a Native teaching meaning maintaining a healthy community and a healthy world for many generations to come—ahead of us, but how do we develop a community that can understand these crises and work towards liberation?

Across the United States, there are educators working and devoting their teaching practice to anti-racist curricular ideals. In ELA education, this has included work in diversifying texts, culturally relevant teaching, and recognizing students as people that enter the space as whole human beings, not just receptacles of information (Muhammad, Love, 2019). While this work is being done, ELA education is still euro-centric, with Common Core State Standards prioritizing the teaching of grammar mechanics, writing styles, and European canonical works such as Shakespeare (Common Core State Standards for ELA). As a Navajo/Diné woman entering the education workforce as an English Language Arts teacher, I am currently working through this tension of teaching Western literacy practices while also teaching Navajo/Diné ways of being and knowing that support students in being able to “read the world” (Freire, 1994, p. xi). As bell hooks (1994, p. 12) said, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility.” Drawing inspiration from this bell hooks quote, this thesis is framed by the following research questions:

1. What possibilities do Navajo/Diné Literacies offer for de-centering Western Literacies and re-imagining ELA curriculum and classrooms?
2. How does centering Navajo/Diné Literacies create opportunities for critical thinking, action-taking, and co-conspiratorship among Native and non-Native students, towards the fight and struggle for sovereignty and LandBack?

These research questions—and, more broadly, this thesis—satisfy the requirements of my special major of English Literature and Educational Studies by combining both disciplines in a discussion surrounding classroom practices and pedagogy.

## **Language and Terminology**

Throughout this thesis, I use a variety of terms to refer to concepts and peoples that are mentioned. This section is to define terms or have starting definitions for these terms, as well as to create a consistent understanding throughout.

### ***Diné (Navajo)***

Throughout the thesis, I will be using Diné when referring to the Navajo people, as well as when referring to their worldview, knowledge, values, beliefs and language (*Diné Bizaad*). Diné is the term of identification that most of the community prefers. Navajo is also a term used in this thesis, but this is the way that the Diné people are identified in Western society—being called the Navajo Nation, and all of the tribe’s governmental entities use this term as well, such as the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education. .

### ***Indigenous/Native***

*Native* tends to carry the connotation of referring to the Americas, and more specifically the United States. I will not use the term “Native American” as Native peoples predate any form of “the Americas.” *Indigenous* carries a global connotation, but both terms refer to the original caretakers of the land. I use these two terms interchangeably.

### ***Literacy***

Literacy is defined as the ability to read and write (Merriam-Webster). I will be expanding on this definition to include orality, other non-textual forms of knowledge, and any other unrecognized ways that knowledge is portrayed. This expansion of the definition will be enhanced and focused by the literature review and interviews.

### ***Co-Conspiratorship***

Co-conspiratorship comes from the abolitionist thinking of Bettina Love (2019). A co-conspirator is someone who understands where they are in relation to systems of privilege and oppression. They unlearn what helps to protect these systems, as well as creating authentic and meaningful relationships of mutuality and solidarity. Love also makes it clear that co-conspiratorship is not allyship—co-conspiratorship as a deeper, riskier, more actionable form of allyship. Co-conspiratorship is not a noun, it is a verb.

### ***Other Terms***

Other language that is used throughout this thesis includes: sovereignty, self-determination, and LandBack. Sovereignty and self-determination are always in reference to Indigenous peoples ability and right to exist wholly as themselves, including the practice and teaching of their cultures. LandBack is a term used throughout Indigenous communities with its roots in a meme created by Arnell Tailfeather (Blackfoot Confederacy, 2018). Alongside this language, I also purposefully capitalize the words “education,” “federal,” and “religion” as a way to refer to the larger institutional and systemic powers of these Western entities.

### **Methods**

In order to explore and attempt to answer the proposed thesis question, I have utilized two approaches to research the phenomenon—a literature review and semi-structured interviews.

### ***Literature Review***

I drew on relevant pieces of literature related to Navajo Literacy, ELA (English Language Arts) Curriculum and Western Literacy, as well as Decolonial and Abolitionist Work that created three sections.

**Navajo Literacy.** This category includes work, interviews, and curriculum material from Indigenous scholars across many academic disciplines such as, Anthropology, Education, Environmental Science, Indigenous/Native American Studies, Linguistics, Sociology and World/Worldview Studies.

**ELA/Western Literacy.** This category includes work from K-12 Literacy Scholars as well as K-12 Curriculum Designers in the 21st Century.

**Reimagined Education.** This category includes a broad range of work that focuses on knowledge not traditionally acknowledged or emphasized in the current world and schools in the United States. This is work from the thinkings of Abolitionists, Aboriginal Scholars, Decolonial Thinkers and Scholars, Indigenous Educators, and the available and shareable knowledge of the Navajo/Diné.

In these three categories, I included research that was exclusively about literacy studies, orality, and the combination of the two, in “non-literate” (Indigenous) societies, while excluding studies that were focused on linguistics and language structures. These sources were derived from reviewing course syllabi—such as Literacies and Social Identities, Anti-Racist Curriculum, and Indigenous Education—and relevant literature that I have read in past semesters. I also conducted an online search of relevant literature using keywords such as “Navajo literacy,” “literacy,” “western literacy,” “ELA origins/history,” etc. in databases such as Google Scholar and Tripod. I also included research from literature recommended by professors like Diane Anderson and Jenn Phuong as well as my thesis advisers, Professors Andrea Terrero Gabbadon and Peter Schmidt.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 2 participants who identify as Navajo/Diné. The two participants had experience teaching in the classroom or had access to cultural knowledge that they use in their lives. I recruited these participants through connections and relationships established at Swarthmore College as well as personal and family connections. These interviews enhanced the review of relevant literature by including the voice of Indigenous peoples involved in education, revealing how Western education has impacted their work and their lives as well as the forms of cultural knowledge that are used in their lives. Some questions from the final protocol were:

1. What do you understand as the elements or characteristics of Navajo/Diné cultural knowledge?
2. Can you tell me about your community work, activities, events, etc? How has your Navajo/Diné cultural knowledge informed this work?
3. Are there any components of Navajo/Diné cultural knowledge that you believe conflict with current bodies knowledge or subjects taught in schools, i.e. science, math, ELA, social studies?
  - a. Follow-up: In what ways, can these conflicts be remedied? How could they further inform classroom practice?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review covers three distinct ways of thinking about literacy, forms of literacy, and rethinking literacy in the classroom. These ways of thinking outline themes within the topics of Navajo/Diné Literacy, Western Literacy, and Reimagined/Decolonial ELA Curriculum. Literacy is explored in terms of literacy learned in schools (reading and writing) as well as literacy as competencies or modes of understanding in an area, recognizing the multitude of literacies a person can have. While this is the current way of defining literacy in this thesis, there will be some overlap with the field of sociolinguistics as current literacy practices are reflective of dominant thinking in the United States, and there is work, such as this one, attempting to shift away from the dominant.

### **Navajo/Diné Literacy**

This section of the literature review will outline the main eras of Indigenous education (missionary, federal, and self-determined) to then examine identified types of Indigenous literacies (what forms they manifest in) and use those forms to explore and define Navajo/Diné Literacy. Through personal and lived experience, I understand Navajo/Diné Literacy as a deviation from literacy as reading and writing. Navajo/Diné Literacy is an embodied literacy, one that is *a way of life*—Navajo/Diné Literacy is a way of being and knowing, as is all Indigenous knowledge. This knowledge has existed for millenia, alongside Indigenous peoples who cultivated, ingested, and propagated it, but as Indigenous peoples came into contact with colonial invaders, knowledge and existence were threatened. Indigenous peoples, such as the Navajo/Diné, protected their knowledge and people as well as they could against the threatening and destructive powers of European colonizers, but Indigenous populations dropped drastically



due to genocidal violence and biological warfare. With the survivors of genocide, U.S. governmental powers decided the return to traditional ways of life were no longer an option for Indigenous peoples. To exist in the new power structures in North America, one had to “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” (Pratt, 1892) It is this history of violence and continued violence that one cannot separate Indigenous education, such as Navajo/Diné Literacy, from its roots in colonial history. Determining what Navajo/Diné literacies will help build towards what can and cannot be used to de-center ELA classrooms/curriculums, to then work towards the development of co-conspirators (Love, 2019) for the struggle and fight towards Indigenous sovereignty and LandBack.

### ***Eras of Education of Indigenous Peoples***

In researching this historical relationship, the most helpful outline of the relationship and its development comes from Sandy Grande’s *Red Pedagogy* (2015), where Grande consolidates the work of Margaret Szasz (1998, 1999), Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder (1989), and Estelle Fuchs and Robert Havighurst (1972) to define three eras of Indigenous education: Missionary, Federal, and Self-Determination. An understanding of the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and Education is to understand the violence and continued violence against Indigenous peoples by Western structures and its agents as well as the complex relationship that exists between the two. This subsection, overall, outlines the way that Education was never meant for Indigenous peoples—it was always a means of erasure and exploitation—and it outlines the way that Indigenous peoples have continuously strived to work against that erasure to ensure the continuation of their cultures.

Missionary schools, with support from Federal powers, were the first form of schooling experienced by Native peoples in the United States, beginning with the French Jesuit, who taught French language, customs, and vocational trades such as carpentry (Noriega, 1992, p. 371, as cited in Grande 2015). Not long after the French Jesuit missionary schools, Christian and Catholic missionary schools were developed and used with the goal of “de-indianizing” Indigenous children. Through the Missionary era of schooling, the Western ideology of European religions (especially Christianity), languages and cultures as dominant and more valuable than non-European (non-Christian) religions, languages, and cultures continued to be perpetuated, with the support of governmental policies and governmental funding. (To see how governmental funding was exploited by Religious entities, look into the foundational years of Harvard University and its short-lived “Indian College.”) Religious-backed institutions were an intermediary agent to land-stealing and resource-expropriation for colonial Western powers showing that exploitation and erasure predates the founding of the United States—the United States colonial project would never have been realized without it.

The Indian Removal Act (1830) marks the beginnings of the Federal government taking over as the dominant ideological and structural power. Later, its fallout established a commissioner to oversee actions with Indigenous peoples, along with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, originally housed in the Department of War. This led to the creation of new schooling structures created by Church and State—manual labor schools—that both continued the project of forced assimilation and culturicide, but also established a free (exploited) labor force in Indigenous peoples. In the late 19th century, the Civilization Fund (1819) was repealed due to tension between rival churches, ending the Church’s control of the missionary schools and its era in “Indigenous” education.

With no partnership with the Church, the Federal government wanted to redefine what it meant to educate Indigenous peoples, thus beginning the era of Federal education of Indigenous peoples in the form of Boarding Schools—the first boarding school being Carlisle Indian School (1879-1918) in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Violence in the education of Indigenous peoples continued in the form of stricter curriculum—upheld through violent actions like hair-cutting, name-changing, and corporal punishment—that through English-only and Anglo-centric schooling prioritized allegiance to the Federal government, extermination of Native languages, extermination of Native religions, as well as the extermination of communal values held by Native peoples (BIA Commissioner Price and Richard Pratt wanted privatization of land [capitalist ideology] to be a value held by Indigenous peoples). In this redefined federal “Indigenous” education, other than the curriculum, distance was created between youth, their families, and their culture—more often than not by force. With no connection to their cultures and no allowance to practice their cultures, loss of Native languages, practices, cultures started to begin. Carlisle was the model for the BIA to create more schools like it, beginning the 19th century with 25 federally-run boarding schools. While the goal of these schools was about forced assimilation and killing the cultures of Indigenous peoples across the United States, it was never fully realized. Indigenous peoples found ways to resist, ways to practice, and ways to teach their own languages, traditions, and cultures.

With erasure incomplete and federal funding decreased, the Federal Government and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (headed by Francis Leupp) began a new era of “Indigenous” education: “Americanization” through public schools. Through this new wave of thinking, more and more Indigenous children began attending public schools to the point where they more widely enrolled in public schools than BIA (government) schools. The push for public school education of

Indigenous children was supported and emboldened by the Meriam Report of 1928, which called for governmental change surrounding the attitudes and behaviors towards Indigenous peoples (Spring, 1997). The Meriam Report also marked the era of the beginnings of “reform,” starting with John Collier, who began actualizing what was outlined in the Report—pushing for religious freedom, tribal self-governance, as well as funding for public education institutions that serve Indigenous students. This started the liberal thinking of “freeing” Indigenous peoples from the Federal government, especially in terms of the reservation system (Grande, 2015, p. 19). While “freedom” from the Federal government seemed like a grand idea for Indigenous peoples, this thinking came from White Liberals—not Indigenous peoples themselves—, that ultimately led to the Termination era (1945-1968), where Indigenous peoples were relocated into urban locations and enrolled into vocational training programs. The goal was still assimilation (Szasz, 1999) and land-stealing—Termination-era policies making it easier to steal land as the Federal government erased the reservations of certain Indigenous peoples. Despite attempts at urbanization, Indigenous resistance and persistence continued—this resistance marks the beginning of the era of Self-Determination in Indigenous education, finally led by Indigenous peoples.

Resistance to Federal policies, that have always meant to harm, assimilate, and erase Indigenous peoples, has always been part of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and institutions meant to “educate” them. A part of this resistance was continued teachings and practices of Indigenous knowledge, as well as the beginnings of Indigenous peoples voicing their opposition—this is happening alongside, and possibly following in the footsteps of, the Civil Rights Movement. In addition to Indigenous peoples, tribal leadership and government begin to exert their power, starting to express their rights as well as their concerns (Reyhner and Eder, 1992, p. 54). With the rise in Indigenous voices surrounding their own education, organizations

such as the National Indian Education Association (founded in 1967), the Coalition of Indian Controlled School Boards (founded in 1971), and the American Indian Movement (founded in 1972) were established, helping tribally-controlled schools become actualized, schools such as Rough Rock Demonstration School (1966) and Navajo Community College (1968, now Diné College) (Grande, 2015, p. 20). Education stayed at the forefront of Indigenous peoples minds, and it was on the radar of politicians in the Federal government, during this time. Many studies and publications arose surrounding “Indian Education”—such as the “Indian Education: A National Tragedy—A National Challenge” (better known as the “Kennedy Report”) and “The National Study of American Indian Education” (Havighurst, 1970, as cited in Grande 2015)—eventually leading to the creation of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Act in 1975, leading to an increase in funding for both BIA schools on the reservation and schools off the reservation as well as parent involvement in curricular development. While these documents, alongside many others, indicate there is progress being made in the sphere of Indigenous education, the many years of genocidal and assimilationist policies is a matter that cannot be undone in the span of a few years—Indigenous students were facing the highest dropout rates, the lowest achievement rates, as well as Euro-centric curriculum, high turnover rates, underprepared teachers, limited resources in materials and technology, and forms of subtle and overt racism (Grande, 2015). Many Indigenous youth still learn in these conditions and are still identified as facing the highest dropout rates as well as the lowest achievement rates.

Indigenous peoples recognize the need for education as decolonization—there is a need, not a want, but a deep, embodied need for teachings to preserve and respect traditional homelands, to learn and preserve traditional tribal governmental structures, to learn and continue the teachings of languages, cultures, economies and social structures.

### *Indigenous Literacy*

Literacy studies has become a field of study rife with dichotomies—there are many contrasting thoughts and studies of the use of reading and writing. Some early literacy studies attempted to answer the question: what exists in the absence of literacy? (Goody, 1977, 1987; Ong, 1982) This led to the dichotomy of literate and non-literate. This spread to and was used in studies of the practices of non-Western civilizations such as global Indigenous peoples as well as Native peoples of the United States. Some of these studies had academics such as Stanley Diamond (1979) who came to the harmful, and false, conclusion that Indigenous communities were non-literate and had no sense of self or singular identity, creating the perception of Indigenous peoples as homogenous. Other academics made the false connection that literate means civilized, and non-literate means uncivilized (Goody, 1980). Through looking at these early sources, literacy studies came to the conclusion that Indigenous peoples, in their “non-literate” way of life, had no way of teaching their younger generations except through enculturation and socialization (Schieffelin, 1990; Kulick and Schieffelin, 2004); thus, equating literacy to Schools and Schools to Education. Through this Western lens, knowledge is only valid and credible if it disseminates through the institution. Literacy studies have served alongside other Western myths of Indigenous peoples to perceive them as non-literate, non-schooling societies. This section of the literature review will look at studies that explore literacy practices of Indigenous peoples across the globe, including reading, writing, and most importantly, orality, in order to attempt to define and outline Indigenous literacy.

Literacy is widely understood as the reading and writing of a language, creating another dichotomy in the field where literacy excludes orality (another division created by academic

studies). For many Indigenous peoples (with a few exceptions), writing systems of their languages were not developed until colonial contact through missionaries and schools (Webster 2012). In Western society, it can be hard to understand language without writing, but this is because “it is we who use alphabets who most frequently associate writing with language” (Basso and Anderson, 1973, p. 1013), so it also makes sense that in Western academia and education that literacy is associated with writing. Before Indigenous languages had writing systems imposed onto them, orality/oral tradition was the foundation for communication, for living, for learning and teaching.

Indigenous languages are the medium in which cultures are able to be understood and passed on from generation to generation. Without language, the continuity of culture is threatened. This importance cannot be understated and it is understood by both Indigenous peoples and Western society, especially in the United States in the form of Federal government and policies. From missionaries to legislators and presidents of the United States, Indigenous languages were understood to be so intertwined with their respective cultures that policy and practices of these Western agents of colonization knew they must be stripped from the peoples, seen in the Education of Indigenous peoples in the violent spaces of boarding schools as well as policies during the Termination era. These policies were slightly reversed in the 1990’s, through acts like the Native American Languages Act (P.L. 101-477), where revitalization was deemed necessary for the survival of Native cultures and peoples, and that Native peoples were able to exercise their sovereign rights in how language learning would occur. Language is culture, language is life, language is power.

Orality is a vital and quintessential part of Indigenous identity. Zepeda (1995), alongside her study of literacy practices, describes the ways in which language is used as identification and

connection to culture and to people/community, in that, dialects of the O’odham language (the language of the Tohono O’odham people) identify relations to people as well as relations to regions/locations. Connections and relations identified through language are further supported by writer LeAnne Howe (Choctaw and Cherokee). Howe (2013) helps us understand language as a creation and assertion of self, personal history and relations, stating:

When I write fiction, poetry, or history, I pull together the passages of my life, and the lives of my mothers, my mothers' mothers, my uncles, and the greater community of chafachúka (‘family’) and iksa (adopted group or ‘clan’), to form the basis for critique, interpretation, a moment in time. My obligation is that I must learn more about my ancestors and myself in order to create. Then I must render all our collective experiences into a meaningful form. I call this process ‘tribalography.’ Whether it is fiction, poetry, a play, or history. American Indian writers and storytellers create tribalography to inform ourselves and the non-Indian world about who we are. (p. 3)

Howe sees everything as connected to one another and this connecting extends to her familial, ancestral, and tribal roots in her writing. Other Indigenous peoples, like the Diné, have identification systems through language, such as the Diné clan system that is shown in my Navajo introduction at the beginning of this thesis.

Orality is the foundation of Indigenous cultures, an influence so strong that it seeps into their practice of Western literacy. Zepeda’s (1995) study shows how strong the influence of oral tradition is through her concept of a “continuum of literacy” that developed from her work with Tohono O’odham students and their fiction writing. Tohono O’odham oral tradition seeped through student writing and carried different narrative structures and techniques than non-Tohono O’odham students—structures and techniques recognized in the writing of other



Indigenous authors such as N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo). Zepeda also takes the time to show how orality is foundational to Tohono O’odham life, detailing the ways in which language is used by the community, such as: communication, storytelling, praying, and singing. This is language as forms of education, invocation and healing. The way language is used points toward the Tohono O’odham value of the intentional use (and not misuse) of language—it’s a recognition of the power of what is being said into the world, a value supported in Momaday’s (1975, 1991) work, as well as the quotes from Tohono O’odham elders who said, “If it’s important, you’ll remember it!” This study shows the strength and power of orality and oral tradition in Tohono O’odham peoples, but is also consistent with the work of other Indigenous scholars and writers (Momaday, 1971, 1991; Four Arrows, 2020) that come from different communities, supporting the idea that oral tradition and orality is the foundation across Indigenous cultures. While this strength is important to recognize, Westernization through the imposition of literacy practices complicates oral tradition, practices and culture.

The imposition of reading and writing of dominant (or matrix) languages on Indigenous peoples complicates their oral traditions and even their cultures. In the case of Zepeda’s and Howe’s work, the context of their work allowed for more freedom in how literacy is practiced—Zepeda’s study was done with students through writing workshops hosted by an outside organization and Howe’s work was published by Aunt Lute Books, an “intersectional, feminist press.” In contexts such as governmental structures and Education, a genuine and authentic Indigenous presence can be misunderstood or suppressed.

Greg Sarris (1993) recounts the Kashaya Pomo story of Slug Woman, where a family member was being affected by Slug Woman and had to be healed through ceremonial tradition.

Through Sarris's personal anecdote, he is illustrating what this story means to his family as well as other members of his community, such as close neighbors. This story is then connected to the tribal school on the Kashaya Pomo reservation where the administration attempts to use culturally-relevant stories in order to garner student interest and pride in their cultural background. The texts used by the teacher in the study were about Slug Woman—told by Kashaya Pomo storytellers and translated by an outside translator—also had outdated information and portrayals of Kashaya Pomo people (i.e., depictions of people wearing loin cloths). When this version of Slug Woman was shared with students in the classroom, students reacted negatively saying it was fake or that they hated the story, with one student stating that it was “devil worship.” Despite this reaction, later all the students admitted to having previously known the story of Slug Woman. For Sarris, Slug Woman was a close danger and a reminder to be cautious, but for the students, who were two to three generations removed from Sarris's understanding of Slug Woman, their relationship with the story of Slug Woman must vary greatly. This observation from Sarris outlines the idea that culture along with tradition are not static concepts—culture and tradition shift as Indigenous peoples respond to their social contexts. The students' responses to the Slug Woman is a representation of one of those shifts. Their response is also indicative of the misuse of a cultural story in that it was decontextualized and there was no space created in the classroom for the expression of student identities and understandings. The Slug Woman text was decontextualized, in that Sarris mentions that Essie Parrish, a prominent Kashaya Pomo community member who was involved in the creation of the texts in class, was never mentioned to the students, despite the fact that they would most likely know who she was. In addition to decontextualization, the classroom norms were never shifted to create a space where students could respond and make sense of the text together. Students were

used to being the receiver to the information that their teacher would provide—there was no precedent of students being able to respond. Sarris explains that part of the students' responses, especially the more negative ones, could have been a rejection of the imposition of a false image of a Kashaya Pomo person onto them, especially as the depictions in the story were outdated and didn't reflect the current conditions of the students' lives. The Kashaya Pomo students, and other Indigenous peoples, are all part of a long colonial history marked by survival and perseverance and Sarris expands on how this history has changed the ways in which traditions and culture persists. The story of Slug Woman lives on for the Kashaya Pomo people, but the exact manifestation of that story differs depending on each Kashaya Pomo person's own personal history, and if that history contains the persistence of or resistance to traditional stories, teachings, etc.. Orality must be used alongside texts that represent Indigenous peoples and their knowledge, but Sarris's study cautions and details an account of the misuse and decontextualization of Indigenous stories and knowledge.

Writing creates the chance to be misunderstood or misinterpreted. In Sarris's study, this manifested in the ways students reacted to the story of Slug Woman, but Digges and Rappaport (1993) portray how the Cumbal people of Highland Colombia were able to subvert possible misunderstanding in the political sphere of their relationship with the Colombian government. The Cumbal people recognized literacy products (colonial legislation, letters, and land titles) through their own non-textual criteria such as their oral tradition and ceremonies—this embodied memory is referred to as “incorporating practices” by Paul Connerton (1989, cited in Digges and Rappaport, 1993). Incorporating practices create a communal history that becomes a part of the Cumables political demands and rhetoric and these practices alongside the written word allow them to retrieve or construct meaning from legislation and other historical documents.

One manifestation of this is through colonial land titles (a government requirement), where the Cumbales hold this textual product on a similar level of symbolic importance as their reclaimed lands and the staff of office carried by council members. In a 1950 letter to the Minister of Mines, there is a focus on a ceremony which granted Cumbal chiefs the rights to their lands—this ceremony acted as a conceptual filter where colonial land titles became remembered and reinterpreted. This remembrance and reinterpretation in ceremony is how claims to land became validated. Other ways that the Cumbales recognize and validate claims is through their practices of walking the boundaries of land, kneeling on the land, calling eyewitnesses, and declaring possession—none of these practices are outlined in legislation. Land claims became recognized in one way by the Colombian government, but were truly legitimated through Cumbal cultural practices and ceremonies. This layering of literacy and orality can be traced back to the colonial period where documents were merely transcriptions of oral communication that occurred at ceremonies solely to “revalidate for posterity those claims already sanctioned through ritual practice.” (Digges and Rappaport, 1993, p. 145) These titles from colonial times show ceremonies that are outwardly similar to the ones performed in the study, but there are slight alterations to content as time has gone on. This illustrates that contemporary Indigenous peoples reinterpret documents through their rituals as well as their oral transmission of knowledge.

The literacy practices of Indigenous peoples are an interesting mixture of the oral tradition of their respective cultures, as well as resistance to and integration of Western literacy. Indigenous literacy seems to be defined as this integration of reading, writing, and oral tradition. The ways in which these three practices mix with each other depends on the community as well as their own history and connections with literacy. To approach the definition of Navajo/Diné

literacy, we have to trace the history of literacy among the Diné people as well as how they integrate reading, writing, and their oral tradition.

### ***Navajo/Diné Literacy***

From literature surrounding the literacy practices of Indigenous peoples from the United States as well as across the world, academics (Zepeda; Digges and Rappaport) see these practices being subverted by these Indigenous peoples' worldviews, especially their oral tradition. This pattern in the literature makes it seem like the literacy practices of the Diné/Navajo people should follow suit in this pattern. Studies that focus on Navajo literacy, defined as the reading and writing of Navajo, show tensions that reflect colonial history, conflict within community, as well as a separation of cultural knowledge from Western knowledge.

Navajo literacy is only understood as the reading and writing of the language (Lockard, 1993; Webster, 2012)—there is little to no mention of connections to cultural knowledge and worldview, only mentions of art forms being separate from writing (Webster mentions weaving and sandpaintings as examples). Instead of explicit ties to cultural knowledge and worldview, much of written Navajo is focused on meeting the orthographic norm a.k.a “the Morgan standard.” This standardization comes from Robert Young (non-Navajo) and William Morgan's (Diné) *The Navajo Language* (1987). The orthography is based on the Latin alphabet, with its roots in military transcription and missionary attempts at translating the Bible into Navajo. It's from this dictionary and grammar that the Navajo language/Diné Bizaad has become decontextualized from its cultural roots and has lost some of its dialectical variation that depend on location/region and clan relations (Reichard, 1945, as cited in Webster, 2012). This loss of variation has also led to some harm in the community in that the standardization of the Navajo

language has led to how to “correctly” write and read the language (Webster, 2012). On the other hand, this standardization of language has allowed for a sense of “modernization” for the Diné (think: rise of the Navajo Nation and its political infrastructure) (Spolsky and Boomer, 1983, as cited in Webster, 2012).

Navajo literacy is taught in, and most closely associated with, schools, yet there is tension in that learning for multiple reasons. There is no, perceived, political or economic reason for learning and writing Navajo. Meek and Messing (2007) write about Indigenous languages being secondary to matrix (dominant) languages and Webster adds to that notion by saying that “Even if it [the Navajo language] does have an alphabet, it will never be as valid as English—merely copying, imitating.” This has led to difficulty in understanding why written Navajo should exist and be used. Alongside this, there are concerns from community members: (1) written Navajo works against cultural values and beliefs, (2) youth aren’t ready to learn the language due to learning through writing (Lockard, 1993).

Despite limitations and concerns surrounding literacy practices, the Navajo Nation has been including and working on bringing cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs into the classroom (Dine School Accountability Plan, Dine Standards). The Navajo Nation’s schools have to follow the standards (CCSS) and assessments of the respective state they reside in (the Navajo Nation spans across Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico), but they can also design their own standards and assessment for cultural knowledge to include character building, culture, government, history, and language. The Navajo Nation also assesses their own Language and Culture teachers, where they use an oral interview format to see how competent potential teachers’ are with cultural knowledge, history, and practices. The Navajo Nation has been able to

exercise their sovereignty and self-determination in the teaching of culture in the classrooms filled with Diné youth.

Along with the foundations created by the Navajo Nation for cultural knowledge in classrooms, Diné educators and other educators in the community have created, and continue creating and fine-tuning, curriculum that center issues and experiences of Diné people and youth. Northern Arizona University (NAU) has a professional development program created by a group of Diné teachers in 2016, who modeled it after the Yale National Initiative, called the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINÉ). This program later expanded to include other Native Nations, and is called the Institute for Native-serving Educators (INE) (<https://in.nau.edu/ine/professional-development-programs/>). In attempting to define Navajo/Diné literacy, I focus on the repository of curricula from the DINÉ program as these curricula focus and center on Diné students and knowledge, as well as relevant community issues and topics (<https://in.nau.edu/ine/program/dine/>). By focusing on Mary L. Washburn's 4th grade ELA writing curriculum plan, we see that she centers her plan in the tradition of storytelling with a focus on the topic of horses, an animal that has importance in cultural and daily life. Washburn states:

Even if they [students] don't have direct experiences with horses, their family stories can provide that connection, as can books they may read for the class library. We can acknowledge and speak in a holistic perspective from the cultural sense and strengthen the power connected to horses in their heritage. Native elders and research also tells us the Navajo culture is losing their native language, so this is a good way of conversing in Navajo about horses and learning some terms about horses and listening to poets that write in the Diné language. (p. 2)

This writing unit connects the culture of students, especially orality, to writing practices in an ELA classroom. Washburn even extends the connection to culture by recognizing the stories of family and elders as sources of information as well as the usage of Diné Bizaad in student discussion and writing.

Curricula in this repository range from K-12 and pull on cultural traditions and teachings or relevant issues and topics as their foundation. Some other curricular topics are: lessons from corn-growing to learn about health and nutrition; geometry and trigonometry as a way to affirm identity through the use of Diné values and beliefs; analyzing water access on the Navajo Nation through understanding the provisions of the Clean Water Act. These curricula vary greatly in topics and sources, but all have the goal of developing Diné cultural understanding as well as community issues that are a threat to cultural well-being.

These educators and curricula are doing the work of combining Western literacy practices with Navajo cultural knowledge, history, beliefs, values, and lived experiences.

### **Western Literacy/ELA Education**

ELA (English Language Arts) education as it exists currently is the teaching of reading and writing, the teaching of Western Literacy. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) expands upon this definition to ground ELA in issues of justice, equity, and diversity (NCTE, 2017). While ELA education is defined this way by the NCTE, it still has “Entrenched pedagogical beliefs about language and learning [that] have dominated English instruction for the past three centuries.” (Sewell, 2008, p. 87) ELA education is stagnant.

ELA education has been rooted in the teaching of using English the “correct” way, with a focus on grammar. This “purity” of English was, and is still currently, attained through the



practice and emulation of “classical” models, with the goal of grammar and rhetoric being internalized. The current Common Core State Standards still have this in mind with the reading standards prioritizing “classical models” in seminal U.S. documents, American literature and the works of Shakespeare despite the standards outlining that “students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries.”

(CCSS, 2022) The writing as well as language usage standards prioritize the usage of standardized English correctly as well. Along with the stagnation of ELA education, the standards as well as reviews of the standards show that they perpetuate and center whiteness alongside Western ideals such as productivity, quickness, and individualism.

### **Decolonial/Reimagined Education**

Education has caused tremendous harm to Black and Brown youth in the suppression of the knowledge of their people and the suffocation of their identities. Education has always been used as a way to perpetuate and privilege whiteness—at the end of the day, Education is an institution rooted in colonialism. Indigenous peoples have known this since the beginnings of formal schooling in this country and are still aware of this fact. Despite the acknowledgement of the harm caused by Education, Indigenous communities see it as a way to continue the strengthening of their respective peoples. One way this can be seen is through the tribal scholarships offered to Indigenous students such as the Chief Manuelito scholarship for Diné students. Another way this is seen is through the continuous work by Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators working to decenter Western knowledge. This section of the literature review looks at studies and work by those who are doing this de-centering.

In the realm of higher education, Indigenous thinkers and scholars have pushed for Indigeneity and explicit critical race studies in curriculum and graduation requirements (Jacobs, 2020; St. Clair and Kishimoto, 2010). Jacobs argues for a centering of Indigeneity that de-centers the Dominant (Western) worldview. Jacobs recognizes that many of the issues that exist in Education and our daily lives is the lack of *true* diversity. The way diversity is defined in his work is one that is reflective of an Indigenous worldview—diverse in that it is a recognition of all living and nonliving beings; being truly diverse means there is recognition of the spirit that dwells in everything, this is a radical recognition of the natural world that a Western worldview keeps separate from people. This recognition of diversity can be and is difficult to obtain, but the struggle is worthwhile, as seen in St. Clair and Kishimoto’s (2010) work in college classrooms and their creation of the Racial Issues Model at a state university. Their work centers on one form of diversity—a form of traditional understanding through race—and attempts to create courses with professors in a way that tackle the issues of racism, institutional racism, white privilege and others across a variety of disciplines. While their work was broad, St. Clair did share her perspective as an Indigenous woman in the teaching of the course she led, illustrating that there is a level of vulnerability in bringing her Indigenous identity and knowledge into the classroom. But, it is through that vulnerability that also allows students to begin opening up and challenging their own identities and perspectives. Jacobs, St. Clair and Kishimoto help point educators to ideas and approaches to bring into the classroom, even though their focus is on institutions of higher education.

In K-12 education, Indigeneity is almost never mentioned in the classroom, especially ELA classrooms. Instead, Indigenous peoples are always mentioned as a historical relic. Debbie Reese (2018) calls for Critical Indigenous Literacies, where Indigenous peoples are mentioned as

contemporary and modern peoples. This type of literacy allows for Indigenous students to feel seen and represented, while also allowing non-Indigenous students to be exposed to more current topics and issues of Indigenous peoples. This works against the harm caused by texts like the ones Sarris (1993) worked with surrounding *Slug Woman*, due to the more current texts created by Indigenous peoples for Indigenous youth. While this is a beginning approach to bringing Indigeneity into the classroom, it does not center Indigenous knowledge in a way that creates a space of vulnerability for unlearning (St. Clair and Kishimoto) to approach true diversity and other values and teachings of an Indigenous worldview (Jacobs). To center Indigenous knowledges and worldviews in the classroom, we can pull on the ideas of Black educators and scholars, as well as Aboriginal education.

The struggles for liberation and sovereignty are closely intertwined and as Indigenous peoples have become more and more politically active, they have pulled on movements created by Black people. A poignant example is the American Indian Movement modeling itself after, and taking inspiration from, the Civil Rights Movement. Similarly, Indigenous education can take inspiration from Black educators such as the work of Lyiscott (2019), Muhammad (2020), and Givens (2021).

From Jamila Lyiscott (2019), educators, of any level, are asked to go through a deep introspection of themselves in a way that interrogates their beliefs and contributions to the perpetuation and assimilation to white middle-class values, ideas, and knowledge. Lyiscott gives an example of how deep-seated these beliefs are in our lives, especially the lives of Black and Brown people who are finding ways to fit into systems that were never meant for them, in her workings through of going through adolescence as an obese Black girl. Her point is that we all carry beliefs and ideas that keep us complicit in the centering of whiteness and Western ideals. In

schools, educators, knowingly or unknowingly, are being complicit in racial oppression and have to examine their role in this systemic racism. As Lyiscott states, “Public impact requires private introspection.” Educators have to interrogate their own experiences, values and beliefs in order to work against and undo harm in the classroom. This personal interrogation allows work, unlearning and learning to occur in the classroom where students are able to explore and take action against racial injustice and inequity.

More explicit classroom practice comes in Muhammad’s (2020) framework of Historically Responsive Literacy (HRL). This framework, based on Black literary societies, works with five concepts: identity, skills, criticality, intellectualism and joy. Through this framework, students, as well as educators, are able to engage in learning that recognizes their brilliance as well as their human-ness. The HRL framework creates a model that works against the Western concept of the classroom where ideas and topics must be decontextualized. Identity is a key component in this framework where identities are recognized for representation and affirmation, but to also come to an understanding of others as well. Even the five pursuits that are outlined are not decontextualized—each pursuit layers and builds onto one another. Identity creates an engaged relevancy for students that enable them to do the work of learning and developing their skills to then create their own intellectualism. This enables them to do active and deeply analytical work (criticality) to understand power within systems to then work towards equity and anti-racism. The frameworks that Lyiscott and Muhammad developed lend themselves to the definition and the work of co-conspirators (Love, 2019), where educators and students are able to understand their relations in systemic powers as well as how to continuously work and strive toward liberation. An understanding of self, systemic powers, and action-taking,

are all ideas and concepts that can be applied to the Indigenous struggle for sovereignty and LandBack.

The work done by Muhammad and Lyiscott are a part of the long legacy of Black educators working to create a new reality where liberation is actualized. Givens's *Fugitive Pedagogy* (2021) outlines this legacy, focusing on Carter G. Woodson and Black educators, and the implications of this work. Black educators were able to de-center curriculum that condemned Blackness and were able to work against restrictions of Jim Crow schools. These educators were subversively educating Black students, doing so in a way that taught them the history of their people through oral traditions, lived experiences and the lives of others—Black educators were producing and legitimizing their own knowledge, setting the precedent for their students as well as future educators. This work was rooted in the idea of “schools as a site to express and enact political visions for a new reality through pedagogy” (p. 237). At the center of this work was a pedagogy that gave people hope and the ability to reimagine a world where conditions do not have to exist in the way they always have been. Black educators, students, and communities have been partaking and contributing to freedom-dreaming (Love, 2019), and will continue to do so.

Across these models, these scholars were able to develop methods that subverted, de-centered, and interrogated Western knowledge, beliefs and values. In doing so, students were able to learn and analyze the systemic powers of the United States, while also strengthening their confidence and power to be able to create action and sustain continuous learning. A framework or model that centers Indigenous knowledge or worldview, taking inspiration from these scholars and their work, could have the same impact on Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, educators, students, and communities.

In addition to Black scholars, Australia—another dominant Western power—could be an interesting place to explore the centering of Indigenous peoples. In contrast to the United States (and Canada), the federal government has issued a public apology to the Aboriginal peoples, for the historical harm and trauma they caused. Australia and New Zealand also have larger Indigenous populations than the United States, a presence that cannot be ignored, subdued, or glossed over. Many scholars and academics in Australia have studied the ways in which education can benefit Indigenous peoples and other students in their educational system. A limitation of this literature review is that there was not enough time to fully explore Australian or New Zealand Indigenous education.

Education has been reimaged by scholars in Australia who are non-Indigenous as well as other marginalized peoples like Black scholars in the U.S.. Similarly, there are Indigenous scholars in the United States who have also done the work to reimagine education. Scholars such as Bryan Brayboy, Four Arrows as well as James Fenelon and Dorothy LeBeau have created and argued for frameworks and curriculum that center Indigeneity and specific Indigenous worldviews. Brayboy in many of his works, but most poignantly in his *Tribal Critical Race Theory* (2005), centers the Indigenous experience in Education, with his theory focusing on the biggest barrier to sovereignty and LandBack, Indigenous peoples' relationships with the United States Federal government. Without this understanding, it's difficult to make sense of the experiences of Indigenous people within the U.S.. Four Arrows (a.k.a Trent Jacobs) creates a case for Indigenous worldviews used in higher education institutions, yet does not create other models or frameworks for K-12 education, but many of his ideas such as de-constructing Western worldview beliefs in the classroom can be applied to those spaces. James Fenelon and Dorothy LeBeau create a framework that explicitly centers the Lakota worldview, values and

beliefs by centering their classroom in the understanding of the six directions (the four cardinal directions, plus a recognition of the spirit above and the land below). Fenelon and LeBeau's framework of de-centering, but their framework is for a classroom of Indigenous students, and specifically Lakota students. These scholars portray the importance of Indigenous education being truly Indigenous with worldviews and cultural knowledge at the center, and also portray the creativity and bravery needed to bring these curricula and thinking into the classroom. The next section of this thesis explores parts of the Indigenous experience in classrooms, particularly as an educator, as well as components of the Navajo/Diné worldview.

## INTERVIEW AND CORRESPONDENCE

The literature review focused and drew upon a variety of academic articles, reviews, and books. While there was some inclusion of Indigenous voices through published authors of non-academic books, there is still a gap in the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and their lived experiences in this thesis. Some of these sources are not operating in an Indigenous worldview, and that kind of information can only come from those who grew up with and continue to use that Indigenous worldview. To address this gap, I conducted a semi-structured interview with a participant I call “Professor.” Professor has experience in the classroom and bringing an Indigenous worldview into their college courses. I was also able to correspond with a participant I call “Shik’is.” (Shik’is is a Navajo word that translates to “friend.”) Shik’is is someone who I met back home in New Mexico. Both participants are of Diné descent and use their cultural knowledge in some form in their lives.

The semi-structured interview was originally going to be two interviews with Diné people involved in education in some capacity, but due to scheduling conflicts, only one in-person interview was able to happen—the interview with Professor. I recorded the interview with the Voice Memos app and then played the recording into a Zoom meeting with live transcription. I used the saved transcription and then edited it for clarity. Some example codes are: “lack of knowledge about Indigenous peoples;” “negotiations in the classroom;” “creating spaces of unlearning/learning/relearning;” and “listening to Indigenous voices.” Codes such as these pointed to larger, broader themes of “Indigenous or Navajo/Diné knowledge” as well as “Conflict with Western worldview.”



The correspondence with Shik'is was unplanned and spontaneous. Our conversation arose from one of our catch-up chats that we have every now and then. During this conversation, Shik'is mentioned their jewelry-making and I was able to ask them more about their process as well as their connection to this Diné cultural practice. From our correspondence, some codes that arose were: “intentionality with verbal and physical expression,” “relationships with community,” and “relationships with land.” The larger theme of this correspondence was “Navajo culture and worldview.” Shik'is extends on Howe's concept of writing/language as an assertion of self and personal history by extending this to their jewelry-making, stating:

I didn't see a lot of pieces that I saw myself wearing so I made, started making what I wanted to see and also have my own traditional jewelry I could pass down one day since we didn't have any passed to us growing up. (Personal communication, April 11, 2023)

The interview with Professor extended on this idea, including traditional songs, dances, and regalia alongside jewelry, to state that each of these artifacts of culture hold their own stories, their own knowledge. Both of the participants work against Webster's (2012) understanding of history and stories, refuting Navajo literacy as only reading and writing and including these other forms of expression. Both of the participants contribute to Zepeda's (1995) continuum of literacy, portraying that orality can be understood in other mediums if people are open and willing to listen to the creators of the artifacts that are presented.

Orality and other non-textual forms of knowledge, such as jewelry-making, are illustrated as an important facet in understanding others as well as the world. These participants help focus the definition of Navajo/Diné literacy further.

## DISCUSSION

ELA education/an ELA classroom that has Indigenous knowledge—Navajo/Diné knowledge specifically, in the case of this thesis—at the center, has the potential to create the beginnings or the foundations of co-conspiratorship. The classroom will become a space of unlearning, unlearning that is required in the continual process in the struggle for the full recognition of Indigenous sovereignty as well as the return of all Indigenous lands (LandBack).

The literature surrounding Indigenous literacies and Navajo literacy point to an important topic that becomes solidified by the interview with Professor. They both show that the practice of Western literacy is rooted and heavily influenced by the respective Indigenous peoples worldview and knowledge. Ofelia Zepeda's concept of a continuum of literacy works for many written texts created by Indigenous peoples; LeAnne Howe explicitly states her ancestry, history and knowledge being entangled in her writings; and Professor points to storytelling as methodology and as a structure of writing, stating that these are only recognizable to Indigenous peoples, but, on the other hand, serve as a starting point for students just starting to learn from an Indigenous worldview. These all point towards oral tradition and other knowledge that isn't Western-centric playing a major role in the writing, a Western literacy practice, of Indigenous peoples.

What the literature also misses is other forms of the expression of knowledge that do not privilege the print-dominant society of Western society. While they do speak of orality, most literacy studies tend to think of orality as a separate entity and ELA using orality, like reading and writing, in decontextualized academic spaces. From the conversations with Professor and Shik'is as well as drawing upon my own lived experiences, Navajo worldview and knowledge are expressed through a variety of forms. From Professor, we see that values and beliefs are

expressed through the roles of storyteller and storylistener, both equally important roles, both equally active roles. Both Professor and Shik'is carry the value of non-assertion of the natural world, rather listening and observing and learning. In their interview, Professor told many stories relating to Western scientists and Indigenous scientists and community members at conferences where Western scientists asserted themselves over the natural world, sacrificing relationships to land and other beings in the name of productivity and finishing their work quickly. From Shik'is, they stated multiple times that in their jewelry-making, they worked with materials as they are and let the materials guide them towards their final product. We also learn from both that Navajo worldview and knowledge is embedded in forms that aren't typically seen as full of knowledge in Western society—forms such as song and dance, regalia, ceremonies, and jewelry. From my personal experiences, I add knowledge in the forms of food and relationships. Across these three Diné experiences, we see that knowledge is expressed in mediums other than print, and is equally valued, if not valued more than print sources.

Both in the literature as well as the interview with Professor, we see that Indigenous literacies are inherently political. In the experiences of the Cumbal from Colombia, their usage of the cultural knowledge and tradition is what recognizes governmental policies, not governmental powers recognizing policy for them. In the United States, Indigenous peoples' history is not in history books, rather it is in the treaties and court cases between various groups and the federal government. Professor recognizes that this is knowledge and history that has been kept hidden by governmental powers, saying their pedagogy is “political praxis.” Indigenous Literacies, and Navajo literacy in turn, are inherently political, adding another layer of complexity on top of worldview.

From the literature review as well as the conversations with Professor and Shik'is, I define Navajo literacy as:

1. The practice of Western literacy rooted in Diné worldview and knowledge and
2. The expression of knowledge in mediums other than printed/written text (i.e., jewelry, storytelling, song and dance, regalia, etc.)

Navajo literacy, due to being rooted in Diné worldview, actively works against Western literacy and the ideas it perpetuates. It should create a classroom community that has expectations or agreements based in Diné worldview such as: language is powerful and intentional—it can bring harm or it can bring good. An ELA classroom should also establish the roles of storyteller and storylistener—making it known that listening is as equally active and participatory as speaking.

In addition to this creation of a classroom community that unlearns values upheld by Western worldview, the unlearning continues in the learning from texts and oral stories surrounding Diné culture, history, political struggles, and lived experiences. While this creates a space of unlearning and grappling with new concepts, it also adds complexity in the ELA classroom—a deviation from the reinvention of the same curricular ideas since ELA's inception in the 1890s—by including the above-mentioned types of stories to examine the true history of the United States, to explore and question the political struggles of Indigenous peoples that were created by the U.S. government, as well as a deep examination of self, in relations to others as well as the land.

Centering Navajo literacy in ELA classrooms can create the beginnings of co-conspiratorship in students. Students through Navajo literacy are doing the unlearning, learning and relearning required as a step towards co-conspiratorship, as well the creation of

relationships for solidarity. I see this process as a part of the larger unfolding of co-conspiratorship towards the full recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and LandBack—implications that point towards the continual process of decolonization.

An ELA classroom that has Indigenous knowledge—in the case of my thesis, Navajo knowledge—at its center, has the potential to create the beginnings of co-conspiratorship in the classroom community, to spark the beginnings of unlearning required to fully recognize Indigenous sovereignty as well as the return of all Indigenous lands (LandBack).

### **In the Classroom**

As a part of my experience as an Educational studies major, I was a student teacher in a 7th and 8th grade ELA classroom. Through the trust of my cooperating teacher, I was able to lead a 7th grade novel unit. While I was learning how to teach and operate in the classroom, I was able to explore and implement practices that were created by Indigenous peoples—the ideas and practices associated with restorative justice. From restorative justice, issues and conflicts are able to come to a resolution through a restorative justice circle, where victim(s) and offender(s) as well as community are able to participate in dialogue with each other to understand one another. This practice has roots in Indigenous cultures from North America, as well as global Indigenous cultures. My goal as a student teacher was to implement this practice in my 7th grade novel unit.

As a part of my unit, I included discussion days, which the students later renamed to “circle days,” as a way to implement restorative circles. The first few days of the unit focused on getting students familiar with the circle—its routines and its artifacts. We had a talking piece, where whoever had the talking piece was the only speaker and other circle participants were

focused on listening. We had a centerpiece, that students chose and voted on, that would signal the start of the circle (by being placed in the middle) and the end of the circle (by being taken out of the circle); it also served as a point of re-focus if students felt like they were not focusing on what was being said. We also created circle expectations that circle participants agreed upon and checked each other on. Students also acclimated to the types of questions that would be asked while in circle. After a couple rounds of practice, and the first few days of using the circle, students acclimated and adjusted to the format.

Through the use of a restorative circle, as a way to discuss the class novel, the class community was able to explore the novel beyond its formal ELA elements. Rather than only focusing on elements such as theme, characterization, etc., students were also able to explore questions such as: what does it mean to restore something that has been broken or damaged? how do we practice forgiveness? what does justice mean? Students also engaged in larger topics such justice versus revenge, as well as safety and belonging. With the implementation of the restorative circle in class, students were able to engage in learning beyond ELA Common Core standards and engage in learning about social and emotional well-being.

While there were no explicit ties to the Navajo/Diné worldview, or a broader Indigenous worldview, students were able to engage in a holistic education that is at the center of these worldviews. Students were also able to engage in learning that started their development into introspection surrounding the communities, and the society, they reside in. My work and my students' work, during my student teaching semester, were an attempt at developing co-conspiratorship through Indigenous knowledge and practices.

## REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

This work was deeply personal and challenging—I'm not an elder and I don't have the traditional knowledge to fully understand and teach the Diné worldview. At times, the work felt dishonorable and disrespectful. Despite these feelings, centering my own cultural knowledge is important to my work as a future ELA educator and I hope to continue expanding on my ideas here and to continue learning from and being inspired by other Indigenous educators. It is also my hope for other Indigenous educators to center their own cultural knowledge in their practice. With a complete shift in epistemological roots, I believe that the systems we live within can be taken down and replaced with more equitable structures.

### **Limitations of the Thesis**

While this thesis contributes to the important and vital work being done in Indigenous education, there were constraints that limited the scope of this thesis.

In this thesis, there were constraints on the literature in that there had to be a narrow scope used, with a focus on the studies and work that are cited and elaborated on in the literature review. For future research, there is a potential need for there to be a larger and broader scope in the review of literature, that would, both, be more recent and include more global Indigenous peoples and their expressions of knowledge.

This thesis would have benefitted from more inclusion of Indigenous—and more specifically, Diné—voices. While the two participants contributed valuable knowledge, a participant with a more thorough and expansive traditional Diné knowledge base could have narrowed or focused the definition of Navajo/Diné literacy further. This participant could have also helped guide this thesis towards Diné knowledge that can and cannot be used or written

about in academic spaces or forms. This thesis also would have benefitted from the inclusion of the voices of more Indigenous educators, to understand the work they do in classrooms that contain both Native and non-Native students.

### **Implications of the Thesis**

For both my work as an educator and other educators, this thesis is a call for comparative global Indigenous studies with a focus on education. Being able to understand the conditions of Indigenous peoples, globally, as well as their individual struggles for sovereignty and LandBack, lends itself to the creation of national and global solidarity—a relationship that threatens and pushes back against the current conditions we live in. Solidarity, across the globe, works against the neo-colonial force of globalization, a process that affects us all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

In my future practice, this thesis is a reminder to myself to focus on specificity and locality in the inclusion of Indigenous worldviews, values, and beliefs in the classroom. In my classroom experiences, so far, I have kept a broad Indigenous lens in the teaching of, and learning with, my students. I was never explicit or greatly direct about my Diné identity, beliefs and values. In future classrooms, with my future students, I will be more explicit and direct about my identity and knowledge base. While being explicit about my own identity, I also want to honor the Indigenous peoples whose land my future classroom and school will occupy, by centering their knowledge in the classroom and creating community connections with them.

My existence and praxis as a Diné woman is a threat to the current systemic conditions we live within and I acknowledge that there will be possible, and real, push back against the work I know is needed in the field of Education. At the forefront of my mind, always, is a quote



from Jamila Lyiscott, “Social justice requires personal wellness.” (2019, p. 14) I strive to take care of myself to continue the work that I want to do. I strive to take care of the students who will walk into my future classrooms. Education should not be just a cultivation of the mind, true education teaches us to take care of our whole beings, each other, our communities, and our land. The struggle for liberation, sovereignty, and LandBack is a continual process—I am working to ensure that process continues, alongside the other educators, action-takers, co-conspirators that are also a part of the struggle.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix A

Hello. I am Shaadiin King.

I am of the Under-His-Cover clan.

I was born for the Towering House clan.

My maternal grandfathers are the Chippewa Cree.

My paternal grandfathers are the Red Goat clan.

In this way, I am a woman.

My mother is Cindy King. My dad is Jeff King.

We are from Shiprock.

Thank you.

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