Rezistance: Diné Grassroots Organization and Modes of Activism

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Rezistance: Diné Grassroots Organization and Modes of Activism

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Ahéhee’
Introduction

The Route to Dzil Yijiin Living (DYL)

The sun had already long disappeared to the west, behind Do’koo’osliid (the San Francisco Peaks) by the time we made that right turn off the lone paved street and onto a dirt trail leading to Pinon. It may have once been a spillway given the deep trenches on either side of the path and the way the road rises and falls like a steady current, or perhaps an old carriage road bearing the worn, deeply sloped marks of countless travelers tracing one another’s trails. On such a moonless stormy night, however, it is difficult to really make any such definite conclusions—and the mind tends to wander. The only features I could really make out for sure were the two slowly fading red taillights, like the fiery eyes of a dragon, of a rental car belonging to Born For Water with his young group of fellows and employees who made up some of the restoration crew. Born For Water, a Pinon resident, knew these roads all too well and traversed the rugged terrain, with its slippery sand and disorienting hills, as if a surfer gliding across a wave. I, on the other hand, tightly clung to the steering wheel of my own vehicle desperately trying to keep up as a storm brewed overhead.

My journey to Pinon begins with Dzil Yijiin Living (DYL), an inter-tribal, multiethnic, fiscally-sponsored Indigenous grassroots organization that coordinates with various communities in and around the federal boundaries of what is known as the Navajo reservation implementing sustainable projects modeled around three core values that inform various modes of activism: just transition, regenerative ecology and restorative economy. These projects, while dynamic and
innovative, are particularly focused toward land reclamation and restoration, public health, air and climate pollution, water depletion, natural resource exploitation, and other forms of human rights. DYL’s co-founder and youth coordinator, Born For Water, along with a number of office staff at their headquarters in Flagstaff, at the base of Do’koo’osliid, and restoration crew—a close group of Diné youth who work at the Bitterwater land in Pinon, as well as involved with the various land restoration, reclamation, and hogan projects—invited me to stay and work with them for the remainder of the summer. Previously, I had visited the Navajo reservation for two years working with various families and local groups regarding water testing for uranium contamination from the mines and the response of Diné residents, particularly elders, regarding the REAL ID Act and its impact as a federal regulation on Diné lifeways. My time spent with DYL and its community has offered another way of thinking about the ways in which we acknowledge and define the problems affecting our community as well as how to confront those issues in ways that are productive, creative, and sustainable.
In many ways, the work that DYL take into action are quite similar to other projects I was introduced to while on the Navajo reservation. The REAL ID Act, for example, is a way of imagining one’s relationship with the state: the fact that one must be documented to be a licensed resident, as well as dilemmas regarding legitimacy and sovereignty within a nation. According to the Department of Homeland Security REAL ID FAQs page, “Federal agencies, including DHS and TSA, may only accept state-issued driver’s licenses and identification cards as identification for purposes of accessing federal facilities - including TSA airport security checkpoints - if the license or card was issued by a REAL ID compliant state in accordance with the REAL ID security standards (meaning the license or card must include the REAL ID compliant star marking),” (Department of Homeland Security). Implying an inherent understanding of federal-citizen obedience in order to access facilities and resources that are apparently only available to specifically marked, identifiable, traceable people.

What the REAL ID fails to recognize, however, are the hurdles that Indigenous peoples must go through in order to obtain such documentation. The fact that federal governments do not acknowledge marriages conducted by medicine people without the proper paperwork, the frequency of home births because hospitals are often hours away, or the complicated history of multiple names and identities for Indigenous coal miners because corporations would assign Indigenous workers with names like “John” to make the identification process easier. These challenges, and many more, contribute to the types of social, economic, and political injustices delivered through settler colonialism and capitalist ideals that DYL is also trying to bring to attention and overturn.
**Language as Identity**

The dynamic changes in disciplines of anthropology, Indigenous studies and history are consistent with the words they use and the timeframes they are situated in. For starters, the word “Navajo,” though a term used in contemporary contexts to describe certain Athapascan descendants who are mostly located on what is now known as the “Navajo reservation,” is packed with a history of imposed identification and separatism. “Navajo” is a Spanish derivation of the Tewa word, *Nabaio*, meaning “people of great lands,” that was adopted as Spaniard settler colonists were expanding through what is now the Southwestern United States. This is a term with a direct relationship to settler-colonial history that will be used intentionally throughout the rest of this ethnography to demonstrate the unwarranted injection of settler-colonist ideals into society as a discrete divide-and-conquer tactic, but also quoted in contexts that may further complicate how we understand and use these names.

Diné, as I came to understand it through my research, translates directly from the Diné Bizaad language meaning “the people.” This is how I will describe many of my interlocutors, as well as other people who may otherwise be called (or sometimes call themselves) Navajo, but who also in some ways resist the term by their forms of activism, seeking traditional knowledge,\(^1\) ancestral connections and lifeways. It is worth contemplating that these identities do not exist in opposition with one another, nor are they distinct binaries. In many cases, Navajo and Diné are identities that can appear simultaneously, and with degrees of variation, depending on specific

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\(^1\) I also want to take a moment to recognize the word “tradition” as problematic and possibly triggering for some readers. This term is baked into systems of difference between the relegated ancestors of the past and contemporary peoples living and acting upon this knowledge today. Therefore, the word is only used as it was dictated to me by my interlocutors.
circumstances and contexts. Tourist enterprises, for example, where a tour guide or resident of a tourist destination such as Monument Valley who defines themselves to their friends and family as Diné may present themselves to a tourist audience as Navajo.² This may be due to familiarity with the term, or the intentional use of “Navajo” in the tourist market, but is ultimately used as a connective linguistic device. An unfortunate side effect of American public education is that when we hear “Navajo,” we most likely imagine a different, more familiar, type of Native American character than when we hear “Diné.” Some might think of John Ford movies while others may be reminded of the World War II Navajo Code Talkers. In my personal experience discussing my research with fellow students and colleagues at Bard College, describing my “Diné friends,” I was responded to with looks of confusion. When I changed my language and call them Navajo, students responded with familiarity. These examples speak to how identities can be politicized in ways that are disruptive to how one forms, behaves, and imagines their place in a community.

Diné, also sometimes referred to phonetically as “Dineh,” has a different history in terms of how identities are constituted than Navajo—although the two can, and sometimes do, overlap in ways that are confusing or disrupting for the people who identify as such. However, this distinction is an important one to make early on because it is often obscured by business, politics, agriculture, and many other forms of society. From my observations, “Navajo” appears to be used in contexts that incorporate a settler-colonist rhetoric, with a specific trajectory toward profit-oriented business capitalism. One needs not to look much further than titles like the

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² For example, from Goulding’s webpage, “All of our tour guides are local Navajos who grew up in and around the Monument Valley area,” (https://gouldings.com/monument-valley-tours/). Or, from Monument Valley safari, “Navajo-owned, our experienced guides will show you the best of Monument Valley,” (https://monumentvalleysafari.com/). Also, from Antelope Canyon tours, “Antelope Canyon Tours is Navajo-owned and operated, providing guided tours from Page, Arizona,” (https://www.antelopecanyon.com/about/).
Navajo Generating Station (NGS), the Navajo Nation, Navajo Neurohepatopathy (NNH),3 or even the Navajo reservation to observe how colonialism has grasped their society and molded it to adhere within the expansive, conquering territories of the “so-called United States.” Compare those titles to places like Dinétah, the traditional homeland or emergence place; Diné Bikéyah, a physical and philosophical being that exists within all Diné; and Diné Bahane’, the “Story of the People.” One can see that both uses of the word Diné and Navajo describe places and the people occupying those places, but there are subtle differences that culminate into greater distinctions as to what those places and people mean for the society overall.

Overall, the point is not so much to shed a Navajo identity for a Diné one, or vice versa, but to recognize the variability of these terms and how they influence the ways we understand the people whom it describes. There are many ways that Diné people embrace the Navajo identity or utilize both terms interchangeably without much forethought. Born For Water, while driving me to a meeting with other Native grassroots organizations and Jonathan Nez, President of the Navajo Nation, told me, "We are not just Athapascan. We may speak the language, but we're more than that. It’s not about race, it's about what makes you a person. It's two people coming together. Some people say, ‘We're crazy people,’ like a lateral violence—but really, we are who we are." By bringing up the distinctions of nuanced character traits, Born For Water is comparing both himself and his community to the Navajo Nation as a way of revealing the underlying details and complications that frequently cluster various Indigenous communities together—sometimes to caricature-esque fates. Furthermore, Born For Water does not shy away

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3 My first hearing of this disease came from a BMWC office crew staff member who described it as a deadly progressive degenerative disorder of the nervous system which affects young children, causing them to walk on the sides of their feet, tense up, and often die. The suspected cause is a birth defect due to drinking undected uranium-contaminated water.
from mentioning the violent stigma associated with being Native, and instead offers a more meaningful suggestion that there is more to someone than just their language and heritage. Rather, the content of one’s character seems to be a quality that provide better insight to one’s identity than the words an outside entity uses to describe them.

“Transition is Inevitable, Justice is Not”: Engaged Modes of Activism

The above quote came from Born For Water during a presentation he was giving to some visitors and me before taking us all on a tour of Bitterwater. One of the ways DYL is able to keep resourcing projects to communities is by inviting interested parties to Bitterwater to see their practices in action. During Born For Water’s presentation he pointed out the large number of various activists and organizations present on the Navajo reservation, indicating a presence of “intergenerational activism,” in defiance of the business-oriented objectives of the Navajo Nation. However, these diversified groups also pose a problem because of difficulties in coordinating with so many groups involved with various projects. Furthermore, when it comes to working with the Navajo Nation, activists run into bureaucratic hurdles due to oversight from the Department of Justice, Department of Interior, and Bureau of Indian Affairs. As one DYL member put it, “The Navajo Nation is the bastard child of Uncle Sam. They fed the child bottles of soda instead of healthy food—and so used to the mining, oil, and fracking it’s difficult to take that bottle away.” Born For Water also expressed similar sentiments, laughing, “It feels like, with the Navajo tribe, we take one step forward and five steps back.” These obstacles reveal certain tensions as to why the demand for justice has been such an uphill battle—a tug of war between communities—that requires a type of resistance to the radical individualism that has created a culture of control. One important quality for evaluating one’s principles, as Born For Water
mentioned in his presentation, is a “tuned moral compass” that seeks to redistribute resources and power to community-owned enterprises.

DYL implements a model of addressing issues they find most concerning to their communities by conceptualizing certain Diné philosophies to inform innovative practices of just transition, regenerative ecology and restorative economy. These pillars can also be thought of as modes of activism that inform the mind, present themselves in spaces, and are constituted within the people who sustain them. DYL works not only with youth, but also various community members such as medicine people, farmers, educators, and residents of the Navajo reservation. Projects may take a number of different forms such as ecological restoration of farms via agroecology, permaculture, and watershed improvements by building regenerative landscapes via rock gabions, rock aprons, and spillways; there are also a significant number of hogan construction projects where structures are built for varying uses of communities, guests, and/or families. Additional ventures include a revival of the Churro sheep species to assist weavers in producing more sustainable products and help farmers manage livestock. Finally, DYL and their fellows organized a seed sharing event where farmers and community members could exchange seeds with each other to promote a more diverse agriculture, learn different farming techniques, share stories, and restore and grow the different plant species that have been threatened by monoculture.

According to DYL, “just transition means we are intentional … for the benefit of our people.” At its core, just transition is a continual process of blending practices of mindfulness with immediate action. Based upon a strategic framework of resist, rethink, restructure, the process of just transition is one that is based upon creating new forms of knowledge. “From chaos came enlightenment and reflection,” Born For Water once told a group of visitors and me
while sharing Diné narratives of the sixth world, the coyote trickster, mountains blowing up out of anger, and other themes of chaos, “there’s an opportunity to grow and learn.” Born For Water’s sentiments of chaos are ones that not only help deal with pessimism, but also the ways in which we may begin to understand how we form our identities. The just transition model stakes claim in the idea that the chaos a community experiences is not one that signifies the end of times, but instead an opportunity to grow, build resilience, reevaluate what we know, and find a balance of energies through our daily processes. Just transition imagines new possibilities for a better future when many other societies tend to romanticize the past as something worth returning to.

In addition to just transition, DYL also upholds the pillars of regenerative ecology and restorative economy to understand and take action toward community challenges. During a presentation by Born For Water and other members of DYL to a visiting group of students from Boulder, CO, it was brought up that the root term “eco” found in ecology and economy comes from the Greek “oikos” or “home,” and that the reservation borders do not define Diné homeland—those borders are communicated through the sacred mountains. It is in understanding these words that the first kernels of knowledge can begin to take shape and refine themselves. Ecology, for example, is the binding of home and knowledge as a way of understanding place names and landscapes. Contemporary economy, on the other hand, a combination of home and management in a way that has been constituted through colonialism and parasitic capitalist enterprises. And yet, the term can easily be reconceptualized as a way of thinking about how we build and manage our homes to restore human communities and healthy

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4 Tsisnaasjini (Blanca Peaks) to the east, Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor) to the south, Doko’oosliid (San Francisco Peaks) to the west, and Dibé Nitsaa (Mount Hesperus) to the north. Additionally, there is Huerfano Mesa and Gobernador Knob which are both Diné sacred mountains.
ecosystems based on mutually beneficial relationships instead of private establishments. Conversations about various forms of government, such as socialism, sometimes came up during my time with DYL. Although nobody in the organization directly subscribed to the ways socialism has played out in other societies, the closest comparison may be what is referred to as a “Hoshké society,” or a type of matriarch community police force that favored direct action toward justice; examples of punishments like branding for crimes of molestation, or in cases of extreme violence: castration, burying up to neck next to ant hill, limbs dislocated, or buried next to sacred animals who could determine their fate.

Regenerative ecology is defined by DYL as “a state of acknowledging the features that contribute to resource extraction both naturally and invasively to reconcile, improve, and innovate techniques in the present for future peoples.” Here is worth recognizing certain landscapes such as Dzil yijiin, a female mountain endowed with water where the name comes from the black streaks of coal naturally occurring on the mountain. Surrounding its borders, energy companies like the now defunct Peabody Coal and NGS once staked claim in the allocation of natural resources as well as a tremendous influence on the local economy. Place names, along with other forms of ecoliteracy, indicate a close connection between landscapes, names, and knowledges that demand a continual relationship with clan mothers and what they can contribute to history or social change. Other forms of regenerative ecology, such as agroecology, rely on communal-based knowledge with a particular focus toward Indigenous knowledge and food sovereignty. The practice of using planting sticks instead of industrial machines or restoring old carriage roads—through some perspectives a permanent marker of settler colonialism—to newly purposed watersheds are but a few meaningful examples of agroecological transitions. This approach is especially sustainable and reliable for uplifting
disadvantaged Indigenous farmers with an infrastructure situated to develop small scale food systems maintained by k’é (families and clans).

Another process through which DYL hopes to confront community challenges is through restorative economy practices, or as they imagine it by “training the body to support itself through skills that do not just build but innovate.” Much like just transition and regenerative ecology, restorative economy is a constant process that refocuses historical trauma, loss, and restoration to collectively address issues reckoning with systemic oppression and the resources, people, and state curriculums that define our relationships with each other and the environment. One way of thinking about these impacts is to consider the community loss as youth that are being trained to work for someone else’s profit. Particularly at risk are young kids who adopt an American public education through a national curriculum values system that pull them away from the reservation and their families to pursue monetary success and corporate benefits. “We are not just consumers,” claims Born For Water, “we are spiritual beings … [DYL’s work] helps us remain human and exist in this world to be a blessing to this world.” DYL’s practices of restorative economy through their watershed innovations, wool buys, hogan builds, seed sharing events, and more attempt to instill within their people and communities the notion that there is more to our existence in this world than absorbing fleeting commodities.

Arriving at Bitterwater

Eventually the long stretch of dirt road morphed into pavement again, and we were in Pinon. To the left we passed a shopping center: a gas station, grocery store, bank, and a Subway—way in the back was the site of the Pinon Chapter House and Housing Alliance offices.
About four or five miles down the road on the right lay the Pinon Health Center. Other than that, the area was outstretched with juniper bushes that surfed sandy hills with little dirt turn-offs here and there signifying the entrances to family lands. At night, however, everything was dark and empty with the open sky, stars, and moon illuminating slight differences between mountains and slopes that led to the vast, arid environment. Born For Water suddenly indicated with a turn signal that we would be leaving the main road, heading to the field site, Bitterwater, which was not just a place to experiment with restorative living, it also doubled as their family land with three homes illuminated in the distance. When we parked, with all the headlights and everything off, the darkness was surprisingly manageable to explore the area with celestial lights beaming up above.

I could see we were in front of a long shack, with a house far in the distance, and fields of corn and other crops surrounding the rest of the land. Born For Water was giving me a quick, basic tour and started by asking, “You know what an outhouse is, right?” I laughed and nodded, half from the hysteria of the manic drive and the other half because I was expecting to just have to use a bucket or a bush for my business as I had on other ventures where running water was scarce. On the way to the outhouse I heard dogs barking in the distance and suddenly Born For Water stopped,

“Oh, this is Kelly,” Born For Water said pointing toward something in the dark, distant area between the shack and the house. I followed his arm, illuminated by the moonlight, and squinted only to see a four-legged, yellowish white creature to the side of the shack. The dog was wolfish, well over one hundred pounds with matted fur, deep-set eyes, and a gaping mouth.

“Introduce yourself,” Born For Water whispered, leaning to me, “just be friendly, say, ‘Hi, Kelly,’ and don’t act nervous.” I did exactly as he instructed, using as friendly a tone as
possible—maybe too friendly because Kelly turned its bulbous head inquisitively, and for a second, I thought I presented myself more as pray than human ally.

“Can you tie the other dogs up?” Born For Water projected into the dark, toward someone who was just getting out of the car. “We have sheep dogs here. They’re wild, so just stand your ground and be big. They’ll probably charge you, but don’t worry. If you can, find a log or something to jump on.” I simply stared at Born For Water, imagining whatever worst-case-scenario event would inevitably happen, but agreed with the helpful advice and continued to follow him into the darkness to find the outhouse.

More dogs barked in the background as we made it to the outhouse. “Alright, well, sleep tight. You can stay in the shack if you want, there’s sleeping bags and stuff there. We’ll be here around nine tomorrow morning,” Born For Water quipped as we then made our way back to the vehicles. The other crew members, all of whom I met at a lunch prior to our embark here, asked if I needed anything else before leaving. Honestly, I was so exhausted from the trip, and feeling farther from home than ever, I just wanted to sleep. That night, I dozed off in the back of my rental truck with the stars twinkling overhead and the sound of dogs barking and howling to the sky. The next morning, I was woken by the sun’s first rays cooking the black truck at a rapid rate to blistering temperatures. Still a bit delirious, I jumped out of the vehicle only to see a dog trotting just inches before me. I could feel my blood run cold, my heart lodge itself in my throat, and I jumped back into the truck. It wasn’t until later in the day that I found out that was one of the friendly, “pet” dogs that I would come to give many head scratches and a few table scraps—first impressions can certainly be deceiving.
Ethnographic Representation

This ethnography is built upon my multiple visits to, and work within, the Navajo reservation and the extensive relationships to DYL’s community. My relation to these people is part of what I’m writing, but I also would not have the more specific skills and techniques necessary to conduct ethnographically representative writing and analysis had it not been for those who came before me. Scholars like Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Audra Simpson have paved the way for disciplinary modes of thinking, researching, and writing—they will be sources I refer to frequently throughout this ethnography. However, as DYL also acknowledges in their ways of innovating agroecology and ecoliteracy, people can be experts without subscribing to a particular form of scholarship. One writer in particular, Hunter S. Thompson, has personally inspired my imagination of different ethnographic methods and ways of representing who and what I am writing about. However, there were many people who have imparted their wisdom on me during this journey, (Shonto Begay, an artist and educator; Andrew Curley, an academic who had presented his doctoral thesis on the “Resource Curse” around the Navajo reservation including with DYL and Ya’at’eeh; Daniel Chee and his family who provide educational tours in Monument Valley; and Sean Sherman, an Oglala-Sioux chef who presented a way of thinking about the relationship between Indigenous foods and history at Bard College), and to each of them I am dearly grateful for every moment of their time.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s 2015 American Book Award winning text, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* was recommended to me by DYL staff as well as other scholars I spoke with during my research. In it, Dubar-Ortiz critiques the dominant historical narratives of the U.S. that are most commonly produced and regurgitated in public schools. Aligned with certain aspects of DYL’s just transition model, Dunbar-Ortiz provides a different
form of pedagogy that contextualizes Native voices with their colonial counterparts in ways that disrupt certain American historical essences and “myths.” Dunbar-Ortiz is consistently drawn back to the question of what values a realistic account of U.S. history might provide for social change. “I always begin with a simple exercise,” Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “I ask students to quickly draw a rough outline of the United States at the time it gained independence from Britain,” (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, 2). This exercise, along with many of her sources that posit colonial and Indigenous dialogues in conversation with each other, challenge the participant to think just how engrained the manifest destiny narrative is embedded within the U.S. public education system.

The value of this text is more than just its way of disrupting historical narratives, but also the fact that it took centuries for a book such as this to come out and still only one of a few of its kind.

While Dunbar-Ortiz is particularly concentrated on the making and discussion of history, anthropologist Audra Simpson offers a way of thinking that is more localized with present people as they experience everyday life. Given my own contexts as an ethnographic researcher, these insights are personally quite valuable. Simpson takes a deep dive into the broader social structures that live on in texts such as *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* and “Settlement’s Secret.” Despite their differences, there are still some valuable similarities that have helped construct themes in this ethnography. For one, Simpson and Dunbar-Ortiz both acknowledge that specific Native groups cannot be grouped into broad themes. One of the challenges Dunbar-Ortiz faces in her historical writing is the dilemma that there is any cohesive way of account for Indigenous peoples’ history since different Native communities had varying relationships with settlers and colonialism in general. “Within Indigenous contexts,” Simpson argues, “when the people we speak of speak for themselves, their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of timelessness, procedure, and function that
dominate representations of their past and, sometimes, their present.” (Simpson 2014, 97). What this may lead to, then, is how we imagine scholarship and knowledge-making as forms of activism that require a deeper level of engagement, research, and participation with the people and ideas we work with. Simpson imagines academic work as a form of witnessing, and accounting for, settler-colonialism in a way that allows critiques of power and insights for change.

Unlike Dunbar-Ortiz or Simpson, Hunter S. Thompson is a quick turn down into a steep ravine—far off the academic pathway. Thompson’s signature form of writing, known as “Gonzo journalism,” narrates not only his subjects and places but also how he is situated within those contexts. Ironically, not much different from certain ethnographic methods that may claim ethnographers are only really writing about themselves and a few observations, Thompson’s “Gonzo” style has inspired a way of imagining ethnographic representation that contributes vivid detail and blunt honesty with a splash of chaotic charm that keeps readers turning pages in a mixed frenzy of fascination and morbid curiosity. Armed with a typewriter, notebook, and tape recorder, Thompson can be imagined as an ethnographer of sorts whose research objectives usually change throughout his writing process and conclusions leave more questions to be answered than before embarking on his journalist endeavors. What Thompson famously contributes, and what ethnographic representation often requires, is an artistic beauty to writing that attempts to connect with the reader. As Bard’s ethnomusicologist, Whitney Slaten once proposed during a dinner discussion on transatlantic slave trade and music, “How do I write about music like a saxophonist plays into their solo?” Even if the subject matter is something completely different, or wonderfully unfamiliar, the ethnographer finds a way of relating
themselves to their interlocutors and audience in a way that lets one’s imagination open up to the excitement and possibilities of new ideas, new ways of thinking—a wider perspective.

Chapter Organization

It is important to recognize that the processes of just transition, regenerative ecology and restorative economy that circumnavigate DYL’s practices and people are not separate, immutable forms of action that exist worlds apart from each other. Much like the various shapes, color tones, and techniques of a weaver’s tapestry, these ideals harmoniously intersect and rely on each other for sustainable thinking, planning, action and reflection. That is why the organization of these chapters is intended not to address just transition, regenerative ecology and restorative economy independently but as a complete, interrelated concepts constituted and realized through DYL, its communities, and their projects. Furthermore, these chapters indicate conceptualizations of multiple levels of activism: hogans as providing a structural foundation through which activism has a space; the Diné youth as thinkers and actors that embody active planning; and finally, how Indigenous anarchy reveals the broader scope of how activism can be imagined in different forms, methodologies, and tensions.

For many people, a home is the most important space where one can find solace, reflection, nourishment, and a sense of self. A hogan—a Diné structure made of earth, timber, and stone—is no different, and in some ways may offer an even more nuanced understanding of a different kind of world view and what home means to its inhabitants. Hogans are symbolic of Diné history, places of celebration, healing, education, planning, reflection—they are a malleable, sustainable, resilient marriage of people and place. Many of my most intimate,
informative, and enjoyable interactions with DYL’s network occurred in hogans. That is why I begin chapter one with an overview of hogan construction, an important and expansive set of projects DYL is engaged with, set to further elaborate the interpretations of a hogan as more than just a home or place of spirituality, but also a learning space and form of activism. By describing the work DYL is involved with, and especially these hogan projects, we can associate a collective goal that everyone who works with DYL is continually driven to pursue. The hogan projects are an example of just transition, regenerative ecology and restorative economy working in tandem as a locatable, unmovable presence built quite literally from the ground up through collaboration.

Both the structure, the land it is on, and the people involved all reaffirm the continual presence of Indigenous identity. The particular places that DYL has constructed hogans is significant in calcifying forms of resistance: In Page, Arizona, a hogan rises between a guided tour of Antelope Canyon and the pluming smokestacks of the Navajo Generating Station; Tsisnaasjini, alongside the eastern mountain, the hogan there serves as a shelter for Diné travelers visiting each of the sacred mountains; and Cuba, New Mexico, where a local school has formed a partnership to help their Diné students by providing a hogan for teachings and other events. Hogans are a key aspect of Diné lifeways, and the effort put into building them is a communal one. This chapter attempts to understand why the work a grassroots organization like DYL is necessary for community wellness by reimagining the way we think about work, spirituality, and politics as interrelated puzzle pieces of a greater socioeconomic mosaic.

Following this chapter, I next take a deep dive into the people who make up DYL: the restoration crew and the office crew. Chapter two specifically focuses on the young fellows and employees who dedicate their time and efforts to a grassroots organization. This chapter is a
necessary follow up as it redirects our attention back to the very people who make these projects possible as well as the future generations who may continue to sustain and innovate its existence. When I first reached out to DYL, I only expected to stay with them for about a week while I reconnected with community members I had worked with on previous projects. After a few days of intense farming, mud stomping, and late nights playing music together in a shack just west of the Bitterwater hogan I became more and more eager to get to know these welcoming individuals who would invite a stranger like me into their homes and work with them. Without these profiles, the remainder of my research is but a two-dimensional façade that obscures the real importance of what these projects mean. A hogan can be torn down and built again, seeds can be saved or replanted another year, but the people, and the knowledges, energies, and ideas they share are indispensable.

Finally, the third chapter engages with a dialogue about the different types of activism as it exists in and around the Navajo reservation. During a brief weekend about halfway through my research I was invited to attend an Indigenous Anarchist Convergence hosted by Ya’at’eeh, an infoshop in Flagstaff. This chapter provides an overview of my experience there as well as an analysis of how the Convergence was orchestrated, and also its relationships to neighboring grassroots organizations like DYL and more globally recognized political movements like Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. This chapter attempts to ask more broadly questions like, what do we mean by activism? By imagining its different forms, we begin to see the people who interact within them and how their principles may inform or be informed by direct action.
Chapter One

Active Spaces: Hogans as Worldview
Bringing a Hogan to Life: In the Field and on the Road

Five of us (Born For Water, Yucca Boy, Riko, Drew, and I) were crammed into a rental pickup truck hauling a trailer full of pine, chainsaws, gas, shovels, drills, nails, scaffolding and other construction equipment blazing east across the Navajo reservation for the five hour drive to Cuba, New Mexico. Along the way we passed notably famous locations such as Window Rock, the capital of the Navajo reservation, and Dinétah, the site of Diné emergence according to creation narratives. The road around this area was shredded, as if blasted by mortar shells, which Born For Water accredited to massive trucks towing their freight of minerals, coal, or whatever payload at unsafe speeds.

“These guys, these truck drivers,” Born For Water grumbled from the driver’s seat, slowing down as he carefully navigated a section of road that looked like a landslide had just torn through an otherwise vast, quiet valley, “they don’t care about this road. No cops really stop them around here, so they just haul ass over this road and then it gets all beat up.” Drew just “yup”-ed in agreement and nobody said anything else. Their silence seemed like enough to tell me that nothing immediate would really change, fundamentally. Instead, we made our way through a present reality toward a place for future possibilities.

About halfway to Cuba I took over driving. “Have you ever drove a truck with a trailer before?” Born For Water asked as we pulled over to the side of the road. “No, but I’ve driven trucks and vans carrying lots of heavy equipment,” I responded referring to my “glory days” traveling around playing in bands and exploring the country on various road trips. “Cool, just
keep the wheel straight and go easy,” Born For Water laughed as we exchanged seats so he could take a nap. From there it was a straight shot, the road would lead us directly to Cuba.

There’s really nothing quite like driving around, or “cruising” as the restoration crew referred to it, in the Southwest—particularly in Dinetah. The bright turquoise sky and golden earth appear to reach out endlessly before you, only occasionally interrupted by giant mountains, rolling hills, or ravines that display striations in their cliff faces of different levels of sandstone and dirt. One can easily imagine where a weaver’s inspiration may come from when looking at these magnificent natural features as the sun rises and illuminates the world before her.

“You know, the Diné and people in Cuba have a long history together,” Born For Water said as he woke from his nap, “yeah, we’ve always been neighbors and they are going through a lot of the same problems we are.”

“Is that why you are working with them on this project?” I asked, having no experience with the people or communities in Cuba.

“That’s part of it,” Born For Water responded, “the school reached out to us, and we’re hoping this hogan helps their school and community.”

One of the “same problems” Born For Water referred to was the mining economy which fueled both Navajo and Cuba markets. A longer history of resource extraction is one worth exploring, but for now it’s important to keep in mind the impact that mining has on the surrounding communities. Not only does it have long term effects on the natural landscape, but also directly impacts the neighborhoods that build their lives upon this type of economy. When the mines shut down, the neighborhood around it dries up as well. During my time with DYL, both Peabody Coal and the Navajo Generating Station announced or implemented closing their
facilities. Neighboring communities in those areas, as well as the employees who travelled to work there, often debated how the closing of these companies would affect their ability to support their families, generate income, access clean water, as well as how (or if) another industry may come to take its place.

After a few dips and winding turns we entered the center of town passing gas stations, a McDonald’s, a couple motels, and an old stucco building that had been deteriorating for about a hundred years or so. “Wow! Look at that! What is that, Born For Water?” Drew asked with his face against the window as we passed the building. None of us really knew, and Born For Water could only guess an old pueblo of some kind that was probably still there for historic purposes. We then turned into a small road and suddenly arrived at the school. Right in front of the track and football field, and next to the athletics building, stood a half-built structure resembling the skeleton of a hogan. Having edited a video Riko had filmed earlier that summer I was somewhat familiar with the work they had done prior; the foundation had been measured by walking a circumference and dictating its size with yarn, twelve holes were then dug and in them stuck thick pine logs, and upon those logs laid five layers of pine stacked in an octagonal shape to form a dome-like roof. To see the hogan in person, however, was something quite stunning. Before then, I had only seen completed hogans so to stand before one still in the process of becoming itself stalled me for a second.

One thing I realized I had not truly appreciated when admiring hogans were the juniper frames which ran vertically throughout all of the walls. They were undoubtably beautiful and smelled amazing, and yet I rarely considered they were found in nature like that. The logs must first be shaved by removing all the bark and knots with a hand tool that looks something like a giant iron file with two handles. After parking the truck, and hazily acclimating to the mid-
August sun, I helped the restoration crew unload logs, which must have been at least ten feet long and weigh well over one hundred pounds, to place on the ground for shaving. Some of the guys went to the hogan to assess the roof and set up the scaffold in order to reach it while I stayed with Riko to shave logs. He did his best to instruct me on proper technique; mount the log tight so it doesn’t escape you, then put the shaver flat side down on the log at an angle, hold the two handles tight and begin scraping. Easier said than done, I suppose. Let’s just say that I didn’t quite earn my stripes in log shaving that day. No matter what I tried, the log would either roll, the shaver would slip, or I just couldn’t get the bark off. I worked on this log for what seemed like hours, with the sun slowly baking the iron tool and causing me to sweat profusely through my hat and t-shirt. With the scraper firmly on the bark I started by pulling it toward me like Riko, to my side, was doing. When that didn’t work, I tried pushing on it so I can use my full body weight and really get this stubborn bark off. Although I luckily didn’t slip, drop the scraper, or severely injure myself—I didn’t really get much bark off either. While Riko’s shaving was clean and smooth, mine was patchy and still full of knots that I avoided altogether.

“Yeah, those knots suck,” Riko laughed sympathetically, “it’s like as soon as you get into the groove, you hit a knot and then it’s like, bang ‘Ow! Damn!’” I laughed and nodded in agreement, saving as much saliva as possible because I was already feeling the exhaustion of the day setting in. Now if only I could get into the groove…
“So, where did you learn how to build hogans?” I had inquired of Born For Water during a water break. This question was asked with an idea that the response was going to be somewhere between a friend or family member had taught him. After all, I had not noticed many hogan-building workshops during my prior visits to the Navajo reservation and from the hogans that I have seen or stayed in they are usually built by the family living there. However, Born For Water’s response was one that spoke to just how antiquated and limited my own ideas of life on the Navajo reservation was. Chuckling after a gulp of fresh water, Born For Water simply replied, “I Google’d it.”
Of course! Practically everything is digitized or connected through social media, so is it really that surprising to throw hogan construction into the mix? And yet, it still seems that way…

I suppose one reason may be because not all hogans are alike. The Cuba hogan has several features that speak to its own unique craftsmanship specifically from Born For Water and the restoration crew. Features like a structurally different roof, which will be elaborated later, or an eastern door meeting the pillar of a western and southern wall are just a few examples where improvisation, innovation, and quality-driven craftsmanship intersect with more broadly understood Diné constructions of philosophy and identity. What is considered “correct” in the qualitative functions of hogan building are often blurred depending on the variables of who is taking part in its construction and where it is actually happening. It would seem as though aesthetics mean less, in terms of quality, than the overall purpose, or function, of a hogan allowing it to take different forms—an embodiment of entirely whole identities in its effort to effectively serve the multipurpose roles of whatever the space calls for at the time.⁵

“There are no hogan blueprints,” Born For Water continued, “so we just get a basic foundation, but then eyeball it from there.” Born For Water then motioned for me to climb a thin metal scaffold to reach the hogan’s roof. We were preparing the chimney and screwing together the pine logs that formed the fifth and final layer of the hogan roof. As of now, the logs were resting upon a secured layer, but everything else was just bundled in a neatly packed design, cut to form a tapered shape as each side approaches the center hole where the chimney would soon fit.

⁵ See Hogans as Worldview for further elaboration on the multiple functions of a hogan.
I suppose this would also be an appropriate place to briefly mention my fear of heights. I looked at the scaffold that the restoration crew and myself had quickly assembled from its previous state of loose bars and a broken plank of wood. The rest of the crew was already on the roof, having quickly clambered the structure without batting an eyelash.

“The roof?” I choked, looking back at Born For Water to make sure he was indeed talking to me. He was smiling at the guys on the roof, let out a slight laugh and asked if I was afraid of heights. I didn’t want to lie, but I also knew I couldn’t just stay here on the ground while everyone else was up there working; there wasn’t much excitement going on elsewhere and I had already proven myself a fairly incompetent log shaver. I managed to squeak out, “A bit,” in a modestly, albeit slightly self-incriminating, accurate response to the humorous question. We both knew I was going up on that roof, it was just a matter of how well this would all turn out.

“It’s actually pretty safe up there,” Born For Water reassured, “because everything holds itself together with its own weight and force, and then we secure it.”

Honestly, climbing the scaffold wasn’t so bad… but it would have gone a lot more smoothly had my trembling nervousness also not shaken the entire scaffold as well. While I’m at it, I’ll also admit that the view from the top of the hogan was spectacularly breathtaking. I reveled in the scenery for a few brief moments—the thick clouds, rigid shadows of mountains, and outstretched athletics field still dance in my memories when I think about my days with the restoration crew. If beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, then I consider myself lucky to behold such an amazing moment that this specific opportunity lent itself to. Looking down the chimney hole from above was like peering through a hole in the clouds. The earth floor below me was
clustered with woodchips and sliced fractions of pine, like clusters of stars and galaxies—the remnants of the secured roof that was now holding all of us up.

“Now careful with some logs,” Born For Water said as he purposely stepped on the edge of a log to demonstrate how it moves, “these here are loose and you could hurt yourself.” He then began pulling up drills, a box of nails, and two chainsaws to hand over to the rest of the crew. “But we haven’t had anyone fall yet!” Born For Water laughed and then motioned with a twist of his neck and swoop of the hand to follow him.

“Remember how I said that we kind of just eyeball things? Well, this log here is too long, so we need to shape it.”

I looked at Born For Water curiously and then at the log he had stepped on earlier. He was right, it stuck out now like an obnoxious plank compared to the angular cuts of the other logs it was aligned with. The roof section we were currently working on had rows of logs on four sides of the hogan forming a square in the middle where the chimney would soon be constructed. Within each row the logs tapered outward with the shortest logs at the far outward end of the roof.

“I want you to hold this log. Hold it tight so it doesn’t move and I’m going to cut some extra off.” Born For Water began revving the chainsaw as I grabbed the log right in the center. It was like instinct. As soon as I heard that chainsaw engine kick into gear I latched onto the log as if it was the only thing keeping me from evacuating into the emptiness of space engulfing me. The adrenaline had kicked my nervous system into gear, and I was operating on completely tuned in reflexes.
“Not there!” Born For Water hollered over the rumbling chainsaw. “That whole back end will kick out and shake like crazy.”

I looked behind me, to my right a bit, and sure enough there was still a lot of log left that was sticking out practically as much as we were about to cut off. So much for instinct. At this rate it would be a miracle if I could even survive the afternoon up here. I nodded to Born For Water and backed up to the far end of the log to hold it in place. Sure enough, this end was much easier to get a firm and steady grasp on.

This day’s theme seemed to be composed of new experiences: hauling construction equipment, seeing a hogan skeleton, shaving logs, and climbing roofs. So why not add another one? This would also be the closest I have ever been to a fully gassed, sharpened chainsaw. As Born For Water kicked the chainsaw back into its full whirring glory I tightened my grip around the log thinking to myself, “I wonder how much this log is going to move?” The blades starting searing through the timber with a harsh hiss and a fountain of wood shavings spraying across the rest of the roof. Below me, the log bucked at first but after tightening my grip it stayed firm and steady. Within seconds the cut was complete, and I felt the weight of the excess wood drop from my piece.

“Great, now the other side,” Born For Water stepped over after turning off the chainsaw and quickly glancing at the cut. The angle was totally in line with the others and made the design look exactly like its western neighbor. “Now with that side,” Born For Water leaned down to demonstrate how to best hold it, “press your hands against it, on the top and bottom like this.” I could see he was leaning into the log a bit, but it seemed like I would mostly just have to keep it from sliding either forward or backward instead of jumping or shaking around. After grabbing the log in the exact place and in the exact form as Born For Water, he returned to the chainsaw
and pulled the cord to get the engine going. Okay, now this was the closest I had ever been to a fully operating chainsaw! With only about a foot or so between my hands and the roaring blades I could feel an immense amount of heat as the chainsaw made its approach to the log. The heat only grew more intense when paired with the vibration and shedding of wood splinters. It felt as though my hands were glued to a roaring oven attached to a supercharged engine. I figured that if there was a time to lose a finger or limb, it would probably be here—an offering to the anthropological gods, and a logistical nightmare for my IRB review committee. Between the heat and blistering steam of woodchips, I couldn’t even look anymore. I turned my head away, which only caused me to focus more on my hands and imagine the inevitable sound of blade against flesh. Even if this whole process only took a couple seconds—it felt like hours. Immediately, the depressurized weight of the log’s end released from the section I was holding followed by an equal release of anxiety clutching onto my heart and muscle fibers. As I turned to make sure all ten digits and two hands were still there, but I instead saw two gloves of wood shavings and bits of debris. I rapidly whipped my hands in the air and was relieved to see everything was still in place.

“Okay, good, now let’s get you drilling!” Born For Water cheered as he tossed the log bits from the roof far into a pile near the truck. The hollow clunk of wood on soil matched exactly with Born For Water’s smirk toward me. Today’s work was clearly far from over.
After securing the rest of the roof logs it was time to get started on making a foundation for the chimney. A square hole directly in the center of the roof would provide the basic structure which would then be built upon with smaller logs to provide proper ventilation and a slope for rainwater to wash over the sides of the hogan instead of falling into it.

“We’re going to have to build this chimney taller,” Born For Water told the crew and myself as they started lining up logs across the chimney. I was then told that most hogans have their chimneys formed with logs that run horizontal (north to south) because they cover more space. With the Cuba hogan, however, the logs would have to run vertical (east to west) in order to effectively drain rainwater without it leaking into the hole below. Thick logs formed the
periphery of the square chimney hole meaning that if we were to run logs horizontally, they
would not entirely form the dome structure typical of female hogans, instead leaving more of a
flattened top to it like a partially deflated beach ball. Born For Water looked around the chimney,
backed up, eyeballed the structure again in complete silence until he finally told us, “I’ve never
done one this way before, so let’s see how it goes…”

These vertical chimney logs would be held in place with similar angular cuts that made
up the roof’s foundation and held each log together in place. Each cut was checked, measured
and double-checked before lining it up. However, the first cut was not off to a good start: the
chainsaw ran almost directly parallel with the log as it rested on the thick foundation below.
From the top-down view that Born For Water was cutting from it was difficult to really
determine where the foundation ended and the chimney log began—there was only the feel of
the wood and a slight incline which we were hoping to remove by cutting the log at an angle.
Born For Water began twisting the chainsaw back and forth, trying to get more leverage to cut
through the thick pine at such an awkward angle. Plumes of sawdust filled the air, only making it
more difficult to see, and nothing seemed to give way. The chainsaw revved faster, higher, and
louder in this tug-of-war game of determination and resistance. A slight snarl crawled across
Born For Water’s face as he gritted his teeth and pushed on through the defiant wood. The
engine revved louder, kicking up more sawdust as the blades continued to rip and tear
aggressively. Finally, the racing chainsaw blades rocketed out the other end, toward the slowly
setting sun and crisp New Mexico air. Born For Water was momentarily victorious. Then a
piercing crack broke the momentary silence and a long, thin strip of pine popped out from below
the chimney log.
“Well, how did that happen?” Born For Water laughed as he looked at this hyper-angular cut in the log—something that looked more like a door wedge for some giant colosseum gateway. The unusual angle Born For Water had been cutting went far too long across the chimney log and dipped into visibility from the ground below. We certainly needed an angular cut for this structure, but not that angular. Riko jumped down to ground level and stood within the hogan looking up at the craftwork above. Without even asking, Riko immediately hollered up that it does not look good and the cut is easily visible.

“We’ll find some other use for that,” Born For Water reassured us. He then tossed the log from view and proceeded to grab another of about the same thickness and length. Luckily, this one was successfully shaped and cut, and slid right into place with lock and key ease.

The setting sun not only transformed the looming storm clouds into a brilliant cotton candy shade of mixed purples, pinks, and reds—it also illuminated the hogan logs in a vibrant, glowing gold. Our first day of four wound down like a calm breeze as we drilled the chimney logs to its base and treated them with an insulating stain so bugs would not tear into the structure. Happy with our work, we unloaded tools from the roof and some of the crew members started taking pictures and videos—documenting what we accomplished today. I admired my “uniform” of sweat and sawdust that completely covered my hat, white t-shirt, jeans and boots in between large gulps of refreshing water. My euphoria didn’t just come from the rest after an exhausting day of work, but the observable truth that we had collectively accomplished something that day. I looked at the hogan and couldn’t help but feel a communal connection with the people around me. Yucca Boy then asked for my camera.

“Do you want me to film the roof?” He asked with an outstretched hand. I agreed and handed him the camera after he safely reached the roof. From below I could hear him narrating
what we had worked on that day, bringing the camera in close at some moments and panning around the roof at others. He then climbed down and handed it back to me.

“Do you want to take some pictures?” I asked while he still held the camera.

“Yeah, okay,” Yucca Boy responded as I changed the settings on the camera and showed him the button to take a picture. He moved around the hogan clicking away with his face pressed to the viewfinder. I then offered the rest of the crew to also take pictures, to which they all agreed enthusiastically.

“Wow, this looks like a weave pattern,” Born For Water smiled as he first looked through the viewfinder, “cool!”

*Figure 5: Born For Water’s picture of the hogan.*
Quality Craftsmanship

The following day, after a late meal of McDonald’s with green chili and sharing a motel, we were to begin working on the walls that would wrap around the outside perimeter of the hogan. We were broken up into teams in order to divide the physically intense labor ahead of us: one group would start digging trenches around the perimeter in the gaps between each support beam while the other team would start filling those trenches with vertically connected juniper logs. While three of the guys began working on the trenches, Born For Water instructed me to follow him in picking out logs that would form the hogan walls. Unlike the logs for the support beam, which were carefully selected as the thickest and most sturdy to be individually dug into the ground, the juniper walls could vary in size, shape, and thickness. Essentially, we were grabbing the ones that just looked the best since they would be completely visible from the inside. Each wall, which would be indicated by its corresponding trench, consisted of about ten logs. Born For Water and I scanned the massive pile of juniper, probably about fifty or more logs, and began carrying our first contestants. Much longer and heavier than the pine logs that made up the roof, the juniper was uncomfortable to carry, and I found myself frequently poked and snagged by splinters. Born For Water, on the other hand, had already perfected the technique of loading the timber across his shoulders as if taxiing a drunken pal home from a rough night out. On occasions when the log was too long or burdensome, Born For Water simply stood it up, tightly hugged it, and leaned back in order to wobble toward the trench and drop it straight down. While I grunted and laughed to myself at my meager attempts to poorly drag one log across the fifteen feet of terrain, Born For Water had successfully made multiple trips. He then assisted me with my remaining pile and together we began lining up the first wall.
With a small collection of logs ready to go, and the rest of the crew making good progress on the remaining trenches, we began setting up the first juniper log in the southern trench. Each log would be hand placed, twisted, spun, or flipped in order to best align with its neighboring logs and aesthetically improve the interior design. Some logs would be tossed out as quickly as they were put in if they didn’t line up just right, but all of this was at the discretion of Born For Water, the crew, or myself. For most log placements, Born For Water would ask me how it looked inside or would ask me to hold the log in place while he observed for himself. There was not strict guideline—only the mindful imagination of attentive craftsmanship.

It would not seem entirely accurate, or at least I fear poorly misunderstood, to call the work Born For Water and crew do as striving for perfection. To say they are perfectionists may run the risk of implying that they are attempting to achieve some high standard to which all other hogans might then be compared. As stated before, each hogan is unique (as well as each hogan project for DYL), and as such cannot truly be compared to others like it. However, there is still a standard that upholds the value in what a hogan represents for both its inhabitants and creators. The idea is not so much to make the “perfect” hogan, but also not make one sloppy, or “good enough” that you wouldn’t want to live in yourself or for your family.

Quality is an important trait to evaluate proper craftsmanship. Unlike its measurable counterpart, quality is something that is felt—a presence within the object that embodies it. Before I was at Cuba helping with this hogan, I was at the hogan on the Bitterwater site with some of the restoration crew helping them pound the dirt floor to make it smooth and level. I entered the freshly finished hogan, which still smelled of rich timber, and could feel an instant drop in temperature thanks to the insulated earthen shell. The cool air almost immediately revived me as I escaped the blistering sun and severe lack of shade out in the field. Inside, three
of the crew members were blasting a heavy-hitting rap album that echoed like a cavern in the mostly empty dwelling. Coupled with the booming bass beat of the music were the quakes of tampers—flat iron squares attached to long wooden handles—as the crew beat loose soil into the hogan floor. A spare tamper leaned against one of the walls, so I made my way over to it to try my skills at floor pounding. We all chatted and joked around as we progressed with our square impressions gradually moving around the circular floor. Within hours my hands were blistered and battered, a clear indicator that I had not worked with my hands like this in a long time. I showed the blisters to Sid, a long-time restoration crew member, who just responded with a high pitched “Dayum!” and then laughed and asked me to show the rest of the crew. The others joked about giving me a clan name, and that I would come back to my school in New York different, “Look at what those Natives did to him!”

After we had spent most of the afternoon working, Riot Punch, another restoration crew member about the same age as Sid, and I took a quick break outside to rehydrate with some Powerade. While leaning on a wire fence and looking out the rolling hills and sage bushes ahead of us, Riot Punch shared a story about the importance of building a quality hogan.

“One time, when we were building the frame for this hogan,” Riot Punch said, pointing back to the massive thirty-foot shell of the impressive hogan we had just left, “Born For Water came up to us and made us take everything apart. He was like, ‘No, no, this isn’t good. You’re rushing it, and it looks sloppy.’ And we didn’t really think about it, you know, we were just like, ‘Let’s get this done.’ But Born For Water had a different mindset. He started talking about Diné philosophy and all that.” Riot Punch started laughing and getting really energetic about this story. By then we both knew how much Born For Water loved to incorporate teachable moments with greater philosophical and practical themes about Diné lifeways. Earlier that afternoon at
Bitterwater, Born For Water, his family, the DYL crew, and I had all cooked a meal of blood sausage, mutton stew, and blue corn mush. Throughout the whole cooking process Born For Water was sharing stories about how blue corn mush is like powerful fuel for farmers, and how excited everyone gets about mutton stew because they have it on special occasions. Riot Punch continued, “Anyway, yeah, he goes, ‘It’s important to take time and produce quality work with mindfulness, attention, and care than to rush just to get the job done.’ So he made us rebuild that whole frame! At first we were like, ‘Damn!’ you know? But he’s right, and I don’t think we would really be happy with [the hogan] if we just left it like that.”

Yucca Boy, a young DYL employee and one of the youth coordinators for the restoration crew, confirmed this story while I was filming a tour of the Bitterwater field and some of their restorative economy projects. We had reached the hogan and Yucca Boy offered to explain how their hogan was built and what they learned during its construction as it applies to their future hogan projects.

“I notice it through how the thinking, and the planning, and the action, and the reflection of it,⁶ of this Hogan, is how we put it together because we had to take it down, this log, this whole roof, because one log was bowing. We had to modify it where two logs had to support that weight. Noticing that and seeing [with] our eyes—and how it changes, and seeing if it’s safe, and having the right position correctly. That’s one thing about it too, on how you make your decision of how they’re gonna come together. Even how we try to cut each end without making it too small, or just making it where each log are touching each other—so we always look on that too … we know that the weight can

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⁶ See Hogans as Worldview for Born For Water’s explanation of thinking, planning, action, and reflection related to hogans and the four cardinal directions.
actually hold it because those logs there are actually hard wood and can actually hold the weight because they’re hard wood and they’re gonna be more exposed through the weather seasons. So it’s like the common sense, like how we put the log there, because we wanted it to long last and also to be sure if it’s actually safe to put it there."

There’s something in these stories that rings true to the continual work DYL strives toward restoration, regeneration, and just transition. Had this event between Born For Water and the crew been an isolated incident, maybe I would think different, but it seems to be one of the core pillars of not just what kind of work we do but how we do it. “These are gonna be here long after we’re gone,” Born For Water once told me when reflecting on the hogan projects, “and lots of people will be in them, and look around, and communicate with each other—so we need to do this right.” His intentions are shared throughout the rest of the crew—that the hogan is supposed to “long last” for not just one family, but multiple generations of families not unlike the multigenerational households that many of the restoration crew live in. Born For Water’s sense of timelessness on the scale of these projects was infectious. He shared stories about medicine people during their trips to sacred mountains and staying at a hogan that he and a team had built near Colorado. The medicine people were so impressed and surprised to see a hogan just resting there, along this trail that connects the sacred mountains, that they found out who built it and spoke with Born For Water directly to share their appreciation. For Born For Water, these hogans are not just for the people who decide to call it home, or a healing place, or a learning space, but for the future of all Diné people who may enter it in seek of whatever it is they need in their lives. The hogan has a sense of eternal nurturing that is more profoundly important than any one individual who comes into contact with it because it demands an understanding and respect that builds upon histories and their communities.
Back in Cuba, as we made progress with the walls, some of the logs we had lined up that afternoon seemed fine to me, but Born For Water would toss the ones that were not shaved quite right, or slanted too much in one direction, or looked strange compared to its neighboring logs. There was one log that was practically perfect for its spot: it was straight with a slight taper downward into the trench but bent in a way that almost wrapped around the log next to it. However, there was a minor setback that did not sit well with Born For Water—the neighboring log had a knot sticking right into the new log we had just placed. I was immediately discouraged! “Forget it, let’s toss this one and grab another—or just get rid of the other log,” I thought to myself. After all, there was not much time to waste; the day was only getting shorter and we were only on our first wall of about a dozen! Soon, it became clear that we were not looking to get this work done as soon as possible, but rather to the best of our abilities and with explicit attention to detail.

“Here, hold that one in place,” Born For Water directed me to the log we had just aligned, “I’m gonna shape it.”

I straddled over the trench, one foot on each side, and leaned all my weight against the thick juniper to keep it tight against the next log. Born For Water had grabbed the chainsaw and was coming back in my direction when he chuckled a bit and started bobbing his head toward the hogan.

“No,” he said with a smile, “I’m cutting in that direction. You’ll see, just go inside the hogan and hold this log still.” He then ripped the cord of the chainsaw to kick the motor on and positioned himself in front of the log. I quickly darted into the hogan and held the log with as
much strength as I could muster. The chainsaw was at full power as Born For Water aimed the blades directly at the log, and slightly at my torso, and began creeping in. The heat and noise from the whirring blades felt more intense from within the hogan—I could feel the frame and neighboring logs shake as the chainsaw slowly chipped away at the log within my grasp. My arms were at full extension as I twisted my body in a bow-like fashion away from the probing chainsaw, but I would not allow this log to twitch from my grasp; be it for the integrity of my own work, or the safety of avoiding lose a limb or worse. Slowly, Born For Water was cutting a notch in the juniper at the same height as the knot in the neighboring log—with each slight grazing I could feel the log move closer to its neighbor, and the gap tightened until the two were just about seamlessly connected. With the chainsaw powered down and removed, I stepped back to admire the artistry. Even within a few feet of the wall the logs seemed to form a unified tapestry—like timber drapes that had been plucked from the forest and stretched across the support beams within the skeletal hogan around us. I then looked down at my white t-shirt and noticed a splatter of sawdust—my new recurring uniform of hogan construction.

*Figure 6: Fitting into place. Walls and roof structures supporting one another.*
Before we can completely understand the significance of a hogan project, especially one curated and led by a group of Diné organizers, I must first acknowledge the prior work that has informed, and in some ways inspired, why a hogan project is necessary. Born For Water, before he co-founded DYL, worked as an interpreter and mediator for a type of housing alliance that would assess and provide for Diné residents in need of homes. Their project was based on an existing sustainable model of home design called “earth ships”. Essentially, Born For Water along with his team would build their own version of sustainable homes out of natural or recyclable materials for people who may be living in unsafe or unsanitary conditions with little or no means to improve their current livelihood. This project was unfortunately terminated, and the funds revoked by the Navajo Nation to fund currently existing housing authority programs that provide residents on the Navajo reservation with stucco homes or trailers, usually employed by outside contractors out of Phoenix.

Ultimately, with Born For Water’s project terminated and no resources to fund the program independently he was forced to inform his community members that they would not be getting their sustainable homes. Acting as the frontline translator, Born For Water used the Diné language to interpret white government policy even though he was also devastated by the upsetting news.

“Yeah, I was pretty depressed, you know. Like, being directly involved with the community, translating and forming connections with residents, only to have to tell these people directly that they wouldn’t get their housing—that gets to you. I didn’t wanna do anything after. I actually was planning on moving out—out of the reservation. So when [DYL] asked me to come back to Pinon, proposing this hogan project, I was like, ‘Man, I was just getting ready to get out
of Pinon!’ *laughs* but then I was like, ‘Alright, I’ll give it a few months.’ And actually, you know what, I learned a lot from that last project. Yeah, being like a bilingual translator helped shape my view on community projects. I learned the language, the business language, and made sense of that to implement what I wanted—on a community level.”

Born For Water’s open and honest way of expressing how he dealt with failure also helped inform him of the kinds of mistakes to avoid as well as the different aspects of running a community-based project to be aware of. His slump into depression, which then bled into a feeling of wanting to disconnect and move away, ended up becoming a type of lightning rod through which he could channel a new form of inspiration. His embodiment of language and cultural identity turned from something he wanted to get away from into a driving force to do things better and with more mindfulness.

It is through this catastrophic failure that we find ourselves with a more profound understanding of the significance of DYL’s hogan projects. Born For Water’s experience of learning with the community, making these personal connections, bridging certain knowledge gaps between business jargon by utilizing the Diné language and philosophies as an empowering device, and a strong desire to build sustainable cultural spaces have constructed the foundation upon which these hogans rise. The resiliency that weaves through Born For Water, the hogans, DYL and their allies is one that succeeds because of its history—political, spiritual, or otherwise. It represents the merits of perseverance that stand in opposition, completely composed and unfazed by manmade laws and policies.

One of the most impressionable projects in DYL’s work toward just transition and restorative economy is their effort to continue the ancestral practice of hogan building. They are made from earth, timber, and stone and feature a chimney that opens in the center and an eastern-
facing door. Hogans are remarkably good at staying warm in the winter thanks to the thick insulation and wood-fire cast iron stove in the center, and cool in the summer because of its earthen shell and open ventilation. Hogans typically exist in two varieties: female hogans feature eight sides and are round in form resembling a womb; male ones are smaller than the female and are more of a pyramid shape. There are also sweat lodges and arbors which borrow similar construction techniques and architectural design from hogans.

The Cuba hogan project is something of a long-term partnership between the Diné and Cuba communities. “It’s part of our restorative economy program where we’re working with various partners and individuals asserting the rights to reclaim cultural spaces,” Born For Water mentioned during an interview reflecting on our week working with the Cuba school, “they wanted to create a space to offer up cultural insights, specifically Diné culture, for the students. The school officials told us about seventy percent of the students here do come off the Navajo reservation.” DYL’s work of just transition, using this hogan project as one example, is a way of reimagining forms of thinking, planning, social organization, and reflection by connecting with the past while being mindful of present issues and forward mobility.

Hogans have long been a site for thinking about Diné worldview. Some scholars, however, have unfortunately misinterpreted or failed to recognize the nuanced ways of imagining and understanding hogans. There are inherent dangers in misrepresenting hogans as objects with specific purposes. In an effort to condense information for specific audiences, authors often fail at capturing the nuances and gestalt meanings that hogans have purposes that are fluid and multidimensional. Although they may portray one character more pronounced than another, that does not mean their other personalities are evacuated from these intentional spaces. Berard Haile, a reverend publishing in a 1942 edition of *Primitive Man*, serves to teach us of
such short-sighted representations in order to communicate information to an audience who may be unfamiliar to the history and meanings of hogans. Haile begins his article by discussing aspects of the hogan’s history (referring to archaeological evidence of above ground dwellings), design and construction methods, and the intentional meanings of the four cardinal directions and how they intertwine between Diné philosophy and their architecture. However, Haile quickly gets to the crux of his argument: a hidden revelation that hogans are spiritual objects, “a pronounced religious feeling” (Haile 1942, 45) that constitute its everlasting design. For the rest of the article Haile continues his fascination of hogans’ purposes as places of worship, specifically designating different hogans as “built primarily for domestic purposes” or “built especially for a large ceremonial” (Haile 55).

This points to a kind of truth that allows for dangerous misinterpretation. For one, Haile fails to cite any Diné sources that provide context from where he is getting his information; but most importantly, also fails to recognize that hogans can be one in the same without any specific designation to its intended design. That is, after all, the point of a hogan: it is a space that can be many things at once. A medicine person will perform ceremonies in the hogan of their patient because the ceremonies are not just for the patient, but for the home as well. Unlike a church or cathedral, which bares the religious symbology and decoration recognized by its intended audience and indicates it is a structure of greater importance compared to the workplaces or homes surrounding it. Haile’s conclusions are also problematic as he references hogans as “proper places for Navaho worship … unless a substitute is found, or radical changes made in Navaho ceremonialism, we may expect the Navaho hogan to continue to survive” (Haile 56). Surprisingly, Haile does not mention the infiltrated presence of Christianity or Mormonism on the Navajo reservation—alluding to a clear avoidance of any authoritative pushback from his
fellow clergymen. Haile’s rigid structure in his article is clearly made for precision of adhering to a religious narrative, but with that precision comes a lack of accuracy. Absent from the discussion are observations that hogans are also teaching spaces or a representation of communal labor. These inaccuracies also inadvertently create targets for the hogan by missionaries who aim to convert the demonized Native to their Christian beliefs via such “radical changes”. His final sentence proclaims a type of ultimatum as if the “final frontier,” so to speak, to converting the Diné is targeting the hogan. Thus, dismantling the hogan also means dismantling their religion and breaking the structural support beam of their society. His argument problematically ties “Navaho ceremonialism” to the hogan as if they are inseparable categories when the reality is much more complex.

Even though Haile has a particular spiritual view of the hogan, and for good measure as both a man of religion presenting his research to other men of religion, we can also see from a Diné perspective that spirituality and politics are not so disconnected. Mark Charley, a “Dineh Hataalii, ceremonial practitioner,” (U.S. Senate 1987, 106) who grew up and was raised in the Teesto Chapter testified before the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs on December 9, 1987 regarding the Reauthorization of the Navajo-Hopi Indian Relocation Commission at 79 years of age intertwines spirituality and politics in an effort to convey the deeply engrained meanings of Diné homeland.  

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7 On hogans: “We have been instructed by our Creator on how we were placed here, and how this land is sacred and that it’s our responsibility to caretake the land. The Creator gave us special prayers, offerings, ana ceremonies in order to keep the natural balance and harmony. The Creator also gave us the Blessingway Ceremony which instructs us how to build a hogan, how the four posts represent the four sacred mountains, the two door posts represent the other two sacred mountains, how the ground is our Mother Earth, and the roof is Father Sky.” (U.S. Senate 108-109).
“Washington tells us we have to move to some foreign land. They do not understand why we refuse to comply with their law and must follow the higher spiritual laws of our Creator. Washington only knows the white man and his ways. I do not see red men in Washington, only the white man. As a result Washington treats everyone the same, like a white man. But we Dineh are different, we were placed here by the Creator, we must stay here according to the Creator’s instructions and caretake the land. The Creator gave us offering places on this land, we are known by the spiritual beings here on this land.”

(U.S. Senate 114)

Charley’s reaffirmation that Diné spirituality is in many ways incommensurable with white man’s politics reverberates with the broad implications of land stewardship and reclamation. Reclaiming land may be viewed as a political act, but as we understand through Charley’s remarks it also carries a heavy spiritual significance in the ways we, as people of this earth, are also responsible for the land. Although the context of his speech is from the perspective of a medicine man speaking before a U.S. political body in response to the partitioning of Navajo and Hopi land, echoes of essence found within his words can still be heard today. Born For Water’s intentions of the hogan as a teaching space, for example, are equally footed in spiritual significance and politically directed. Likewise, the movements of Indigenous people to Standing Rock, NGS, or Peabody Coal reverberate with chants of “protecting” the land against opportunistic resource extraction corporations. In this sense, a hogan occupies varying perspectives of both spiritual and political significance. It’s construction manifests itself along a long timeline of meaningful intentions—from the first communities who built them as instructed by the Holy People to present-day occupations in territories that do not technically “belong” to the Diné according to U.S. Federal rhetoric. The hogan itself is a manifestation of activism that
occupies land, and works in long-lasting ways that allow for a different narrative to remain relevant in conversation.

The Cuba school, with its large Diné population and close proximity to the eastern part of the Navajo reservation, has offered a space for Native-led grassroots organizations like DYL to constitute what it means to be Diné and invite resources for the community to share in its continual work of reclaiming and redefining identities through work, education, and landscape.

This project began with a connection between DYL and a cultural advisor at the Cuba school, who is also a medicine man, to build a space for cultural teachings. Medicine people are of great importance to Diné communities because they harbor stories, philosophies, language, and connections between the physical and spiritual planes of existence that are passed down communicably between generations. They also share songs and knowledge of different lifeforms that refer all the way back to Diné creation narratives. Unfortunately, there are less medicine people inheriting the traditions of their elders leaving much knowledge at risk of fading away.

This is where the educational and spiritual aspect of the hogan acts as a beacon of hope: “A place like this, with its traditional structure, it just really goes more smoothly—just the way the structures work together, there’s references to these things, these different parts of the hogan, as you’re teaching it really helps one to understand why we hold our land sacred and what this embodies, this hogan.” Much of my conversation with Born For Water about hogans took place during this day of filming and me asking about particular aspects of a hogan’s meaning or construction both for my own insight and for the benefit of audiences who may be unfamiliar with these structures overall. It would be difficult for me to assume that all Navajos are deeply familiar with hogans given the growing implementation of housing authorities to provide Navajos with homes or trailers that align more with the “nuclear family” aesthetic than Diné
traditions. Born For Water’s statement on the benefits of having a living, present structure right at the school is one of optimism, gratitude, and respect. The work of reclaiming spaces is more than just one of constituting identity, but also a refusal to allow that identity to fade from existence.

Hogans as Worldview

“So the east is associated with the thinking process, and in the thinking process we have to be aware of our own inner being, our consciousness, our timelessness—so we wake at dawn from that deeper sense of gratitude and spiritual sense of place.

To the south is our physical body, or we call it n ’gone, which is given to us to experience this life here—the blessings of experiencing life, all the negative and positiveness that comes with it.

To the west reminds us that we’re not individual beings, solely individual beings, that we are in a community, so we call it k ’é which is the social wellness of our community and our responsibility to the whole, and what can we contribute individually to the benefit of the whole, so all the teachings are based sort of west direction.

The north direction talks about our environment and our home—that this is a home, the planet here, and we have six sacred mountains that are also represented and the four cardinal directions in the Hogan. That’s within our homeland, what we’re supposed to do

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8 According to the Navajo Housing Authority’s 2011 survey, “Phase II Housing Needs Assessment and Demographic Analysis”, of 31,000 individuals living on the Navajo Nation 59% of Navajo Nation housing structures are single family homes, 17% are mobile homes and 11% are hogans with “a significant portion of respondents classified their dwelling simply as a house; these responses were considered to be single family homes” (NHA 2011, 15)
and how we’re supposed to care for all the life forces and all other life beings that we coexist with and to ensure that those things can continue to move forward in life and to be regenerative. And in that there’s so much more—that’s I guess the philosophy of our people and how it’s reflect in the hogans.” – Born For Water

Born For Water shares this knowledge with us from within the partially finished framework of a hogan located on the school grounds of Cuba, New Mexico. He is surrounded by his fellow restoration crew members who have each shared in the communal work of building this shelter from, literally, the ground up. Coincidentally, Born For Water and the crew have situated themselves along the southern wall; partly because it is the most finished section so far, but also symbolizes a physical embodiment of the work at hand. The crew’s presence along this direction reminds us of more than just the spiritual forces at play, but also of the practical realities we face in an effort to find harmonious balance in our lifeways.

This monologue of sorts came from a collaborative project DYL and I were working on to help promote their summer fellowships and also share information for future applicants and other audiences interested in DYL’s work. As I got to know the organization and its people by working and living with them, I noticed they were interested in documenting their projects but did not have anyone specifically to do such a task. One fellow, Riko, who was deeply passionate about photography, shared with me some of the photos he took during his summer with DYL. He, and some of the other fellows as well as Born For Water, asked if I knew how to edit these into a video presentation. I told them that I did, but also suggested that we could improve these photos with audio and video of the crew at work while explaining what they were doing and why. The crew agreed with my suggestion and took great interest in getting me to document
everything they were working on. “Hey, take a picture of this,” or, “Do you want me to explain that,” with some fellows even asking if they could use my camera to tour the hogan or various agroecology projects back at Bitterwater.

While I didn’t notice it at the time, I have now come to realization that much of the information shared with me about Diné lifeways occurred in hogans. Moments like Born For Water’s monologue carried as much valuable informational weight as Yucca Boy sharing with me the connection between a hogan and human being,

“This chimney represents the umbilical cord too, from us, they say that the coal, which is the fire, the air that we breathe and also the water—that they have inside of a hogan, and that’s what we have inside of us too which is our central fire, and also the water that is in our body, and also the air that comes in and out from our body, so it also represents that in the Hogan too because there’s a fireplace here and also the fire that burns in there—the only way the fire can burn is the oxygen that blows it and the water that is probably coming from how we have our place that the water is and it’s representing our own bodies too.”

Yucca Boy’s description of the hogan as that of a person provides an insight as to how hogans are an important part of how one identifies themselves as Diné. The central heating element is not just a source of warmth or cooking for the home, just like the people who build the hogan are not just a group of anonymous two dimensional beings—they are interrelated and interdependent on each other for the benefit of both their survival and continuation. Most importantly, is that both hogans and people are profoundly unique in the ways we understand worldview. The contexts through which hogans are seen as not only spaces, but the most chosen and intentional spaces through which various forms of Diné identity are articulated that help
imagine hogans as more than living or religious spaces—they also embody a type of resistance to state violences. In short, the places one sees these structures matter.

It must have been my second or third day with DYL in Pinon when I got to sit in their hogan and was introduced to the entire restoration crew as well as a few others. Born For Water was sitting against the west beam with most of the crew against the south wall and myself and a few of Born For Water’s family members along the north. Born For Water introduced himself⁹, and then in a clockwise direction the rest of us recited our own introductions. Next, we each shared a story about ourselves or something that we wanted everyone else to know about us. This is where I was introduced to Born For Water’s aunt, Penny, who told us about her experience with the boarding schools. “We were abused into the system,” Penny told us, “where administrators took you and you got beat up.” Other members of Born For Water’s family, especially his grandmother, also mentioned boarding schools and how these people would come to their hogans to abduct children. “My parents hid me from them,” Born For Water’s grandmother said in Diné Bizaad. It was here, and through these poignant, intentional, articulated interactions that I began to see hogans as the kind of safe spaces Born For Water was looking to construct for all Diné people. They were, and possibly still are, shelters against the types of colonial violence that otherwise disrupt Native identities either through abduction, reduction, or destruction.

When you find yourself staring out the open door of a hogan, facing the white-hot sun rising in the east, you see more than the open fields of corn, the grazing horses, and rolling hills that ebb and flow between the crystal blue sky and soft earth. All your senses seem to ignite as a

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⁹ First in Diné Bizaad reciting his mother’s clan, father’s clan, mother’s father’s clan, and finally his father’s father’s clan, followed by an English introduction. Born For Water’s family and the rest of the restoration crew also introduced themselves this way. I later found out that one of the first exercises for the fellows during their summer internship was to research their clan heritage and be able to recite it in Diné Bizaad and English.
reminder of your presence in the world, a timelessness\(^{10}\) shared by all beings from the infinitesimally small organisms to inconceivably gargantuan celestial bodies. A spirituality awakens within the physical plane that stutters your mind just enough to think of all that has come before you—relatives, historical figures, geological miracles—and wonder about the mysteries that remain ahead of us, as shadowy figures and shapes that race just out of reach from our candlelit gaze. A hogan does this by firmly forming itself within the land as a physical presence, a symbol of Diné life, that emerges not only from the earth but from the minds and bodies of the people who assembled it there. Yet still, despite its undeniable solid structure, a hogan is also shapeless in its capabilities. As a site of knowledge, healing, community, shelter, and more these homes offer its inhabitants multiple resources for the wellness of the mind, body, and spirit. “These were places that our people came together to live, to make a life,” Born For Water tells us, “and there’s a whole lot of teachings just within this hogan about what that means, what our life purposes are.”

Raymond Friday Locke, member of the Navajo Tribal Ad Hoc Committee and author of The Book of the Navajo, connects Diné lifeways as they are constituted within the hogan. “The Navajos do not refer to their mode of living as a way of life; it is the way of life,” Locke writes in his section, “The Beautiful Rainbow of the Navajo,” “[a]t the center of the Navajo world is their shelter, the Hogan … the hogan is a gift of the gods and as such it occupies a place in the sacred world” (Locke 1976, 13-15). Locke’s observations and analysis of the hogan, in communication with Born For Water’s knowledge, begin to form a perspective of what is so

\(^{10}\) Timelessness here is meant to imply the philosophical and spiritual sense that extends beyond human limitations. In other contexts, politically and academically, “timelessness” has been used as a categorical erasure of Native identities along with “pure” or “natural” differences according white, Western, expansionist ontologies (Simpson 2011)
symbolic, so meaningful, about the construction of these structures for grassroots organizations like DYL. Whether a “gift from the gods,” or a cultural space built by the relatives who inherited its teachings, the hogan is more than just a symbol of Diné identity—it is very much a part of that identity. Furthermore, the destruction of hogans, whether through natural causes or intentionally, do not bear the same weight as the loss of a home, church, or school would burden other U.S. citizens. As Locke notes, “If a hogan is struck by lightning it is considered chindi—bewitched—and is deserted. It is also deserted if a death occurs within and the body is removed through a hole broken in the north wall—the direction of evil” (Locke 15). The destruction of a hogan does not so much symbolize the destruction of an identity in the same way that moving from one town to another erases one’s memory of their hometown. Instead, the hogan allows for a perpetual reconstruction, reconstitution, reclaiming, and redefining of one’s space. Hogans offer a worldview in the sense that they are the catalyst of ceremonies, families, communities, and knowledge that persevere long after the individual people who inhabit them are gone.

Born For Water feels that the hogan is a more appropriate space to learn about Diné philosophies, but also provides contexts for understanding history, in a way that schools do not accurately depict. Audra Simpson also calls for a type of paradigm shift in the ways Native American history is taught. Simpson’s (2011) article, “Settlement’s Secret” argues for a theoretical analysis and critique of “state power, force, and occupation” (Simpson 2011, 212). For one, it’s important to remember the delicate, violent, and often oppositional history of

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11 While I never heard the term “chindi,” or talk about any taboos regarding the destruction or abandonment of a hogan, it is possible that this is a type of taboo that has changed over time, as many taboos do, and does not quite fit the narrative of those with whom I was working and living. However, I believe it is necessary to contextualize this quote as coming from a particular time and person that is much different from the work I was engaged in. We were building hogans in places that were expected to last long beyond the lifespan of any one of us. Also, these hogans were not intentioned to be lived in, exactly, but as spaces that talk about life and represent a kind of life that still exists today.
boarding schools on the Navajo reservation. Following the 1868 Treaty\textsuperscript{12} (which also followed the Long Walk to Fort Sumter), the author’s language made it so future Navajo children were forced into boarding schools where they would be disciplined in anglo-fied ways. Abuse, beatings, and other forms of violence were soon to follow within those academic structures. Whereas the boarding schools represent the erasure of Diné identity, hogans remain a pillar of resilience. A hogan provides a space to not only inform about Diné teachings, but also talk about the failures of institutional, targeted racism on the part of academic facilities that continue to push their own narrative in the various forms of history and social science. Hogans provide structure for a mentality that allows one to imagine a better future while still remaining in the present.

\textit{Figure 7: Peering through the smokehole, which will later become a chimney.}

\textsuperscript{12} See Article 6 of “Treaty With The Navaho, 1868”, June 1, 1868, by Lieutenant-General W.T. Sherman, “In order to insure the civilization of the Indians entering into this treaty, the necessity of education is admitted, especially of such of them as may be settled on said agricultural parts of this reservation, and they therefore pledge themselves to compel their children, male and female, between the ages of six and sixteen years, to attend school; and it is hereby made toe duty of the agent for said Indians to see that this stipulation is strictly complied with; and the United States agrees that, for every thirty children between said ages who can be induced or compelled to attend school a house shall be provided, and a teacher competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education shall be furnished, who will reside among said Indians, and faithfully discharge his or her duties as a teacher. The provisions of this article to continue for not less than ten years.”}
Figure 8: Murals on a water tank near Page, AZ.

Chapter Two

The Social Misfits: Diné Youth and Activism
Functioning in a Dysfunctional Society

Bob Marley’s “Buffalo Soldier”, coming from Yucca Boy’s Bluetooth speaker, gently swayed through the hogan frame as the restoration crew wrapped up their final trench while Born For Water and I continued making progress on the walls. “If you know your history,” Marley sang, “Then you would know where you coming from.” Although the song’s central theme is racial segregation in the military, and its history of discriminated peoples instructed to fight other federally decreed minority enemies during America’s fetishized “western expansion,” there are also dissociative themes on conceptualizing one’s identity to place, country, and family—I couldn’t help but think about the current state of affairs for the Native youth at DYL. The overlap of work and education between various structures of home, private, and public life is worth exploring in the way it can help unite and inform us as active participants in our own communities.

“A lot of these kids, you could say, are like ‘social misfits,’” Born For Water once told me during a drive from the Cuba school back to Pinon. We were in the midst of discussing his history with the youth program and what it does for DYL in general. He continued, “But it's a challenge to function in a dysfunctional society. In some ways this boarding school mentality still exists—kids are punished for their language, or religion, lifeways or whatever.” His sentiments recognized the struggles and stories of the young crew in a way that provided space to retain their history while also learning new things and gaining experience. When considering what the young people that made up this current generation were inheriting, that includes a lot of the historical trauma their parents and grandparents experienced as reality including aspects of the work and teaching that DYL was attempting to restore through their young associates. DYL, in many respects, was imagining a much different future for youth than what may be constituted
by the Navajo Nation overall. Instead of dismissing the members of the youth program as “unsalvageable,” or some kind of waste of potential, Born For Water wished to help channel their energy and rebellious behavior into something productive—a meaningful contribution to the community and their families simultaneously.

It’s interesting how Born For Water used the term “social misfits” to describe the youth he works with—for these are terms that seem to relate more toward an outside perspective than an internalized mindset. Is Born For Water purposely using this term to acknowledge preconceived stereotypes about rebellious youth who challenge social norms? If so, to what society do these young people not fit in? His use of terminology here is both challenging and intriguing because it opens up a wide range of interpretations regarding identity characteristics—especially for the complexities of adolescence, a particularly sensitive point in time for human development where the notion of identity is charged by the various social systems of education, economics, religion, politics, and much more.\(^\text{13}\) Coupled with the fact that Born For Water was telling me all this while the two of us were driving hours across open landscape and long roads hinted that he may have been trying to connect with me while venting some of his own thoughts. By mentioning the role of being required to “function in a dysfunctional society,” Born For Water was making a comment on the societal structures which bind ways of thinking or behaving that are deemed appropriate or acceptable by powerful hegemonic forces. If the

\(^{13}\) For more on these systems, see Bronfenbrenner (1979). He defines a set of forces that contribute to what we call an identity: A microsystem, “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics;” a mesosystem, “comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates;” an exosystem, “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person, as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person;” and a macrosystem, “refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems ... that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies;” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 22-26).
fundamental structures of a society are not working to the advantage of members of that society, then why bother upholding its values? In this context, engaging in deviant behavior can be imagined as a symptom of systematic disenfranchisement; it’s not the people who are dysfunctional, it’s the society which entangles them.

*Getting to Know the Restoration Crew*

In order to understand who the restoration crew are, and what they do, we should question what is even meant by the term “restoration.” Certainly, aspects of the work they perform are a large part of DYL’s restorative economy goal; reclaiming landscapes by building hogans, restoring fields by implementing watersheds, and improving the economy by localizing wool production. What is under the surface, however, are the ways restoration plays into relationships the crew have with each other and their families. One of the first assignments for all DYL staff and fellows was to learn more about their familial clans (in specific order: their mother, father, mother’s father, and father’s father clans) in order to introduce themselves in Diné Bizaad. This is a particularly enriching process since many of the young DYL members live in multigenerational households, therefore requiring youth to learn more about their family history and connections with each other. Additionally, this learning process seemed to stand against some of the more diminishing, assimilation techniques administered by boarding school systems whose goals were to drive families apart. With DYL implementing projects on the very foundational level of restoring relationships with their own communities, they are creating a learning environment by providing the language resources Diné youth need to learn more about their histories and form connections with each other.
Speaking of languages and forming connections, it is necessary to provide context as to how I made some initial connections with the DYL crew. For me, music is an incredibly helpful form of understanding communal sensibilities. By paying attention to the lyrics, or the audience, or the spaces and instruments that construct a music “scene” one can begin to understand what music does to its audience. In this context, musical expression is another way of peeling back the many layers of activism brought into being by the young people I was with. Now, that’s not to say that all music required an activist-oriented quality. There were, of course, some songs and artists we listened to that did not have an agenda of stirring up the status quo. However, it was the music that we talked about, recommended, or played repeatedly that informed others more about ourselves. The music of Bob Marley, Immortal Technique, Anti-Flag, or any number of the various punk, hip-hop, or reggae songs the restoration crew and I listen to characterize a certain counterculture narrative typical of youthful rebellion. Its wide global audience serves as a type of recognition that validates the raw, frustrated emotions young people come to terms with as they learn more about their histories, cultural identities, and try to find their sense of place in the world.

Furthermore, these knowledges are negotiated in creative mediums that often encourage forms of performative expression. While “Buffalo Soldier” may represent a call to understanding the violent histories of racialized militarization via European colonialism, it is creatively expressed through a medium of music and performance that may be interpreted by some as “radical,” because of its lyrics or association with other cultural taboos. Similarly, the work of DYL is a cry to the community to recognize and continue Diné teachings while also performing creative outputs; a mosaic of corn for seed sharing, displays of churro sheep wool and dyes for a wool buy, the improvisation in building hogans, or Native bands performing for community
events. In doing so, these resilient efforts are also trampling on the infestation of various colonial practices that are tactically guised and justified as considerate to the best interests of all Navajo reservation residents.

However, as Born For Water points out, it is not so much the content DYL produces that is challenged, but its creators—the young people who may often drop out of school, get involved with drugs or alcohol, become young parents, defy against law or authority, or engage in violent confrontations with others. The following biographies briefly explore who these creators are, what they do for DYL and their communities, and some of the everyday challenges they face as young people.

Yucca Boy

It wasn’t until about a week or so before finishing my research that I felt I actually knew Yucca Boy. He often spoke in short, direct sentences with a deep voice. At first glance one might assume Yucca Boy carried a sense of pride and seriousness watching him dress a freshly slaughtered sheep or tan its hide, and they would be half correct if they simply watched him work instead of working with him. The Yucca Boy I got to know balanced serious discussions with humor, arduous labor with gentle care, and extensive knowledge with genuine curiosity.

Starting with his pseudonym, Yucca Boy, immediately speaks to his connection with his family and DYL. I asked most of DYI members whom I remained in contact with to provide their own pseudonyms and Yucca Boy was the first to reach out with his. The reason being, “It’s my clan, my family name,” he said with a laugh. Practically everyone I met at DYL considered Yucca Boy a good friend. To many of the restoration crew he was also a classmate or teammate
from Pinon’s football team. Even Born For Water acknowledged that Yucca Boy had a knack as a leader, someone who could take a group of rowdy football players and bring them out to a field to haul buckets of water, drag large stones for a rock, or lay cement to build a spillway by inspiring others with his powerful work ethic. Even though he had only recently graduated high school, his professional demeanor and guided mindset commanded a great deal of respect among his fellow crew members. During my stay with DYL I was inspired during a tour of the Bitterwater land that served as a headquarters for DYL’s restoration crew. Yucca Boy was leading us along rock gabions and aprons built along repurposed carriage roads, lasagna beds that made up the edible landscape of naturally growing plants with crops and fruit trees, and a root cellar made from recycled vehicle tires. Later that day, after the tour, I asked Yucca Boy if he would be interested recording the tour for DYL to use as promotional footage for future fellows and he enthusiastically agreed. It was during this tour that Yucca Boy and I began working together and getting to know one another.

“I feel a lot of pride seeing my work produce results. It’s like, you keep taking care of this seed—then one day it just pops up, and it just feels good to know that you helped to do that.”

I had asked Yucca Boy what he thinks about when he’s working, and after a few moments of
thinking he told me the above quote. Yucca Boy’s sense of pride is not a demonstration of ego, or an accomplishment of some record-breaking event, but a testament to how his resiliency and persistence, when combined with appropriate knowledge, produces something genuinely good. This good is also not just for Yucca Boy, but something that can be used for others as well in all its aspects: resiliency and knowledge as this sustainable, replicable thing. It also tells us that Yucca Boy is not just thinking about himself, but his relation to other living beings as it emerges through his work. Many times during the video tour Yucca Boy referred to “we,” either referring to DYL or its larger community that Yucca Boy found himself unquestionably a part of. “We built this structure,” or “we partnered with …” was helpful in understanding what Yucca Boy thinks about how he sees the usefulness of his work with DYL.

While helping with the hogan project in Cuba, Yucca Boy had shown me a better technique for shaving logs and securing the screws in place. Out of the other two guys with us, he was definitely the most passionate about this work. There would be moments when we weren’t working; whether we were camping, having lunch, or cruising around, where Yucca Boy would ask about materials we may need for the next day’s project or suggest another aspect of the hogan to begin working on next. His dedication even came through during moments of leisure when we would listen to music and start freestyle rapping. Yucca Boy and Riko, a restoration crew fellow we will learn more about shortly, were the more poetic of the crew and would often play music while we worked or made up lyrics to instrumental songs they had on their phones. I noticed that Yucca Boy would weave themes of earth, ancestors, and medicine into his lyrics. His call for just transition was not only through the work he does, but the words he uses and the way he imagines his future. Like his reflection of feeling proud to see his efforts produce results, his music also nurtures and reaffirms the things he learns throughout his
experiences with DYL. Although I couldn’t even come close to writing down his words quick
enough, when I asked how he came up with his lyrics he simply told me that this is how he feels.
It’s a state of mind that seems to flow through him, sourced from his work, life, family, and
surroundings.

Off camera I asked Yucca Boy what he has learned from DYL, and how this knowledge
may be applied to other things he is interested in. Without hesitation, Yucca Boy began giving an
dexample of the hogan projects—which we were in the midst of completing during my research.

He answered my question with the following,

“Just by experiencing all these hogans that we have built, it has brought me on
like what could I do for myself too—and how I’ve been learning to cut logs, and how to
place it in right, in the right angle, and just check it if it’s more secure. It just gives me
another skill where if I want to pass down this knowledge to a younger generation or
people, like people are starting to know less and less about the old structures that we have
been building, so it’s also good to bring the refresher of how the youth can also take on
the opportunity and pass it on to the next generation.”

DYL’s efforts certainly have a positive impact on its communities, but sometimes it can be
difficult to determine just what that impact is. Yucca Boy’s statement is one that we will see
similarly throughout many of the bios from other DYL members. He is recognizing that the skills
he learned through the organization are primarily useful for him, but also reverberate in their
potential to help his community as well. Through acquiring skills like carpentry and hogan
construction, Yucca Boy is simultaneously acquiring related ways of thinking about and seeing
his community from a new perspective. This perspective provides a way of addressing concerns
brought up by the people living near him while at the same time sustaining itself as a teaching
model. As Yucca Boy mentioned at the end, he wants to “pass it on to the next generation,” which is a vital component in testing the sustainability of the kinds of work DYL engages in. Far too often projects are abandoned because nobody is willing to take up the mantle and ensure its continuation. In this sense, DYL also seeks to build a team of leaders who will take on the knowledge that has been provided to them through exposure to various Diné resources and replicate itself for more people to learn from.

Riko

Whenever you find yourself with a group of friends there always seems to be that one person who gets treated like the “younger sibling.” They’re always at the receiving end of jokes, they seem to follow along with whatever the group is doing, and they have the most energetic and optimistic attitude. To me, Riko is like DYL’s “little brother,” because of these great qualities. One of the first people I considered my friend from the organization, Riko brought a certain lightheartedness that helped us all relax and remember to have fun. Even though he was nineteen, and definitely not the youngest member of the restoration crew, he carried himself with a childlike curiosity and sense of humor that others connected with. And yet, he could also turn a joke or light conversation completely serious when he wanted to. He frequently expressed interest in philosophy, often sharing parts of the Diné creation narrative he found inspiring—citing medicine people he was
introduced to through DYL as especially inspirational—and his thirst for knowledge was like a beacon beaming out from his personality. But Riko’s true passion was photography because, according to him, “I just love to show others the way I perceive the world.”

It was with photography that our friendship found its first foothold. I had brought my Canon DSLR with no intention to capture anything specific—just another tool in the ethnographer’s versatile toolbelt. Early in my first week with DYL a trip was planned for some of the fellows, a few visitors, and I to visit Chaco Canyon and see some petroglyphs and Athapascan dwellings. I had only mentioned that I wanted to bring my camera with me when Riko perked up excitedly, “Oh! You have a camera?!” and insisted he ride with me when we left. From that point, we were practically inseparable. I was following a van with the other DYL fellows and their guests while Riko was sitting next to me with his phone inches from my face trying to show me all the pictures he took over the summer.

“DYL asked me to take pictures and videos to document some of the projects we’ve been working on this summer,” Riko chirped between comments explaining each picture. His pictures captured the world as he saw it, often literally, as he explained the intentions or techniques of each photograph. As the organization implemented their community-centered projects like building hogans, sheering sheep, and collecting seeds sharing, Riko was behind the lens documenting moments to be shared for future generations. Some pictures were closely focused on the fine details of a weaving or the mosaic of a rare corn species, while other portraits depicted the joy of a team packing mud onto the outer shell of a hogan or the thoughtful gaze of an elder as she listens to a neighbor’s story.
Despite the pride Riko took in his pictures, there was also a sense of growing frustration—especially when he started showing me video footage he had recorded. “I have all these videos and clips and stuff, but I don’t know how to edit them. Photography is my thing; videography is not my thing, but I need to learn to make a presentation.” What I was hearing from Riko was a desire to link his interests to a skill he did not have, and how to make that skill also practically inform and allow a further pursuit into his expanding interest of how to expertly use the camera. During our previous conversations Riko and I had talked about our origins of first using a camera, and I mentioned that I started out as a videographer for my friends’ skateboarding demos and some music videos. I offered to share my video editing software in order to show him how I think about video storytelling if he was interested in learning from me. Riko agreed excitedly and we began setting up a regular meeting schedule over the course of a week to experiment with the software, play with the story of what the video could tell, and set up a time to premier the final footage.

During that week of video editing Riko offered a couch in his grandparent’s house for me stay, as well as a place at the table for meals, and a much-needed hot shower. We would travel between Pinon, where his grandparents lived, and the DYL office in Flagstaff where we could access the internet and more space to edit the videos. When we weren’t working, we explored
Flagstaff, photographed murals in the area, shared music, and ate tacos. During our editing sessions Riko would often vent to me his paradox of not knowing what to do in the future. Unlike Yucca Boy, who imagined the skills he was learning from DYL as something prospective for him and his community, Riko was less interested in the demanding physical work that came with the restoration crew fellowship.

“It’s like, I know I should finish school, but I also don’t know what to do with it,” Riko had once expressed to me in frustration. Riko told me he also had a history of being bullied in school because his family lineage is a mix between Diné, Apache, and others. In retaliation, Riko would fight back which would cause further problems with classmates and school administrators. However, sometimes it was difficult to determine who was really at fault with these disputes. I had the pleasure of meeting Riko’s grandparents and relatives after he let me

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14 It is worth noting that although Rajan indicated that this made it difficult for him to socialize with others, that was not the consensus for everyone. Some DYL members identified as related to Mexican clan, who trace their origins to Mexico, suggesting that some Diné families are composed of various Indigenous backgrounds. This also complicates what we mean when we identify someone as Navajo or Diné, and why having a language that introduces people in association with their parents and grandparents is helpful in disrupting these notions of purity.
stay at their place for a few nights. Riko’s grandfather he was a boiler maker when I met him but told me about his past working and living between six coal mines.

I noticed that he had a heavy cough as he spoke, claiming, “I think my father gave me this cough. He used to work in the uranium mines, and I didn’t see him very often, but miners would always come home with bad stuff on their clothes and boots—get everyone in the house sick.” Much like Riko, his grandfather also did not know his father very well and mostly lived with his grandparents as a young man. Riko’s grandfather returned to the Navajo reservation after traveling for various mining companies to take care of his grandfather’s land and livestock. When I stayed with Riko and his family, they lived off the main road in a fenced-in neighborhood of identical stucco homes, some of them abandoned or destroyed entirely, overseen by a housing alliance that contracts outside help from Phoenix to repair damages.

Over coffee, Riko’s grandfather and I talked about school since the other siblings in the house attended school in Chinle, the next town over, instead of Pinon where they lived. “My kids were always getting into trouble there, just for talking back and speaking up—with the bus driver, teacher, everybody. In Chinle, that doesn’t happen.” Riko’s niece, a rambunctious little six-year-old named Kay, also seemed like a bit of a troublemaker. She refused to wake up in the morning, did not like having breakfast before school, and had been in a fistfight with one of her classmates the other day. While I was having breakfast with the family one morning, Riko’s grandmother said to Kay, “Now you behave yourself on the bus today, you hear? No fighting!” I looked over to Kay and saw her smirking at me, and responded to her elder with a sing-songy “Okay” before running out the door to the bus and leaving her breakfast behind. After Kay left, I asked Riko’s grandparents if they could tell me what happened, but they seemed to dismiss the
action as “…the usual stuff with kids, bullying and all that.” Kay’s actions, maybe not much different from Riko’s, seemed less of a retaliation against the education system than a battle against the students themselves. Both Riko and Kay’s tensions with their classmates speak on the larger social tensions that may very well exist among adult audiences when it comes to notions of proper behavior, genetic purity, knowledge, and future potential as a contributing citizen to society.

Music, a common theme sewn throughout my relationship with the young DYL members, was also an important part of Riko’s life. As stated before with Yucca Boy, Riko also had an affinity for rap, lyric-writing, and improvising stories. During our travels I noticed that Riko rapped about life—both what he imagines for himself, and the reality in which he currently lives. After stopping at Taco Bell for about a dozen tacos and burritos, Riko connected his phone to my rental car’s stereo and played a few instrumental tracks. A slow, lo-fi, jazzy tune carried us on our journey as Riko pulled lyrics from his brain like some rabbit-out-of-the-hat magic trick. He depicted a scene of himself and I filling up on tacos, making our way back to the rez, and fulfilling some kind of prophecy of a better life for us all. We laughed at each cheesy line as the truck banked around long, windy roads, and the faint lights of distant Hopi homes came into view. He told me that he doesn’t take his music too seriously, but it’s fun for him to connect
rhymes to a thinking process. Not too different from photography, Riko’s lyrics attempt to articulate his perspective in a way others can understand for themselves, and in a way that is creative and liberating for him personally.

Sid

After my first night at Bitterwater, being lulled to sleep by the sounds of barking dogs and light rain, I woke early the next morning anxiously anticipating what my first day with DYL would be like. At around nine, while I was outstretched in the back of my rental truck, Sid was the first to arrive and greeted me with mild confusion.

“Oh, damn, sorry,” Sid joked, “I thought this was one of Born For Water’s rentals.” By that point Born For Water was primarily driving rental cars because his truck was frequently in a repair shop, so he was on a first-name-basis business relationship with Avis rental associates. Nevertheless, Sid and I introduced ourselves, and I briefly mentioned why I was sleeping in their driveway and who I had already met so far.

“That’s cool, man. I like working with places where I get to travel and stuff too. I used to work with the Arizona Conservation Corps (ACC) for park restoration, and one time we got to go to Detroit to work on these, like, infrastructure projects for communities and stuff. We were, like, working with city activism, restoration, and agrarian projects.” Sid’s background in these kinds of activism and ecological projects made him an excellent candidate for DYL’s restoration crew. Having gone to high school and played football with Yucca Boy, a job opportunity with DYL was open for him when he stopped working with ACC for reasons he didn’t explicitly talk
about. He told me he prefers his time with DYL since he’s able to keep doing work that excites him while also being able to have fun.

“We spend a lot of time around here riding horses, listening to music, and partying,” Sid laughed at the end. During our conversation we had started working on my first big assignment with DYL: inventory. We were collecting all the tools and supplies scattered across the multiple fields in order to count and reorganize the tool shed. Far out in the eastern corner of north field we spotted a cluster of shovels and hoes. “I miss breaking in horses,” Sid told me as we were gathering the farming tools. “It’s like, you know, you just feel connected to them.” Others, like Riot Punch and Yucca Boy, also told me in separate conversations how much they admire and respect horses. Sid started pointing to nearby mesas and hills that surrounded Bitterwater and stuck out far across Pinon. He told me about trails that were only accessible by horse, and camping trips that would last days with only his horse and a few supplies. Unlike cars, which allowed for vast travel across relatively smooth surfaces, a horse was a more intimate affair requiring a confident knowledge of the landscape and a substantial deal of patience riding with a horse.

He then asked what I like to do for fun back home, and I mentioned that my friends and I do similar things. “You ride horses?” Sid asked, practically coming to a complete stop right in front of me.

“Oh, well, no—not really, but we sometimes race cars,” I backtracked in order to clarify what I meant.

“Yeah, we do that too. Or, you know, sometimes just cruise around when there’s nothing else to do,” Sid laughed as we continued walking through the field.
After spending most of the day with Sid (organizing and taking inventory of the tool shed, feeding the crops, rebuilding a cracked portion of the hogan wall, clearing out the fencing of the rock gabions, and refilling the half dozen drums around the field with water), and meeting a few more members of the restoration crew, we went out to grab lunch. We had taken a break to cruise around and stop for a bite to eat at Basha’s, a local grocery store chain that also featured the only bank, atm, hairdresser, and sandwich shop in the area. Sid had purchased two burritos and a side of potato fries, and I had done the same. Now, I like to think of myself as someone with a pretty good appetite—a member of the clean plate club, if you will. By the end of this fairly substantial meal I was pretty well satisfied and couldn’t really imagine eating much else. Sid, on the other hand, had not only finished the two burritos and potato fries, but also pulled out a banana, apple, and a few granola bars from the front pocket of his hoody. Mind you, this was also the same hoody that he wore every single day for all the projects he worked on with DYL. In fact, it was the same outfit all the time—grey Nike hoody, blue jeans, sneakers, and a woven straw sun hat. Everyone always joked that it must smell pretty bad by now, but Sid just laughed and justified it.

“Hey,” he calmly said, “this way I don’t have to wash all my clothes all the time. I know this one’s gonna get dirty, so I just keep wearing it. Why bother?” So maybe his hoody was not just reasonable because it saved him time and water, but also provided a source of nutrients!

Yello and Drew

Even though I spent most of my time with restoration crew, I never got a chance to meet everyone involved. Many of the young people had other responsibilities and I would sometimes
see people leave just as quickly as they arrived. Two such individuals, Yello and Drew, I was able to get to know briefly in between moments of transition between one obligation and the next. It is worth mentioning that Yello and Drew both had families they were building, and both the reasons they worked with DYL and why they had to suddenly leave in the middle of the day were to support those families. Yello had a two-year-old daughter and was living with her parents and siblings. Drew, the youngest of the restoration crew members at sixteen, was about to be a father to his first child while also juggling school and work.

Yello, the only woman in the restoration crew, had a commanding voice that soared to all corners of the Bitterwater land. From the far side of one field, she could instruct someone the next field over to give more water to one plant or clear weeds from a nearby trench. Where Yucca Boy seemed to have difficulty dictating jobs to the crew, as we will explore later in this chapter, Yello orchestrated the task with great ease. Yet, this partnership made them an excellent team when working together since Yello could oversee, and sometimes assist, with tasks while also taking care of her daughter. Thus, leadership was not implicitly the responsibility of one crew member or another, but an aspect of accountability that assured quality craftsmanship over nonsensical bickering and finger-pointing.

Drew just wanted to work. His priorities were to learn as many practical skills as possible so he can keep working and making money. As one of the only restoration crew members with their own reliable source of transportation, a large pickup truck, Drew used this asset to his

Figure 13: Pickup trucks hauling large water bins such as this are often the only way for many Navajo Nation residents to access clean water.
greatest advantage whether it be traveling around collecting and distributing water or transporting parts and equipment. After an exhausting day of various field projects, I was in the middle of taking field notes while the restoration crew filled out their time sheets. I then overheard Yello say to Drew, “Careful when you put in your hours. You’re supposed to still be at school.”

I looked up from my notebook to see what was going on, “I sneak out of school a lot,” Drew smiled, leaning over to me, “to work and stuff, you know?” I was familiar—somewhat. Back when I was about twelve or thirteen, I had a paper route where I was paid based on how many houses I delivered to. In order to make more money, I would sometimes skip homework or some school days to deliver to as many houses as possible. However, this was something I did to buy things I wanted; a new videogame, CDs, a skateboard—not supporting my growing family. With Drew, DYL’s financial support provided a means of survival for him and his family without adhering to some of the restraints that may come with working a part-time job stocking shelves or collecting shopping carts at Basha’s. However, because DYL was fiscally sponsored and in a transition to becoming a non-profit, employees like Drew were unsure how long a job with them would remain available or what it may look like should it get absorbed by the Navajo Nation or extinguished completely.

Riot Punch

Riot Punch always reminded me of my best friend back home in Connecticut—this guy was nice to everyone who got to know him and had a signature sense of humor that seemed to infect everyone around him. Even when sharing memories that were sad for Riot Punch, he
always seemed to end them with some kind of joke or fond moment that made us laugh. Riot Punch skillfully balanced grim aspects of his reality with a playful sort of fiction in a way that reminded me that life can be serious and enjoyable at the same time.

It was a bright afternoon when I had my first conversation with Riot Punch: repairing the hogan walls. Mud had to be prepared by mixing sand, yellow dirt, and soil with mud and straw. Between the sounds of whistling wind wrapping itself around the rolling hills and mesas, and the occasional caw of a crow spotting the sprouting young corn, music filled the air. Riot Punch had queued up a playlist of his favorite songs and the pounding rhythms energized our fatigued bodies as we began to mix the mud clay for the hogan.

“So, yeah, we just gotta start stomping on it to get it all together,” Riot Punch told me as I unloaded the sixth and final bucket from a wheelbarrow of dirt onto a tarp with the rest of the mixture. With Anti-Flag’s “War Sucks, Let’s Party!” blasting in the background, I wasted no time leaping onto the earth mound and started jumping and kicking with as much force as possible. I mentioned to Riot Punch how much I loved this band—I had already seen them live several times and bought practically every album they released. Riot Punch rocked his head, cracked a crooked smile, and pumped his fist in agreement. As I proceeded my chaotic mud dance, Riot Punch dowsed the mixture with bottles of water to give the mud a fresh and smooth texture. He then jumped on the pile as well and we started laughing at our exhausting efforts of trying to mix mud with our feet.

“This stuff always ruins my shoes,” Riot Punch joked between breaths. The music was fast and loud, but the work was difficult and straining on the legs and back. I looked down and sure enough, my legs were connected to two mounds of mud and soil. My feet were no longer strapped into shoes—they looked more like two miniature hogans with my legs stretching out of
the chimney above. Even though I was wearing boots, it seemed to make little difference as the
dense mud pulled me in like quicksand.

After a few more minutes of stomping, squishing, sliding, and shimmying, we had to roll
the mud to mix it further. We leapt off the tarp, flinging clumps of mud into the air as we did so,
and Riot Punch instructed me to grab one corner of the tarp while he grabbed the other next to it.
He then counted to three and we pulled the tarp back and over the mud pile, rolling it into a log
shape. With my boots still caked in mud I slipped on the initial pull—the tarp was much heavier
than expected and I had little traction on the sandy dirt floor—sending me careening backwards
into a pile of shovels and buckets. I sat dazed for a moment or two, snapping back to reality and
the sound of Riot Punch giggling at my amateur mistake. “It’s all good,” he reassured, and I
returned to my position at the tarp. Thankfully avoiding another slip up, we managed to roll the
mud successfully.

“Kinda looks like a joint, huh?” Riot Punch laughed as he poured more water on the mud.
I couldn’t help but join in laughing at the coincidence, and that image has been implanted on my
mind every time I think back to that day. We then had to proceed to keep stomping on this
mixture, then rolling, stomping, rolling, and stomping until the consistency was just right. This
process was repeated for two more tarps while other crew members filled buckets with the mud
mixture to pack into cracks that had formed on the western part of the hogan shell.

While taking a much needed break, and attempting to clean off our permanently clay-
caked shoes, we wound up talking about his late father, who was a drummer, and how his
passing had caused Riot Punch to lose interest in music. “My dad used to work for Peabody (coal
mining) and got tuberculosis about two years ago. He died, and I miss him a lot. We used to jam.
He was a drummer and was always better than me. Then when I started getting good, that’s when
he died. I don’t play much anymore, but I still love to rock out!” He then started swaying back and forth, shaking his hair wildly in a headbanging motion. “My mom wanted me to work for Peabody to continue my father’s legacy, and I was like ‘What?! No way!’” Riot Punch reminisced with a light laugh. “I want to do something with kids, farming, outreach and teaching, you know? Because of what I’m doing here (with DYL). Or, maybe go back to construction or get certified as a mechanic. Oh, I don’t know!” I hesitated from saying anything too quick—I couldn’t even imagine what he must be going through losing a father and taking on the extra responsibility of supporting his family. However, as a fellow musician, I desperately wanted to reinvigorate the love of music back into him. Based on earlier conversations and listening to his music playlists I knew we had similar tastes, so I offered to teach him a few songs on guitar.

The song I wanted to teach Riot Punch was Anti-Flag’s “$1 Trillion,” an upbeat acoustic tune in the style of a protest rally with lyrics about capitalism and humanism. After our long evening of mud stomping, we began setting up a little area in the shack just north of the hogan to have a jam session. Yucca Boy, Sid, and a few others joined along too as they waited for their rides to come pick them up. Before leaving for my research, I was given some advice from a mentor to bring my guitar with me, “as a spiritual component” to my research. He suggested having music on my side would help in balancing work with recreation and at that moment in the shack I believe he was right. As soon as I began strumming the crew recognized the song and we all started singing along. Our harmonies, accompanied with the powerful chords and bouncing rhythms, seemed to energize the shack in a way I had never before experienced the song. We

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15 Peabody had just announced they were closing for good, with their final freight shipping from the facility around mid-August. Jay’s laughter could both reflect the fact that it would be impossible to work for Peabody anyway and the irony of his mother wanting him to work for the same company he believes contributed to his father’s death.
started jumping, shaking, cursing, and shouting with everything we felt as if releasing some otherwise constricted emotion that only the raw measures of music could unlock. Even during a few mistakes we laughed it off and carried on with even more energy than before, as if to confront our mistakes with a kind of acknowledgment and persistence that speaks to the efforts of what it means to be human in a world free from judgment.

As the song reached its end, I looked around the room and decided to continue playing—it was clear nobody wanted this freight train to stop, so I floored the accelerator and started playing whatever I felt. We had transitioned from structure to improvisation almost seamlessly and without instruction. That’s when members of the restoration crew started freestyling their own lyrics. I had known earlier that a lot of the guys from the restoration crew liked to rap, and some of them even wrote music themselves. At one point, earlier that day, we were skinning the hide from a sheep that was slaughtered and took turns making up verses as we worked. The rhythms I decided to play on guitar allowed space for people to start injecting their own lyrics and ride this musical wave we all seemed to find ourselves on. When somebody got lost in thought, or couldn’t find a rhyme, another crew member jumped on and began incorporating their own trail of lyrics. Nobody was sure where this was going, or how it would end, but this chaotic, bouncing conversation continued to fill the room with an emphasis on free expression. Eventually, we were running out of things to say and play, and our sense of time had seemed to lose itself entirely, so I introduced the chorus of “$1 Trillion” one more time to wrap our jam session in a referential bow.

I looked over at Riot Punch, who was smiling and giggling like a kid. With a guitar clutched close to his chest, Riot Punch examined the fretboard as we went over chords and notes thoroughly. Riot Punch laughed off a few early mistakes, but eventually began to understand the
song’s structure and asked if I could teach him more. Months later, when I reached out to him to check up and see how he was doing, Riot Punch told me that he was still practicing “$1 Trillion” and learning other songs along the way.

“Damn,” Riot Punch said joyfully, “now I’m gonna be up all night playing! My fingers hurt so much, but I wanna keep playing!” It was about that time that Riot Punch had to leave, his ride had just arrived and was waiting for him. He jumped up, gave me a high five, and sprinted out of the shack fueled by the powerful energies of punk rock. Shortly after Riot Punch left, I had queued up a song on Yucca Boy’s Bluetooth speaker, “Beat Your Heart Out,” by the Distillers. Seconds into the song’s fast and loud slamming of drums and power chords, Riot Punch came running back into the shack jumping around and singing with the song.

“Oh man!” Riot Punch screamed, “oh wow, I forgot about this song! What’s it called again?!” I had joined in rocking out with Riot Punch, but took a moment to show him the song and the band who was playing it. He recognized the band with a sense of nostalgia before departing once more. “Okay, now I really gotta go,” Riot Punch laughed as he jumped, fists rocketing in the air in all directions, right out the shack once more.

The office crew

DYL fellowships offered two branches to apply for: the restoration crew, which involved working with the hogan and land maintenance projects, or the office crew where fellows worked primarily in the Flagstaff office. There was room for overlap as well—Riko’s video project, for example, documented the restoration crew while also utilizing office crew resources. Likewise, the two teams often collaborated on projects by coordinating the various skillsets offered by each
member. A wool buy was organized and promoted by the office crew, and the restoration crew helped with collecting the wool alongside office crew members distributing it to communities. Many of these community collective events featured these kinds of coordination efforts which were useful in demonstrating the ways people need to work together in inclusive environments.

Like the restoration crew, the office crew also had a number of fellows I was unable to meet for various reasons. Timing was one obstacle, but another unexpected challenge came from internalized drama where certain members were fighting with one another and there were some allegations of theft as well. “There’s a lot of drama,” Yello once said during a break from smoothing out the floor of the Bitterwater hogan, “like the office crew will complain that we’re all, like, drunks or stoners or whatever—but it’s like, they’re all lazy and stuff too!” When I asked what she meant by “lazy,” Yello referred to the types of work the teams are engaged in and how different they seem. The restoration crew worked mostly outdoors with projects like hogan construction, agroecology, watershed restoration and the like, while the office crew was primarily outside the reservation doing more research-oriented tasks and tapping into academic or political resources. Although the two may sometimes work together on projects like the wool buy or seed sharing event, I rarely saw the restoration and office crew in the same space. However, this is not to suggest that one type of work was more legitimate, authentic, or real than the other, but rather speaks to the multiple angles with which Native activists and organizations constitute their presence among many different communities. While certain stereotypes may bind Indigenous activism with nature conservation, DYL’s office crew tackles the multiple ways Native communities are affected by gender and LGBTQ+ issues, education and political science, as well as linguistics and technology.
There were other differences as well—primarily when it came to the level of education office crew members were exposed to. Most of the office crew were either in the process of obtaining a college degree, or already had one in the case of administrative staff. The restoration crew, on the other hand, had a more sporadic set of educational experiences. Yucca Boy and Riko, for example, had graduated high school while many other restoration crew members did not or did not express interest in completing school. Even with Riko, his academic experience was also associated with bullying and frustration, leaving him perplexed as to whether he wanted to continue pursuing higher education or not. The college-oriented mindset of the office crew also informed how they addressed their community concerns. For example, the University of rNorthern Arizona hosted a two-day conference on the topic of Missing and Murdered Diné relatives. Members of the office crew invited me to join them in attending the conference, which not only featured guest speakers but also a participation component where attendees contributed to drafting a commitments statement to be brought to the Navajo Nation to directly address and demand action for grievances and trauma associated with and including Missing and Murdered Diné Relatives.

Hózhó, one of the office crew members, proposed that the types of action demanded toward addressing Missing and Murdered Diné Relatives should not be defined by the Navajo Nation. Rather, she proposed that the families themselves determine what they feel should be done to address these justices. In that regard, the Navajo Nation should be a point of contact for obtaining resources instead of a judiciary body that treats every case exactly the same. Hózhó, along with many other attendees at this conference, believe that not enough action has been done by the Navajo Nation—particularly because of certain federal restrictions that make it difficult to pursue individuals who are not residents of a reservation who have committed crimes on
reservation land. These bureaucratic ties often leave families more upset, hopeless, or angry without any outlet or platform for a wider audience to hear their story.

Other members of the office crew spoke to me about their particular interest by explaining projects they were working on with DYL over the summer. Unlike the restoration crew, these projects were managed independently and took on more of a research-focused approach. Hoshi, one of the oldest DYL fellows, was interested in reviving narratives from two-spirit/queer and non-binary Diné people. “There’s a lot of shaming,” Hoshi told me one night during a dinner celebration in Sedona with everyone involved in the DYL summer fellowship, “especially when it comes to ‘outing,’ people will call you out in public on purpose.” Hoshi, who identifies as queer, told me that discovering narratives about two-spirit Diné was inspiring because it made him feel like he was connected with those people. That connection also created a sense of purpose, and lifted a burden of shame that he felt from members of his family.

Kiki, a Harvard student, was collecting stories from elders by recording audio of conversations he would have with them in Diné Bazaad. During a lunch break at the NAU conference, we were talking about the ways young people are engaging with the Diné language. A young attendee at the conference who identified as Hopi mentioned that some people choose not to learn their language, specifically indicating in this example an individual who lived on the Hopi reservation but did not speak the language. “Lots of people think that way at first, mostly young people, but it’s more complicated than that,” Kiki suggested, “Some people don’t have access to the language because their parents don’t speak it, and that may have to do with them going to boarding school and directly forced not to speak it. They were told what they are doing is wrong, it’s a sin against God.” What is so interesting with this example are the parallels between Kiki’s observation and the hogan projects by the restoration crew. While Kiki is
engaging with the language by speaking it himself, conversing with others, and documenting stories with elders, the restoration crew is creating spaces to allow these types of exchanges while also building resilience against the kinds of infrastructures, like boarding schools, that hindered and demonized the development of Native languages and knowledges generations prior. This is an example of how contemporary issues have a complex history that can be addressed through multiple creative outlets by a range of actors with different skillsets.

_Social Misfits_

There are many parallels that can be drawn between the “social misfits” of DYL’s young participants, and the young people found in Laurence Ralph’s ethnography on Chicago gang lifestyles in _Renegade Dreams_. For this reason, it is worth exploring how certain icons seem to emblemize, complicate, or sometimes even define what it means to be an adolescent, albeit in different ways. Ralph’s ethnography takes a deep dive into Eastwood, a neighborhood in Chicago dominated by rivaling gang members, while also exploring the lives of people from multiple generations linked with the neighborhood gangs.

Whether we call them “social misfits,” as Born For Water says, or the “hip-hoppers” and “renegades” found in Laurence Ralph’s _Renegade Dreams_, there is an underlining form of separation between social classes—age, wealth, education, ethics, and possibly much more. An important distinction we must first make is the implicit meaning behind a “social misfit” and a “renegade.” Primarily, this distinction comes from the very people who use these terms. Born For Water’s tongue-in-cheek remark that the young people associated with DYL could be considered “social misfits” is one that may reflect the values of a much wider society. I do not
believe Born For Water sees these kids as social misfits (in fact, I would argue that he probably associates as one himself), but uses the term to indicate a type of social structure that discredits young people who do not adhere to imposed settler-colonial values. “Renegades,” on the contrary, are described as young gangsters who “govern themselves,” (Ralph 2014, 67) by Red, as well as other older generations of gang members. This distinction is important to keep in mind as it describes how young people view themselves through the lenses of older peers from their communities. And yet, both of these terms do little to form a relationship that crosses these invisible, yet distinguishably marked, borders. Instead, they are imposed adjectives set to distinguish differences in identity both for those who believe in such terms and the people they are used against.

Ralph dedicates one chapter specifically to the trend of gym shoes as status symbols for the renegades. The shoes and fashion of Eastwood’s gang culture are as apparent, if not quite similar, as the taste in music or rebellious attitudes toward education I noticed among the restoration crew.\(^{16}\) Both symbolize an acknowledgement of historical situatedness and a consciousness that segment generational boundaries. Ralph posits that trends in fashion dictated the emergence of different eras of gang members’ relationship with themselves and their community, with footwear becoming ever more representational of one’s claim to status and respect via prestigious gym shoes. When it comes to music and education, however, things become more complicated for Diné youth.

\(^{16}\) Ralph does follow this chapter with one focusing solely on music. However, his chapter on music is particularly focused on rap and hip-hop, and the notion of “keeping it real.” These themes of authenticity and reality certainly reflect contemporary issues facing Native youth, but also act a driving force to separate people and create more violence rather than find common grounds upon which we can collaborate.
Music, as one example, is a more informal and conversational means of not so much articulating status but an understanding of one’s relationship to each other in sharing similar musical tastes. My familiarity with the likes of various subgenres of pop, country, reggae, rap and rock earned me a place in the conversational circle to talk about these artists’ impacts on ourselves and our social networks. This is especially true for some contemporary Native bands like A Tribe Called Red or iskwē who merge recordings of traditional instruments with nuanced vocal melodies and production techniques. A particular song that came on by Anti-Flag, for example, would do more than just serve as background noise or entertainment. I would start a comment saying that the song reminded me of a time or place in my life, either seeing them live or buying that album in high school, which would evolve into more conversations from Riot Punch, Yucca Boy, or Sid talking about the concerts they have been to or wished to attend. In other situations, music became a type of resource for exchange: the trading of playlists, Spotify accounts, or lyrics and melodies became ways that we could remain connected with each other either across digital spheres or while entertaining ourselves during down time. Further, in the context of sharing ideas and knowledge, I was able to teach members of the restoration crew certain songs on guitar or talk about the meaning of lyrics while they told me about their experiences with Diné teachings or hogan construction techniques.

As a mode of expression, music and gym shoes overlap in specific parallels that may draw on similarities between the renegades in the Divine Knights and the social misfits of DYL. For the young gang members in Eastwood, fashionable gym shoes spoke about how a someone imagined themselves in the gang in ways that created fashion hierarchies. Danny, one of the renegades interviewed in Ralph’s ethnography, acknowledged Ralph’s shoes by correcting a fellow inmate. Ralph’s “Dunks,” were a popular shoe in Danny’s community; “[e]verybody on
my block rocks them. Those are cool,” (Ralph 83). I noticed similar circumstances with the restoration crew’s music choice. Contemporary hip-hop and rock tracks were played with much greater frequency over other forms like classical music or ceremonial songs. Conversely, radio stations along the Navajo reservation played an outstanding number of country tunes, much to the distaste of the young crew members. “It’s country on, like, every station,” Riko once joked from the passenger seat of my rental car as he rapidly, and with a slight tinge of frustration, prodded at the seek button on the car’s radio. Sure enough, after completing one revolution exploring every station available, we connected his cell phone to the radio in order to play his own music choices. A commanding leap forward thanks to the technological progressions of Bluetooth and Spotify.

That being said, there are many ways that gym shoes and music are different in their own regards. For the Renegades, gym shoes are similar symbols that are situated among the bodies of gang members. Fashion trends dictate a type of personality that is articulated through one’s presence, whereas music is less aesthetically driven. Alternatively, music invites communal spaces for people in ways that gym shoes do not. While exploring the northeastern part of the reservation with Riko and some of his friends, I was directed to several punk “venues” that looked more like abandoned shacks on the side of the road. These collapsed structures were suitable for momentary music events that were self-organized by the music communities around the reservation. This type of collective action, while particularly driven by a demand for music events, can also be seen in a similar style with the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence found in chapter three. While both gym shoes and music represent how young people form social groups

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17 Berto played a peyote song for us that was published from a friend’s social media page when we were on break during the hogan project in Cuba. He then proceeded to give a historical backstory to the song itself and what the singer was saying.
and recognize each other as peers, these subtle differences regarding commercial hierarchies in the case of gym shoes or collective action for punk shows are useful in parsing out how young people maintain their social groups.

Education, on the other hand, is a much more noticeable example of how each generation experienced life on the Navajo reservation and what that meant for their own identities and that of the community. Unlike music, which seemed to dissolve across generations with relatively older people like Born For Water sharing similar music tastes to the young restoration crew, educational systems had clearly marked generational changes as boarding schools phased in and out of existence due to federal implementations. While some elders viewed the forced assimilation into boarding school style Christian teaching practices as horribly violent, humiliating, dehumanizing, and unnecessary, it is also not the general consensus for the whole community. Many members of higher political authority, such as representatives of the Navajo Nation, come from a background of higher education and often infuse Diné lifeways with other forms of pedagogy. This philosophical and epistemological bifurcation, justified in an effort of creating a cohesive Diné identity, has only trickled down to the Navajo reservation’s youth with polarizing effects. Restoration crew who dropped out of high school seem to think little to nothing of it, preferring instead to work and gain their education through DYL’s efforts. Others, alternatively, have expressed interest in using higher education to acquire the academic and professional recognition necessary to improve oneself, and in effect their community, within the capitalist structure of the United States. Born For Water and members of the office crew all held or were in the process of obtaining college degrees focusing specifically on Native studies, human rights, or other forms of academic disciplines that could then be used to bolster and legitimize DYL as they present themselves outside of the Navajo reservation.
Yet, the categories of a misfit or renegade do not completely represent those young individuals burdened with carrying the labels unloaded upon them by their fellow community members—most of them older or in an occupation of disadvantageously higher power. An overwhelming amount of literature is dedicated to the violences and structural disenfranchisement of Native youth revolving around incarceration (Kunitz et al. 1998) (Litt and Singleton 2015), suicide (Grossman et al. 1991), mental and emotional health statuses (Barney 2001) (Cummins et al. 1999) (Blum et al. 1992)—yet, we hear very little from the youths themselves. Their voices, in the hegemonic spheres of academia, are eclipsed by statistics and measuring devices that project outward while causing tremors in the lived experiences of Native youth. Because I only worked with a relatively small collective of young fellows and employees this research does not attempt to make any claims about the broad implications of Native youth identity in the twenty-first century. Instead, it is my hope that the profiles I have established of the young DYL members changes the way we think about those often dismissed, marginalized, or categorized by unfaithful labels that do not attempt to understand who these individuals actually are.

DYL’s Legacy

Born For Water, sometimes, had doubts that the youth program was really making a difference for his ragtag group of youngsters. The restoration crew was often in charge of leading workshops for community members, providing tours of the field site for researchers, and interacting with elders through a process of introducing themselves and sharing stories. The latter example is one in which Born For Water frequently wrestled with frustrations. “It’s like sometimes I wonder if the work we are doing—teaching the kids—is worth it, you know?” Born
For Water explained during a cruise back to Pinon from Cuba. The previous day we had filmed a tour of the Cuba hogan for DYL to market digitally for a new group of young recruits. Born For Water and the crew had decided it would be helpful to provide an audio dialogue with the hogan—explaining what makes this one so unique, the meaning behind its construction, and what they are hoping the finished product will represent. I suggested that each crew member share a brief moment with the camera to talk about their contribution to the hogan project and anything they learned throughout the process of building such an iconic structure.

Born For Water started off the video with an introduction of himself and his work with DYL. He then set the crew up with some talking points by covering the basics of what a hogan is, what it is used for, and why people still live in hogans today. Following Born For Water’s lead, the rest of the crew took over, one by one, going into the details of the Cuba hogan in particular. However, some of the newer members of the crew stumbled over some information, confusing certain directional meanings or the geometric layout of construction, and frequently referred to Born For Water for clarification. It seemed that for the sake of video representation Born For Water kept his cool and filled in parts that required further explanation, but he was also clearly disappointed.

“If these kids can’t even keep their directions right, how can we expect them to remember these stories,” Born For Water lamented from the passenger seat as I drove in silence, listening thoughtfully, “the details matter, but it’s like the kids don’t care.” I didn’t have a solution to his dilemma; I didn’t even have a creative idea or joke to try and alleviate the situation. Born For Water’s dilemma, one that he puts on the responsibility of the kids who will carry these metaphorical identity torches, is one that reminds me of parents worrying about the wellbeing of their children. Given the familial energy felt during our meals together with the restoration crew
back at Bitterwater it doesn’t surprise me that Born For Water probably imagines the kids he mentors like relatives that he is equally responsible for. He once told me that he has a hard time firing kids from the youth program because he doesn’t want to create a “legacy” of people getting kicked out this program. He wants to see it thrive, but also questions its longevity if people are not taking it as seriously as he is. Part of the dilemma is the ways in which DYL, and Born For Water specifically, imagines futures for Diné youth must also reckon with obstacles that are completely out of their control yet also fiercely interfere with their objectives.

The legacy that Born For Water seems to want is one where the kids are able to maximize their potential for the greatest benefit of themselves, their families, and their community. These benefits are more than just monetary means of paying bills, buying food, or ensuring there is clean water available every day—though that is certainly an important aspect for many youth. Rather, Born For Water wants the kids to leave with an impression that the knowledge and experiences they gain through connecting with Diné history and innovating modern technology can be used, practically and sustainably, in a way that is an improvement in their lives and livelihoods. Kids can utilize their knowledge to grow more connected to their community instead of just existing within it—observing this unrecognizable object from afar, disfigured by colonialism and perpetuated by selfish ideologies. Such benefits not only acknowledge history as a device to organize and reclaim power, but also suggest possibilities for a feasible future that not only includes youth, it prioritizes them.

As opposed to micromanaging in order to ensure that everything is going according to his own plan, Born For Water handed the reigns over to the kids to see how well they can steer this carriage that we are all riding together. One project I was unable to help DYL continue was a restructuring of the rock gabions that run from the northern-most point of Bitterwater into the
fields below. These waterways were made from old carriage roads but have since been reclaimed and modified with rocks and fencing to navigate rainfall toward the fields. Rocks were loaded into a tractor that Born For Water borrowed from a friend nearby and then dropped off along the watershed. However, one time it was difficult to get a tractor out to the field site because a machine operator had broken the tractor’s tires leaving it completely out of commission. A lot of the heavy machinery was borrowed which leaves a great deal of uncertainty regarding when projects will get done or if they will ever get done at all. Riot Punch used to work construction and often talked about going back to school or getting certified as a machine operator.

“Yeah, I think that would be a good thing,” Riot Punch remarked, “to make money, but also to help out around here. Born For Water really wants me to get certified, that way we don’t have to rely on these people where it’s like, ‘When is this thing coming? I don’t know’”

Additionally, Born For Water was also providing space for kids to be their own leaders and learn their own ways of cooperating with one other to improve teamwork. Yucca Boy was a particularly strong candidate to take on these leadership responsibilities if Born For Water ever decided to step down or focus on other projects. I would often see the two planning out the day’s goals before working on the hogan, or traveling to conferences that welcomed DYL. When working on the hogan, Born For Water and Yucca Boy seemed to divide tasks where the other crew members were with one person or the other in order to get things done quickly and effectively. While Born For Water was setting up the hogan walls, Yucca Boy was building trenches and the rest of us were helping them out by bringing in logs, resupplying tools, or providing additional support. Even in my earliest observations I could tell that Yucca Boy was serious about the work they were doing and took great interest in all aspects of what DYL was trying to accomplish. During my first lunch with everyone, grabbing a bite to eat at a local
Chinese restaurant where the options were “cheap and plenty of it,” I was able to casually speak with Born For Water and Yucca Boy. Yucca Boy had already been with the program for about five years and had brought along some of the guys from his high school’s football team to be part of the crew. Born For Water continued by mentioning that he often leaves Yucca Boy alone to organize the plan for the day and make sure everyone is doing what they are supposed to be doing.

“Sounds like you have a replacement coming up,” I jokingly remarked, not really thinking much of it. After all, in my experience it is not often that you are trained by someone with the intent of replacing that person. Then again, most of my work experience were mundane retail jobs or in kitchens were even the thought of replacing a superior chef was one whispered after hours at a bar down the street. The closest analogy I can think of regarding this notion of working yourself out of a job is the mission of non-profits: its volunteers who essentially spend their time fighting a problem that is hopefully solved, but also effectively terminating their volunteerism in the long run.

“That’s the idea,” Born For Water responded casually, taking a bite out of his sweet and sour chicken. He then laughed a little and asked me more about myself. He wanted to know why I was interested in the Navajo reservation, what I could share about my family, and general information about my school. However, I couldn’t stop thinking about what he really meant by that quick statement. Was the idea to replace himself, to keep the knowledge going by passing it down to a new generation, or something else entirely that I was not yet seeing? Born For Water’s later frustrations, as they sporadically poured out during our four-hour car rides back and forth between Pinon and Cuba, seemed to indicate that what the restoration crew needed was some
young blood to relate to the other kids in the program. If that’s the case, was Yucca Boy the best one for the job?

“He’s great,” Born For Water said when I asked about Yucca Boy’s commitment to DYL, “but the problem is sometimes the other kids don’t listen to him. I tell him, ‘Hey man, those kids need to respect you. Don’t be afraid to tell them what to do.’” In some ways I agree with Born For Water’s suggestion, but at the same time he didn’t acknowledge one of Yucca Boy’s best traits: he leads by example. Yucca Boy’s commitment to his work, demonstrated by his constant focus, contagious energy, and inspirational knowledge, are all excellent leadership qualities. While he may not call people out who are not doing their share of work, his subtle leadership traits became quite obvious when other kids end up gravitating to Yucca Boy for advice when they don’t know what else to do.

At the same time, I couldn’t help but empathize with Yucca Boy’s situation at that moment. Just the year prior I had been a manager at a supermarket in my neighboring town of Bristol and I knew how tough it was to get respect in a professional situation. A lot of the people I worked with were about my age and saw me more as a friend or co-worker than someone with higher authority. I started getting flashbacks to meetings with the store manager in a cramped, wood-paneled office, sitting on a horribly uncomfortable steel chair and hearing about how to best delegate tasks to my staff.

“Just because they’re the same age as you doesn’t mean you get less respect. They need to know you’re the one to listen to,” said the head store manager to me—or some type of pseudo-motivational nonsense like that. The problem is that there is nothing you can really say or do to force someone to respect you. It kind of just happens naturally, or not at all. Now, this is not to suggest that the kids on the restoration crew did not respect Yucca Boy. In fact, I would often see
or hear them asking Yucca Boy for advice or help with something they were working on. Instead, I noticed that Yucca Boy was more of the quiet type who seemed to prefer working alone than managing a large project with many people. Although he would give terrific advice when asked, it was his more reserved personality that gave room for other kids to do what they wanted—even if that meant slacking off. Luckily, all of the kids I worked with were highly motivated and seemed to really enjoy the work they were doing, but I could see a problem arising if Yucca Boy had to manage a project with kids who preferred slacking off. I shared my managerial experience to which Born For Water laughed and agreed, and then shrugged off his dilemma with a dismissive “What are ya gonna do?” response. After all, the projects were coming along great and DYL’s community presence was growing at a phenomenal rate. It seemed that, for the time, his concerns with how effective the youth program was for its participants was one more worthy of reflection than any immediate action. If any kind of change were to be made, it would be accomplished in the long run with returning trips to elders and more frequent repetitions of stories. It was an endurance challenge of the mind a spirit, not a blitzkrieg of identity reinforcement.

With the odds seemingly pitted against them, Diné youth are looking for a way to support their families while also learning the things that are important to them. If it’s science, why not an agricultural science; if art, why not taught by a weaver or medicine person; if history, why not Diné history? Although I do not wish to deeply explore an ethnography of American public education on the Navajo reservation, it adds substance to why the youth program at DYL is so effective. The kids that go there do so with a drive, force, and effort to make something of themselves while they still can. DYL, likewise, provides the space and guidance to reconnect
young Diné with their communities and types of knowledge, while also making some money to sustain their families.
Chapter Three

Recognizing Ourselves: Reflections on an Indigenous Anarchist Convergence
Different Spaces Building Similar Communities

Along with the restoration and office crew, I had begun to meet other people who lived or worked on or near the Navajo reservation and were interested in forms of activism. Riko’s uncle, along with Hózhó and Kiki had told me about a place in Flagstaff, an infoshop, that was a headquarters of sorts for Indigenous activists. “It’s a cool spot, lots of good people there,” Riko’s uncle said to me during a conversation over breakfast about the Standing Rock protests, “I remember going there [to Standing Rock] and hitching a ride with these people from the infoshop, and I was like, ‘Oh, cool! More Natives!’ You know? Like we were all riding together. Then I saw them way later, back here, at a punk show on the rez.” The way he talked about it, the infoshop sounded like a small community itself, where active-minded, usually young, Indigenous people could organize themselves and address issues they personally feel passionate about.

DYL, similarly, offered spaces for active Indigenous youth to also help themselves and their communities—but in a different way. For one, DYL provided a financial incentive that fellows like Drew found attractive and useful in supporting his family. Criticized by some as operating under a “non-profit agenda,” DYL, whose founders prefer to identify the organization as a “fiscally-sponsored Native movement,” faces a series of challenges that an independent, volunteer-operated organization is free from. Primarily, DYL is subjected to audits in order to ensure that their budgets are appropriately allocated and accounted for. These bureaucratic, logistical obstacles sometimes interfere with the timing and dedication to projects. The hogan constructions, for example, were temporarily suspended for weeks while DYL organized its books and prepared a presentation to their sponsors.
Ya’at’eeh, the infoshop in Flagstaff, oriented itself toward a different kind of activism that attempted to keep its distance from any kind of outside interference, be it from loan sharks, government agencies, or otherwise. However, that is not to say the infoshop did not face its own challenges. Operating mostly under the guise of one owner and a couple volunteers, Ya’at’eeh required a dedicated team of self-motivated individuals in order to perform the daily upkeep of the relatively modest building on the corner of a short road off the main highway. Its space included a library of poetry, history, novels, and more ranging from topics on LGBTQ+, critical race theory, cookbooks, art and music as well as a vast selection of NAIS texts. There was also a kitchen just north of the library, a storage room that held printing supplies, ink and paints, and a colorful collection of posters with protest slogans handwritten on them. Three multipurpose rooms surrounded the kitchen and library where events, discussions, and performances were hosted. Finally, in the back yard was a garden of white and red corn, watermelons, strawberries, fruit trees, squash and herbs as well as a wash basin and steel grill. When I arrived at Ya’at’eeh I met a couple, Lou and Alana, who had been living there for a month after recently becoming homeless. To them, as well as other homeless people (particularly Indigenous homeless people), Ya’at’eeh was more than just a place to plan a protest—it was a home, a shelter, a learning space, a safe spot to hang their coat and eat a warm meal. Not too dissimilar from the hogans DYL was building to create new models of learning, communicating, and living, Ya’at’eeh was also providing a sanctuary for Native people to retain some semblance of self through a structured, caring community.

Besides the uncle’s recommendation, I was also told by Hózhó and Kiki to check out Ya’at’eeh as it would be hosting a significant event that upcoming weekend. In an impressive and inspiring act of collective communication, Ya’at’eeh would be the gathering place for a large
group of Indigenous activists in what would be called the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence.
The four-day meeting would be open for all to attend, free admission, to discuss Indigeneity and Anarchy, play and dance to music, perform at a drag show, share food with each other, and more. Representatives from activist organizations such as Haul No!, an awareness and action group to safeguard sacred sites around the Grand Canyon communities affected by uranium extraction and transportation, Diné NO NUKES and others would also be present at the Convergence.

Indigenous Anarchism is more of a force than a structured entity. It is like magnetism in that it attracts certain material beings, but also repels and separates others. It has the ideological power to energize a collective while also probing into a deep reflective understanding of what it means to be a part of that collective. Indigeneity and anarchy emerge at a discursive crossroads that is mobilized by people dissatisfied with the settler-colonial status quo state. Organizing a gathering to discuss Indigenous Anarchism is a complex and demanding process: phones buzzed and lit up with outreach efforts, spaces needed to be openly available and accessible, and social media pages pulsated with intensity from the numerous artists, activists, scholars, and others flooding into the gathering. For myself, I simply managed to show up by myself at the right place at the right time. The day before the Convergence was scheduled to begin, I popped my head into the main entrance of an infoshop in Flagstaff to simply ask about what they do there and who they work with. I was greeted with a friendly, but slightly confused, smile from Lou who told me, “Sorry, we’re kind of in the middle of cleaning up for this big conference starting tomorrow.” I apologized for my sudden arrival, but asked if they needed any help with the cleaning. Within a few minutes I was grabbing a pair of work gloves out of my rental and helping volunteers throw out old printers, wash a donated jungle gym for the day care, and tend to a garden in the back yard. As we were cleaning, Lou introduced me to his wife, Alana, who
laughed at the random stranger hauling buckets of paint, “You know, a lot of people who come volunteer here are like this. They just show up, say, ‘Hey, I want to help,’ and before you know it, they’re like family.”

Meanwhile, in the middle of soaping the plastic jungle gym with Alana, another volunteer, Kenny, emerged from the back entrance holding a torn-up camouflage vest. “Look what I found underneath some boxes! I’m thinking about wearing this to our grocery store trip,” they said flailing the tattered fabric around wildly. Alana introduced us and asked Kenny to give me a quick tour since Ben, the owner, was busy taking phone calls. Excitedly, Kenny agreed and began asking me about myself, what I was doing here, how I found out about the infoshop and so on. They introduced themselves as a “passionate, kick-ass medic,” who got interested in activism early because of their mother, who was an activist, but even more so after Standing Rock.

“What they won’t tell you,” Kenny said, “is that we didn’t leave after the government ordered us to. A lot of us stayed—me too to help people, and the news didn’t cover it or anything! I felt so pissed after, and I didn’t just wanna go back to ‘society,’ you know, so I stuck with some people I met at Standing Rock and ended up here!” Kenny’s energy was contagious, and I could feel their passion for protest and sticking with their community. They showed me the library, which had a clipboard and paper to sign out books. “There’s no check-out date, really, so just be sure to give it back in a fair amount of time,” Kenny said with a smile. The community garden, kitchen, and printing room, like the library, were all available for anyone who entered Ya’at’eeh. There seemed to be an understanding that everyone in this space was mindful of the people around them, and to only use Ya’at’eeh’s resources as much and for as long as necessary—to not take more than needed, or steal for one’s own benefit.
I was beginning to understand why so many of the friends I had already made with DYL had suggested I visit the infoshop. Similar to DYL, Ya’at’eeh had invited a complete stranger into their space, worked with them on projects, and offered a place to learn and hang out. After Lou and I finished moving some extra tools and the wash basin outside, we came back in to meet Ben. A tall, slender man dressed all in black had his feet crossed on top of a square foldable table in the middle of the main entrance. His dark, wide dobro obscured his face as he leaned into his phone. In the background I could hear the industrial music of a popular rock band, Tool’s new album, the latest in about ten years, playing out of Kenny’s phone. He was jumping and cheering about receiving a signed print of the album’s artwork by artist Alex Grey. Ben smiled at Kenny as he hung up the phone and then looked at me. I briefly introduced myself, mentioned some of the people at the infoshop I just met, and asked about the Convergence. Ben, a man of simple words, said, “Ok, feel free to help out if you want,” then gave me his phone number and went to the back room.

“It’s cool,” Lou reassured, “he’s really busy planning this whole thing. You know, there’s like hundreds of people coming, and we’re running out of space.”

Ben had a reputation for being radical, and even he acknowledged it. He was no stranger to the prison system, and neither were many of the other volunteers at Ya’at’eeh who casually mentioned, or sometimes dreaded, upcoming court dates regarding previous protests they attended. Although Ben didn’t go much into the details of what exactly his reputation meant, aspects of his personality and the following he amassed were a bit controversial among some of the people at DYL. Hózhó, one of the office crew fellows, suspected he was using his Native identity as a selling point to attract radical youth who wanted to be involved in a Native movement—using anarchy and colonialism as vindication for his own self-worth. Clara, another
member of the office crew who I only met once, seemed hooked on some of these selling points, going so far as to say they think Ben is right in criticizing DYL because the ways they are enacting resistance are not radical enough. To add to the tension, Ben is also related to Born For Water through his aunt, Penny. While Born For Water did not speak much about Ben during our many conversations, it does not seem like they are in any state of confrontation. Instead, Born For Water imagines their two respective organizations as having similar goals with different means of achieving them. In many ways, the two organizations are difficult to compare because of the multiple, discreet variations in the way they operate and who they work with on a daily basis. It is easy to see these activist groups as just two sides of the same coin, but in reality they are almost completely different currencies. And yet, due to their close proximity, not only geographically but also the people they share, both organizations find ways to cooperate with one another: DYLCrew attended the Convergence and Ben showed up to a gathering on Big Mountain, a celebration of the closing of Peabody Coal in one area of the Navajo-Hopi partition land, along with most of the DYLC staff.

What’s significant about these interactions is how it reveals a bit of what we begin to understand about activism. Particularly the notion that activism is not just about the social structures we are trying to change, but the communities we build in that process. David Graeber’s (2009) ethnography on anarchists and activism comments on the structure of these communities as, “a host of radical filmmakers, web journalists, radio activists; it involves a vast Independent Media network that first emerged from Seattle and has continued, during every major convergence, to provide detailed minute-by-minute accounts of action,” (Graeber 2009, 11). Whether it be through tapping into people’s urge to get loud, angry, or discursive about the things that irritate them, or address the realities of everyday financial hardship that hinder how a
young Diné father learns about his ancestry. The importance here is the actual “act” of activism, and what it accomplishes for the people who are doing it. Does it inspire them like it did for Kenny? Does it educate them like DYL attempts to do with their various projects? Does it bring forth nuanced discussions and ways of thinking, planning, working, and reflecting? There are, of course, many things activism accomplishes—and not all of them the immediate result of the goals they articulate—but what is most fascinating are the different ways it brings people together.

Opening the Doors of Ya’at’eeh

Late August is a particularly unsettling time in Arizona. Most of the region experiences intense heat, drought, fires, and a swarming of insects that gnaw on the body and pesky critters that rob farms. One August day, however, I found myself in the luxury of a cool, shaded room listening to narratives, practices, and reflections on decolonization. I was at an Indigenous Anarchist Convergence, hosted by Ya’at’eeh—an infoshop in Kinlani18 (currently occupied Flagstaff as they refer to it) on the base of Do’koo’osliid (San Francisco Peaks, the Diné Western mountain) where over 120 individuals and 30 organizations gathered to talk about what it means to declare oneself an Indigenous anarchist. In the words of a Ya’at’eeh admin reflecting about the Convergence online a few weeks later, “we’re interested in inspired formations, agitations, interventions, and acts towards total liberation,” (taalahooghan.org). About fifty or so people,

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18 It is worth considering the terminology one uses to declare oneself an Indigenous anarchist. In a way, proclaiming to still refer to a place as it was prior to colonial settlement is a statement on a different understanding sovereignty as embedded in names. Because anarchists have a disruptive relationship with the state, the terminology they use to refer to significant places is another form of reclaiming and resisting power structures.
myself included, were sitting in a circular formation of chairs around the room listening to each other share thoughts on what it means to decolonize, organize, and interact with each other.

Hózhó and Kiki, who wanted to check out the Convergence since the day prior, had almost immediately left me on my own when they ran into some friends at the infoshop’s entrance. After signing in, we stood in a large open room with tables full of pamphlets, stickers, books, t-shirts, and more. We were each given a patch—a brown square decorated with a white arrowhead and an anarchy “A” symbol in the middle—and told that a discussion was already being held in the multipurpose room next to us. While Hózhó and Kiki chatted, I explored the infoshop while heading to the discussion. Ya’at’eeh was vibrating with all sorts of energies: people chatted and laughed, others circled the tables collecting various forms of literature, the heat and aroma of a kitchen in full force emitted from the back of the shop, and finally I stepped through into the multipurpose room where chairs and people spiraled out in a circle across the floor. I saw Lou’s thoughtful face poking out from a crowd of strangers on the far end of the room, and Ben was sitting, outstretched and dressed in all black, alongside the wall closest to me.

Although I was not at the Convergence to intentionally confront my whiteness, through virtue of curiosity and discomfort I had voluntarily exposed myself as one without a complete understanding of my own settler-colonial history as it attempts to mark Indigeneity. The discussion I stepped into centered around decolonization and its obstructive uses in both politics and academia in ways that remain distant from Indigenous perspectives. Speakers at the Convergence directly referred to and engaged in dialogues with Tuck and Yang’s “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” as a textual resource to vent their frustrations of living in a colonized white patriarchy while also confronting the difficult responsibility of being
representatives of their cultural associations. As a direct artifact of the Convergence, texts such as this one reveals the ways their subject matter may very well also be their audience.

A key aspect of Tuck and Yang’s argument is that the processes surrounding an attempt at decolonization—whether it be through academia or social thought—are ultimately incommensurable to the actual goal of decolonization: repatriation. The historical act of colonization has ambiguously obscured accountability from forms of implicit structural violence felt upon the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples to a widespread national “white guilt” complex in which even those with a settler-colonial past attempt to “go Native” by fabricating their familial genealogy. Decolonization, however, has nothing to do with letting go of the past or letting bygones be bygones. Instead, the process of decolonization through repatriation involves an acknowledgement of colonial violence and a purposeful departure from colonialism in all its forms. It is not enough just to return the land because it was never owned to begin with. Instead, the call is to allow a reconnection with the land and a disconnection from colonial control. In the words of Tuck and Yang, “incommensurability means relinquishing settler futurity, abandoning the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples,” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 36). Decolonization differs from other civil rights approaches in that it is intentionally, and literally, unsettling. At its core, civil rights are constituted within a liberal framework that assumes direct participation between citizens and the state. Decolonization efforts, on the other hand, work directly against the rhetoric of statehood (e.g.; the Constitution) in that part of its unsettling quality is its non-collaborative demands for repatriation. Liberalism, along with many other “-isms” for that matter, must be relinquished to the priority of decolonization before any hope for true collaboration can be imagined.
One speaker, a Michif-Cree individual called Micah, talked about the double-standard associated with being invited to a Truth and Reconciliation conference in Canada because she is Native. “I was being seen, but not heard,” they recalled, “I talked unapologetically. I called them out on their hypocrisy, and they smiled and laughed and said, ‘You’re right,’ but that was it.” The room began to sway with nods and bubbled with sympathetic laughter or groans of agreement. Soon others began to respond. “White people should just go back to Europe,” one guest declared, “and if they can’t go back to their homelands they have to learn how to live according to systematically oppressed populations.” Others nodded in agreement, and I found myself searching for my own understandings of American political history: everything from the institutionalized “founding” of America in 1492, to the lack of Native presence in the Constitution, Jacksonian genocidal campaigns and manifest destiny narratives flung open the metaphorical doors of America’s closet to reveal the mangled skeletons that lay inside. The steamroller of European colonial patriarchy continued its work through rhetoric, literature, law-enforcement, politics, and education in ways that subverted and disempowered Native voices.

Then another guest responded, “It’s probably really difficult for them to understand, but just because we were forced off our homelands doesn’t mean that we ever really left.” This discussion was more than just embodying anarchy or Indigeneity to stand opposite the government: people were commenting on the historical erasure of Indigenous peoples and what it’s like to be part of that community and feel erased and live with that every day. These discussions gave enormous weight and powerful reality to the texts they engaged with. NAIS scholars such as Tuck and Yang and Dunbar-Ortiz are taught in college environments as well as circulate within Indigenous anarchists as an important part of their work. From this perspective, the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence possessed the qualities of an educational space that
allowed for attendees to reflect on their own history and sense of understanding. Furthermore, these texts have also been incorporated into the curriculum of a Native American course at Bard College along with efforts to bring Indigenous voices back to the communities from which their presence is often unrecognized. The work accomplished through bridging activism and education is, despite its challenges and frustrations, necessarily meaningful and a call for others to engage in their own research and challenge their assumptions.

However, what I saw at the Convergence was more than a gathering of people representing, in their own way, Native families trying to identify themselves in the world—this was resistance actualized, colonization rejected, and pain articulated. I found myself, inadvertently, face-to-face with the “historical realities” that Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz confronts as a necessary form of “outrage and demand” that descendants of settlers and immigrants must acknowledge and “assume responsibility” (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, 10). Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* approaches U.S. history from a perspective that attempts to dismantle the institutional vice-grip that most Western schools have on how its students understand the history of their country. Dunbar-Ortiz talks about the formation of the U.S. as a “colonialist settler-state” that forcibly “crushed and subjugated the original civilizations in the territories it now rules” (14). This perspective not only serves as an intellectual counterweight to years of intentional historical manipulation instilled onto U.S. citizens, but a platform for Native voices to share their histories. However, as Dunbar-Ortiz recognizes, “there is no such thing as a collective Indigenous peoples’ perspective,” which problematizes what we mean when we use the term Indigenous.
What Do We Even Mean by “Indigenous”?

Predicated on this term, the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence is a way of reaching out to a particular identity entangled within other, more global, expressions and movements. Unlike anarchism, which has its own theories on social life about curtailing certain forms of government, when combined with Indigeneity it acquires a different kind of meaning. The fact that a gathering like the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence or DYL aligning itself as “intertribal,” and part of a Native movement situate themselves in a specific context that demands understanding as to what they are doing and why it is important for them. The concept of Indigeneity is one that is both situated within the nation and orbiting around its periphery. Stuck between two spaces, the Indigenous person must be marked and pure in order to be recognized by the nation enforcing and occupying their homelands. Its reconciliation leaves no room for the various slippages and difficulties that tug at the Indigenous body, dragging it back to the fringes outside the observable spaces of the state.

Elizabeth Povinelli’s ethnography, The Cunning of Recognition takes interest in irreconcilable moments of interaction between colonial and Aboriginal Australians. These moments are encapsulated in the various legal and political frameworks that constitute what is morally acceptable versus what is detrimental. Examples permeate through generational differences within families where younger members contest the value of culturally significant places, such as the Dreaming site, in favor of mining pursuits to alleviate structural poverty. New social imaginaries are thus formed from people’s everyday interactions with each other and the state: “I should be tolerant but you make me sick; I understand your reasoning but I am deeply offended by your presence” (Povinelli 2002, 5). For Povinelli, concepts of citizenship and nationalism are in direct contestation against Indigenous repatriation. Shameful colonial damages
are unapologetically instituted through various methodologies of affect and discourse. It is in this bind that the Indigenous self is irreconcilable: how can one be part of a society when its structure forces one to arbitrarily stop being themselves? The impasses of social and moral orders further propagate this dilemma.

“It is not necessary to conceptualize a coherent subject nor completely separate discursive orders in order to conceptualize the vital sociological consequences of moments in which indigenous and nonindigenous subjects (or any subjects for that matter) experience contrasting obligations to reasoned argument and moral sensibility—and, most important, are called upon to performatively enact and overcome this impasse as the condition of recognition.” (Povinelli 3)

Impasses of such a magnitude become further complicated when recognition is paired with decolonization efforts. Part of this challenge involves a recognition of not just the Indigenous, but its settler-colonist opponent. Liberal morality finds itself on a slippery slope when its actors and enforcers must recognize the types of structural violence that may be unexpectedly or unintentionally repeated in pursuits of equality. Decolonization is one such example where moral obligation and political reasoning find themselves in a back-and-forth battle for the steering wheel of a sinking ship upon which ferry its reluctant passengers.

Evoking the argument brought up by Audra Simpson in her chapter on “Ethnographic Refusal,” Indigeneity is problematically bound to colonialism and anthropology to the point where it is the primary medium through which “Indigenous people have been known and sometimes are still known” (Simpson 2014, 95). However, Indigeneity is more than just a colonial concept but an ontological and epistemological dilemma that has evolved into one of understanding nationhood as well. In a violated kind of exclusion, the Indigenous body is either
forced to assimilate to the nation or navigate its fringes. While Povinelli is interested in what happens during moments when those two forces interact—where obligation meets moral sensibility—I am curious about what is lost in the bifurcation of Indigenous and national identities. For example, what histories do we lose due to the erasure or flattening of Indigenous narratives? What would our education system look like if we followed the teachings of Native elders? How would our agriculture be different if we practiced the ancestral eating and farming patterns of those who inhabited this land before us? In what ways would our concepts of borders, citizenship, and community change according to the views of Indigenous neighbors?

*Listening as Ethnographic Discipline*

I was wanting to have a conversation, and instead became a silent listener. There is no shame in admitting that I entered the Convergence with an objective of discussing with those I believed would best benefit my own research process. And yet, the precursor to that discussion through unpacking the inherent unsettling of decolonization reverberated like a winter chill in my bones. I felt that my history was not a welcomed addition to the process of understanding Indigenous Anarchy. My heritage as an Anglo-European, Irish, white male might as well have stood in for the enemy—the oppressor. It was the fact that they already knew so much about my concepts of American history while I knew little or nothing about theirs.

There was a moment when the Michif-Cree presenter, Micah, had finished talking about decolonization as non-metaphorical and was taking questions “specifically from women or trans with black or brown skin.” I was floored! Never before had I been to a public speaking event where a speaker purposely and intentionally vetted questions from a specific audience. Yet,
given the space I was in and the themes being discussed, it shouldn’t have been that unusual. A grand majority of the people present had black or brown skin, and there were many women and trans, so what was so shocking? Upon reflection, it seemed that the speaker’s specificity was intentional to bring the voices of those who had been categorically underrepresented in past narratives where those populations are usually in the minority of speaking groups. What was different here, though, was I was actively forced to listen. My participation was not measured by the presence of my voice or body in the room, but of my ability to connect with someone else’s voice and try to understand them. Through bearing witness to people’s testimonies, ideas, and voices I too would be in possession of their truth, albeit in a different way. The lived experiences to which I was an audience to hearing were, and still are, unignorable and an undeniable fact of history. In addition to myself, there were others in the room who held equal weight in the responsibility of witness. Thus, we together formed a collective audience of actor and narrator to our own histories and what those histories implied in our actions moving forward.

Discomfort is remarkably productive. Not just in anthropology, but in all social relations we find moments of discomfort as opportunities to learn from each other and grow. Discomfort allows for the reversal or dissolving of power dynamics that create comfort, luxury, and excess to begin with. Consider what associations a Western, white, colonized audience may deem discomforting: isolation, disease, poverty, oppression, etc. Now, think about how often those traits are associated with individuals of particular populations, such as Indigenous peoples. The high rate of incarceration, diabetes, family separation, and gendered violence are only skimming the surface of how “discomforting” it may be to identify oneself as Native. Further, there is also a present isolation among reservations as sites in which these violences not only occur, but blossom in rampant repetition, as well as places relegated to “outside” white populations, that
prevail as discomfort that exists outside the lived body. What discomfort offers, therefore, are “opportunities for solidarity,” claim Tuck and Yang, “in what is incommensurable rather than what is common across these efforts” (28). The point of placing oneself in a setting of discomfort is not to bring about definite answers or immediately solve the world’s problems, but to draw in an understanding and perspective of our own human relations and ethical treatment towards one another. In bearing witness to not only the histories of others, but also misunderstandings of my own history, I was forced to confront the disorienting effort of actually doing something about it. If I could not speak up in the Convergence, and if I cannot unsettle all of colonized white America, then what can I or we do?

My curiosity, nonetheless, always got the better of me. While I certainly wanted to add to my research, the real reason I was sitting in that circle listening to the presenters at an Indigenous Anarchist Convergence in Flagstaff was because I brought myself there. It was that same curiosity that made me knock on the door the previous day, and ask to help clean up the shop; the same curiosity that took me back and forth across Pinon, Cuba, Page, and other places with DYL; and similar qualities that pushed me to visit the Navajo reservation years ago and help test water sources for uranium contamination. Discomfort was certainly a passenger on that journey, but it was not controlling the steering wheel.

In a sense, the space I shared with Indigenous anarchists were working toward the same goals of reformulating the contradictions that we all live with. The notion that someone is “purely” Indigenous, an anarchist, or a colonizer is a fallacy that obscures the ways in which we view the world and/or interact with people. Many of the people I listened to felt profoundly disconnected from an origin they never felt they had to begin with. Similar to the impasses of recognition that Povinelli argues make Indigeneity a complex and nearly impossible figure,
Indigenous anarchists also struggled with articulating their embodiment of this concept. Unlike some of the outcomes from the various work DYL is involved with, particularly those related to reclaiming, restoring, and innovating important aspects of an Indigenous identity, the anarchists I met directly expressed what they did not know about or did not feel comfortable with their identity. While DYL implored projects that allowed its people to use Diné Bizaad to articulate their clan heritage, touch on historical construction designs through hogan building, and restore landscapes and economies through farming practices, these efforts are situated within a particular Native identity that may not be the same for other populations.

According to a blog post reflecting on the Convergence, “an indigenous person can have a complicated personal relationship with their indigeneity and their role within the violent dominance of capitalist settler-colonialism,” (thecollective). These grapplingings, while often violent and unsettling, were also relieved by the work and accountability of anarchy in which we recognize the ways we harm, have been harmed, and how that relates to our upbringing. Furthermore, anarchism, as defined by an attendee at the Convergence, “isn’t rooted in the land, but in self-education and community education.” Similarly, DYL engaged in educational practices that were reflected in both the self and community, albeit their forms of education also included place-based knowledges and teaching how to restore landscapes. With Convergence attendees, however, the idea that one must seek out their own education speaks once more to the self-motivated qualities of who maintains a relationship with Ya’át’eeh or the other anarchists. And yet, what’s so interesting in this statement is the connection, or in this case a disconnection, between ideology and land. Do we need a sense of claiming the land in order to defend it? According to anarchist values, it would seem that the true responsibility lays in moral justice and community participation: a “tuned moral compass,” as Born For Water once said to me weeks
prior. The difficulty lies in expressions of Indigeneity, as one perceived as phasing out through assimilation or extinction, as both knowledgeable and that knowledge being “ancient” in some way. A “decolonized anarchy,” as one attendee put it, would envision a more fluid community that was not limited to states and borders. Other attendees built upon this statement by “returning to old teachings which allows us to change those teachings,” referring to older systems of community building, “without romanticizing our ancestors.”

*The Shortcomings of Reconciliation*

While Micah positioned their presentation by focusing on the demand for repatriation, she also contextualized her argument in the space of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and their process of opening historical dialogues. Her argument: reconciliation, despite its liberal and moral appeal, is not the same as repatriation. “The founding of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2007 unleashed a torrent of ham-fisted tearful apologies,” Micah stated referring specifically to the Canadian TRC in response to a large class-action lawsuit, “I have no interest in reconciliation (at this time) and I think the concept is a state-led smoke screen used to advance a more sophisticated policy of assimilation.”

Here it is worth noting a brief overview of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one of the most globally referenced and widely known examples, emerged after the violence, abuse, negligence, and various human rights violations of apartheid and consist of three committees: the Amnesty Committee, Reparation and Rehabilitation (R&R) Committee and Human Rights Violations (HRV) Committee. According to Dullah Omar, former Minister of Justice, on the TRC website, "... a
commission is a necessary exercise to enable South Africans to come to terms with their past on a morally accepted basis and to advance the cause of reconciliation," (TRC). A series of speakers from all sides—those directly or indirectly affected, as well as others who were actors, witnesses, kin, government officials, or residents of areas affected by apartheid—were given a space and audience to talk about their experiences. These experiences were also translated by a group of interpreters for those who may not be able to understand the language with which a speaker was using. Whether the TRC was a success or not is up to interpretation, but clearly the model has attempted to be replicated in other countries (such as Canada) and directed toward other groups of people.

However, the sustainability of TRC initiatives are highly contestable as both the forms of violence and those involved are never exactly the same. A key difference here, and as noted in “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” are the experiences of people of African descent and people of Indigenous heritage as measured commodities for white settlers in their quest as occupiers of land. According to Tuck and Yang, “Through the one-drop rule, blackness in settler colonial contexts is expansive, ensuring that a slave/criminal status will be inherited … Native Americanness is subtractive: Native Americans are constructed to become fewer in number and less Native, but never exactly white, over time,” (Tuck and Yang 12). Reconciliation is therefore problematized in its implication to attempt progress and advancement for a population who are reduced to a vanishing race.

The Indigenous Anarchist Convergence itself was also different from the types of organization found in Truth and Reconciliation commissions. For one, the Convergence was organized from the ground up with collaborative efforts among grassroots groups, activists, and scholars shouldering the efforts of bringing this collective to life. Unlike the top-down approach
administered by branches of governments addressing victims of violence, the Indigenous
Anarchist Convergence was specifically meant to be organized by and for Indigenous anarchists.
TRCs, on the other hand, will usually feature a wide range of actors that are in some way
responsible or part of the collective narrative that justifies such a commission. Additionally, the
setting of TRCs is in a neutral building under the guise of a “safe space” that permits
vulnerability and confrontation. The Convergence, in some ways, shut out the oppressive actors
that stand opposite of Indigeneity by reaching out specifically to a network of Native organizers.
And yet, even still the infoshop went so far as to say that it “could not guarantee it was a safe
space, but that it should be viewed as a threatening space to all forms of oppressive behaviors
and that known abusers, particularly perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence, would be
kicked out of the gathering,” (Admin).

Inclusion, in the context of the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence, was different from the
TRC’s open forum discussions that brought emotional catharsis to the same level as political
debate and historical awareness that attempted to make sure everyone was on the same page.
Instead, an attendee at the Convergence who was non-Indigenous or otherwise uninformed had
to make an effort to gain familiarity on the subjects being discussed (two-spirit identity,
ceremony restrictions, colonial entanglement and the resource curse, etc.). Despite the infoshop’s
open door invitation, one was not given a pamphlet that carefully articulated the issues being
addressed (for numerous reasons, one being how quickly the pamphlet would turn into an
encyclopedia of colonial violence). There were, however, many different forms of literature and
information that allowed attendees to understand the current issues at hand. About a dozen or so
tables were arranged around the main entrance to Taala-Hooghan stocked with flyers,
informative packets, stickers, business cards, t-shirts and more to address Native voices for those
willing to hear it. Regardless, it is important to recognize that even though the Convergence may share similar qualities to TRC events there are still key differences that drastically alter how the events are organized, what is discussed, and who is involved.

Micah’s critique of the TRC resonated with specific issues Indigenous anarchists find with terms like decolonization in their application. The very political systems that institute the TRC are the same as those which perpetuate the violence to which they are responding. In the same way that decolonization cannot happen within the constraints of a colonized society, reconciliation is more than just accepting the past as something that is over with and move on. And yet, decolonization and reconciliation are two different things. In Micah’s words, “Reconciliation is about resolving conflict … it can also mean the bringing together of two positions so as to make them compatible … Decolonization is about repealing the authority of the colonial state and redistributing land and resources. It also means embracing and legitimizing previously repressed Indigenous worldviews.” In polarizing reconciliation against decolonization, Micah further conveyed the issues to which the two terms cannot be used interchangeably. Other attendees expressed similar sensitivities, asking the audience to think carefully when they use a term like “decolonize,” and what that means within the context of our thoughts and words.

I found myself agreeing with Micah on many points—the state is flawed, people do not often consider the implied meaning of terms before using them as cannon fodder to further an argument, and Indigenous spaces are rarely considered in colonial rhetoric—there were also aspects of her presentation that I felt needed more consideration. Particularly, the usefulness of reconciliation as a discursive device to deliver a platform for voices affected by violence. As some other Convergence attendees stated, “It honestly feels great to have y’all here and just be
able to share what’s on my mind,” as well as mutual feelings of empowerment or motivation after the Convergence to bring about “a movement global enough to essentialize a racial, humanist, and material struggle of indigeneity so others will comfortably speak for any absent voice,” (Thecollective) from the reflections of one blogger present at the Convergence. However, the dialogue was not all just aimed toward love and admiration for each other. Discourses about violence and gender led to more culturally situated debates. When it came to ceremonies, for example, one attendee spoke out, “A lot of ways they do that is fucked up,” referring to gendered roles in ceremonies, “they won’t let you in if you’re bleeding. They impose gender on you.” This sparked conversations about leadership structure and deconstructing notions of purity within and imposed upon Indigeneity. In an effort to push forward while also acknowledging the past, Convergence attendees recounted their interpretations of hierarchy in Native political spheres and how some people felt angry that that aspect was not recognized as such. In response to the “fucked up” way ceremonies were led, another attendee spoke out, “Despite matrilineal systems, there was still a patriarchy in order that produced violence and people need to acknowledge that.”

These critiques are necessary in our understanding of how to reckon with the past and present while thinking about the future. Many attendees of the Convergence, as well as some DYL members, are frustrated with the notion of returning to the past—favoring instead to imagine what it means to be better. Convergence attendees dressed the way they want, listened to the music that spoke to them personally, and engaged with social media in ways that put a middle finger to tradition. As attendees discussed how they experience and interpret hypocrisies within their own communities, I began to think more about notions of purity and how they reveal the types of misinformation that become popular belief about Indigenous communities. One year,
during my research involving the REAL ID Act, I spent a couple days in Hopi meeting some friends of my professor who I was traveling with at the time. While having lunch at a rest stop, one Hopi woman told me a bit about the ways elected officials on the reservation engage in Kiva\textsuperscript{19} politics. Despite the trust that communities put in their political leaders by electing them, there are still taboos regarding making important political decisions within the intimate confines of a Kiva and often without any input from women. I had only found this out after asking about elections on the reservation and how they work—hoping to learn more about what local politicians do about informing residents on laws such as the REAL ID Act. However, my learning about Kivas as exclusive political spaces came to a surprise as I knew very little about how Kivas operate and even less about Hopi politics. It may not be unreasonable to suggest, therefore, that many people who live, work, and learn outside reservations are also completely unaware of such deeply engrained community issues because they are not brought to a wider public audience. Notions of Native “purity,” consequently, are also further disrupted between the ways people imagine communities operate and what actually happens.

Must the Indigenous body be continuously relegated to the past and fit the impartial narrative of purity just to accommodate the satisfactions of liberal morality? Indigeneity has been segmented by institutional policies of the nation, so what constitutes an “authentic” Indigenous person is frequently challenged and forever unrecognizable. The repudiation of Indigenous practices from a national aversion standpoint will inevitably, claims Povinelli, “encounter the difficulty of discursively grounding their moral claim within a multicultural discourse” (28).

\textsuperscript{19}Kivas are rooms that are often located underground, with an entrance through the roof via a ladder, where ceremonies and political meetings are held. Similar structures can be found in other Pueblo societies.
Similar to the process of healing through narration in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, I found the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence to be a cathartic act of releasing anger and pain while sharing knowledge and stories to an audience. Despite my moments of discomfort, I needed to be a listener in these moments in order to learn more about them. Different from the types of “confessionals” that have been associated with the South African TRC as a process of acknowledging damage (Posel 2008, 134), there was still a call for recognition at the heart of the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence. After all, why would all these organizations and people come here? And why bring up TRCs at all? If the TRC is a publicly known model that recognizes state violence, a type of “nation building” (Posel 119), then what does it mean for an Indigenous Anarchist Convergence to critique it? Rather than sanitize societies through bureaucracy and political procedures, violence must be confronted with solutions that do not merely attempt to erase them. Despite the resistance to broker peace and forgiveness with perpetrators of violence, Indigenous people still wish for the violence that so frequently affects their community to be recognized and taken seriously on a platform that reaches far beyond reservation borders.

Although that audience was specifically for people who identify as Native, there were many different peoples represented—African, Latinx, Asian, and European—in some form or another we were all learning each other’s histories. While Dunbar-Ortiz’s claim that “there is no such thing as a collective Indigenous peoples’ perspective” (13) is certainly true, this Convergence became a moment where a collective history and an attempt at understanding each other’s perspective was necessary to even have a conversation with one another. However, deeply set within the discussions of reconciliation, Indigeneity, and anarchy were critiques of Western liberal ideals. Micah’s distaste for reconciliation along with Convergence attendees
speaking out about purity contradictions within their own understandings of Indigeneity called for a deeper analysis of liberalism’s place in constituting and implementing colonial practices.

In addition to the organizational differences between the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence and the TRC, there are also fundamental distinctions as to their implementations and goals. The Convergence was more than just a single event about sharing stories and venting frustrations. For three days various individuals used the infoshop as a place to cook, dance, perform, meditate, laugh, cry, and exchange resources. A calendar of the week handed out to all visitors provided a map as to the possibilities of exploring what Indigenous Anarchism even means. Here is a brief snapshot: Saturday, August 17 – Autonomous Foods & Medicine, Another World is Possible: an Indigenous Governing Council and Zapatista Proposal, O’odham Anti-Border Collective, Music; Sunday, August 18 – Harm Reduction for the Community, Organizing Indigenous Radical Spaces, Dinner/Closing. These sessions were meant to open creative responses to colonialism and the call to explore Indigeneity and anarchism simultaneously. Yet, the infoshop also provided a space where people could simply enjoy the food, music, and company amongst their peers and surrounded by like-minded individuals.

Although I didn’t get to explore all the events at the Convergence, the consensus that I understood based on my conversations with attendees was that people were not just here to protest, organize, and fight colonialism. They were maintaining their sense of community, making new friends, and joining in a collective identity that they might not get to do in other environments. Shortly after Micah’s presentation, Hózhó and Kiki introduced me to a few of their friends who were also attending the Convergence. Along with Lou, Alana, and Kenny, who I had greeted and briefly caught up with, I also met Shana, who served positions in multiple Indigenous activists organizations including Haul No! and told me to investigate more into a
power system in Peekskill called Indian Point Energy Center, and Kira, an attendee who told me about an organization called the Indigenous Kinship Collective and invited me to a Native Movement occurring in the Lower East side of Manhattan in early September. As we chatted, a tall, bulky man walked past us with a smoking bundle of sage asking people if they would like some. Kira turned from me briefly, smiled at the man as he handed her the smoking bundle, and she quickly traced her feet, legs, torso, arms, and head with a swirling smoke trail. Keanu then handed me a bottle of water and asked if I would like to grab some pamphlets and stickers while everyone was on break.

Moral and Multicultural Mistakes

TRCs are redeemed by some human rights advocates and scholars as progressive in their efforts to acknowledge certain violences and conceptualize a progressive future of forgiveness and acceptance. Critics of these commissions, however, argue that they are ultimately reductive in their aims to speak of only specific victims of specific violences. Because TRCs are flawed in temporality and language, their goals are bound by the same laws which constituted historical violence. Therefore, certain forms of activism can be interpreted as a means of spotlighting and resisting the legal and political limitations of TRCs: the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence and the restorative justice programs facilitated by DYL are two examples. Although they are different in their specific interactions with Native and non-Native communities, as well as the kinds of work that they do, it is worth exploring what these organizations are and how they diverge from the neoliberal imaginations of TRC objectives. For one, discussion seems to be at

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20 For more info, visit their website: http://www.safesecurevital.com/
the forefront as a core pillar of communicating what the purpose of their organization is. TRCs have their specific agendas, the Anarchist Convergence says they are still in the process of defining themselves, and DYL indicates the importance of restoring Diné language while engaging with community members of various ages and backgrounds.

Where these entities begin to diverge is significant. The spaces these discussions are conducted is interesting as it informs the nuanced profiles of each organization. TRC discussions occur in large rooms with multiple translators, government officials, and community members—almost similar to a courthouse or political meeting like one would expect from the U.N. Ya’at’eeh is a much different space; smaller, with a garden, library, kitchen, and even some bedrooms. The homely atmosphere is equally constituted in the spaces DYL literally builds for their discussions: hogans. The hogan, being a symbol of not only the home, but an educational, spiritual, sacred, and holistic space amplifies the dialogue in a contextual environment that situates itself among the communities, and their historical and cultural spaces, that are directly impacted by the types of violence which may necessitate a commission for truth, reconciliation, and repatriation.

What all this may indicate is the degrees of separation that inform how incommensurable certain government practices are in regard to the people they are serving. TRCs, from a removed perspective, may not seem much different from a BIA court hearing—where oppressor and oppressed are confined to the same room in order to negotiate how the two can live with each other, often overseen by a panel largely non-Native. Instead, one may wonder what an interaction would look like in a space like Ya’at’eeh, or a hogan out in Pinon? What if government officials had to abide by the specific rules that come with conducting a discussion, ceremony, or meeting within these spaces? Further, would any governing body even entertain
such an idea? These questions help us understand why resistance is so important for Native communities that face constant efforts to retain what is left of themselves. It is not so much to fight the government because that is the radical thing to do, but to point to the hypocrisy of a neoliberal mindset that claims we should all get along and cooperate while checking everyone’s I.D. at the door for their member’s only star.

“Everyone and everything in the world is affected,” Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “by US dominance and intervention,” (235) asserting the claim that our responsibility is not in what our ancestors did, but in what we do now as a society. However, because of the historical dispossession of Native voices, knowledge, and action, Euro-Americans are still dealing with the incommensurability of unlearning years—sometimes generations—of institutional conditioning. In order to progress, therefore, the colonial model must be challenged and unhinged. Frantz Fanon (1963), in his concluding remarks in *The Wretched of the Earth*, calls for a breaking away from European social constructs through “invent[ion]” and “discoveries” that challenge our Western beliefs. In sum, the individual and the collective should not be determined by the state of colonization, but the willingness to coexist with one another for the benefit of all of society. And yet, while coexistence is a beautiful sentiment it is also a fundamental challenge that humans who are uncomfortable with one another fail to overcome.

A contributing issue to liberal ideals is the moral high ground to which political standards and obligations are set. In a liberal pursuit for equality and fairness for all, it disguises the irreconcilable slippages and differences that contribute to the failures of moral sensibility. Tuck and Yang use the term “incommensurable” experiences to dictate the explicit struggles of Indigenous peoples, and I would suggest that my experience at the Convergence confronted an incommensurability toward what it means to occupy the various spaces of race/ethnicity, gender,
politics, and morality. Whether that results in discomfort, education, or appreciation is meaningless compared to the modes and processes through which others in the same room can articulate how they, too, come to terms with those same spaces. Although there may not be clear answers to such big problems as how we proceed with decolonization, there are certainly a wealth of resources in the form of people we interact with, or those whom we may need to interact more with, that inform how we begin to proceed with such practices. It is our responsibility as actors and narrators of history to be mindful of our positionality and limitations, and recognize moments of incommensurability as intersections with the lives of others in which both characters are negotiating their own moralities in combination with the obligations and constitutions set within themselves and of the political State.
Conclusion

It was a quiet early morning when I set up my laptop in DYL’s Flagstaff office to begin editing and compositing video footage for a presentation of their summer fellowship program. Mosa and MJ, two of lead office crew members, were the only ones in the office when I arrived. They greeted me with a friendly “Good morning,” and motioned me to a table full of coffee and donuts. As I started up the video editing program, my phone lit up with a message from Hoshi, an office crew fellow.

“Morning. So I don’t know if another supervisor will be in today at the office. But the summer fellows are going into work today. We’re headed to Big Mountain for an Elder Discussion at 11am … I’m sure if you ask the office folks they can fill you in.”

I was immediately curious what Hoshi meant by an “Elder Discussion,” and just as interested in learning more about Big Mountain and why the discussion was taking place there. As it turns out, this event had enormous significance for not only DYL, but Diné history overall. Big Mountain is located on what is sometimes referred to as Navajo-Hopi partition land after the resulting bill of the Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act of 1974. Large tracts of land were cleared and justified by claims of negotiating grazing rights between the tribes. The results of these negotiations ultimately lead to large-scale livestock reduction and the eviction of many Diné residents in the area. Another, more devious, result of the land clearance were the incoming coal mining industries such as Peabody Coal to take advantage of the now severed, tumultuous relationship between Navajos and Hopis.

However, not every Diné family who was living on the partition land left. Despite government agencies, and even fellow Diné, trying to uproot the families living there, they
continued to stay in their hogans and attempt to go about their daily activities. More than just an act of resistance, those who stayed did so because it was their home— their source of livelihood where their past and future families should live. Even still, the people who stayed needed to be strong and resilient as their land was attacked, livestock wiped out, and families terrorized. This discussion at Big Mountain was, therefore, symbolic as a place of strength, unity, courage, knowledge, and history. In addition to the past events that made Big Mountain such a meaningful place for its residents, recent changes to the coal mining industry also turned this discussion into a celebration.

Earlier that week in August, Peabody Coal had shipped its last and final freight, announcing that it would be shutting its doors for good. The reasons for its closure are multiple, but the resulting fallout among Navajo Nation residents was mixed. While some viewed the closure as a terrible blow to the economy, forcing many Navajos into unemployment, others questioned just how many Navajos were employed by Peabody compared to other, mostly non-Native, employees. Additionally, arguments were made that the release of Peabody freed up other energy companies to come in and take advantage of the area’s resources (methane, natural gas, oil, and even sunlight21). Nevertheless, the closing of Peabody was a momentous occasion that would be discussed and reflected upon, as well as the effects of the 1974 act, by the very people who were present in that area.

By about noon most of the DYL office crew were hanging around the office; Hózhó was getting help from Hoshi wrapping her shins and moccasins in buckskin while MJ and Mosa coordinated a shopping trip to grab food and supplies for the elders. As I was wrapping up some

21 Kayenta, the town that Peabody once operated in, now hosts two massive solar panel projects. Kayenta I, which is currently running, features over 100,000 solar panels on about 300 acres of land. Kayenta II was just launched in September at about 65 acres.
final edits for the video in the adjacent room, MJ came in and asked if I wanted to come with them to help with shopping.

“They keep asking me if you are gonna come,” MJ lightly said, referring to the office crew, “you know, they’ve really taken to you—you’re like one of the family.” By that point I had been given something of a pet name by some of the office crew, W’êt, which meant “baby” in an endearing context like a grandmother would say to a young child. The office crew and I had explored Flagstaff, visiting the Indigenous Anarchist Convergence and a presentation at Northern Arizona University on Missing and Murdered Diné Relatives. We had also spent an evening in Sedona, the “bourgie” part of Arizona as they called it, celebrating the end of the summer fellowship program at a few clubs, and renting an Air BnB for the night. All the while Hózhó would always call “shotgun,” for my rental truck and serve as the car’s DJ playing all kinds of pop music from her Pandora account. Hoshi and Kiki rode in the back, gossiping and cracking jokes about what they will do after DYL: Kiki planned on going back to Harvard to complete his Bachelor’s degree and Hoshi wanted to apply for a full-time position as a staff member of DYL (to which he has been successful since recently catching up with some crew members).

Before meeting at Big Mountain, the office crew and I had to stop at a nearby grocery store in Flagstaff to grab some food and supplies for the elders who live out there but have difficulties traveling such far distances for their daily needs. As it is, most residents living on Big Mountain do not have access to electricity or running water, and the dirt roads make it even more challenging for vehicles to navigate the terrain. Hence, we would be compiling a sort of care package called the “Sheephearder’s Special,” which consisted of flour, fruits (peaches and nectarines, clementines), canola oil, rice, lima beans, squash, oatmeal, honey, and avocados. During the shopping trip, Mosa, a Hopi woman who was a full-time office crew member, was
concerned with “loading the elders up with fat,” debating whether to get little bricks of lard, shortening, or canola oil, “to give them a choice in how much to use.” With diabetes slowly consuming somewhere around 70% of Navajo Nation residents, health conscious buying and eating has been an important aspect of DYL’s active processes in just transition, regenerative ecology and restorative economy.

Whether this care package was a way of reinforcing DYL objectives is up to interpretation, but the primary reason I was told we were supplying these gifts was to "repair a relationship ... a peace offering," according to MJ. Because DYL staff are so close with their communities in not only their projects, but also kinship relations, it seems that these gifts were also symbolic of the ways they recognize how a working relationship may also interfere, or conflict, with family bonds as well. Although I wasn’t explicitly told what had happened to cause any rift in their relationship that required repairing, the Sheepheeder’s Special could also simply be a hospitable gesture for the elders who allowed us into their homes and told their stories.

Earlier that day, while discussing forms of exchange with the younger office crew fellows, I was informed that it is considered respectful to pay elders for their time and knowledge with “food, tobacco, or money,” and if I were to supply tobacco, “mountain smoke is one of the best, but it’s hard to come by if you don’t know where to look.” By DYL’s staff providing food, and especially considering the longevity and health of their elders, instead of tobacco or money suggests that they were making a conscious effort to maintain a nourishing relationship with their elders rather than supply them with something considerably less vital to their wellbeing.

On the way to Big Mountain we split up into two vehicles. Mosa would drive her son, who was also usually present at the DYL office but did not work or serve as a fellow there, along with MJ and the dozen or so Sheepheeder’s Special packages, while in my rental I chauffeured
Hózhó and Hoshi who wanted to chat more and control the music playlist. In order to make the most of our three-hour drive, Hózhó and Hoshi would point out various places, abandoned buildings, and roads that they found significant. Some buildings were decorated in murals depicting old Diné men and women in striking detail. Although there was no direct indication of who these people were, or the artists who drew them, their vibrant presence engrained into the slowly deteriorating plaster walls made me think of the kinds of stories we may hear up on Big Mountain. Sometimes during the drive Hózhó and Hoshi would joke about what it’s like to be back from school and living near the reservation.

Figure 15: Murals decorated an abandoned building just outside Flagstaff. The inside also had drawings and words of wisdom.
“Tinder is—interesting,” Hózhó playfully joked, referring to the popular dating app, “it’s like, when you match with someone and they don’t tell you their clan—that’s just suspicious!”

Then Hoshi chimed in, “Ew! Just unmatch them!”

I couldn’t help but momentarily imagine the horror of going on what is essentially a mildly blind date with someone who turns out to be a cousin, brother, niece, or aunt! And yet, Hózhó and Hoshi were also contextualizing, and modernizing, the importance of learning about one’s clan and history and what that means about socializing with others. These things have significant value in the way Diné articulate their relationship with one another, and to blindly let part of that go also severs a connection in ways that make it more difficult to not just socialize, but also know about oneself and their history. And, if all else fails, at least part of DYL’s work makes their fellows more eligible single people navigating a virtual dating platform.

Following Mosa up the winding, bumpy dirt roads to Big Mountain showed just how far we were from much of anything. Houses and buildings that clustered around Hopi slowly depleted, and in its place more abandoned shacks that were once occupied now served as a reminder of the displacement after the 1974 Navajo-Hopi Land Displacement Act. “A lot of Navajos were forced to leave,” Hózhó said while looking out the window, “but not where we’re going: Penny’s father’s hogan.”

According to Penny, who told us the story of her father that night as we arrived at her home, “He was an activist who brought his family out to protest the fencing being put up on September 22, 1980. He died before he could see the closing of the mine, so this gathering is also a celebration of his life and something he would have been glad to see come to fruition. Earlier
today there was a little girl playing out here, and I remember when that girl was just a baby when
the government came in, held us all at gunpoint while they took our cattle.”

Penny’s insights on her father also tells us something about how resistance is imagined. In Penny’s case, it seems to be an aspect of her family’s history, like an heirloom that is passed down multiple generations. In some ways, Penny not only inherited her father’s hogan, but also the symbol of resistance that comes with it. Penny’s duty in taking care of her father’s land is more than just respect for her family, it is a responsibility to maintain a presence that defines her family’s history in that place. Despite government efforts to divide and conquer through manipulation tactics, Penny’s father’s hogan remains testament of what (and who) was there before these other forces came into being. Her family’s land provides a different narrative that also problematizes her relationship with her own community of Big Mountain residents and neighbors as well. While some Hopis and Navajos may argue that the land Penny is living on may not be rightfully hers, for legal reasons or otherwise, the very fact that she is still there reaffirms the value of remaining present in place and knowing one’s own truth.

We were lost once, maybe twice, along the way to Penny’s father’s hogan. The directions consisted of, “Keep following the dirt road until you see a red ‘A’ and a tire, then follow the flags down.” So, unsurprisingly, when one dirt road forked off into two, we had to make a quick decision as to which one to follow. Nevertheless, a red ‘A,’ similar to the anarchy logo, appeared attached to a pole with a tire holding it in place. A few dips and turns later, we made it to the edge of a mesa where a hogan and large gathering of people seemed to pop out of nowhere. The office crew and I made quick work of unloading the two cars full of about a dozen or more Sheepheeder’s Specials, with elders thanking us as we passed them and Born For Water and other DYŁ members greeting us along the way. As care packages made their way inside the
hogan for elders to pick up as they wished, we were motioned to a table with a large pot full of mutton stew and multiple plates with frybread laid out across them. We had arrived just as the sun was setting, and with a bright full moon slowly emerging in the distance it was time for elders to tell their stories.

Moving clockwise, each elder had a chance to share their story of life on Big Mountain or their thoughts on the closing of energy companies and impart some wisdom for us. Many stories started with feelings of loss—some felt they lost a sense of control in how to live traditionally, others associated livestock loss and resource extraction to actual pain of the body, and still others felt lost as Diné, as they watched their fellow clanspeople build fences that divided the land.
Gathering in a circle under an awning connected to the hogan, a woman began to talk with a calm, relaxed, soft-spoken voice. She spoke about what it was like as a young child playing with the sheep, riding horses up to mountain tops, down through valleys, and celebrating their home here. Soon, however, that all changed. With the livestock reduction came a feeling of her own life being taken away. Her connection with the sheep was this mutual dependence, and so when intruders unnecessarily slaughtered their sheep or horses, a piece of her died as well. “We feel a lack of hope, hope as a symbol with livestock,” one woman next to me translated as I listened to the tone of the elder’s voice, mutton soup warming up the bowl in my hands. Another elder, a gentleman, spoke on knowledge as “not what you acquire in a day as a young person, but something that comes over years of living and experience with the world.” His take on knowledge, and possibly wisdom, is that it requires a continual effort. The knowledgeable person will make mistakes, do things that may be both good and bad, but will constantly work towards accumulating knowledge because without it—specifically without using knowledge—they forfeit their power to think and behave consciously. It may also be a call for the young audience, who listened in silence, to pay close attention to their elder’s and connect with them in order to help make a better future for the next generation.

Even though many elders felt harmed, and continue to hurt, as a result of the land partition they ended their speeches with an optimistic outlook. They thanked young people for coming, and felt it is up to them to take the lead in making a change, protecting cultural identities and knowledge, and act as leaders to a better future. Penny chimed in towards the end, proclaiming, “The universe is our source of power. If you feel hopeless look to the sun, water, stars, and trees for knowledge.” She encouraged young people to keep talking with their elders,
get to know their stories, and learn songs—songs that will teach them to overcome fear and
defeat beasts.

Ben, from Ya’at’eeh, had also shown up later that night and provided another perspective on resistance. “This is resistance,” Ben said with his hands guiding around the space, “it’s here where people stay, and no government force in the world can change that.” Unlike the elders, he stood up when he talked and used his body to emote and add emphasis to his words. He continued, adding his own frustrated thoughts on what it means to be an Indigenous activist addressing Native issues in a globalized world. “Where are our people protesting?” Ben asked, reflecting on his observations of recent calls to turn Do’koosliid into a ski resort, “I always see white people sitting in, coming out to speak against these companies. What about us Navajos?” Ben was frustrated by the fragmented support from Navajo communities and the disgust that more white people seem to care and want to take action than the people who actually live there. However, considering the disjointed internal history of Navajo and Hopi families turning on one another in places like Big Mountain, the nuances of protest and activism are further complicated. Does the act of protest invite internal drama into one’s home? How does it affect the protester’s relationship with their own community? And why does it seem so wrong for “outsiders” to take interest in these issues?

Ben’s critiques seem to echo frustrations that Born For Water expressed regarding youth and knowing their cultural histories. Both Born For Water and Ben were grappling with the same sense of pastness, loss, and dying out that has stereotyped Indigenous communities for centuries—and they are deeply upset about it. Looking at the mass gathering of people from all over the continent for the Indigenous Anarchist Convention, or the ways DYL has reclaimed landscapes that were once symbols of colonial expansion into practices of restoring the area’s
ecology, it is clear that these communities are doing anything but fading. What is in danger, however, are the histories and principles that defined these practices. While Born For Water fears the Diné language may slip from the mouths of the only people who can accurately speak it, Ben wants to see the mentality of his fellow Navajos change to one that protects their community not for money, fame, or fleeting values but because it is theirs to protect. For these individuals, resistance is more than just a form of defiance, it is reclaiming a sense of self that one may never have realized was theirs to begin with. Like finding a long-lost relative, resistance is a compass to help navigate the turbulent forces that various power structures create and allow new possibilities for a better future. However, resistance also demands a substantial degree of committed action. One cannot simply will resistance into being. Like building hogans or organizing a gathering, it requires constant work, cooperation, and innovation.


