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Becoming a Diné Woman Scholar: Navigating Race, Language, and Identity through Diné Epistemologies

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Abstract: This autoethnographic study examines the journey of becoming a Diné asdzáán (woman) scholar through the intersections of race, language, identity, and education. Grounded in Diné epistemologies, this narrative draws on lived experience, intergenerational teachings, and relational accountability to explore how Indigenous knowledge systems shape scholarly identity and practice. The study situates personal experience within broader contexts of colonial schooling, highlighting how educational systems have contributed to the erasure of Indigenous language and knowledge while also serving as sites of resistance and resurgence. Through Indigenous storywork and interpretive autoethnography, this article illustrates how storytelling functions as both methodology and pedagogy, affirming lived experience as a legitimate and rigorous form of knowledge. Findings demonstrate that relationality, cultural grounding, and community responsibility are central to navigating and transforming academic spaces. This work contributes to scholarship on Indigenous methodologies by offering a Diné woman scholar's narrative as a form of relational knowledge that advances Indigenous educational sovereignty and supports culturally sustaining and decolonizing approaches to education.

Keywords: *autoethnography, Diné epistemologies, Indigenous methodologies, relational accountability, storywork*

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Introduction

I begin this paper with a personal introduction, following the teachings of my family and our *Diné* ways of knowing. *Yá'át'ééh. Kinłichíi'nii nishłį, Áshįįhí báshíshchíín, Táchii'nii dashicheii, Tódích'íi'nii dashinálí. Tsé Łichíí' Dah Azkání dęę' naashá. Akót'éego Diné asdzání nishłį.* Translated to English: Greetings. I belong to the Red House clan, I was born for the Salt People clan. My maternal grandfather's clan is Red Running into Water clan and my paternal grandfather's clan is Bitter Water clan. I was raised near Preston Mesa. This is how I identify as a *Diné* woman. This traditional self-introduction, grounded in *K'é*, our *Diné* kinship system, not only identifies who I am but situates me relationally, geographically, culturally, and historically. Among *Diné*, the sharing of clans precedes names, establishing relational accountability and demonstrating respect. When I share my clans with other *Diné* women and men in professional and community spaces, they often regard me as a sister or niece, a recognition that shapes our interactions with care, respect, and a shared sense of responsibility.

I honor relational accountability by beginning with my clans and ties to land, grounding my narrative in *Diné* epistemologies (Kovach, 2009). My story is told through sacred conversations, lessons from shímasání (my maternal grandmother) and shícheii (my maternal grandfather) carried forward as teachings, not anecdotes. I write not only to remember, but to resist. I was encouraged by Denzin's (2014) call for interpretive autoethnography that critiques colonial systems while centering embodied, Indigenous knowledge.

Locating the Self and the Story

This relational orientation also aligns with Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit; Brayboy, 2005). TribalCrit challenges deficit narratives and colonial logics by positioning Indigenous knowledge systems and relationality as legitimate and vital to educational discourse. My introduction is not simply cultural protocol. It is an assertion of sovereign identity and a disruption of Eurocentric academic norms that often seek to universalize research methods and codify ways of knowing.

I offer my story as part of a broader methodological stance grounded in Indigenous storytelling, a framework that honors ancestral knowledge and lived experience as theory. This narrative emerges not from a place of data collection but from relational accountability and ethical responsibility to the community, which departs from extractive and colonial research paradigms (Tuck & Yang, 2014). My education began not in formal schooling but in the home, through teachings shared by my mother, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and extended kin. *Shímasání* would often say, "I am telling you this so you can use it in your life and have a good life." Her words emphasized respect, humility, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing as foundational to living well.

Through these teachings, I came to understand that I was being entrusted with ancestral knowledge, wisdom meant to be carried forward, not simply for my success but for the flourishing of future generations. As a *Diné asdzáán* (woman) scholar, I recognize my responsibility to not only embody this knowledge but to engage in research and educational practices that honor Indigenous sovereignty, disrupt deficit frameworks, and center Indigenous ways of knowing. This story is not mine alone. It is part of a continuum of Indigenous resilience, care, and contribution.

Theoretical Framework: Diné Epistemologies and Relational Accountability

My scholarly journey as a Diné educator is deeply rooted in the teachings of *Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón* (SNBH) and the Beauty Way (*Hózhóójí*), epistemological frameworks that emphasize harmony, balance, and relationality. The principles are central to *Diné* epistemologies and are deeply embedded within SNBH and the Beauty Way (*Hózhóójí*). In this article, SNBH and the Beauty Way guide both methodology and interpretation. They shape how stories are told, how relationships are honored, and how harmony and balance are maintained throughout the research process. The concepts shape and guide educational philosophy, research ethics, and scholarly identity.

Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón (SNBH) emphasizes living a life of balance across physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, guiding individuals toward holistic well-being and ethical decision-making (Benally, 1994). SNBH is a life philosophy that emphasizes harmony, balance, and the cyclical nature of existence and aligns with the *Diné* understanding of living in beauty and balance (Benally, 1994). Harmony in this context is not static. It is an ongoing process of aligning one's thoughts, actions, and relationships with the natural and spiritual world. SNBH is not merely a concept but a lived practice, shaping decision-making, relationships, and educational responsibilities. It calls for intentionality in thought and action, guiding individuals toward a life that honors interconnectedness and respect for all beings.

Beauty Way (*Hózhóójí*) complements SNBH by offering ceremonial and practical pathways for maintaining this balance. It calls for walking in balance, living with respect, reciprocity, and mindfulness in all relationships. It is expressed through prayer, song, and daily practices that affirm relational accountability and the pursuit of balance (Benally, 1994; Wilson, 2008). We return to the prayers, songs, and practices often to ground us throughout life. Within educational contexts, the Beauty Way informs how knowledge is approached, not as a commodity to be extracted but as a relational process grounded in respect and reciprocity (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). For *Diné* scholars, these frameworks are not abstract theories; they are embodied in everyday life and serve as epistemological anchors for research and teaching.

SNBH and Beauty Way principles were daily practices in my home, passed down through the teachings of *shícheii*, a *Hózhóójí* practitioner, to *shímá* (my mother), *shímasání*, aunts, and uncles. From a young age, I was immersed in a *Diné* knowledge system grounded in observation, listening, participation, and responsibility. Knowledge is not a static entity to be extracted. It is formed through relationships and maintained through relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). I witnessed and participated in this knowledge system firsthand. By age four, I knew how to prepare bread and dried meat, not through written instruction, but by watching and doing alongside the women in my family, guided by their love and care. My early schooling took place in a local boarding school staffed largely by relatives who treated me with care and respect. While they taught me English and fostered my love for reading, they also affirmed my *Diné* identity by incorporating our language and culture into the curriculum.

These experiences mirror what Lee (2006) identifies as the goal of Indigenous education: to nurture youth who are grounded in their culture and equipped to lead with integrity and compassion. As I continue this journey as a *Diné asdzáán* scholar, I carry with me the teachings of my family, the relational ethics of my community, and the scholarly guidance of those who remind us that research and education, when rooted in Indigenous paradigms, are acts of ceremony, resistance, and cultural continuance.

My educational philosophy is shaped by the Navajo philosophy of learning and pedagogy in which education is experiential, grounded in kinship, and tied to one's responsibilities within the community (Benally, 1994). I understood early on that the teachings I received were not solely for my benefit but were investments meant to be passed forward to future generations, to sustain our lifeways, values, and languages.

Lee (2006) addresses this sense of responsibility through the lens of *Diné*-centered leadership and critical Indigenous pedagogy. Lee shares that Indigenous education fosters a consciousness that is both critical and communal, preparing youth not simply to succeed individually but to serve their people (2006). My lived experiences affirm this. I knew education was never about individual achievement alone. It was about becoming someone who could give back, someone who contributes to the well-being of the community. I recall a relative once asking how many children I had. Before I could respond, another relative answered for me, "She's a teacher. She has many children." That moment reminds me of the sacred trust educators hold. An educator is to be entrusted with the future of the people.

My approach to research is grounded in the principles of SNBH, Beauty Way, and other Indigenous research frameworks. Relationality is central to these frameworks. Relationality is the understanding that knowledge is created, maintained, and strengthened through relationships rather than in isolation (Wilson, 2008). These *Diné* philosophies guide me to conduct research in ways that uphold harmony, balance, and accountability to family, community, and future generations. Through this orientation, I affirm Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate, rigorous, and essential to educational scholarship.

Building on these guiding frameworks, the following literature review situates this work within broader scholarly conversations on Indigenous methodologies, autoethnography, and culturally sustaining education. These conversations provide the theoretical and methodological grounding that informs the narrative approach taken in this article, ensuring that personal experience is understood as both culturally situated and academically rigorous. By engaging with these bodies of scholarship, the literature review demonstrates how this work contributes to ongoing efforts to legitimize Indigenous ways of knowing within mainstream educational research. Guided by lived experience and existing literature, this article asks: How do *Diné* epistemologies and relational accountability shape the lived experiences of a *Diné* woman scholar as she navigates, resists, and transforms colonial educational systems?
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Literature Review: Situating the Work Within Existing Scholarship

Research on Indigenous education and inquiry demonstrates that knowledge is relational, place-based, and grounded in community accountability, shaping how research is conducted and interpreted across contexts. Studies further show that issues of power, sovereignty, and decolonizing practice remain central to understanding how Indigenous knowledge systems are engaged within educational research. This body of scholarship collectively provides the conceptual and ethical foundation for this study and informs how Diné ways of knowing guide both method and interpretation.

Education, Sovereignty, and Resistance

Research on Indigenous education consistently demonstrates that schooling has functioned both as a mechanism of assimilation and a site of resistance and resurgence (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Studies further show that Indigenous

presence in educational and academic spaces can challenge colonial knowledge systems and call for pedagogies accountable to Indigenous communities (Grande, 2015).

Research also indicates that when education is grounded in Indigenous languages, epistemologies, and community relationships, it can support sovereignty and collective well-being (McCarty & Lee, 2014). Place-based approaches further emphasize that learning is embedded in land, history, and responsibility, resisting universalizing frameworks while affirming community-defined purposes (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Together, this body of work highlights education as a site where sovereignty, place, and power are enacted, positioning pedagogy as relational, community-centered, and oriented toward survivance rather than individual achievement (Vizenor, 1999).

Standpoint, Belonging, and Navigating the Academy

Research on Indigenous students' sense of belonging demonstrates that structural and cultural forces within higher education often produce alienation, underscoring the importance of culturally grounded relationships and validation (Tachine et al., 2017). Studies further show that knowledge is shaped by positionality and power, requiring attention to how perspectives are situated within systems of inequality (Harding, 2004). Together, this work highlights that belonging and epistemic authority are co-constructed through relational and institutional contexts, shaping how Indigenous scholars navigate and persist within academic spaces.

Decolonizing Research and Indigenous Data Governance

Research demonstrates that inquiry grounded in Indigenous priorities, protocols, and community benefit resists extractive practices and reduces harm in research involving Indigenous communities (Smith, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Studies further show that Indigenous communities assert collective rights over how data are collected, used, and governed, emphasizing accountability to tribal systems and long-term community outcomes (Carroll et al., 2020; Rainie et al., 2017). Together, this body of work extends research ethics beyond data collection to include stewardship, authorship, and responsibility to Indigenous communities.

Synthesis and Relevance to the Present Study

Across these bodies of scholarship, research consistently affirms that Indigenous knowledge is relational, place-based, and grounded in sovereignty, storytelling, and community accountability. It treats story as theory and views methodology as ceremony and responsibility (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). *Diné* epistemologies provide a specific ethical grammar for that relationality, while TribalCrit, Red Pedagogy, and culturally sustaining pedagogy situate practice within power, policy, and community resurgence (Brayboy, 2005; Grande, 2015; McCarty & Lee, 2014). Standpoint, belonging, and IDS/CARE principles clarify the implications for researcher positionality, student experience, and knowledge governance (Carroll et al., 2020; Harding, 2004; Rainie et al., 2017; Tachine et al., 2017). However, there remains limited research that centers the lived, relational, and intergenerational experiences of *Diné* women scholars as both methodological and epistemological contributions. In particular, few studies offer autoethnographic accounts that demonstrate how these principles are enacted in practice across educational and academic spaces. This article addresses this gap by drawing on

these traditions to argue that a *Diné* woman scholar's autoethnographic story is both a culturally aligned method and a rigorous contribution to educational scholarship, advancing Indigenous educational sovereignty through relational accountability.

Building on these scholarly foundations, the following section outlines the methodological approach, autoethnography, and Indigenous storywork that operationalize these principles within this article. Autoethnography and Indigenous storywork are employed not only as research strategies but as culturally aligned practices that honor relational accountability and Diné epistemologies. This methodological stance reflects the commitment to situating personal narrative within broader social and educational contexts while maintaining the integrity of Indigenous ways of knowing.

Method

Indigenous Storywork

I selected autoethnography as the methodological frame for this work because it allows me to tell my own story, in my own voice, and in alignment with Indigenous knowledge systems that honor lived experience, relational accountability, and storytelling as pedagogy. Interpretive autoethnography situates the researcher within their narrative, foregrounding reflexivity and social meaning-making (Denzin, 2014). For Indigenous scholars, this practice is not only a methodological choice but a culturally aligned responsibility. My journey as a *Diné asdzáán* scholar cannot be told without recalling the stories passed down to me by shímá and shímasání and without reflecting on how these stories shape who I am in relation to others, place, and purpose. I selected autoethnography not only as a methodological choice but as a culturally congruent approach that aligns with Indigenous epistemologies. This approach is particularly relevant for Indigenous scholars because it resists colonial erasure and validates lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge.

Indigenous methodologies emphasize relational accountability, cultural protocols, and community benefit (Kovach, 2009). Research is not an extractive process but a relational one, grounded in respect and reciprocity where knowledge often emerges through relationships (Wilson, 2008). These principles guide this manuscript's commitment to honoring *Diné* ways of knowing. TribalCrit complements autoethnography and storywork by situating this narrative within broader struggles for Indigenous educational sovereignty and justice. Together, these frameworks justify the use of autoethnography and Indigenous storywork as valid, rigorous methodologies. They ensure that this research is accountable to the community, grounded in cultural knowledge, and positioned to challenge dominant paradigms while advancing Indigenous epistemologies.

I utilized the conversational method, a culturally grounded approach that views dialogue as both method and meaning-making process (Kovach, 2009). These conversations, whether with my mother, my students, or my inner self, are sacred and relational. They are rooted in *Diné* epistemologies, *Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón* and *Hózhóójí* (the Beauty Way), which emphasize balance, harmony, and interconnectedness. Within these dialogues, knowledge is not extracted but co-constructed, emerging from a foundation of respect, kinship, and relational accountability.

Storywork further strengthens this methodological stance by positioning storytelling as both pedagogy and inquiry (Archibald, 2008). Storywork is a holistic, pedagogical practice that integrates cognition, affect, embodiment, and spirit, reflecting the interconnectedness central to

Diné epistemologies. Through storywork, this manuscript affirms that narrative is not anecdotal but theoretical and ceremonial. My mother, now an elder nearing the end of her life, tells me our family stories with a sense of urgency, not only because they must be preserved, but because she trusts that I will carry and share them with the care they deserve. Her stories, like those of shímásání, are more than memories. They are ceremonial knowledge, offered to guide my path and the paths of those who will come after me.

In my professional and educational life, I have seen how relationships create the space for Indigenous knowledge to be honored. When working with other tribal communities, I begin by introducing myself and sharing why I am present, establishing *K'é* (our kinship system), and laying the foundation for trust. This was especially evident when a quiet student I taught in South Dakota shared a teaching from his grandparents. He shared that thunder in the springtime wakes our animal relatives and signals to the land that it is time to come alive again. He did not often speak, but when he did, his words carried generational knowledge. If I had not built a relationship grounded in mutual respect and safety, that story might have remained unspoken.

As an Indigenous scholar and educator, I understand that learning through stories involves responsibility and humility. Storywork is not about taking knowledge but about listening, observing, and reflecting with care and patience. The process of sharing my journey to becoming a *Diné asdzáán* scholar required me to discern which parts of my story hold meaning for others and which teachings might support emerging scholars walking their own paths. This work, grounded in Indigenous methodology, is ultimately an offering, a continuation of the knowledge passed to me, shared now in service of future generations.

Storywork Findings

Schooling and Erasure: Early Experiences with Language and Race

As I reflect on my educational journey, I recognize how foundational *Diné bizaad* (Navajo language) was to my early learning. Before entering kindergarten, I primarily spoke and learned in my home language. I attended a local federally funded boarding school in my community that initially adopted a bilingual model, integrating *Diné bizaad* and English in the early grades. This approach reflected a form of self-determination and local control over education, demonstrating the tribe's efforts to uphold educational sovereignty (McCarty & Lee, 2014). Tribal leaders and community members exerted influence over the school's staffing, curriculum, and cultural preservation practices, an act of resistance and agency in a system long shaped by assimilationist policies (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006).

Although classroom instruction gradually shifted to English in the upper grades, my cultural identity was reinforced through the presence of elders and educators who spoke *Diné bizaad* and the visibility of our traditions. Still, as I moved through the grades, I noticed many of my peers drifting away from *Diné* language and traditional practices, sometimes even ridiculing those who maintained them. The teasing about being "rezzy" reflected internalized settler-colonial ideologies, an outcome of subtractive forces of schooling that displace Indigenous identity and knowledge systems in favor of dominant norms (McCarty & Lee, 2014).

At home, I continued to speak *Diné bizaad* with *shímá* and *shímásání*, who never spoke English in our household. They consistently reminded me that I came from strong and resilient people, and that education was not just a personal goal but a responsibility to our community. When they decided I would attend high school out of state to prepare for college, I understood their hopes and fears. They wanted to shield me from the socioeconomic barriers that often burden youth on the reservation while ensuring I held tightly to my cultural roots.

Transitioning to a predominantly white public high school was jarring. Indigenous identity and perspectives were virtually absent in the curriculum. The U.S. history courses I took were emblematic of the historical erasure of Native peoples through formal education systems (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). I recall how two paragraphs in a textbook reduced the entirety of the Indigenous Peoples' experience, from pre-colonization to contemporary time, into sanitized language. The white teacher, who also served as a football coach, had us silently read textbook chapters without discussion or critical engagement. In contrast, the civilizations of Europe, Rome, Greece, and Egypt were animated through storytelling and teacher expertise, reinforcing whose histories were deemed worthy of study.

It wasn't until my junior year that I was exposed to multicultural literature. A class on ethnic literature introduced me to the voices of Black, Jewish, Latiné, Indigenous, and women writers. Reading *Lakota Woman* (Crow Dog & Erdoes, 1990) was a transformative moment. It was the first time I encountered an Indigenous perspective that spoke to the realities of colonization, resistance, and survival. Later, reading *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Brown, 1970) independently in another literature class was life-changing. Though my teacher did not guide me through the book, the stories ignited a desire to learn more about the true history of Indigenous Peoples. McCarty and Lee (2014) remind us that culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogy includes critically engaging with history and encouraging students to question systems of power, something my high school education had largely failed to do until that point.

During college, I continued seeking community and knowledge. Although I was often one of the few Native students in predominantly white institutions, I found strength through friendships with other Indigenous students, especially a Lakota friend who invited me to visit her homelands and relatives. Visiting the Black Hills and Wounded Knee grounded my understanding of the intergenerational pain and resilience held in those lands. These visits served as experiential learning deeply rooted in place-based Indigenous knowledge, an important aspect of culturally sustaining education (McCarty & Lee, 2014).

Eventually, I transferred to a university in Arizona with a stronger Indigenous presence, both in the curriculum and the faculty. There, I worked in a local school district as a liaison supporting Native students and families. Encouraged by the director of the program, I entered an Indigenous teacher preparation program. I was inspired by the noticeable absence of Indigenous educators in schools serving tribal communities. Becoming a teacher felt like a return to what *shímásání* and *shímá* had always hoped for: that I would carry our language, stories, and values forward, not just for myself, but for the generations to come.

In many ways, my story reflects the broader tensions that Lomawaima and McCarty (2006) highlight, the paradox of schools as both sites of assimilation and potential vehicles for Indigenous resurgence. While the public education system failed to affirm my identity for much of my schooling while I was a teen, the cultural grounding I received at home, along with critical experiences in literature and community, helped me remain *Diné* and fueled my commitment to transform education from within.

Resistance and Reclamation: Becoming an Educator and Scholar

After the passing of *shímásání*, a deep sense of grief enveloped me. She was meant to live with me once I finished college. Her encouragement, her steady reminders to "keep going," echoed in my mind as I transitioned into the professional world of education. I earned my

teaching license and began working in a public school that served primarily Spanish-speaking English learners. Transitioning from student to licensed educator revealed a hidden curriculum. I had to navigate expectations and professional norms that were often unspoken. Again, I found myself as the only Indigenous person on staff, and Indigenous perspectives were absent from the curriculum, unless teachers made a deliberate effort to include them.

Some teachers approached me for guidance on integrating Native content, and I was glad to support them. I introduced texts like *The Goat in the Rug* (Blood et al., 1990), bringing props such as a Navajo rug woven by my mother, a figurine of a *Diné asdzáán* weaving a rug on a loom made by a relative, along with vocabulary and cultural context. Students were curious and respectful, asking meaningful questions about being *Diné*. I used culturally responsive pedagogy (Lee, 2009) to center student identity, language, and stories in the curriculum, guided by teachings from s*hímásání* and s*hímá*, who reminded me that "words and actions are powerful" and should always reflect the values of *Hózhó* (the Beauty Way).

Eventually, I relocated to South Dakota to teach at a tribally controlled Lakota school where culture and language were central. The transition was significant, but I felt welcomed by the community. I was deeply moved by the respect shown by families and staff, and I honored their generosity by integrating cultural relevance in my lessons. For example, when teaching math concepts like rate, time, and distance, I localized the stories and examples to students' lived experiences. It worked; students engaged, understood, and felt seen. True Indigenous education is rooted in place and power; learning must be anchored in the specific cultural, linguistic, and historical realities of the people (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). I felt this truth in South Dakota. Many of my students were descendants of great Lakota leaders like Red Cloud and Crazy Horse. This realization deepened my commitment to honoring their identities through high-quality instruction. The school itself embodied tribal sovereignty, resisting federal policies like *No Child Left Behind* that undermined local control and cultural preservation.

Later, I pursued graduate studies in educational leadership through a program for Indigenous school leaders in Pennsylvania. There, I found mentors and a scholarly community that recognized Indigenous epistemologies. We visited the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, a site symbolic of federal attempts to erase Indigenous identity. Seeing the graves of Native children at Carlisle reinforced why I teach, why I resist assimilation, and why Indigenous educational sovereignty matters.

Returning to Arizona, I worked as a reading interventionist at another tribally controlled school while completing my school leadership internship. I noticed troubling patterns. Native students are disproportionately identified for special education services. I wanted to know why. This question guided me into a doctorate program in Oregon, focused on special education and clinical sciences. Once again, I found myself navigating academic spaces that weren't built for people like me. Western theories by Hegel, Geertz, Marx, and Foucault dominated. Eventually, I encountered Sandra Harding's standpoint theory, which affirmed that Indigenous perspectives are valid, situated knowledges. This gave me language for what I had long known through experience. The Indigenous perspectives of scholars like Deloria, Brayboy, Grande, and Wilson brought clarity. Two-Eyed Seeing, taught by Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall, resonated deeply. It aligned with what s*hímásání* always said: balance *Diné* knowledge with Western tools. I realized this was the path: using both eyes, honoring both systems of knowledge, and doing so with relational accountability and maintaining balance.

During the early phases of my doctoral program, I struggled with imposter syndrome, a pervasive sense of not belonging in academic spaces so far removed from my homeland. Native

students often experience cultural dislocation and marginalization that undermine their sense of belonging (Tachine et al., 2017). My feelings of alienation were compounded by being geographically distant from Diné Bikéyah, cut off from the land, language, and relationships that had grounded me throughout my educational journey. Still, I reminded myself of my elders' teachings and carried turquoise with me as a symbol of protection and belonging.

COVID-19 disrupted my dissertation process. I experienced illness, grief, and personal trauma. Still, I remembered the Hero Twins, *Naayéé' Neizghání* (Monster Slayer) and *Tó Bájíshchíní* (Born for Water). Their courage to face the monsters of their time inspires me to face today's monsters, which show up as institutional racism, educational erasure, and cultural silencing. I practiced survivance, not just survival, but active resistance, presence, and resurgence (Vizenor, 1999). My journey is one of persistence, rooted in the teachings of my ancestors and driven by a commitment to future generations. My story, my scholarship, is a ceremony, one that honors the past and prepares the way forward.

Diné resilience is rooted in our origin stories, teachings, and cultural practices passed down through generations. We look to *Naayéé' Neizghání* and *Tó Bájíshchíní* for strength and guidance. Raised by a single mother and armed with the teachings of *Diyin Diné'e* (the Holy People), they overcame tremendous hardship and defeated the *Naayéé*', monsters representing chaos and imbalance, to ensure the survival of the *Diné*. Today, we interpret these teachings as both metaphor and instruction. No matter how often we are knocked down, we are taught to rise again and get back on our feet, to face adversity with courage, and to overcome the contemporary monsters of injustice, oppression, and erasure. We pray for the strength and will to continue this battle daily and to be guided and protected by *Diyin Diné'e*.

These stories and spiritual teachings have supported *Diné* survivance across generations. They sustained our people through historical trauma and genocide that included forced removal during the Long Walk, four years of imprisonment at *Hwéeldi* (Bosque Redondo), and, later, the cultural devastation of Indian boarding schools. Indigenous and *Diné* resilience is not merely recovery from hardship but a collective expression of distinct worldviews, values, and practices that enable resistance and transformation (Oré et al., 2016). For example, *shímásání* was a survivor of the Indian boarding school system. Despite the pain and silence surrounding that era, she taught her children and grandchildren to pursue education not as assimilation but as survivance and self-determination. She emphasized that we must also remain fluent in *Diné bizaad* and grounded in our cultural knowledge to truly sustain ourselves. Her teachings remind me that when I face challenges in academia or life, I must turn to prayer, ceremony, and our ancestral wisdom to find strength and purpose. Her voice continues to guide me, reminding me to keep going, to walk in *Hózhǫ́*, and to use my education to uplift future generations.

Walking in Two Worlds: Tensions and Transformations in the Academy

As a *Diné* scholar, navigating academic institutions requires constant negotiation. These spaces often prioritize Western norms, which conflict with Indigenous epistemologies. Western academic spaces are not inherently designed to support the presence or success of Indigenous peoples; our existence within these institutions challenges colonial logics that have historically rendered us invisible or presumed us extinct. Native presence in the academy disrupts dominant narratives and calls into question the epistemic foundations of Western education (Grande, 2015). This tension became evident in clinical research spaces, where Indigenous perspectives were often discussed in deficit terms, relegated to the bottom of statistical categories in health,

education, and behavioral outcomes, without meaningful efforts to understand root causes or involve Indigenous communities in shaping research agendas

Too often, I was invited to contribute to research only after the design had been finalized, positioned as a cultural consultant rather than a co-creator. This reflects systemic resistance to Indigenous self-determination in education, where institutional norms and procedures limit the transformative potential of Indigenous knowledge (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). When I advocated for Indigenous methodologies, emphasizing relationship-building, community-based inquiry, and tribal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, my recommendations were met with confusion or resistance. The burden of translation and education often fell on me, requiring emotional and intellectual labor to explain the foundational principles of Indigenous research to those unfamiliar with them.

These challenges also extended to teaching. My commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy, particularly in centering Native voices, histories, and literatures, was sometimes questioned by students and colleagues who expected a more "neutral" or "mainstream" curriculum. This pressure to suppress or dilute my *Diné* identity for the comfort of non-Native audiences reinforces what Grande (2015) calls the colonizing impulse of schooling, to silence difference in the name of universality. I continue to teach from a *Diné asdzáán* perspective, integrating works by Indigenous scholars and authors such as Brayboy and Sherman Alexie to ground my students in the lived realities and intellectual contributions of Native communities. I understand that culturally responsive education is an act of self-determination (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009).

I also encountered instances of tokenism in academic and professional settings, where my presence was invited to fulfill diversity goals rather than to genuinely integrate Indigenous perspectives. While I was asked to attend meetings or serve on committees, my insights were not always heard, implemented, or valued. This experience echoes superficial inclusion, where institutions symbolically engage Indigenous scholars without ceding power or committing to structural change (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). These moments underscored the importance of not only inviting Indigenous voices but also transforming institutional cultures to honor and act upon them.

I found encouragement in collaborating with colleagues committed to inclusive, justice-oriented education. Through these partnerships, I invite educators who actively implement culturally responsive and sustaining practices to speak with my students, offering concrete models for transformation in classrooms and schools. These conversations not only affirm the validity of Indigenous pedagogies but also equip future educators with tools to support all students, especially those from historically marginalized communities. In doing so, I strive to honor the teachings of my elders and fulfill my responsibility to prepare the next generation of educators to act as agents of equity and change.

Discussion

Walking in Beauty as a Scholar

My scholarly identity as a *Diné asdzáán* is rooted in service, *K'é* (kinship), and relational accountability. These values guide my teaching and research and shape how I see my role in movements for Indigenous educational sovereignty. I approach my academic work with a commitment to relational accountability, ensuring that my teaching and research practices benefit the communities to whom I am accountable, especially Indigenous students, families, and communities (Kovach, 2009). I begin each course by introducing myself through a *Diné* lens,

situating my scholarship within my lived roles as a mother, daughter, educator, and community member. This positionality informs my curricular choices, which center Indigenous scholars, perspectives, and experiences not as add-ons but as foundational epistemologies that challenge dominant narratives in education.

As part of cultivating relational accountability in my courses, I begin with a land acknowledgment, naming the original stewards of the land where the institution resides. This practice honors the sovereignty and presence of local Indigenous nations and serves as an entry point for my students and colleagues to engage with the histories, responsibilities, and ethics of place-based education. It also situates our academic work within broader movements for Indigenous visibility, healing, and justice, aligned with embedding Indigenous perspectives within the global educational landscape (McKinley & Smith, 2019).

In sharing my identity and approach with students, I create an academic space where Indigenous knowledge systems are not only visible but respected and valued. This is a deliberate act of interpretive autoethnography, a method that resists colonial erasure and affirms Indigenous presence and pedagogy (Denzin, 2014). I encourage students to reflect on whose voices are present or missing in their curriculum and to consider how they can respectfully include their students' cultural and linguistic knowledge. This is particularly urgent in today's polarized climate, where culturally responsive teaching is often politicized and discouraged. I often tell them, start by listening. Listen to your students, their families, and the communities they serve. Let that be the foundation of inclusive pedagogy.

In research, I seek projects that support self-determination and are grounded in Indigenous values and community needs, and align with decolonizing principles (Smith, 2021). This process includes evaluating whether Indigenous scholars co-develop research design, whether Indigenous methodologies are applied, and whether Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) and governance principles are upheld throughout the process. IDS asserts that data about Indigenous peoples must be subject to Indigenous laws, governance structures, and collective rights (Rainie et al., 2017). Research must not simply extract data from Indigenous communities but instead contribute to their well-being and uphold the principle that data generated through research rightfully belongs to the community itself. To operationalize this, I follow the CARE (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) Principles for Indigenous Data Governance, which complement FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) data principles by centering Indigenous rights and interests in data ecosystems (Carroll et al., 2020). These principles guide ethical data practices that prioritize reciprocity, transparency, and respect for sovereignty. Indigenous scholars are not merely responding to dominant discourses; we are actively reshaping educational paradigms through place-based, culturally grounded knowledge production.

My role, then, is not only to share knowledge but to build and sustain relationships, to be a good relative in academic spaces. I model this after the *Diné* women who mentored me, who demonstrated that leadership involves listening, making space for others, connecting people to opportunities, responding to community needs, and planning for the future. As a *Diné asdzáán*, I carry forward teachings that are rooted in *Hózhó*, balance, respect, and harmony. These teachings guide my pedagogical stance and my belief that education is not solely about individual achievement, but about collective healing, transformation, and the continuity of Indigenous life and knowledge. My story, therefore, is not mine alone; it is an offering to the next generation of Indigenous scholars and educators committed to reclaiming education as a tool for liberation. This commitment reflects the principles of harmony and balance embedded in S*a'ah Naagháí*

Bik'eh Hózhóón and the Beauty Way, which guide my approach to scholarship and teaching. By centering relational accountability, I ensure that my work honors interconnectedness and reciprocity, affirming that educational transformation must be grounded in these *Diné* epistemologies.

The themes of harmony, balance, and relationality discussed throughout this manuscript are not incidental; they are grounded in *Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhóón* and the Beauty Way. Walking in beauty reflects the pursuit of balance across physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, guiding how I approach teaching, research, and relationships in academic spaces. Relationality is central to Indigenous research and life, and in this work, it shapes my commitment to accountability and reciprocity with students, families, and communities (Wilson, 2008). These principles ensure that the narrative is not only personal but also aligned with *Diné* epistemologies that call for living and learning in harmony with all beings.

Conclusion

Affirming Story as Knowledge

Storytelling has always been central to Indigenous ways of knowing. Today, it is increasingly recognized as a legitimate and powerful mode of inquiry within the academy. Denzin (2014) reminds us that autoethnography is not merely a personal reflection but a political and pedagogical act that disrupts dominant narratives, reclaims Indigenous presence, and centers knowledge systems that have historically been marginalized. My story, situated within the lived experiences of *Diné,* becomes a form of resistance, an affirmation of survivance (Vizenor, 1999), and a call to transform educational systems that often silence Indigenous voices.

In telling my story, I draw from the epistemological grounding of relational accountability articulated by Kovach (2009), who emphasizes that Indigenous research must serve the community and honor the relationships that sustain us. The act of sharing lived experience is not just self-expression; it is a responsibility to those who came before and those yet to come. It is a commitment to be a good relative in academic spaces, to create pathways for future generations, and to uplift our communities by contributing to knowledge that matters.

The teachings of *shímásání, shícheii*, and *shímá* continue to guide me, to adapt, to learn, and to use ancestral wisdom in service of our people. These teachings mirror foundational principles in Indigenous education, the interweaving of spiritual, cultural, and intellectual traditions to sustain Indigenous peoples and foster educational self-determination (McKinley & Smith, 2019). My positionality as a *Diné asdzáán* scholar is shaped by this intergenerational wisdom, by community relationships, and by the recognition that land, language, and story are intimately bound.

Sense of belonging for Native students in higher education is forged through relationships and the validation of cultural identity (Tachine et al., 2017). Sharing our stories cultivates that sense of belonging, not only for ourselves but for those navigating similar paths. It tells them, "You are not alone." In this way, storytelling becomes a healing practice and a blueprint for institutional transformation.

I have also come to value collaboration with non-Native colleagues who are willing to learn, grow, and stand in solidarity. When such relationships are grounded in mutual respect and aligned with the goals of Indigenous sovereignty and educational justice, they become powerful spaces for co-resistance and shared advocacy.

My scholarly identity is not only academic, but also spiritual, relational, and ancestral. Through story, I contribute to a larger movement for Indigenous educational sovereignty, grounded in love for my people and the teachings passed down through generations. As a *Diné* scholar, I seek to walk in beauty and in balance, to pray, to listen, to offer gratitude, and to ask for guidance from *Diyin Dine'é*. I was taught to wear or carry turquoise so that I may be recognized as one of their children, and to offer prayer and an offering when entering the lands and waterways of other Indigenous nations, acknowledging their spirits, their ancestors, and their sovereignty.

Broader Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

This narrative offers critical insights for transforming educational systems. For practice, it underscores the need for culturally sustaining pedagogy that honors Indigenous languages, stories, and epistemologies in classrooms. Educators can draw from relational accountability to create learning environments rooted in respect and reciprocity. For policy, the work calls for institutional commitments to Indigenous educational sovereignty, including support for tribal-controlled schools, Indigenous teacher preparation programs, and frameworks that resist assimilationist practices. For research, this article affirms the validity of Indigenous methodologies and invites scholars to engage in community-based, relational approaches that prioritize ethical responsibility over extractive paradigms. By centering harmony, balance, and relationality, this work contributes to a growing movement to decolonize education, reclaim Indigenous knowledge systems and identity, and advance equity for Indigenous peoples.

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