Securing Navajo National Boundaries
War, Patriotism, Tradition,
and the Diné Marriage Act of 2005

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Like many other Americans, I became aware of the attacks on the
United States on September 11, 2001, via the national news, which broad-
cast the scenes of airplanes diving into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.
I remember learning of the attacks right before having to go to teach a
class at Northern Arizona University. That day the students sat quietly,
for it was almost impossible for anyone to not have heard the shocking
news.¹ Many Americans marked these events as a signal that they were no
longer safe and supported President Bush and his administration’s prepa-
rations to begin invasions in the Middle East, first Afghanistan and then
Iraq. In much the same way, Navajos also enthusiastically expressed their
patriotism to the United States; however, Navajos have manifested their
loyalty within the rhetoric and symbols of Diné traditional values.

This manifestation of Diné traditional values conflates Navajo na-
tionalism with American nationalism, so that they appear to be one and
the same. Such articulations streamline Native pasts into the dominant
American narrative about itself as a multicultural nation founded upon
moral and ethical principles and erase the historical links between the
past and the present, wherein Native peoples have been violently dis-
possessed of most of their lands and they see their sovereign statuses
as nations continually undermined by U.S. federal Indian policies and
the Supreme Court. Native peoples remain second-class citizens within
their own lands and under American rule. This essay examines the conflation of American and Navajo nationalisms by scrutinizing the intersections of war, gender, and Diné tradition and the ways in which the Diné have drawn upon tradition to support U.S. militarism that sustains a rhetoric of multiculturalism, thereby erasing the U.S. imperialist history. I draw upon an emerging Indigenous feminist analysis that is illuminating how Native gender roles are significant to the construction of Native nations and how histories of Native nations have been shaped by histories of colonialism.

I begin by drawing out the Diné cultural landscape in the wake of September 11, 2001, that became increasingly militarized, note the history of Navajo participation in U.S. wars, and raise questions about how Navajo participation becomes aligned with a Navajo warrior tradition. Of particular interest are articulations of the bridges between the traditional roles of warriors and present-day Navajo soldiering for the United States and the links between family values and recent legislation, such as the Diné Marriage Act of 2005. Interrogations of how we have come to view Navajo causes and priorities as aligned with U.S. foreign policies disrupt the dominating American narrative of itself as a moral, ethical nation devoted to the principles of freedom and democracy and can move us to decolonization and the recovery of traditional principles of governance that were in place prior to 1863, when the Diné were in charge of their own destiny.

THE NAVAJO CULTURAL LANDSCAPE, POST 9/11

On September 11, 2002, Indian Country Today reported Native sentiments on the first anniversary of the airplane attacks on the United States with a story about Mashantucket Pequot member Jewell Praying Wolf James, who, along with several others, was transporting a “healing pole” around the country. Dedicated to the victims of the September 11th catastrophe, the pole was designed to aid in a national healing. Asked why Indians would participate in memorials dedicated to September 11th, when they have “suffered great wrongs from the United States,” James responded that, yes, Indians had suffered at the hands of the United States but that “all healing has to begin from within.” By helping the United States to heal from the attacks, “Indian peoples are making themselves whole.”

At the time of the attacks, as the article further noted, approximately three hundred tribal leaders had been attending a National Congress of American Indians meeting in Washington, D.C. Expecting to hear from Senator Daniel Inouye, the leaders, including Navajo Nation President Kelsey Begay, instead learned of the second attack on the Pentagon. Rather than add to the chaos, the leaders opted to continue with their meeting. Tribal leaders and their communities felt...
the attacks as "deeply and personally as any other inhabitants of the continent, and perhaps even more so," although there were "a few isolated voices to the contrary." With commercial air traffic at a standstill, President Begay and his constituents rented a car and drove across the country to get home.

Following the Washington, D.C., meeting, the Navajo leaders showed solidarity with the United States and proclaimed October 15, 2001, as "Navajo Nation Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Terrorist Attacks on America." In their proclamation, President Kelsey Begay and the Navajo Nation Council expressed gratitude for the first responders, as well as support for President Bush, the United States Armed Forces called to active duty, and all other American citizens making contributions and donations to aid the survivors of the attacks. In 2002, the annual Navajo Nation fair took as its theme "Sovereignty, Faith, Freedom–Remembering Our Heroes," which linked the events of September 11th with the impending invasion of Iraq. Further illustrating the fair's theme, Miss Navajo Nation Jolyana Begay appeared on a poster in which she sat attired in a traditional dress designed in red, white, and blue. Above her crowned head was emblazoned the proclamation "Let Freedom Ring!"

In the Navajo Times, a newspaper that has a wide circulation beyond the Navajo Nation's borders, the number of reports of Navajo soldiers enlisted in the U.S. military increased, as did the visibility of veterans' associations, including the famous Code Talkers. Cultural events, such as pow-wows, which also feature gourd dance societies, were also highlighted in the homeland. At pow-wows, Navajo veterans displayed American symbols on their regalia, while others donned T-shirts displaying the American flag with the declaration "These colors don't run." As Navajo soldiers left for the Middle East and then returned from their tours of duty, welcome home festivities were announced in regional newspapers. Some returned in body bags.

Following Osama Bin Laden's attacks on America, like most Americans, few Navajos appeared to have any questions about the impending invasion of Iraq. Neither did they question whether the airplane attacks were directly related to Iraq's president, Saddam Hussein. Like the rest of America, Navajos responded to the atmosphere of fear and rallied around the American flag. No doubt, in response to fears of terrorist attacks, some listened to national security advisors and dutifully loaded up rolls of duct tape and jugs of water at the Wal-Marts in border towns, such as Gallup and Farmington, New Mexico. Intensely interested, perplexed, and frustrated at the fervor of Navajo support for the war, I once asked Vine Deloria Jr. why Native people have displayed such patriotism to the United States when history has consistently proven the United States to be an imperialist force that has stolen our lands, cultures, and livelihoods, so that we remain dependent on the
U.S. government and larger economic forces for our very subsistence. Professor Deloria was reflective, saying that the best he could venture was that Native people hope that at some point the United States will live up to its declaration that it is a moral nation and will honor the treaties it has signed with Native Nations. It is perhaps that hope that keeps Natives supportive of the United States.5

Navajo patriotism is but one manifestation of a sanitized past, for, like other Americans, we wear ideological blinders and imbibe information filtered and fed to us by the media, politicians, scholars, and educators who sustain American imperialism. For Native peoples, the history of federal Indian policies, which have been largely assimilationist, has included the sanitization of our histories and has had far-reaching consequences, including an ignorance of American imperialism. History sanitized has kept most Americans ignorant of one American core value—violence—and of the fact that, in the eighteenth century, English settlers and their descendants claimed their freedom from their mother country, England, and then used violence to divest Indigenous peoples of their freedoms and lands. As feminist scholar Andrea Smith declares, “... the notion that terrorism only happens in other countries makes it difficult to grasp that the U.S. is built on a foundation of genocide, slavery, and racism.” For Navajos, the prevailing Navajo national mood is connected to the resurgence of American imperialism and, in particular, manifests a hatred and intolerance of difference within Navajo society.

A militarized Navajo cultural landscape has led our tribal leaders to call for a return to traditional values, which actually re-inscribes patriarchy. One result is the passage of the Diné Marriage Act of 2005—the Navajo version of the same-sex marriage ban—that discriminates against and calls for the exclusion of gays, lesbians, trans-genders, and bisexuals in same-sex partnerships in Navajo society.

Fairly recently, Jicarilla Apache scholar Carey N. Vicenti, who has served many years as a tribal judge, expressed frustration at the state of tribal nations and the failure to achieve sovereignty. Carey notes that Native people’s colonial education has led us to believe that we are not capable of governing ourselves, that we are “not entitled to independence of governance over our affairs.” For Native nations, sovereignty and self-determination have translated as “we could administer federal funding for ourselves.” Vicenti’s commentary reflects Native people’s sustained criticism of their tribal governments, who have been co-opted by the United States.

Native intellectuals express similar sentiments and are mapping the shifting relationships between tribal nations and the U.S. government in order to illuminate the history of Native sovereigns and the erosion of tribal sovereignties under American federal Indian policies, and especially by the U.S. Supreme Court.8 Mohawk scholar Taiaike
Alfred argues that Native peoples must return to governance based on traditional principles, while others insist that we might look to constitutions and treaties, which were established and created as a result of Indian–white relations in the formation of the American nation, as tools to assert sovereignty and to remind the United States of its obligation.9

These intellectual discussions about Native sovereignty are part of discussions about the need to decolonize our respective communities and nations. Dakota historian Waziyatawin (formerly Angela Cavender Wilson) has articulated the goals of Native scholars’ intellectual labors: the decolonization of our people, our communities, and our nations. Decolonization means the fomenting of a critical understanding of the colonist structures that have shaped Indigenous lives and communities and the bringing back to our communities “useful ways of talking about our experiences and co-creating a culture of resistance based both on the recovery of Indigenous knowledge and traditional means of resistance as well as the useful theoretical frameworks and language from outside our cultures that can assist us in our struggle.”10 A decolonization framework allows for the interrogations of the present states of tribal governments, so that we may return to traditional philosophies as the foundation of our communities and nation.

However, while these discussions occurring throughout Native North America are thoughtful and critical, there remains serious inattention to the ways in which nations are gendered, for the imposition of Western democracy principles on Native peoples has inscribed relationships of domination, so that patriarchy has become entrenched in Native societies where women’s formerly high traditional status has been continually undermined. Feminist scholars, particularly those who study “third-world” nations, have extended studies on the ways in which nations are “imagined communities” where the world is divided between “us” and “them,” and how the creation of a collective consciousness is maintained and ideologically reproduced through institutions, such as schools and churches, and cultural events, such as fairs and beauty pageants. An analysis of gender reveals how women are integral to the project of nation building, for they reproduce nations—biologically, culturally, and symbolically.11 The ways in which war is gendered remains undertheorized, particularly by Native scholars.

Women were targeted for wartime messages wherein traditional feminine and masculine roles were redrawn as necessary to national interest.12 In particular, after World War II, as American men filled the ranks of the military and went off to war, women answered the call for crucial labor needed to produce weapons and arsenal. Feminist analysis sheds light on how patriarchy operates as the structural system of domination, which diffuses questions of discrimination across race and other differences while bifurcating gender as feminine and masculine.
With the onset of the Cold War, government officials quieted American citizens’ fears about the possibilities of communist infiltrations into the American homeland and fears of bomb attacks by framing public policy in the language of family, thereby normalizing a militarized American landscape. From the 1950s and into the 1980s, American leaders built a formidable arsenal to make the United States a world power. They also tested bombs on their own citizens for more than a decade.\footnote{13}

Susan Jeffords’s critique of cultural depictions of the Vietnam War in films and novels demonstrates how these media played a significant role in renewing a sense of American masculinity after the Vietnam War. As Jeffords observed, representations of the war led to a redefinition of masculinity that “presents itself as separate from and independent of an opposed feminine.”\footnote{14} Further, white males were cast as the newly oppressed “who had been falsely scorned by society and unjustly victimized by [their] own government,” thereby allowing all men as a group to declare “their suffering at the hands of government biased toward and operating under the aegis of the feminine.”\footnote{15} Feminist analysis sheds light on how patriarchy operates as the structural system of domination, which diffuses questions of discrimination across race and other differences while presenting gender as a bifurcation of gender as feminine and masculine.\footnote{16} Feminist observations are applicable to the ways in which Navajo national boundaries are redrawn around patriarchy that promotes Western binaries of feminine and masculine.

Building on war and gender studies, Cynthia Enloe describes how militarization of a culture privileges masculine values and, importantly, how women participate in this privileging. Enloe defines militarization as “a step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend on its well-being on militaristic ideas,” and “the more militarization transforms an individual or a society, the more that individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal.”\footnote{17} She cautions that we must be wary of claims that connect militarization to tradition or culture, thereby naturalizing the phenomenon.

Native feminist analysis has also made critical inroads into illuminating the formations of Native nations as primarily patriarchies that perpetuate systems of dominance. A gendered analysis exposes how women are simultaneously invoked as cultural symbols and signifiers of nations and denied equal access to scarce resources and full participation in the political arena. Moreover, the imposition of the Western legal system onto Native justice systems and the adoption of Western prescriptions for domesticity have further undermined Native women’s traditional status. Finally, Andrea Smith points out, Indigenous sovereignty and the status of Native women are so interwoven that the realization of sovereignty requires attention to the impact of sexism and gender discrimination in our societies: we cannot decolonize without
addressing sexism, and attempting to do so ignores the fact that it has been precisely through gender violence that we have lost our lands in the first place.\textsuperscript{18}

The goals of decolonization are intertwined with those of Indigenous feminists who are committed to the retention of Indigenous land, the realization of sovereignty, and the recovery of tribal languages, educations, and cultural practices. In moving toward Indigenous governance, it is important to interrogate the creation and perpetuation of modern tribal governments; as such, feminist praxis is proving useful in unveiling the ways in which tribal governments have sustained colonial practices and attitudes. This study is therefore intended as part of the interventions that Native feminists are developing around Native women, feminist theory, and sovereignty.

**NAVAJOS IN THE MILITARY: PATRIOTISM AND TRADITION**

Like other Native peoples, Navajos have a long tenure of military service in the U.S. armed forces that stretches from the First World War to the present war in Iraq. My own great-great-grandfather, Dághá Ch’íí, served as a scout under the Navajo leader Manuelito for a number of reasons, including the imperative to lessen the conflicts between Navajo herders and white and Hispanic ranchers who were competing for scarce pasturing lands in and around Navajoland. Earlier, Navajo scouts were used in the campaign against the Apache warrior Geronimo. Historian Peter Iverson notes Navajo participation in American wars beginning with World War I and into the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{19} Today, the Code Talkers, so named because they used their Navajo language to assist in defeating the Japanese, are especially high profile and lauded for their valuable contribution to the U.S. war effort. The narratives about Native and Navajo involvement in the defense of the American nation attract popular acclaim and speak to assumptions about the successful integration of Natives into American society. Several themes highlight the predominating understanding of Native peoples’ relationship to the U.S. polity and present the United States as a model multicultural nation. Significantly, Native peoples also deploy the same messages about their relationships to the United States, albeit in the rhetoric of tradition.

First, historian Lawrence Barsh notes a long history of Indian involvement in U.S. wars. Indians fought alongside both American and British troops during the Revolution and figured visibly in the Civil War. Indian military enlistments unleashed in the American imagination colorful images of “real Americans” fighting against European tyranny and at the same time, naturalized Indians’ skill in combat. In the First World War, journalists echoed military officers’ reports that Indian men’s fighting ability was “on par with that of their forefathers.”\textsuperscript{20}
Alongside the fascination with images of the Native warrior unleashing his wartime prowess on behalf of the American nation, observers, including Indian Service officials, argued that military service disposed Native Americans toward integration into American society by directing Indians away from tribal relations and toward white civilization.

Participation in the First World War also led to Native men's exposure to European countries, where they compared people's social conditions with American ones, to find their own American land filled with more opportunities and technological advancements. Many Natives concluded that, indeed, although American Indians might have been oppressed in their own lands, they still lived better than many other people throughout the world. As Barsh wrote, "Despite experiences with discrimination and problems arising from cultural differences, Indians generally came away from their service experience with more positive attitudes towards whites, a sense of entitlement to fair treatment, and an orientation towards Euro-American political values." Returning Native soldiers recognized that many people did not distinguish them from other Americans, that the uniform had made them equals. However, once they had returned to civilian life, they realized that racism and discrimination remained a reality for Native peoples. Wartime experience, including exposure to other societies, provided the veterans with skills to confront the harsh existence of Indian life. On the Indian national front, a new Indian leadership emerged out of Indians' engagement with American wartime service. Barsh observed, "War service led to the emergence of a new tier of leadership that was more Americanized, disciplined, and materialistic, but at the same time less intimidated by the Indian Office." The emerging leadership, shaped by exposure to outside political and social forces, consolidated around issues of U.S. citizenship, the establishment of Indian self-governance under the 1934 Reorganization Act, and the quest to retain the lands for which their ancestors had fought so hard.

By the 1950s, Native people saw renewed assaults on their remaining homelands as whites attempted to liquidate tribal lands and force them into the American mainstream. Reacting to Cold War ideology that named Indian people as subjects forced to live in reservation "concentration camps," congressmen such as Arthur Watkins, who fashioned termination legislation, declared that dissolving Native people's relationship to the federal government would allow Natives to join the rest of American society. At the same that American officials sought to terminate Native nations' sovereign status, Native leaders, many of whom were veterans, countered Watkins's assaults by organizing around an "indigenous patriotism that married loyalty to the United States to third World ethnic nationalism, challenging both American and Soviet propaganda by affirming the sacredness of the reservation." According to historian Paul Rosier, a Native consciousness emerged that bound a
Native sense of a distinct Native nation within the American borders with their sense of being U.S. citizens, which he terms “a hybrid nature of Native American political institutions and identities.”

In publications of Native military experiences, there are few questions about the process through which Natives have been inculcated with U.S. military values and how they intertwined traditional concepts of warriorship with U.S. military service, although Peter Iverson, in his history of Navajos, comments on the contradictions of Navajos serving in the armed forces while being refused American citizenship. Even after Navajos returned from WWI, they were denied citizenship in New Mexico and Arizona. Into the twentieth century, Navajos experienced ongoing crushing poverty and racism, even as their leaders capitulated to U.S. dominion over their lands, natural resources, and lifeways.

Since September 11th, the Navajo Times has regularly featured Diné soldiers being deployed to Iraq and cultural events where displays of Navajo loyalty to the United States are central to the narrative. Links between traditional concepts of warriorship and U.S. patriotism remain integral to interpretations of these stories of how Natives fit into American society. For Navajos, men’s roles as warriors are reflected in the traditional stories of the Hero Twins, Monster Slayer, and Born For Water. Earning the gifts of the warrior’s implements—the bow and arrow—from their father the Sun, Monster Slayer, and Born for Water slew the monsters roaming the land and causing fear among the people. Returning from their warriors’ feats, the Hero Twins underwent healing ceremonies, which restored them to their society. Today, Navajo soldiers and veterans draw on these stories to sustain them as they soldier for the United States.

The narratives that Navajo men and women tell about soldiering for the United States display themes that remain central to understanding Navajo wartime experiences. Enlistment in the military continues cultural and family traditions and is a source of pride and status in their families and communities. Serving in the U.S. military also perpetuates the role of the warrior, which is a signifier of traditional manhood. Also echoed is the widely held belief that educational opportunities will also be available once they have served their time. Navajos also declare that Native soldiers are preserving American freedom and democracy and are committed to Iraqi freedom. For example, nineteen-year-old Pfc. Michelle Wauneka returned for a brief visit to her Window Rock, Arizona, home after a five-month stint in Iraq and Kuwait. In addition to her enlistment, several of her brothers are in the military. Both of her parents expressed pride in their daughter’s service: “Somebody has to ensure what we enjoy. They have that responsibility.”

In January 2006, Army Sgt. Clifton Yazzie, twenty-three, of Fruitland, New Mexico, became the seventh Navajo to die in the Iraq war when an improvised explosive device detonated near his vehicle during patrol operations.
Survived by his wife, Michelle, his daughter, and his son, Clifton was heralded by the Navajo community. His mother reported that her son had wanted to be a soldier since he was a little boy. Clifton’s death is made significant with his mother’s remarks that “[Iraqi people] didn’t have freedom and that hurt him the most.” She hoped that his children would know that their father had a kind heart and that he had served in Iraq “for them so they could enjoy life, have education, freedom and safety.” Clifton also died so that “the Iraqi people could have what we have here. We’ll miss him.”

As women become part of the militarized landscape, they are also referred to as warriors. In particular, the story of the first Native woman to die in combat, Army Spc. Lori Piestewa, has become a touchstone for reiterating American values of freedom and democracy, values that include women. One year after Piestewa’s death, her best friend, Jessica Lynch, who had survived the attack on their company outside of Nasiriyah, Iraq, visited Tuba City to meet Piestewa’s community and family. Greeted with friendship from many dignitaries, including Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr., Lynch shared the story of her friendship with Piestewa. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, the two women had become friends. In her visit to Tuba City, where Native people honored her with gifts, speeches, and food, Lynch found commonalities between her culture and the Native cultures—“family ties are strong.” She was also presented with an eagle feather by a Hopi marine, who tied it to her hair, an ultimate signifier of the Native warrior.

To honor all women who served in the U.S. military, Ralph Zotigh, a Kiowa who is the lead singer for the drum group the Zotigh Singers of Albuquerque, composed a song for women warriors, which the group performed for Lynch. Zotigh noted that, in traditional Kiowa culture, only men were warriors, but times have changed and it has become necessary to acknowledge women warriors. He said, “Traditionally, the mentality not only among the Kiowa but the plains tribes, there was no prediction that women would protect our culture and ways of life.” Not realized in this comment is the awareness that Native women have been the first protectors and guardians of tribal nations. These stories of Navajos in the military and the significant number of Navajos who have supported the U.S. cause suggest that Navajos have successfully integrated into the American multicultural landscape.

While Native and Navajo responses appear to align with broader American sentiments regarding President Bush’s war policies, from the onset of the planned invasion in the Middle East to the present, Natives have voiced dissent. For example, Cherokee scholar Jeanette Haynes Writer raised questions about a history of federal Indian policy that has willfully destroyed Native people and the complicity of American citizens to remain ignorant of their history when it comes to the treatment of Native peoples. Countering voices that contend that September 11th
is the first time that Americans have been attacked on their own soil, Haynes declared:

What has been forgotten or unrealized is the United States’ historical formation, set within the context of terrorism against this nation’s Indigenous peoples. Forgotten or ignored are the United States’ colonization, deculturalization, and oppression of Indigenous peoples through acts of terrorism. For over 500 years, terrorist acts have been carried out yet erased from the consciousness of the non-Native United States population and its forms of media. ... As Native people we have had, and endured, a long history of domestic acts of terrorism in our homelands.33

Writer’s understanding of the roots of American imperialism and the links among American militarism, the history of Native and white relationships, and Native cultural landscapes is part of a growing body of literature that interrogates the U.S. historic relationship to “third world” countries, as well as the history of its relationships with the original inhabitants of the Americas. In interrogating the intersections among war, patriotism, and traditional cultures and concepts, we can better understand the consequences of the imposition of Western democracy and how we as Native peoples have internalized American ideology, so that many of us exhibit amnesia about our history under colonization.

When reports of the torture of prisoners began to surface, Navajo citizen Lester Chee of Phoenix, Arizona, wrote a letter to The Navajo Times expressing concern about the dilemma soldiers were facing. Even if they were only following orders, the soldiers could still face penalties, even death sentences, and they could not hope for too much support from other Americans or their own Native communities. Chee ends his letter, “These individuals were willing to die for you and me. Just what do we mean, and how far are we willing to go, when we say, ‘Support Our Troops?’”34

**DINÉ MARRIAGE ACT**

In April 2005, council delegate Larry Anderson from Fort Defiance, Arizona, sponsored a resolution that would restrict marriage to heterosexual couples. Anderson declared that his legislation was intended to “promote strong families and strong family values, not discriminate.” Anderson made his proposal palatable to his constituents by saying, “Traditionally, Navajos have always respected the woman and the man union. Family values are important. The Navajo elders said we should respect both men and women.”35
Anderson’s resolution passed through the council, whereupon President Joe Shirley Jr. promptly vetoed the measure for a number of reasons, including its low priority for Navajo citizens, its discriminatory nature, and its violation of a basic human right. Not deterred by the president’s veto, Anderson mounted a successful campaign to override the veto wherein the Navajo Nation council voted sixty-two to fourteen, with twelve delegates abstaining or absent, in favor of the Diné Marriage Act. While Anderson has insisted that his only interest in the matter is the preservation of Navajo traditional practices, critics have pointed out that the passage of the Act coincides with American obsessions with family values, including monogamy, nuclear family preservation, and sexuality. Further, as Elaine Tyler May and Cynthia Enloe have demonstrated, national responses during wartime re-inscribed Western values, which privilege masculine values.

The debate over gay marriage has divided the American nation, with efforts to write into the Constitution a provision about marriage; is seeing reverberations for Native nations, including Navajos; and raises questions about the meaning of tribal sovereignty, cultural tradition, and legal rights. In Indian country, same-sex marriage came to national attention when a Cherokee lesbian couple applied for, and received, a tribal marriage license from the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. For the Diné, a key issue pivots around the question of whether Navajo society had at one time recognized a third gender, called the “nádleehi,” or even multiple genders. Just as Diné patriotism gets conflated with the traditional role of the warrior, tradition is used to affirm Western gender ideals, thereby denying the existence of “two-spirits” in Navajo society. More recently, in the fall of 2007, one of the topics presented at the Diné Policy Institute was “family, marriage, and the Diné Marriage Act.” The day-long session, which was conducted primarily in the Navajo language, resulted in an almost unified agreement among the participants that Navajos had traditionally recognized more than two genders. They also agreed that a third gender, the “nádleehi,” was a person who had been valued in Navajo society. There were sharp disagreements on whether the “nádleehi” had engaged in same-sex sexual activity. Moreover, at least two Navajos questioned the link being made between the “nádleehi” and modern-day gay and lesbian. Traditional Navajos involved in the discussion readily cited creation narratives to make their points about traditional Navajo practices around marriage, sexuality, family, and homosexuality.

For Navajos, understandings of multiple genders are based upon traditional stories. According to these narratives, First Man and First Woman argued about whose role was more important, which then led to a separation between the sexes. First Man informed the other men that First Woman had declared women more important than the men, whereupon they followed First Man across the river, where they set up
their households. The nádleehí went with the men, taking his dishes and weaving implements. During their first years apart, the men and women ably planted their fields separately, although the women began to hunger for meat because they were not hunters. Both sides became lonely for the other and many began to satisfy their sexual desires with inanimate objects. Some of the women gave birth to monsters as a result of their aberrant sexual activities. The nádleehí provided crucial domestic duties and provided an outlet for the men’s sexual desires. Eventually, the men and women reconciled and resolved to learn to get along. This story of the separation of the sexes indicates the importance of men’s and women’s roles to the survival of the people while acknowledging the value of a third gender in Navajo society.

While some Navajos still recognize a third gender, hatred of and discrimination against the nádleehí were already evident by the early twentieth century. Anthropologist W. W. Hill, who conducted extensive studies among the Navajos, defined the nádleehí as a person who was born with male and female sex organs and who often was a transvestite. In 1930, Hill noted shifting Navajo views toward the nádleehí when he heard returning schoolboys scoffing at a nádleehí, who upon hearing the ridicule changed from women’s clothing into men’s wear. While he did not observe any nádleehí women who behaved and dressed as men, he did locate several dressed as women and performed domestic duties. Nádleehí were associated with wealth and the family who counted one among their family members was considered fortunate. Known for their intelligence and skills as medicine people, nádleehí were also skilled weavers. Hill’s close questioning of one nádleehí, “Kinipai,” who endured six days of the anthropologist’s scrutiny, indicates the regard given to a third gender. In response to Hill’s questions about his role in Navajo society, Kinipai answered:

A family that has a nadle born into it will be brought riches and success by that nadle. A person like that will be like a head of the family. Even now I have charge of everything that my family owns. I hope that I will be that way until I die. Riches do not just come to you; you have to pray for what you get. When I was young my father and mother and grandfather took special care of me. I am a hermaphrodite.38

Although Hill noted older Navajos’ “genuine respect for the nadle,” his own bias was apparent in his remarks that, under his observations, Kinipai appeared nervous and therefore had not adjusted well as a nádleehí.39

In the 1970s, Sioux anthropologist Bea Medicine reported that many Native societies, such as the Sioux and Diné, had forgotten their former regard for third and multiple genders and expressed discrimination
and hate to those who failed to fall into Western male and female gender roles. Medicine found that many Native gays and lesbians moved away from their reservation communities into urban areas, where they found more accepting communities. Anthropologists Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang have noted the universality of homosexuality and the ways in which contemporary gay and lesbian Natives—and, specifically, Navajos—regard traditional stories of a third or even multiple genders as proof that Navajos recognized multiple genders and celebrated them. Some Navajos have embraced the nádleehí as evidence of acceptance in Navajo society and as a model for their own lives. For example, as the debate about homosexuality and same-sex marriage surfaced in the Navajo public forum, Diné College students Jackie Burbank and Cheryl Bekay responded to discrimination against Navajo gays and lesbians by creating the Gay–Straight Alliance. They hoped to promote civil rights and provide a place where gays and lesbians could get support. Several faculty members volunteered to act as sponsors, including Professor Harry Walters, who is a well-respected traditional scholar. According to Walters, Navajos have recognized several genders, including third and fourth genders, which are gays and lesbians, respectively. Bekay recalled a chapter meeting in which the Diné Marriage Act was being discussed and many were making negative statements, when an elderly man stood up and declared, “Why must we treat our children and grandchildren like this? Allow the rest of America to treat their children like that, but not the Navajo Nation.” His rebuttal shifted the flow of the discussion. Bekay said, “If we could get a few elders like that in our group, it would mean so much to the youth. They have a lot to teach us.”

Anderson’s same-sex marriage ban has not only brought Navajo gays, lesbians, and transgenders into the public eye but has also heightened the discrimination and oppression they face, both in their own and in mainstream societies. For example, Phoenix New Times reporter Joe Watson interviewed two Navajo transgenders, Everson and Trudie Jackson, who described what their lives were like. As a youth who lived on the Navajo Nation, Everson played with dolls and his mother’s makeup. At fifteen years old, he began dressing as a woman. Because he was met with discrimination and found few economic opportunities in his own community, he traveled to Phoenix, Arizona, where he eventually turned to prostitution. Trudie also moved to Phoenix and found sex work, the only employment available. Eventually, she was able to move out of prostitution to become an outreach coordinator for the Native American Pathways Prevention Program, which provides support for Native gays, lesbians, and transgenders. Everson’s and Trudie’s stories exemplify the shifts in the ways in which Navajos had once regarded third and fourth genders.

Watson’s interviews with Wesley Thomas and Navajo administrator Albert Deschine illustrate the depths of the divisions created with
Anderson’s legislation. While Thomas shared his expertise on the place and significance of nádleehí and transgenders in Navajo society, saying that many northern American Native societies have versions of nádleehí stories, Deschine not only dismissed the idea that the nádleehí had once held a measure of status and esteem in traditional Navajo life but also expressed hatred with his reference to Thomas, “Is that the homo archaeologist? Yeah, I know who that is. I hate that fucking fag.”

Also of considerable discussion and debate is the question of where the nádleehí had engaged in sexual activities with men, which Thomas notes in his interview with Watson. In asking questions of Navajo elders, including my father, Frank Nez, who is a healer, I found differing responses. For example, conversations with my father on this topic showed that traditional Navajos still hold high regard for the nádleehí. However, on the question of sex between nádleehí and Navajo men, my father said he didn’t think such activities were standard. His tone indicated his reserve in discussing such questions with his daughter.

Waziyatawin has explained the divisions and bitterness that have occurred within our own communities with such issues as patriotism and traditional warriorship and the Diné Marriage Act by noting how we have embraced Western values as survival strategies. Just as victims of trauma (such as those held hostage) suffer physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or cult indoctrination, so have Native peoples exhibited an emotional bonding with their conquerors. Of this tendency to deny the oppressions under which we live as Native peoples, Wiziyatawin wrote, “While this might be a way to overcome powerlessness and maintain hope in an overwhelming situation, it nonetheless denies the violence of the perpetrator. Or, perhaps some rationalize the abuser’s violence as a way to maintain an emotional and psychological bond with the colonizer in the face of an ongoing colonization.” Thus, the colonizers coerced and used violence against Navajos to compel them to adopt American beliefs, attitudes, and practices. These practices to promote American hegemony deserve to be more fully examined. Certainly, Navajos’ uncritical acceptance of American values and the ways in which they have aligned contemporary Navajo beliefs and practices with tradition can be seen in the blurring of American and Navajo values.

**CONCLUSION**

A perusal of Navajo history proves that traditional practices have differed across time and that, under colonialism, and particularly with the rise of the modern Navajo Nation, the rhetoric of tradition has been deployed in different ways and with the aim of legitimizing and validating contemporary attitudes and practices. Just as many Native scholars and activists have demonstrated, the ways in which Native American studies have been structured within Western paradigms have limited our
capacity to articulate a past, present, and future that are founded upon Native sovereign principles and have failed to move Native peoples toward sovereignty. Rather than perpetuate Native peoples’ accommodations “within a ‘legitimate’ framework of settler state governance,” we must question these sorts of approaches as part of the process of decolonization. Andrea Smith challenges us to re-conceptualize Indigenous sovereignties where patriarchy is dismantled. In our endeavors, Native feminist praxis will prove crucial. Our traditional stories and practices have shown a remarkable resiliency under hundreds of years of invasions and oppressions. However, we must be willing to raise questions and interrogate those beliefs and practices that are presented as tradition but, in truth, are meant to uphold American imperialism.

NOTES

3 Ibid., A 4.
8 See, for example, Joanne Barker, ed., Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).
10 Waziyatwin Angela Wilson, Remember This! Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 14, 15.
NOTES


15 Ibid., 168, 169.

16 Feminist scholars have interrogated the constructions of nations, which have been established on Western conceptions, as masculine spaces that have undermined women's traditional roles in political and economic realms. See, for example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), and Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, eds., Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). See also Jennifer Nez Denetdale, “Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition,” Wicazo Sa Review 21 (Spring 2006): 9–44.


18 Andrea Smith, Keynote address, “Indigenous Feminism and Social Justice,” University of New Mexico, April 27, 2006.


21 Ibid., 284.

22 Ibid., 296.

23 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 1302.

26 Ibid., 1309.

27 Iverson, Diné.


36 “Gay Marriage in Native America,” interview by Amy Goodman with Joe Shirley, Jr., and Dawn McKinley. Transcript accessed at www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/05/31/1349225.

37 As an invited participant in these day-long forums over the course of several months, I was very pleased to spend the day listening to Navajo traditional scholars, elders, and cultural specialists discuss how we as Navajos might return to traditional principles in our families, communities, and nation. My insights regarding the place and uses of tradition are my own and do not reflect the perspectives of others who participated in the discussions. My thanks to Robert Yazzie, director of the Diné Policy Institute, for inviting me and to Moroni Benally and Andrew Curley for their thoughtful insights into the topics under discussion at these forums.


39 Ibid., 274.


41 Sabine Lang, “Various Kinds of Two-Spirit People: Gender Variance and Homosexuality in Native American Communities,” in Two-Spirited, 100–118.


