Broken Kingdom: An Analysis of Cultural Shifts Amongst the Diné People Upon European Contact

Ashley Bouton

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/etd/1748

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Knowledge Repository @ IUP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations (All) by an authorized administrator of Knowledge Repository @ IUP. For more information, please contact sara.parme@iup.edu.
BROKEN KINGDOM: AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL SHIFTS AMONGST THE DINÉ PEOPLE UPON EUROPEAN CONTACT

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Ashley Bouton
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
May 2017
We hereby approve the thesis of

Ashley Bouton

Candidate for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Nathan Heuer, M.F.A.
Professor of Art, Chair

Ivan Fortushniak, M.F.A.
Professor of Art

B.A. Harrington, M.F.A.
Professor of Art

ACCEPTED

Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Title: Broken Kingdom: An Analysis of Cultural Shifts Amongst the Diné People Upon European Contact

Author: Ashley Bouton

Thesis Chair: Mr. Nathan Heuer

Thesis Committee Members: Mr. Ivan Fortushniak
Ms. B.A. Harrington

The MFA thesis show Broken Kingdom: An Analysis of Cultural Shifts Amongst the Diné People Upon European Contact explores the dichotomy between the Diné, or Navajo, traditional culture and the impact of modern, Western society. Having ties in my family ancestry to French, Irish, and Native North American roots, I have a deep interest in studying these historical overlays. By taking part in a powerful community-service learning experience through the non-profit organization, Amizade, as well as personally conducting field study research with members of the Navajo Nation, I have spent extensive time on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona exploring various components of diverse North American cultures. I grew up in a small, industrialized town in Pennsylvania, where Native culture is commonly unknown. My choice to investigate cultures with which I have personal experiences is in accord with this ignited enthusiasm for cultural awareness. Through this cultural analysis, I examine what the modern world has learned from and shares with Native cultures and describe how the Diné have progressively and actively persevered to maintain their culture in a Western dominant world. I believe it is important to create cultural awareness and preserve cultural identity, because each culture contributes to the global society of different perspectives, knowledge, experiences, and ways of living. Broken Kingdom: An Analysis of Cultural Shifts Amongst the Diné People Upon European Contact examines the historical and contemporary
cultural changes since first contact and conveys the vibrancy of similarities and differences between the Diné and Euro-Americans ways of living.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank my drawing professor, thesis chairperson, and top mentor, Professor Nathan Heuer. He has unwaveringly given me endless support, guidance, insight, and motivation during not only the time frame of this research project, but throughout the full time that I have been a graduate student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania receiving both my Master of Arts and Master of Fine Arts degrees. Without him by my side these last four years, none of my accomplishments as an artist or student could have been possible. I owe my success to him.

I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee, Professor BA Harrington and Professor Ivan Fortusniak, for their impactful encouragement, strong advice, and intellectual challenges throughout this research project.

I would also like to thank my close family, friends, and fellow graduate students. They have all fully encouraged, supported, and believed in me throughout this immeasurably fulfilling, intense, and enriching process of graduate school.

Finally, I would like to thank my Diné family in Arizona. From the first day I stepped foot onto Navajo land as a community service-learning volunteer, to going back as an anthropological field study researcher and good friend, to every day in between, they have given me their deep blessing and support, shared thorough life teachings and stories, and welcomed me with open arms into their homes and lives. It has truly been a life changing journey and honor to work directly with and alongside them throughout this whole process to celebrate the Diné people with genuine hopes of spreading Native cultural awareness. I thank them whole heartedly.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Introdution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Project Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formal/Technical Approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>History of the Diné</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Land and Origins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional Way of Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>European Contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political, Social, and Economical Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contemporary Life and Current Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Artistic and Anthropological Influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jaune Quick-to-See Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R.C. Gorman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anselm Kiefer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Gauguin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jared Diamond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Charles C. Mann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gary Witherspoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examination of Artwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contextualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Project Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Works Cited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Grand Canyon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tuba City Flea Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tuba City Intersection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>tāā anēē téh bilāā esh glāā éé dáh nēē gléé; we are all five-fingered people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Newspaper Rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Kaibetoney Family Ranch Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Newspaper Rock Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>táá lááha déh bé din schíd ghó nid dé déé tah; one leap lets you fly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>hogan dóh béé hāās äánii; home from the roots up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Monument Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Anasazi Ruins in Canyon De Chelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Weaver Betty Nez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kaibetoney Sweatlodge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Nez Family Ranch Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Hogan on the Navajo Reservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Life Lessons from a Diné Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Newspaper Rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>idāān nát att so dil zin gó; purify your soul through worship.......................... 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>nááhāās śzhán dóó en dóót ent dáá; the earth cannot be recreated ......................... 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Art Making at Melissa’s House............................................................................. 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Melissa Woody and Mr. Kaibetoney Teachings...................................................... 36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
No peoples have absolute ownership of a landmass, but the Diné and many others native to the North American continent built complex, civilized cultures before European arrival in the late 1400s:

Sometime before the end of the last Ice Age that covered most of North America with glaciers, there began a series of migrations out of Siberia that were to continue for thousands of years. Small bands of Stone Age hunters wandered across the land bridge which spanned the Bering Strait and moved from Asia into the Western Hemisphere without realizing they had ‘discovered’ a new continent. These people were not all alike but differed in physical appearance, customs and language. The trait they did share was an ability to adapt themselves to new environments. Following ice-free valleys in pursuit
of game, they drifted southward. So slowly did these movements take place that probably no single generation was conscious of the migration. Under favorable conditions bands increased in size to tribes; some might settle in areas that suited them while others were content. This process was repeated over and over again until every region, from the Arctic to the southernmost tip of the South America, was inhabited. By the time of its second discovery in 1492, the Western Hemisphere was already well-populated with diverse cultures. (Bahti 2)

My research explores the cultural changes that transpired specifically amongst the Diné people following European contact. Through this cultural analysis and my time spent on the Navajo reservation, I question what Euro-America has imposed on and learned from Native North American peoples with an emphasis on the Diné.

Expressing their way of life is a common theme amongst Diné artists, as culture is mutable, and the modern Diné culture is inevitably distant from the pre-Columbian Diné culture. Many indigenous artists believe that the physical act of creating artwork is a central element within the experience of life itself. For them, making art is purely part of living, and the notions behind the definition of art are merely the act of making. For example, within the Diné culture, silversmithing, weaving, singing, and sand painting are all forms of art making and ways of living. Without deeper knowledge, the typical Westerner may see a sand painting as simply a painting made of sand on the ground. In reality, this way of making requires a daily, lifelong commitment:
Long, complicated rituals, Navajo healing ceremonies last several days and require many people as helpers, singers, and dancers. The principal singers must study for many years to memorize the songs and sand paintings of just one ceremony. Though there are many different kinds of ceremonies, there are only a small number of singers to perform them. The ceremonies require such long study that few medicine men are able to learn more than one or two. Some ceremonies have been lost when the only singer who still knew them died. ... Making sand paintings requires years of study to learn the many different patterns used in just one ceremony. (Dwyer/Birchfield 25)
This philosophy about art and life was incredibly influential in the way that I created the artwork for this thesis exhibition. A common contemporary artist’s view of making art emphasizes how the material product can communicate ideas of life experiences. The emphasis in the contemporary fine art field is to convey a concept, and the conceptual side of art is about what the outcome expresses over embracing the pure act of daily making. Differing thoughts, such as the emphasis of the conceptual and the Navajo philosophy of art making, both become applicable toward multiple cultural themes throughout this narrative.

Through various painting and drawing strategies, I evaluate the effects of the Western impact on the Diné world. My abstracted, representational paintings and drawings internalize the hardships that the dominant civilization has placed upon North American Natives, such as the Diné. The artwork also emphasizes the positive outcomes that came as a result of their traditional culture’s perseverance through assimilation and forced influence of the Western dominant culture. Although this imposition was unsolicited, it inadvertently solidified an undying vitality and determination within their vibrant culture. Throughout the centuries since first contact, the indigenous communities of this country have not fallen victim to modern society, but instead, they have consistently stood up for the human right for their voices to be heard, respected, and known, as every twenty-first century person desires.
Through spending extensive time on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, I have observed and studied how modern society has impacted the Diné culture. Within the context of growing up in a modern, Western world, I hope to promote the significance of becoming aware of Native people’s history and contemporary life, as these worlds are parallel. This also encourages self-realization within each individual who develops this worldly awareness and allows them the opportunity to question their own history in order to further grow their foundation of self-identification. Translating this learned information through visual artwork is a means to promote cultural awareness of the Diné culture, and simultaneously, of Native culture. By combining an artistic vision with historical facts of the Native and Western narrative within the United States of America, I create a contemporary viewpoint that expresses the simultaneous human need for cultural awareness and cultural identity.
The goal of *Broken Kingdom: An Analysis on Cultural Shifts Amongst the Diné People Upon European Contact* is to promote Native cultural awareness in contemporary society. I want the viewer to be aware of their history, homeland, and human needs through the lens of another culture. As I was born and raised in a modern, Western community with an insignificant amount of education about Native peoples, the guiltless illusion of Euro-American history was an illusion that I, among many, was conditioned to accept as true. It was not until
recently that I have carefully studied how impactful modern society has been on Native culture, and in particular, the Diné. By becoming aware of Native people’s history and contemporary life, it simultaneously allows for a more open-minded world-view and a clearer perspective of the human story.

Fig. 5. Newspaper Rock. (Ashley Bouton 2015) Petroglyphs on the archeological site of Newspaper Rock west of Moenave, Arizona on the Navajo Reservation.

The characters that form my abstracted representations are simplified forms of visual communication directly descending from Navajo petroglyphic symbols. The ambiguous nature of abstraction allows for a wider audience to be able to investigate their own personal biases, experiences, and questions, as simplified symbols are akin to a universal language. Self-
identification is motivated by cultural awareness. It promotes a more mature view of culture by granting the ability to question details of one’s family history, gain knowledge of the country they call home, and find human connections with people who are outside of their comforting familiarities. By reinterpreting this awareness through paintings and drawings, I open up the discussion of what cultural ties lie within Native and Western societies. With Diné culture and the Western impact as the focal point of my research methodology, this painted manifestation will assist in spreading the understanding of a frequently unknown element in U.S. history.
CHAPTER II
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Purpose

Fig. 6. The Kaibetoney Family Ranch Land. (Ashley Bouton 2016) This captures the pursuit of balance at home between the traditional and modern worlds.

Through conversations that I have personally had with Diné people, I have learned that they often feel caught between their traditional and the Western, modern worlds. Despite the prevailing influences of globalization, culture is not a monolithic entity. In contrast to the homogenizing effects of globalism, the value of individual cultures is undisputable and timeless. A way of living is a pluralistic notion encompassing entire lives amongst people throughout the
whole world, and modern, Western society is just one particular approach to the idea of
culture:

you will also be reading about Indian behavior that seems strange, bizarre, and possibly
barbaric. In these cases, your response probably will range from the negative to one of
abhorrence. Examples will help you realize that behavior associated with human biology
is not the same everywhere but rather the result of cultural learning. Among traditional
Navajo, for instance, youthful males stand to urinate, whereas older men kneel on one
or both knees. Young Navajo women squat, but older women urinate while standing.
Then, too, you may regard swearing as universal among peoples around the world. This
again is not true. When first contacted by outsiders, Native Americans, Japanese, and
some other peoples did not swear. Thus one must be cautious when making broad
statements about specific cultural behavior. Our own biases may distort our
evaluations. (Oswalt, 63)

There are countless other ways of living that are often overlooked and seen as inferior to the
dominant culture, and in reality, this is simply not the case. Native North American peoples
have felt this illusion of Western superiority firsthand for centuries.

There are many Native communities, such as the Diné, who have maintained their
cultural vitality alongside the dominant global culture of the Western world. There is always
the strength of their ancestral traditions in the core of their being that ties them to their culture
and the land, but the impacts of Westernization cannot be ignored. Finding stability within
one’s individual cultural identity is crucial to maintaining a sustainable, positive mindset in this
dominating modernized, Western world today.

Cultural threads have developed during the historical chronicle of Indigenous and Western peoples, and those essential human needs are what drive my research methodology. Cultural universals include language, traditions, social practices, expressive forms, religion, and technology.

The sacred are those symbols that demand attention and inspire reverence, in contrast to the more everyday profane. ... whether in traditional Australian Aboriginal clans with totems ... or in contemporary industrial society with emblems such as national flags, colours and heroes, it is sacred symbols that enable the sharing of collective emotion. ... Durkheim posits that the power of sacred symbols comes from their ability to represent collective identity, embodying abstract notions and beliefs that can never be fully conceived of and interacted with in a rational way. ... While symbols are simply ideals, Durkheim argued that their importance to the ‘collective conscience’, the culmination of shared beliefs and values, means that they affect social life in the same way as if they were real physical forces. Documenting the centrality of ritual to all societies he writes: "There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective ideas which make its unity and personality." (Elliot, 192)

This anthropological analysis of cultural themes is communicated through art-making of two diverse cultures within the United States, as they actively embody those comparative life philosophies historically and in the present day. My purpose is to convey the historical narration of Diné life through contemporary visual artwork. This expression is my way of
metaphorically combining distinct artistic and cultural viewpoints, and it will be elaborated on in the following section.

Formal/Technical Approaches

Fig. 7. Newspaper Rock Observation. (Ashley Bouton 2015) The first experience of observing and documenting the petroglyphs at Newspaper Rock.

My drawings celebrate the impressive and effective minimalist power of Native American artwork, exemplified in the art of the Diné, while my paintings use the European style
of Primitivism as a lens for looking at two cultures. I develop my painting and drawing compositions through simplified, graphic imagery from personal photographs of my experiences in both my hometown and on the Navajo reservation. Petroglyphic symbols play a vital role in conveying my ideas. As I utilize indigenous Navajo symbols, I also construct my own pictograms to communicate various modern elements within this profound story, which is a critical part of American history. By juxtaposing these aboriginal and self-made symbols, this history is symbolically expressed. My unified color palettes are the result of careful observation of the photographs that I captured during my stay on Navajo land.

Fig. 8. táá lááha déh bé din schíd ghó nid dé déé tah; one leap lets you fly. (Ashley Bouton 2016). Piece from my MFA thesis exhibition. Acrylic and ink on wood panel. 20in x 30in
The stylistic variety that I exemplify within my work channels inspirations behind the European painting style of Primitivism, and with its intentions connecting to indigenous art practices, the juxtaposition of these styles visibly links the Native and Western cultures. The Western art movement of Primitivism arose from Post-Impressionism and was influenced by non-Western artistic styles. Much like the distinct notion of Western art and because of the fast paced contemporary world, modern human culture is constantly creating and recreating itself. However, indigenous art in many traditional societies is valued for maintaining a singular style over many centuries, as maintaining traditional culture is valued with the same lens.

Fig. 9. hogan dóh béé hāās áánii; home from the roots up. (Ashley Bouton 2016). Piece from my MFA thesis exhibition. Acrylic, charcoal, and graphite on wood panel. 36in x 48in
My work consists of connective cultural themes, unifying symbols, and harmonious color palettes to draw parallels between these American cultures. The drawings convey stylistic ties to my interpretation of Native American artwork, and the paintings reference painting approaches seen in the Modernist style of Primitivism to express historical and personal narratives through symbolic pictographs. Merging symbolic language, unifying color selections, and collective cultural themes produce a conceptual and aesthetic cross-pollination between these two bodies of work. Themes relating to home, belief, and landscape will be used to express a true coexistence and also drastic contrasts within these ways of life. By utilizing the communicative processes of painting and drawing, I have the ability to successfully evaluate the overlapping cultural tenets that have established themselves in the midst of these various ways of living.

The indigenous-inspired minimalist drawing style and European Primitivist painting style each contain a cultural lens speaking to the two distinct American cultures that are part of my artistic study. I employ symbolic representation to decode the Native American and European’s overlapping stories, such as the implementation of Christianity within both cultures. I strategically implement Native American petroglyphic symbols, such as the cactus, alongside pictograms of my own invention, such as the Christmas tree. These pictograms are formed by extracting simplified graphic imagery from modern inventions attributed to the United States, such as the skyscraper. Juxtaposing the petroglyphic and illustrative imagery creates narratives of thematic relevance to the foundations of culture including traditions, politics, religion, and education.
Native Americans are various groups of people whose ancestors of thousands of years ago have lived on the land that is now known as North America. It is commonly thought that their ancestors migrated here from Asia over twelve thousand years ago through the northeastern dry lands between Asia and Alaska during the ice ages:

Around that time, water levels rose and covered the land between Asia and the Americas. The ancestors of the Navajos and the peoples who spoke similar languages may have been among the last to cross the Bering Strait. By around ten thousand years ago, the climate had warmed and was similar to conditions today. The first peoples in North America moved around the continent in small groups, hunting wild animals and collecting a wide variety of plant foods. Gradually these groups spread out and lost
contact with each other. They developed separate cultures and adopted lifestyles that suited their environments. (Dwyer/Birchfield 4)

Thousands of years ago, the Diné originated in Canada and Alaska as hunter-gatherers. The ancestors of the Diné left their northern homelands around 1000 A.D. eventually settling in the desert of the Southwest sometime around the fifteenth century, where they were amazingly adaptable:

Some time between A.D. 1150 and 1200, Chaco Canyon was virtually abandoned and remained largely empty until Navajo sheepherders reoccupied it 600 years later. Because the Navajo did not know who had built the great ruines that they found there, they referred to those vanished former inhabitants as the Anasazi, meaning ‘the Ancient Ones.’ (Diamond, 153)
In the wake of European contact and the establishment of a reservation following the 1868 Navajo Treaty, most Diné people today live in the Navajo Nation, also known as Navajoland. This land reservation expands throughout parts of southeastern Utah, northwestern New Mexico, and northeastern Arizona. This is the largest reservation attained by a North American Native tribe as far as land mass and population at 27,413 square miles and home to around 200,000 Diné peoples.
Traditional Way of Life

Fig. 12. Weaver Betty Nez. (Ashley Bouton 2015) The Amizade volunteer group learned about the traditional Navajo weaving techniques from local weaver, Betty Nez, on her family ranch land.

Maintaining the traditional Diné culture has been difficult throughout the multiple challenges they have faced from the Euro-Americans over the centuries, but they successfully have kept those cultural ways dynamically vibrant. Their diverse traditions consist of spirituality, livestock, ceremonies, expressive art forms, and the clan system. These lifestyle traditions are kept alive through the generations by teachings of the elders and parents to the younger people. Some Diné families have remained more traditional than others who have taken a more modern route of living, but they all share the deep connection of being Diné. This
simultaneous traditional and modern society is a major concept that my paintings and drawings visually express, as this is a counterpoint to a common misconception that Native American reservations are lost in time. It is expressed through the symbolic representation of various aspects of cultural overlays related to ideas, such as religion, infrastructure, education, technologies and recreation.

The belief in living in harmony plays a key role in traditional Diné spiritual values. They are taught from a young age that to be rich is to “walk in beauty” with their surroundings and their family with peace and balance. As a matrilineal society, the clan family system is an important element in knowing who they are as individuals within their culture. A Hogan is the traditional home of their culture, and in this home, Diné families respect these traditional spiritual beliefs and matrilineal family practices.
To live harmoniously or to *walk in beauty* is the center of life, and if one is out of harmony, ceremonies are conducted by medicine men, who sing traditional songs and bless traditional healings. Ceremonies are held for multiple reasons such as for healing, celebration, or harvest. Their livestock consist mainly of sheep, cows, goats, and chickens, and caring for animals is a core element of their spirituality. The act of creating their traditional art forms is also a form of spirituality practices, such as silversmithing, weaving, basketry, and sand painting.
European Contact

Fig. 14. The Nez Family Ranch Land. (Ashley Bouton 2015) This shows the traditional Navajo Hogan directly next to the more modern, European style home on the Nez family ranch.

In 1492 A.D. the first Spanish settlers invaded Native American life with guns and horses, taking over the land and forcing work on them. The British, French, and Dutch followed the Spanish with the same intentions of finding land to settle on and establish trade opportunities. History books claim that the Spanish first provided sheep and horses to the Diné people allowing them to spread throughout Arizona and New Mexico, but the Diné have always had sheep, as they have always been weavers:
…whenever peoples lacking native wild mammal species suitable for domestications finally had the opportunity to acquire Eurasian domestic animals. European horses were eagerly adopted by Native Americans in both North and South America, within a generation of the escape of horses from European settlements. For example, by the 19th century North America’s Great Plains Indians were famous as expert horse-mounted warriors and bison hunters, but they did not even obtain horses until the late 17th century. Sheep acquired from Spaniards similarly transformed Navajo Indian society and led to, among other things, the weaving of the beautiful woolen blankets for which the Navajo have become renowned. (Diamond 164)

This contact also introduced European disease, such as measles and smallpox, which killed over 50% of all Natives at the time. Guns were presented as well to the Natives from the Europeans followed by battles between the French and British where Natives were forced to take sides. It was not until the latter half of the 1700s that European settlers started to migrate across the Appalachian Mountains, and it was the mid-nineteenth century when they reached the western half of the United States, which was catastrophic for Indigenous peoples. When the U.S. government established the states of Arizona and New Mexico in 1848, the Diné started having conflicts with the new Euro-American settlers. “In 1864 the U.S. Army carried out what is now known as ‘The Long Walk,’ where Dine life was intended to be destroyed. Their houses were burnt, animals were killed, and the people were imprisoned. It was not until 1868 that the surviving Diné people were able to establish a treaty for them to move back to a small part of their homeland, which is now the Navajo Reservation, or Navajo Nation” (L. Kaibetoney, personal communication, August 7, 2016).
Political, Social, and Economical Impact

Laws and treaties designed by the federal government have politically, economically, and socially taken control over Native American lives since the nineteenth century and for the Diné people since 1864 specifically. Their road to self-determination has been a long, ongoing uphill fight with never-ending broken promises, ignorance, and lies. However, I want to emphasize that Natives have not fallen victim and have not been defeated by the Euro-American government, as many people tend to believe. Rather, they have persevered, stood strong, and maintained their diverse cultures. Even though all of the “-tions” (annihilation, relocation, assimilation, termination, reservation, etc.) have definitely placed negative impacts
on their societies, they continue to push for, and are surely on the road to, attaining self-governance by finding the balance between their traditional culture and the modern world.

Natives have suffered forced poverty and all of the hardships that stem from those means of economic living, such as alcoholism, domestic violence, poor infrastructure, and minimal education. Through intense discrimination and prejudice in mainstream, Euro-American society, it has been difficult to compete for employment and establishment of tribal sovereignty. Although the Navajo Nation is considered a sovereign culture and land, they continue to face discriminatory issues with the federal government related to health care, infrastructure, education, food and water sources, and business opportunities. However, they have effectively and profitably created jobs within their tribal government and society, particularly from their art forms and tourist attractions, as Navajoland contains portions of the Grand Canyon. The Diné continue to fight for their human rights as twenty-first century people.
Contemporary Life and Current Issues

Fig. 16. Life Lessons from a Diné Child. (Ashley Bouton 2016). A young girl was teaching me about the current Navajo news in the Kaibetoney family home.

Finding the balance and harmony (“to walk in beauty”) between and within the traditional way of life and the modern world is the current hope for Diné people. We all have
common core human desires of wanting to find balance in today’s world. The contemporary life of the Dine culture is incredibly active and progressive. With their reservation land being settled in 1868 as the largest, most populated Native area on the continent, with the Navajo Tribal Council officially adopting the name of “Navajo Nation” in 1969, and the Diné Development Corporation being formed in 2004 to create more jobs, they are continuously moving forward.

There are certainly current issues that are still faced related to education, health, and employment with around half the population living in economic poverty. Diabetes rates are four times that of the average person in the U.S., and multiple cancers have been caused due to uranium pollution from mining. However, their traditions keep their culture and spirits alive, thriving, and hopeful. With more than 200,000 speakers of their Native language, it is not in danger of being lost like many other Native languages. Their tribal newspaper, published literature, and sought after artwork are various examples of their cultural strengths. The Navajo Nation has developed numerous educational, health, and social programs to improve their tribal economy, and the Diné College was the first Native nation college. They feel endlessly grateful to be still living on their ancestral homeland, which helps them to always uphold their strong cultural heritage with optimism and confidence.
Fig. 17. Newspaper Rock. (Ashley Bouton 2016) Documentation of petroglyphs at Newspaper Rock from my field study on the Navajo Reservation.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

Contemporary artist, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is a painter and printmaker, who communicates ideas related to the social, economic, and political life of Native Americans. Through her expressive interpretations, she addresses current tribal, political, human rights, and environmental issues, while emphasizing the importance of being aware of Native peoples through analyzing the abuse they have endured and the problems with cultural appropriation. With painted commercial slogans, obscured text, and graphic symbols from petroglyphic
imagery, Smith approaches her concept in similar ways that I approach my own. We share a parallel conceptual purpose of raising Native awareness and confronting stereotypes; however I provide a Euro-American perspective on this massive issue, which is an issue essentially started by and continued by my own culture. Smith’s formal use of conveying her ideas through simplified petroglyphic symbols is what I find to be most intriguing, as petroglyphs are my main visual source of conveying similar ideas.

R.C. Gorman

Rudolph Carl Gorman, also known as R.C. Gorman, was a Modern Navajo artist. He was raised in a traditional Navajo home, and he artistically expressed his culture’s teachings throughout his life in a variety of mediums, such as painting, drawing, and sculpture. His paintings are vibrantly colored with color references to the Navajo reservation landscape and the colors utilized in traditional Navajo sand painting. His minimal, expressive painting style is a modern twist that tells stories of his culture with his conceptual emphasis on the female power within their matrilineal society. I am drawn to his usage of atmospheric perspective through color values in his landscapes and abstraction of imagery. My work takes a similar approach in embracing the simplification of the landscape. These are technical and formal approaches that I take within my paintings that also are a direct link to tribal art and the style of Primitivism.

Anselm Kiefer

The German Contemporary painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer addresses conceptual concerns very aligned with my own. Whereas he conveys feelings of personal turmoil as a German person contemporarily frustrated with the historical issues of his culture related to the Holocaust, I communicate similar inner battles with accepting the past problems that my own
culture has created with Native Americans. It is interesting to research this thesis topic with his artistic intentions in mind. “German Nazis directly looked towards how the Euro-Americans conducted their form of genocides of the first peoples, like the Navajo Long Walk, in how they executed their genocide of the Holocaust (M. Woody, personal communication, August 8, 2016).” This is a fact that people do not often know, and I find it fascinating to investigate these historical issues from a new standpoint.

Paul Gauguin

The French Post-Impressionist artist, Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin, created paintings, ceramics, and sculptures with a style that transformed into the European art movement of Primitivism. Gauguin’s inspirations rose from the intentions of this European style of painting, where the spirituality, emotion, and beauty of simplification that has always been embraced in tribal art and traditional societies art forms is celebrated. I am employing this style of painting to conceptually and aesthetically unite the European and Native cultures. Artists such as Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso all felt that this form of creative honesty had been somewhat lost within the academy of art, and these were artists of the avant-garde who desired to bring those artistic qualities back.

As the artists of the Primitivism movement celebrated the strength of communicating cultural narratives through simplified symbols, colors, and linework, they were also deeply criticized for cultural appropriation and the innocent, childlike depictions that they created of indigenous people. Culturally appropriated imagery or symbolism was used without knowledge of or against its original cultural context. Artists who directly work with and alongside a culture to learn the meanings, significances, and importance of the utilized imagery are doing quite the
opposite of cultural appropriation. Through this approach, implementing cultural imagery to purposefully expand the audience’s cultural knowledge is embracing its original context.

Jared Diamond

Jared Diamond is an American scientist and author whose scientific studies focus on cultural ties between traditional and modern societies. In his book *Collapse*, he explores the power of societal choice to fail or succeed as he analyzes past societies in how they collapsed or thrived, and he reflects on what modern societies can learn from these explorations in history. Through my experiences on the Navajo reservation, I have learned that in actuality, Euro-America has absorbed a multitude of life approaches from various cultures, and it is fascinating to study as it makes me view this culture through an entirely different lens. This ability to historically examine cross-cultural relations is a core inspiration within my artistic explorations.

Charles C. Mann

In his books *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* and *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*, American journalist and author, Charles C. Mann provides an in-depth history of the Americas and the indigenous people of these lands dating back thousands and thousands of years. In his first book about Pre-Columbian life, he discusses recent research about the vast human population of indigenous peoples of the Americas. He states how this research shows that these people have always been more culturally sophisticated than the pre-conceived notions of past scholars. Within the book about Post-Columbian life, Mann examines both the positive and negative effects that Columbus entering the lands of the Americas has had on cultures throughout the world and how those effects have led to the civilization of the contemporary global society. By studying Mann’s viewpoints and
Gary Witherspoon

Gary Witherspoon is an American scholar who was raised in a Mormon family and married into the Diné culture. He has lived among the Diné at multiple points throughout his life as he consistently studied and focused on their culture throughout receiving his Ph.D. in Anthropology. Witherspoon is most noted for his book *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*. This book is a philosophical study on the Navajo language and its complexities, as well as the cultural significance of understanding the Diné people and their views. As I share the same Euro-American perspective as Witherspoon where we both had life-changing experiences with the Diné culture on the reservation, it is exciting to study and learn about this type of experience from someone else’s point of view. Talking with and reading about other people who have had similar experiences is a key component in expanding this cultural knowledge.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Examination of Artwork

Fig. 18. *idān nát att so dil zin gó; purify your soul through worship.* (Ashley Bouton 2016). Piece from my MFA thesis exhibition. Acrylic, charcoal, and graphite on wood panel. 36in x 48in.

My chosen painting and drawing styles were developed to create a cohesive body of work conceptually and aesthetically. The drawings employ the impressive, minimalist quality of aboriginal Native American artwork, particularly Navajo petroglyphs and sand painting. The paintings embrace the European style of Primitivism, as its purpose is to take the traditional, Western style of painting and reinsert the intuitive, expressive, and spiritual quality of aboriginal art making. The color palettes are meant to be reminiscent of the red rock
southwest. The drawings are made with red oxide as the only color to have a direct and minimalist tie to that landscape, and the choices of colors within the paintings are extracted from photographs that I took during my time on the reservation.

Fig. 19. nááháás șzhán dóó en dóót ent dáá; the earth cannot be recreated. (Ashley Bouton 2016). Piece from my MFA thesis exhibition. Acrylic and ink on wood panel. 20in x 30in.

The importance of the imperfect line in my work is correlated with and influenced by the beautiful rawness of the line quality that makes the time-honored Navajo petroglyphs and the sacred art of Navajo sand painting, which are two of their most celebrated art forms alongside weaving and silversmithing. I decided on the rectangular, landscape orientation and the continual horizon line to produce a strong directional movement for the eye to move easily from one piece to the next, aiding the storytelling component of the work. Symbols have been the visual focus of this work throughout the entire process in relation to petroglyphs and sand
paintings. These symbols were the Diné people’s original form of written language and storytelling. The majority of incorporated symbols are Navajo in origin and recorded in photographs that I documented at Newspaper Rock on the reservation. The remaining symbols are self-made to represent more modern issues and notions. As these pictographs are truly a language within themselves, the petroglyph keys in juxtaposition with each piece are vital for the viewer to develop a deeper understanding of the concept. These keys make the work more accessible and less obscure. They prioritize educating the viewer by readjusting and correcting the preconceived biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that they may most often place on Native culture through the Western lens.

Contextualization

Fig. 20. Art Making at Melissa’s House. (Ashley Bouton 2016). We were learning how to make traditional Navajo stirring sticks from the plants in Melissa’s backyard during my field study.
As these works address topics relating to economic, political, and social tribal issues, Native cultural appropriation, the breakdown of stereotypes, and the fight against ignorance, I consider myself a contemporary activist artist for Native cultural awareness. I provide a Euro-American perspective on these historical and contemporary problems that my culture started and continues.

**Project Outcome**

Fig. 21. Melissa Woody and Mr. Kaibetoney Teachings. (Ashley Bouton 2015) My dear friends, Melissa and Lawrence Kaibetoney, were my top primary sources throughout the entirety of this thesis project.
The Diné people are rich in cultural vibrancy, and the majority of Modern, Euro-American society is often unfamiliar of the significance of being aware of Native culture. The Native American and European’s story is a complex entity that needs to be heard, acknowledged, and respected. It is vital to learn that this knowledge of their history and contemporary life can be a beneficial contribution in this world to further our understanding of the past as a way to improve the present and future. As I have fully recognized my own past lack of cultural knowledge through my experiences on the Navajo reservation, I strive to relay my learned cultural awareness through my work in hopes of broadening the viewer’s knowledge of the Diné, and of Native culture as a whole, and opening their eyes to these significances in modern day life.
Works Cited


Kensley, Brian. “What Does It Mean to Be American?.“ Personal Interview. 28 July 2016.


Robbins, Catherine C. *All Indians Do Not Live in Teepees (Or Casinos)*. University of Nebraska Press, 2011.


