“DON’T TALK ABOUT IT”
Navajo Poets and Their Ordeals of Language

Anthony K. Webster
Department of Anthropology, MC 4502, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901, USA. Email: awebster@siu.edu

KEY WORDS: Ordeals of language, Intimate grammars, Navajo, Navajo English, Poetry

This article follows the theme of this JAR special issue—from self-suppression to expressive genres—as a way to investigate Navajo poets’ ordeals with languages. If ordeals of languages arise from languages as objects of scrutiny, then intimate grammars can be seen as the use of expressive genres in the face of such ordeals of language. I look first at the ways in which Navajo is an object of scrutiny and how, as objects of scrutiny, Navajos have self-suppressed speaking Navajo. Next I turn to the practice of some Navajos of feigning monolingualism in Navajo to avoid interacting with “outsiders” and to remove their uses of non-mainstream Navajo English from external scrutiny. I then turn to the ways Navajo poets continue to use Navajo English in their poetry and to the fact that Navajo poets now write about social, environmental, and political issues on the Navajo Nation. Here they resist a Navajo injunction, doo ajinída (don’t talk about it), which is meant to discourage critique that can be overheard by outsiders. I conclude by arguing that we can only understand Navajo poetry within the context of both emergent ordeals of languages and the expressive satisfaction of intimate grammars.

IN THIS ARTICLE, I TRACK THE THEMATIC PRINCIPLE OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE—from self-suppression to expressive genres—as a way to explore Navajo poets’ ordeals with languages. In the end, I argue that it is in that tension between self-suppression and expressive genres that an intimate grammar is found. At a Durango Joe’s coffee shop in Farmington, New Mexico, a Navajo consultant, discussing a poem that relied on a bit of speech play that connected male sexuality with kinship responsibilities, made the following point about the poem:

This is one another prurient ya know so ya know the whole realm of observation within the Navajo was very open but ya know [looking around] everything got kinda strange after awhile Now we’re very sensitive

This consultant nicely encapsulates the history of contact between Euro-Americans and Navajos in the phrase, “everything got kinda strange after awhile.” As this Navajo consultant pointed out, Navajos have become “sensitive”
to the evaluative critiques of outsiders. When the consultant mentioned that things had gotten “kinda strange” he looked around Durango Joe’s, which was filled with non-Navajos. He was the only Navajo in the place; the rest were Anglos or Anglo-looking. The long strangeness, the interaction between Euro-Americans and Navajos, has led to “sensitivity” on the part of Navajos about the expectations and assumptions of the dominating and dominant Euro-American society. This sensitivity is not confined to Navajo concerns with prurient issues, but also to the very ways that Navajos speak. As Jane Hill (2008) has noted, the languages of minority populations are often opened up to outside inspection and devaluing (see also Webster and Peterson 2011).

Recently, I have been trying to understand the ordeals of languages of Navajos and the emotional attachments to linguistic forms and ways of speaking that Navajos have toward such potentially stigmatized acts of speaking and writing. I have found it useful to couple Herzfeld’s (1997) “cultural intimacy” with Povinelli’s (2006) “intimate pragmatics” and to talk about intimate grammars (Webster 2010a, 2011; see also Kroskrity 2011; Suslak 2010). These are linguistic forms and ways of speaking and writing to which Navajos have felt attachments, which are “satisfying” to some degree and yet are simultaneously marginalized ways of speaking in relation to the dominant expectations. Ellen Basso describes what she terms the “ordeals of language,” as the “suppressed voices” of self-censorship that become tacit “accomplices in the domination that suppresses our voices” (Basso 2009:122). It is in such ordeals of language, I argue, that an intimate grammar is forged.

Another way to think about this is to note that intimate grammars are forged in the tension of the two freedoms of “voice” (Hymes 1996:64): (1) a “negative freedom,” “freedom from denial of opportunity due to something linguistic, whether in speaking or reading or writing”—one consequence of a lack of such freedom are ordeals of language—and (2) a “positive freedom,” “freedom for satisfaction in the use of language, for language to be a source of imaginative life and satisfying form”—often through expressive genres. When languages become “objects of scrutiny” (Urciuoli 1996:178–79), as they often are for minority populations (Hill 2008; Meek 2006, 2011), speakers may confront ordeals of language.

If ordeals of languages arise from languages as objects of scrutiny, then intimate grammars can be seen as the use of expressive genres in the face of such ordeals of language. I look first at the ways in which Navajo is an object of scrutiny and how, as objects of scrutiny, Navajos have self-suppressed speaking Navajo. Next I turn to the practice of some Navajos of feigning monolingualism in Navajo to avoid interacting with “outsiders” and to remove their uses of non-mainstream Navajo English from external scrutiny. I then turn to the ways Navajo poets continue to use Navajo English in their poetry and to the fact that Navajo poets now write about social, environmental, and political issues on the Navajo Nation. Here they resist a Navajo injunction, doo ajinída (don’t talk about it), which is meant to discourage critique that can be overheard by outsiders. I conclude by arguing that we can only understand Navajo poetry within the context of both emergent ordeals of languages and the expressive satisfaction of intimate grammars.
My research on Navajo poetry began in March 2000, when I met Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim at the Navajo Nation Inn (now Diné Restaurant). Fieldwork on the Navajo Nation (located in the American Southwest) in 2000–2001 followed. More recently I have done fieldwork on the Navajo Nation in the summers of 2007–2011. I have been very fortunate to discuss with Navajo poets—over dinner or while driving or sitting around their homes—their views on poetry and languages. I have also interviewed and recorded poetry performances by a number of Navajo poets (Webster 2009). While my research has focused primarily on the Navajo Nation, I have attended and recorded poetry performances by Navajo poets off the reservation as well. I have also spent time in the border towns of Gallup and Farmington, New Mexico, and Cortez, Colorado.

Navajo poetry is an emerging site for Navajos to express themselves about a wide variety of topics and themes (Belin 2007; Webster 2009). Furthermore, Navajo poets often describe contemporary Navajo poetry as emotionally intense uses of language (Webster 2009). Some of the first evidence of written Navajo poetry can be found in U.S. government publications, but Navajo poets have long since moved beyond such limits (Webster 2009). Contemporary Navajo poetry is written in a variety of languages, reflecting—however imperfectly—the heteroglossia found on the Navajo Nation and the surrounding area (Webster 2009, 2010a). Navajo poets write and perform in Navajo, Navlish (a code-mixed form), Navajo English, and “mainstream” English (Webster 2010a). Today, recognized Navajo poets include Luci Tapahonso, Rex Lee Jim, Laura Tohe, Gloria Emerson, Blackhorse Mitchell, Esther Belin, Sherwin Bitsui, Hershman John, Orlando White, and Venaya Yazzie. Some, such as Rex Lee Jim, Luci Tapahonso, and Laura Tohe, are recognized both on and off the Navajo reservation. Others, such as Esther Belin, are better known off the reservation. Few are full-time poets; most have other jobs.

The Navajo Nation, covering parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, is roughly the size of West Virginia. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, nearly 300,000 people identify as Navajo. In the census, 178,014 people identified themselves as speakers of Navajo, with roughly 120,000 of those identifying themselves as speakers of Navajo and as residents of the Navajo Nation. Rough numbers, then, give an impression that the Navajo language is widely spoken (in fact, it is spoken in every state in the U.S.) by a significant number of speakers. However, as Navajo scholars such as Tiffany Lee (2007) and Ancita Benally (Benally and Viri 2005) point out, Navajo is a threatened language. It is threatened in the sense that young Navajos are not learning the language at a rate that will insure the continued use of the language. Also, despite a number of efforts over the years, literacy in Navajo is still rather limited.

**NAVAJO AS OBJECT OF SCRUTINY**

Navajo can be an object of scrutiny and run the risk of negative evaluation. This is often an internal scrutiny—that is, a scrutiny from other Navajos. For example, some poets who do not consider themselves fluent in Navajo, but who write
in Navajo, refrain from performing their poetry for Navajo audiences because of the potential scrutiny of their pronunciation of Navajo. Klain and Peterson (2000:124) note that “Broadcast Navajo” is often critiqued by Navajo listeners. They give the telling example of an ordeal of language in the use of naat’áanii (leader) in a “news promotion” that compared naat’áanii to a “carnival ride.” As Klain and Peterson (2000:124) note, “Council delegates flooded the station with calls . . . making the claim that the word used to refer to leaders was a religious, traditional term that could not be taken in vain.” The content for the promotion was eventually changed.

In the complex confluence of languages and their speakers, sometimes indigenous languages are self-censored owing to outside scrutiny and sound affinities. A number of years ago, Haas (1951) described what she called “interlingual word taboos.”1 What Haas was describing in her Creek (Muskogee) and Thai examples with relation to English were what I would call unintentional interlingual puns (see Webster 2010a, 2010b). Thus, Creek speakers were hesitant to use fákki (soil, earth, clay) in front of English-language-dominant speakers because the Muskogee word bore a phonological iconicity to an English curse word. As Haas (1951:338) notes, it is unlikely that mainstream English speakers would have recognized fákki as a four-letter word in the flow of Muskogee conversation; rather it was bilingual Creek who had become attuned to outsiders’ assumptions about Creek (both the language and the people) that led to the hesitancy to use such terms in front of dominant English speakers. Fákki is innocuous enough in Muskogee, potentially vulgar in mainstream English. The risk of misrecognition by the dominant society—of misrecognizing fákki (soil, earth, clay) or apíswa (meat, flesh) for vulgar English words—meant that Muskogee speakers self-censored such forms, to maintain an imagined civility (see Basso 2009).

Similarly, Ervin (1961:239) reported that “in polite conversation” with, it appears, outsider linguists, some “English-dominant” Navajos were reluctant to use the term tátł’id (green, algae, water scum) because the form tl’id was evocative of flatulence. I have been told by Navajo consultants that this form is sound-symbolic of flatulence.2 Some Navajos were then reluctant to produce the form tátł’id because it bore a phonological resemblance (an iconicity) to a term for and evocative of flatulence. Ervin (1961) noted that semantic shifts in color terminology were occurring in bilingual Navajo speech practices, but she was less concerned with the fact that some bilingual Navajos were self-censoring their speech because of potential negative evaluations by outsiders of a particular color term. Indeed, Ervin (1961:239) noted that tátł’id was not well-known among younger Navajos. Concern with outsiders’ sensitivities by some Navajos seemed, then, to be a crucial site of ordeals of language and of language change.

Some Navajos see the Navajo language as an “object of shame,” something that is premodern, backwards, and associated with reservation poverty—what in colloquial Navajo is sometimes termed “john” [jáan] (glossed by one Navajo consultant as “hick” and by another as “hillbilly”) (see Lee 2007:22; Field 2009; Webster 2010c).3 “John” can also be used for Navajos who speak Navajo English. Some Navajos now self-censor speaking Navajo in front of racist (or potentially
NAVAJO POETS’ ORDEALS OF LANGUAGE

403

racist) non-Navajos because they recognize Navajo as an “object of scrutiny” (see Urciuoli 1996:178–79). Such self-censorship is periodically reinforced by articles in the Navajo Times recounting the stories that Navajos tell of not being allowed to speak Navajo at work off the reservation, for fear of imagined or real recriminations (Webster 2010c). These are the “ordeals of language,” where Navajos self-censor themselves to create an imagined civility predicated on their social inequality.

Meek (2011) has documented a number of pervasive expectations about Native peoples “failing” in their use of language. As Meek (2011) notes, Native peoples are often assumed to “fail” both at speaking “English” (and non-standard forms of English are read as failures) and at maintaining their traditionally understood heritage language (the often emotionally fraught “apology” for not speaking the “Native” language). Navajo poets, as I discuss below, are often aware of such expectations and apologize for their lack of language skills. Navajo poets are also aware that some non-Navajos have expectations of what should and should not be written by Navajo poets. Minimal displays of Navajo are acceptable indexes of ethnic identity, but code-mixed forms such as Navlish or Navajo English violate a predominant standard language ideology that equates linguistic difference with linguistic deficit. While the use of Navajo in Navajo poetry can be understood as a relatively “secured domain” (Woodbury 1998), outside such demarcated, ethnically appropriate and “safe” domains, Navajo is still a language that is often devalued or stigmatized by many non-Navajos (and sometimes by Navajos). This is especially true in border towns. Poetry, however, is often considered a nonthreatening domain (sensu Urciuoli 1996) in which the Navajo language might be deemed “aesthetically” pleasing and “nonthreatening” by a non-Navajo dominant society that often appears reactionary when it comes to use of the Navajo language in “the workplace” (see Zachary 2005). These dominant views of subordinate expressive forms as mere ethnic markers trivialize linguistic practices as a kind of expected “show-and-tell.” As Urciuoli (1996:35) has noted, many displays of ethnic difference (including languages other than English) revolve around dominant attempts at “ethnification” in which difference is sanctioned by making it “cultural, neat, and safe.” Once “shown,” they can be safely put away.

FEIGNING NAVAJO MONOLINGUALISM

How do Navajo poets and other Navajos navigate such a minefield of linguistic expectations? Some Navajos have feigned monolingualism in Navajo to avoid the scrutiny of their Englishes or to disengage with outsiders. In an influential article, Keith Basso (1991) argued that silence among the Western Apache was predicated on the ambiguity of the interaction, its potential uncertainty and unpredictability. When Western Apaches are unsure of how an interlocutor may respond, they prefer to remain silent to let the situation unfold. One telling example is in what Basso terms “meeting strangers,” and especially Anglo strangers. Toward the end of his paper, Basso notes that similar patterns of silence also seem to hold among
Navajos. From my observations, silence is used by some Navajos when they encounter ambiguous and potentially dangerous strangers.

Feigning Navajo monolingualism has been a strategy for some Navajos to avoid interacting with unpredictable strangers. Reed, in a paper titled “Navajo Monolingualism” published in 1944, noted, “That most Navajos avoid speaking whatever English they have had to learn is familiar to Southwesterners—especially those who have had to ask Navajos for directions in traveling.” Here we can see an example of Navajos remaining silent or disengaging from “strangers.” Reed’s assumption of “Navajo monolingualism” may seem too much, however, when we understand such practices in the context of Navajo ways of not speaking. As Voegelin et al. (1967:439) note, “some Navaho veterans of World War II reacted to Anglo-American social exclusion upon their return to the Southwest by refusing to speak English when spoken to in English. This reversion to a feigned monolingualism from demonstrated bilingualism is not necessarily restricted to returned veterans or even [to] men.” (Voegelin et al. then note that much “true” monolingualism does occur on the Navajo Nation as well.) Navajos feigned monolingualism here as a removal from a socially unjust dominant Euro-American society, a society many Navajo veterans had come to know. One Navajo consultant—born in the 1940s—that I have worked with for years has told me about his grandmother who attended mission school in Farmington in the early part of the twentieth century. It came as quite a surprise to him when he discovered one day that she spoke English. For this consultant’s grandmother, English was associated with the mission school, and her refusal to speak English, like that of the returning veterans, was a refusal to engage with a dominating institution and a racist society (indeed, my consultant told me that his grandmother had run away from the mission school twice).

On the other hand, an elderly Navajo acquaintance of mine on the reservation always spoke in Navajo: to his grandchildren, to his wife, to his nephew (who was in his fifties), and to me. It came as a bit of a shock one day when he asked me in English for a ride to the Indian Health Service clinic. Here this elderly Navajo’s use of Navajo was a way to avoid interacting with outsiders but was also a way to model a proper way of speaking. He was setting an example as a Navajo speaker. In fact, this is why some Navajo poets include Navajo kinship terms, place-names, terms for emotions, poetic devices and the like in their poetry, as an explicit form of modeling proper ways of speaking (Webster 2009, 2012a).

**NAVAJO ENGLISH**

There is another reason to feign monolingualism in Navajo, and that is to avoid putting one’s English up for scrutiny. Many Navajos speak a local way of speaking sometimes called by Navajos “Navajo English.” This is an English that is often devalued and stigmatized in schools and elsewhere as “confused grammar” or “lacking in grammar” (see Webster 2011). Navajo poet Esther Belin has called Navajo English a “Diné language” (that is, a Navajo language). Lionel Wee (2005) notes that intralanguage diversity is often stigmatized and devalued by outsiders...
and often within such communities as well. Take, as a brief example, an exchange that occurred on the Navajo Times Facebook page in April 2011. The Navajo Times asked their readership how they thought current Navajo Nation President Ben Shelley and Vice President Rex Lee Jim were doing. One respondent posted the following (in each of the following examples I have followed the capitalization in the original):

AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE NAVAJO PEOPLE! KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT TO PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE NATION. IF THEY CANNOT GRASP OR SPEAK PROPER ENGLISH, IT REFLECTS ON THE NATION AS A WHOLE! (posted April 13, 2011)

This was followed by another respondent’s post:

I have also been horrified at the language Ben Shelley uses. Such horrible grammar. . . . I do not know how he is where he is today. He is a complete embarrassment to the Navajo people . . . (posted April 13, 2011).

Both of these respondents self-identified as Navajos. Other self-identified Navajos challenged this position concerning President Shelley’s English language abilities. For example, one respondent posted the following in response:

WHAT DOES A MAN’S GRAMMAR WHO IS FROM THE REZ MATTER, SHELLY IS NOT AN EMBARRASSMENT, THATS RIDICULOUS . . . I DONT HEAR YOU BEING EMBARRASSED BY ARNOLD SWARTZENAGERS ACCENT, BECAUSE THATS ALL IT IS . . . AN ACCENT. SOME PEOPLE KIDS TRY TO OUT DO ONE ANOTHER ON WHO CAN MASTERS WHITE MAN LANGUAGE BETTER THAN THA NEXT . . . THATS AN EMBARRASSMENT . . . AHO!!! (SORRY ABOUT THE GRAMMAR BRO) (posted April 13, 2011)

In this exchange we see the tensions inherent in an intimate grammar, in language as an object of scrutiny. For the first two respondents, the “embarrassment” is that President Shelley speaks in Navajo English, and because his English is different from the imagined monoglot “proper” English, it is deficient (see Meek 2006, 2011). For the third respondent, the use of Navajo English seems to localize President Shelley and suggests that he is “from the Rez.” It is speaking like a “white man” that becomes the “embarrassment” for the third respondent. Navajo English is a site of ideological struggle among Navajos (Kroskrity and Field 2009).

Moving off the Navajo Nation, however, we can note that Blackhorse Mitchell, a Navajo performer I know, will apologize for his Navajo English when the audience in composed primarily of non-Navajos. For example, when he came to Carbondale to perform at Southern Illinois University in 2009, he began with
a lengthy apology for his “bad English.” (There is also an embedded critique of outsider expectations in this apology.) Indeed, it had taken several years of talking with Mr. Mitchell to convince him to come to rural Illinois. He had been concerned about the racists who live in southern Illinois. I had to convince him that southern Illinois was not racist and that he would be safe there. When Mitchell performs before Navajos, no such apology is forthcoming. Indeed, as Benally and Viri (2005:104) note, “Navajo English enjoys considerable celebration in the expressive arts,” and especially as it relates to contemporary literature (see also Webster 2011). Over the years, I have interviewed a number of Navajos about their attitudes toward writing in Navajo English, and many have seen such writing positively—to quote one consultant, as “writing the way we speak.” There is, however, ambivalence about the use of Navajo English in contemporary Navajo literature. Some Navajos have criticized writing in Navajo English as deficient English, but these have largely been in the minority (Webster 2011).

Mitchell is perhaps most famous to outsiders for his book *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, a semi-autobiographical work that was published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1967 with an introduction by Mitchell’s teacher, T. D. Allen. *Miracle Hill* has since been re-issued by the University of Arizona Press without the introduction by Allen. In the introduction to *Miracle Hill*, Allen (1967:vii) makes a plea for readers to “please read loose.” Allen states that Mitchell lacks “grammar.” There is, of course, history here. Many Native American languages were devalued and dismissed because Euro-Americans believed that traditionally understood Native American languages lacked “grammar” (see Boas 1889; Meek 2006, 2011). Allen has replaced the Native American language with Navajo English (Webster 2011). In a later piece, Allen (1972:91) claims that Mitchell’s grammar is “tangled” and that “writing in English presented almost insurmountable difficulties.” She repeatedly excuses Mitchell’s English language skills. She claims that Mitchell’s work is “more documentary than aesthetic or literary” (Allen 1967:viii). Allen (1967:viii) likens Mitchell’s work to “primitive” art. Allen, that is, apologizes for Mitchell’s literary voice. Allen (1967:xi) then goes on to claim that “in spite of confused tenses and genders and sound-alike words, [Mitchell] was writing in sensory terms.” Instead of understanding the structure of Navajo English, Mitchell is reduced to being “confused” or, to echo Meek’s (2011) analysis, a “failure.”

Allen considers Mitchell’s use of a regularized plural marking on the irregular noun “sheeps” a mistake. On the other hand, Mitchell has explained to me on numerous occasions that he prefers the forms such as *sheeps*, *popcorns*, and *dungs* for the plurals. And while my Word spellchecker may underline those forms as I type them, these forms are not, for Mitchell (nor now for me), mistakes. They are a decision that he has made. “Sheeps” and the like make more sense to him. Mitchell is aware of such negative evaluations over “sheeps” and other Navajo English forms (from phonology to lexical choices to syntax). The plural marking on “sheeps” is an intimate grammar, an emotionally saturated use of language that runs the risk of negative evaluation by outsiders, but one that can create a common bond of sociality, an intimate sociality, among Navajos.
Navajo English is a local way of speaking and writing that differs from an imagined “mainstream” English on phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse grounds. Some of the features of Navajo English are carryovers from Navajo, some are forms of regularization of irregular “mainstream” English forms, and some are based on the distinctive historical trajectory of Navajo English as a local way of speaking and writing that does not completely overlap with the historical trajectory of “mainstream” English. Navajo English is spoken at the supermarket, at the tire shop, at the trading post, in homes, and at the local mutton stand. It is written on signs on and around the Navajo Nation and in emails. Here, then, is the risk of using Navajo English, which is what Mitchell’s book is written in: it opens it up to outside inspection and evaluation, outside “scrutiny,” based on criteria and expectations that are not local. Note that Navajo English is also—like English more generally—not a homogenous phenomenon. Rather it is—like all languages—a set of heterogeneous practices based on local registers and the unique histories of linguistic individuals.

However, because Navajo English is spoken and written by marginalized peoples it can always be dismissed or devalued by outsiders’ assumptions concerning “standard” English and “aesthetic principles.” Peterson (2011) provides an interesting example of the way in which the Navajo English language skills of Elsie Cly Begay were dismissed by “media professionals” when discussing earlier versions of the documentary The Return of Navajo Boy. Indeed, a pervasive belief about languages in mainstream American culture is that linguistic differences equal linguistic deficiencies. The expectations for Navajo English are for an English that is “primitive” and “incompetent.” The expectation is that English is a foreign language for Navajos and not their language (Meek 2006, 2011). What is not taken seriously is the deeply felt and perduing attachment that Navajos have toward their different Englishes, as attested by the facts that a common sociality can be created among Navajos in the very use of Navajo English (Webster 2010a), that Navajo English can be an intimate and deeply felt grammar, and that Mitchell might be doing something with his use of Navajo English besides mere documentation. Navajo poets, however, are keenly aware that their Englishes are objects of scrutiny. Here is the tension in Mitchell’s work: he knows that his English is often negatively evaluated by outsiders, yet he continues to find writing in Navajo English to be a satisfying form of expression.

**DOO AJINÍDA (DON’T TALK ABOUT IT)**

As I sat in a dorm on the campus of Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona, on a cold March evening in 2001, a young Navajo college student and poet lamented that contemporary Navajo poets are not talking about the important issues on the Navajo Nation. He said that Navajo poets are good at criticizing “white people,” but that they are less inclined to criticize the myriad issues that are confronting Navajos on the reservation—issues, he says, such as poverty and pollution. I responded by noting the poetry of Nia Francisco (1994), with its gimlet eye on the myriad social issues confronting Navajos. He had not heard of Francisco’s
book. I might have also mentioned the early work by Gloria Emerson which criticized the social and political ills on and around the Navajo Reservation. When Rutherford Ashley’s book of poetry was published in 2001, one Navajo praised the book and told me that Ashley is one of a very few Navajo poets who are talking about social and economic issues on the reservation. On the other hand, in 2000 I also heard one aspiring Navajo poet state that the poetry of Esther Belin was too political.

A number of years later, in July 2008, I brought up my conversation with the young Navajo college student with Navajo/Hopi poet Venaya Yazzie. Yazzie, along with Gloria Emerson, Esther Belin, and Tina Deschenie, has been active in Dooda Desert Rock (dooda means “no”), an attempt to block the construction of a power plant in the Four Corners region of the Navajo Nation spearheaded by Elouise Brown, a Navajo woman who lives in the area where the Desert Rock power plant would be located (Horoshko 2008). These activities for Yazzie have included an exhibit at the Center for Southwest Studies at Ft. Lewis College, Durango, Colorado, in 2008, titled “Connections: Earth + Artist = A Tribute Art Show to Resistance to Desert Rock” and a poetry and art session in March 2009 titled “Connections: Earth + Artist II” at the Navajo Studies Conference in Shiprock. During that event, which was lightly attended, Yazzie described some of the opposition she encountered from Navajos about the art exhibit in Durango. In an interview I did with Yazzie in July 2008, she pointed out that one of the issues that Navajo poets face is a concern with doo ajinída. She has had people tell her that some of her politically engaged poetry is best left unsaid. Doo ajinída, as another Navajo consultant explained, is often associated with ‘aseezí (gossip). As Yazzie explained, the phrase doo ajinída encapsulates the idea that “you don’t talk about these things cuz that’s what happens, when no one’s around and you don’t want other people to know that’s what happens.” Doo ajinída can be understood as an injunction used by some Navajos to maintain imagined civility. Here it makes explicit an “ordeal of civility”—that is, the “acquiescence to a tradition of politeness [which] . . . results in a consciousness of participating in one’s own subjugation” (Basso 2009:127). Using doo ajinída in this context suggests, like the cultural intimacy described by Herzfeld (1997), that you should not write about social, political, and environmental issues on the Navajo Nation because outsiders, primarily Anglos, might overhear it, and it will confirm various negative stereotypes that Anglos have about Navajos.

Navajo poets are quite aware of these negative and racist stereotypes about Navajos—for example, that all Navajos are alcoholics. Indeed, a number of Navajo poets have pointed out the tension involved in simply ordering a beer at a border town bar or restaurant. The moment you order that beer, they tell me, you can be seen as confirming Anglo stereotypes. This is especially true in Farmington. I recall the relief one Navajo poet expressed as he was ordering a beer outside St. Louis, Missouri, where he felt such expectations were less likely than in Farmington. Many Navajos have told me that Farmington was once known as the “Selma (Alabama)” of New Mexico. Farmington is often described by Navajos as a “racist” or “redneck” town. I have heard astonishingly racist comments
about Navajos in Farmington. Some Navajos refuse to do business in Farmington because of the racism they see. Some Navajos—who speak Navajo freely on the Navajo Nation—are reluctant to speak Navajo in Farmington. Navajo poet Zoey Benally has told me she did not want her slam poetry team to be associated with Farmington. She and the other poets preferred to be identified as coming from the Four Corners region. However, some Navajo poets are quick to add various caveats. For example, many Navajo poets speak highly of the bookstore and cafe Andrea Kristina’s, which has hosted art exhibits and poetry readings by Navajos. But, in general, many Navajos consider Farmington a “dangerous” place. And by “dangerous,” Navajos often mean a potentially violent place. Stories of violent encounters in Farmington are not uncommon.

Navajo poets are also aware of outsiders’ expectations that trivialize and exoticize them. They encounter such expectations at poetry readings and conferences (see Belin 2009). At poetry readings I have attended off the reservation, Navajo poets are often confronted with questions from audience members that present ordeals of language, of maintaining the imagined civility of an unequal society. I have seen a Navajo poet being asked about the ancient Navajo writing system as shown on the television show “The X-Files,” and whether or not the poet was a “shaman.” In the former case, one Navajo poet directed the questioner to talk with me because I was an “expert on Navajo writing.” In the latter case, the poet responded that he was not “a medicine man” and thus subtly corrected the questioner. In both cases, the imagined civility was maintained by Navajos suppressing responses that would have highlighted the condescending assumptions behind the questions.

Compounding all of this is Desert Rock. Desert Rock is a power plant project that was officially supported by the government of the Navajo Nation and by many Navajos. Some Navajos have explained to me that Desert Rock will create jobs and spur “economic development” on the Navajo Nation. Other Navajos—including some poets—counter these arguments by suggesting that few jobs will actually be created and that these jobs will primarily entail menial labor (janitors and security guards). They note that most Navajos lack either the education or the educational opportunities to get high-paying employment at a “high tech” power plant. Finally, these Navajos note that the power from this power plant will not go to Navajos, but rather to Texas or California. Indeed, the letters to the editor published in the Navajo Times document a spirited debate about Desert Rock. This, I might add, includes a letter written by Venaya Yazzie and published in February 2008. Navajo critics sometimes label those involved with Dooda Desert Rock as “troublemakers.”

In a poem for “Connections: Earth + Artist = A Tribute Art Show to Resistance to Desert Rock,” Tina Deschenie addresses some of these issues. She writes—in the voice of those critics—“Those people protesting, they’re just trouble makers/Protesters, trying to be like AIM.” (AIM is the American Indian Movement, a politically active American Indian group in the 1970s whose activities included a number of high-profile protests and occupations. However, Navajos with whom I have spoken express ambivalence about AIM. Some are proud of what AIM
was able to accomplish; others think that AIM is responsible for the relocating of non-Navajo businesses off the reservation.) As Yazzie noted in an interview I did with her, “a lot of Navajo people are very apathetic to anything that goes on that’s political; they just don’t wanna get involved.” This apathy is a concern repeatedly expressed by other Navajo poets as well.

When I spoke with Mitchell about doo ajinída he also equated it with a prohibition against gossip, but he noted that “you have got to talk about” issues such as the environment. He said that the injunction doo ajinída should be used, instead, for example, when someone tells someone “to go to hell.” As he said, “you don’t say wrong things like that, don’t tell your neighbors to go to hell.” Here Mitchell’s description of doo ajinida is reminiscent of a familiar point—a familiar creative or performative language ideology—in much of the literature about Navajos. Toelken (2003:111) describes it this way: “For Navajos, actually uttering words creates the reality of their world . . . hence people avoid speaking of things they don’t want to see appear in the world around them.” The injunction doo ajinida is about not saying things that are not already in existence. Yazzie and Mitchell both agree, however, that some issues must be discussed, most likely because they already exist. The state of the Navajo Nation is one such issue. Here, then, both seem to agree that the injunction doo ajinida is being misapplied or, as Mitchell said, “distorted” when it is used against poets discussing such issues as power plants or treating “Mother Earth” cavalierly. For some Navajo poets, expressing such views is an attempt to restore hózhó (order, control, harmony; see Webster 2012b). Kamper (2010:161–62) has made a similar point about Navajo union organizers and speaking out about controversial issues. He argues that one way of understanding Navajos who voice concern about important political issues is to see it as an attempt to restore hózhó. Yet, as Kamper notes, there is also the risk that such voicing of views will be seen as disruptive. This, then, is an ordeal of language.

Some Navajo poets have suggested that being overtly politically active would likely decrease the chances of getting published. As Deschenie noted in an interview I did with her in July 2008 about venues for Navajo poets, “there’s just so few publishers.” Many Navajo poets have expressed to me a feeling that publishers have stereotypes regarding what a Navajo poet should write about. More than one Navajo poet has told me about a poetry manuscript that was rejected for “not being Navajo enough.” Navajo poets, like other Navajo artists, know that tourists and non-Navajos often have expectations about what Navajo poets or artists should write about or create. One Navajo poet/artist explained that she does artwork to satisfy tourists’ expectations and artwork that she feels is important but is unlikely to sell. This is the much-noted double bind of the Indigenous art market. One Navajo poet described the Navajo Nation as a “zoo,” a place where tourists could come and gawk at Navajos. Such comments show the deep ambivalence that some Navajos have with marketing the Navajo Nation and themselves as a tourist destination or attraction. That ambivalence can also be heard in some of the poetry that concerns the environmental and socioeconomic realities that Navajos confront.
Navajo poets are aware of these multiple tensions: tensions from outside, non-Navajo expectations and tensions from other Navajos as well. In my experience, more Navajo poets are actively engaged in environmental and other social and political issues than there were in 2001. To write poetry that is critical of tourists or that calls attention to the economic, environmental, and social issues on the reservation is still a risky undertaking.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have sketched three thematic and telling ordeals of language. First, I noted reluctance by Navajos to speak Navajo, whether to avoid confirming outsiders’ negative stereotypes or as a way to disengage from potentially dangerous and/or racist strangers. Second, I noted that Navajo English is also self-censored or apologized for. To avoid scrutiny of their Navajo English, some Navajos have feigned monolingualism in Navajo. Third, I documented the criticism of Navajo poets for writing about social and environmental issues on the Navajo Nation. Some Navajos have used the injunction doo ajinida against those poets, suggesting that they have violated a basic tenet of Navajo civility. Yet, in each case, some Navajos do persist in speaking Navajo, in speaking and writing in Navajo English, and in writing poetry that challenges the status quo on the Navajo Nation.

For me, ordeals of language suggest the ongoing tension found in the basic inequalities of languages and their speakers that Hymes noted years ago. For Hymes (1996), languages are not equal because the speakers of those languages are not equal. The examples presented here suggest that Hymes’s (1996:64) “negative freedom,” a freedom from a denial of expressive and linguistic form, has not been achieved. As Basso (2009:134) notes, “the suppression of voice is often one consequence of mutually perceived inequalities of power.” Everything has gotten kinda strange, as my consultant noted, and Navajos continue to be objects of outside scrutiny. But ordeals of languages are ordeals—moments of struggle and tension. And Navajo poets display much courage in the face of such ordeals. Part of the feelingful intensity of language found in Navajo poetry emerges in the crucible of ordeals of language and the intimacies of grammar. It is in such moments of tension that an affective bond to expressive forms, an intimacy of grammar, can be found, felt, and, indeed, expressed. Navajo poets have, through an intimacy of grammar, found Hymes’s (1996:64) “positive freedom,” a “satisfaction in the use of language” in expressive forms. That some Navajo poets can find voice in such ordeals, however, does not make those ordeals, whether of shame, of scrutiny, or of civility—ordeals, that is, of languages—less real. We cannot, then, understand contemporary Navajo poetry without understanding the ways in which Navajo poets have negotiated and come to terms, however in imperfectly or fleetingly, with their own ordeals of language.
I wish to thank the many Navajos (poet and non-poet alike) who have taken the time to talk with me over the years. I have especially benefited from conversations with Esther Belin, Venaya Yazzie, Orlando White, Cliff Jack, Sherwin Bitsui, Tina Deschenie, Gloria Emerson, and Blackhorse Mitchell. I also thank Juan Rodriguez, Jonathan Hill, Aimee Hosemann, and Leighton Peterson for conversations about issues taken up in this article. Thanks also to the AAA panel in New Orleans on the Ordeals of Language and especially the commentary by Judith Irvine. The debt this work owes to Ellen Basso is obvious. Her work has been an inspiration. Research on the Navajo Nation was done under permits from the Historic Preservation Office. I thank them. Finally, I thank three anonymous JAR reviewers for a number of useful suggestions.

1. I thank Tony Woodbury for pointing out Haas’s paper on “interlingual word taboos.”

2. I have heard the form playfully used to refer to a restaurant with a reputation for inducing flatulence, as in “tl’id restaurant.” Ervin (1961:239), citing personal communication with Herbert Landar, sees the reluctance to use this form being a result of the semantics of tl’id and does not discuss the sound-symbolic quality of the form. Elsewhere (Webster 2009:51–79), I have noted that many Navajo poets valorize the use of sound-symbolic and ideophonic forms in their poetry. However, I also noted that some Navajo poets resist using ideophones and sound-symbolic forms in their poetry because they believe it violates a perceived Western bias against the use of such forms in “literature.”

3. Navajo scholar Tiffany Lee (2007:22) cogently describes “john” this way:

   My opinion is that it [“john”] stems from the indoctrination of Western education, worldviews, and ways of life during colonization, carried through the boarding-school era, and continues now. The policies of boarding schools and the general attitude of mainstream America assigned an inferior status to Navajo people, culture, language, and worldview. The term “john” is a manifestation of this type of thinking and influence.

4. There is conflicting evidence regarding monolingualism among Navajos. Field (2009) summarizes much of the evidence for a view of widespread Navajo monolingualism in Navajo. On the other hand, Bsumek (2004:33) notes that Stewart Culin reported circa 1902 that Navajos “rapidly acquired ‘a knowledge of the English language.’” In my experience and in conversations with Navajo consultants, it was not always clear whether a particular Navajo was monolingual in Navajo or had “feigned monolingualism” in Navajo for social reasons as discussed in this article.

5. I should note that in my experience, especially with older Navajos, the use of all caps does not always indicate “emphasis” or “shouting” but rather is the regular way that they write emails and the like. Reading the all caps here as emphatic may not be warranted. This remains a question to be investigated.

6. For Navajos, on the other hand, Mitchell is perhaps most famous for his sheepherding songs.

7. This section is developed more fully in Webster 2012b. In that piece, I treat the negation frame doo--...-da as a circumclitic that is attached to both the beginning and the end of the form ajini (one says). In discussions with some Navajos it has been suggested that I place doo as an independent particle. I follow that suggestion here.
REFERENCES CITED

Lee, Tiffany. 2007. “If they want Navajo to be learned, then they should require it in all schools”: Navajo teenagers’ experiences, choices, and demands regarding Navajo language. Wicazo Sa Review 22(1):7–33.


