

PREFACE



Arrivals

Through the bus window, I saw a horseback rider herding a flock of sheep across the parking lot of a Taco Bell. Just beyond the sheep stood a slender windmill tower, its base attached to a corrugated metal water basin spray-painted “Livestock Only! Not for human consumption.” Our tour bus of musicians, sound techs, and environmental activists pulled into Window Rock, the capital of the Navajo Nation, following an all-night westward drive along Interstate 40. My eyes cut across the road to a dusty gas station where several stray puppies huddled against a concrete wall and a man wearing a cowboy hat fueled his pickup truck. A younger man, in a black heavy-metal T-shirt and baggy shorts, sold burritos from the trunk of a weathered sedan. Terra-cotta cliffs rose in the background, crowned with sagebrush and juniper.

After a few hours of sleep at one of the two hotels in town, I took a late morning walk along the potholed pavement beneath the bluest sky. Parking lots with trailers of alfalfa for sale and a few abandoned cars eventually gave way to the surrounding arroyos and open terrain. Dozens of sheep and goats grazed silently, encircled by a team of watchful sheepdogs. Low, dry mesas rose north of the small town; I had no idea of the verdant, high alpine forests they concealed. Past a chain-link fence stood a concrete sports center, encircled by rodeo fairgrounds and parking lots, its digital signboard announcing “Window Rock Sports Center: Indigo Girls Tonight.” This was the reason for my arrival. I was on tour as a political organizer and assistant manager for the folk-rock duo Indigo Girls, singer-songwriters and activists who undertook a month-long benefit concert tour in native communities every couple of years as part of their collaborative work with Honor the Earth, a national native environmental organization. The event in the Navajo (Diné) Nation was part of a longer road trip of acoustic performances, media campaigns, and high school and community education events aimed at transforming dominant

energy policies. Our team partnered with native leaders—elected officials and grassroots activists—who questioned the public health, economic, and environmental effects of long-standing, and escalating, intensive extraction of fossil fuel in native territories. We had come to the Navajo Nation at the request of Diné Citizens against Ruining Our Environment (Diné CARE), a community-based organization working within a broader movement to transition the Navajo Nation away from its reliance on uranium and coal and toward sources of renewable power.

Reporters from the tribal radio station arrived early, interviewed the musicians and activists, and set up a live broadcast of the show in the Diné language. Outside, behind the arena, I met local organizers Earl and Leila Tulley and their three young daughters as we worked to unload boxes of concert T-shirts, petition cards, posters, and brochures. When the venue's doors opened, teenagers, families, and elders rushed excitedly onto the rubber gym floor, filling the metal bleachers and muttering, "But who are the Indigo Girls, anyway?" The popular Native American rock band Indigenous was the headline act, with Jackson Browne and the Indigo Girls as relatively unknown openers. The lights dimmed, and a leading member of Diné CARE invited the audience to "enjoy the music and learn to organize around uranium contamination across the reservation." Another Diné CARE member sold shirts and distributed pamphlets that described the group's efforts to secure federal compensation for Navajo uranium workers sickened by radiation contamination. I circulated among the crowd of black-clad youth and elderly grandmothers adorned in turquoise jewelry and velvet skirts, collecting petition postcards addressed to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior that described the toxic legacies of uranium mining in the Navajo Nation.

These acute challenges intrigued and troubled me in the years that followed. I continued direct action and fundraising work with national indigenous environmental justice movements, yet I grew increasingly skeptical of my own certainty about what was truly at stake in these matters, and in Diné territory in particular. My once secure faith in the "right" way to advance social justice as an ally began to falter. The structural violence of toxic risk was clear, yet contamination was a complex social and cultural issue; my brief encounters suggested it was also not the end of the story. There was a powerful, if understated, vitality, creativity, and resilience in the environmental movements laboring to shift federal and tribal energy policy, countering the widely circulated reports about the "wasteland" Navajo territory supposedly had become. How could these forces of ruin and renewal coexist, I wondered,

and what was going on beyond and between the ecstatic moments of collective political action?

These questions and others drew me back to the Navajo Nation six years later, but in a very different role. I returned to the reservation alone, outfitted with a laptop, audio recorder, notebook, four-wheel-drive truck, and tribal research permit: equipment for ethnographic fieldwork on “the rez.” I had migrated from the world of activist musicians into a doctoral program in cultural anthropology, where I planned to continue my work with indigenous environmental movements, though from a different position. In Window Rock, I noticed that new fast food joints and a regional bank had joined the gas station and Taco Bell. Horses, cows, and sheep still ambled across the highway, and tumbleweeds tangled themselves in the axle of my car. The pavement shimmered under the sun’s heat. As I drove across the reservation, I noticed networks of electrical transmission lines, oddly invisible to me on previous visits, despite the fact that I had been engaged in solidarity work that focused on the Diné energy landscape. Heading west beyond the commercial and governmental hub of Window Rock, I noticed fewer and fewer distribution lines: while the towering transmission lines stretched as far as the eye could see, hardly any power lines distributed electricity to the wooden hogans, metal single-wide trailers, and other homes visible from the road. Some residences had small arrays of solar panels or generators, while others appeared to have no electrical power at all, even though they were in the shadow of transmission lines that carried Navajo coal power to distant substations and, ultimately, to urban consumers.

This was the infrastructure of an export economy, transferring Navajo energy to regional utilities for off-reservation consumption—a literal and figurative transfusion of power. Although I had glimpsed this landscape years earlier—from the relative distance of the tour bus and sports center—I moved *through* the landscape in this later visit over a longer period of time, paying more careful attention to the contours of the terrain, contemplating the invisible histories and overtly embattled possible futures. I began to see the endless miles of power transmission lines as infrastructural capillaries: the lines were material connectors between seemingly remote Navajo places and global metropolises such as Phoenix and Las Vegas. As the power lines branched across open rangeland, sheep and goats grazing beneath, they stretched beyond Navajo homes with no electricity or running water. For nearly a century, as this story relays, the Navajo Nation’s economy has been dependent on intensive extraction of energy minerals, especially oil, uranium, and coal, while

the household energy needs of many Diné families on the reservation remain unmet. This historical contradiction has been a central critique from Diné social movements, as well as from tribal leaders and native studies scholars. Voracious energy consumption in the greater United States, paired with underconsumption and uneven production in native territories, is a foundational challenge that many native nations face in their ongoing struggles under U.S. colonial rule. Yet in that moment I was not yet attuned to this more analytical perspective. It would be a long time yet before I would come to understand these complex landscapes of power as fundamental arbiters of Diné experience today.

I began my official fieldwork in the eastern Navajo town of Shiprock, New Mexico, with a deep sense of existential displacement: refracted in my newfound anthropological undertaking was my activist collaborator at the Indigo Girls show in Window Rock six years earlier. Standing before the sparkling new Shiprock Performing Arts Center, the venue for yet another Indigo Girls show in Diné territory, I felt uneasy occupying the role of “participant observer,” that awkward, fraught, yet productive position unique to ethnography. Shifting from activist to researcher was a more dizzying subjective pivot than I had anticipated. Past and present seemed to collide in unsettling ways. Colonialism and knowledge extraction defined the history of North American anthropology, haunting my newfound stance. Many of my friends-turned-collaborators were acutely aware of this history, and we gingerly navigated our changing relationship in the carpeted and air-conditioned splendor of the newly constructed Shiprock Performing Arts Center.

The performance venue stood as a shining monument of modernity in the twenty-first-century Navajo Nation, juxtaposing the ashen and angular Jurassic-era volcanic formation just to the south, for which the center and the town are named. Emblematic of this badlands plateau, Shiprock was named by Anglo settlers, who perceived the towering rock as a seafaring sailing vessel. Their expansionist frame of reference drew on a repertoire of global technology unfamiliar to locals. Yet for Diné people, the ancient mountain’s movement is not waterborne but airborne: it is Tsé Bit’áí (Rock with Wings), a dimension beyond the settlers’ imagination. The sacred bird’s crumbling mile-wide wingspan marks a natural north-south border between the glowing mesas of Red Valley and the dusty Navajo settlement guarding the reservation’s northeastern edge.

In 2005, after mounting significant political pressure, Diné environmental justice activists and their allies in the Navajo Nation’s leadership celebrated a hard-won victory with the passage of the Diné Natural Resources Protection Act through the Navajo Nation Council. This law secured the Navajo Nation’s

official moratorium on new uranium mines on Navajo land, with tribal officials publicly designating the effects of this Cold War legacy as a twentieth-century “genocide” against the Diné people. Coal, however, remained central to official tribal economic development. That evening in Shiprock, the newest and perhaps most controversial energy project slated for Diné land in the early twenty-first century was the target of the activists’ concert: a 1,500-megawatt, coal-fired power plant known as the Desert Rock Energy Project had recently been proposed for the Northern (New Mexico) Agency of the reservation. The power plant would be a mine-to-mouth operation, using Navajo coal from an adjacent mine and following the long-established model of exporting power off the reservation to supply the urban Southwest.

Activist groups had chosen Shiprock as a strategic location for the concert for political and financial reasons. The proposed site of Desert Rock was forty miles to the south, and the nearby markets of Farmington, New Mexico, and Durango, Colorado, would guarantee greater ticket sales for the concert. This, they gauged, would help build regional networks of support for the movement. Although the Navajo Nation’s government proposed the new coal plant and invited transnational energy developers to bid on the project, the Diné community was deeply, publicly divided on whether intensification of coal exploitation should build the future of their nation. Groups like Doodá Desert Rock and Diné CARE had recently expanded their media and grassroots campaigns to include arresting new visuals creating associations between bio-hazardous emissions and regionally salient images of human life (see figure Pref.1). Backstage, local environmentalists briefed us on the latest news concerning Desert Rock, including tribal legislation, the New Mexico governor’s vehement opposition to the power plant, and a detailed description of the dynamics of the reservation-based movement against the project. Activists gave interviews on the issue to tribal and regional news reporters, while students, local organizers, and community elders exchanged information about the proposed power plant. The energetic performance by the Indigo Girls was followed by an onstage discussion among Diné and other native activists and the musicians. Members of the audience lined up at a stationary microphone to ask questions and express concern about regional air quality and their own health risks as residents of the Four Corners area.

From that evening onward, I was literally, and figuratively, on the other side of the stage. Sitting quietly in a plush theater chair in the audience (rather than moving around backstage, as before) helped me hear and feel nuances of the issues that had been acoustically out of my range, so to speak. Experiencing



FIG. PREF.1 Doodá Desert Rock activist banner. Artwork by Klee Benally. Photo by the author.

a distant closeness, a suspended intimacy, I understood for the first time that I was part of an ongoing conversation, and had been for years, but now my location within that conversation had changed. Yet far from making me more removed or “objective,” my estrangement signaled a more complex relation with the problems at hand: it was a novel location of partial connection. The acoustics were better out here than backstage; the harmonies more vibrant and clear; the audience members’ questions more vulnerable. In changing my location and perspective, I had changed myself, reinvigorating my senses. The measure of this difference was more auditory and more sensory than spatial. Now offstage myself, I was still close to our shared concerns, but I could hear and see in a way that was not possible before. Sound rushed forth, bass vibrating the floor beneath my feet, harmonized mandolin and guitar sparking adrenaline surge, the acoustic moment becoming an energetic nexus where thinking, being, and sound converged. The sensorial field of energy—its vital flows through electric guitar and amplifier, verve of performance and activism—is where this story of infrastructure and ingenuity begins.