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Southwest Talks

The *New Mexico Historical Review* Interview Series



JENNIFER NEZ DENETDALE

Q: Who have been your biggest educational influences or mentors?

A: The people who influenced me to become a historian and an educator are many. First, as I heard from a scholar of color at a Ford Foundation fellows conference, as people of color, we are rarely told by dominant society that we are intelligent or have possibilities as scholars and educators. Rather, it is always our communities and families who let us know that we are fully capable of pursuing our dreams. And so that has been the case for me. My mother and father have always been the inspiration for me to pursue my love of education and intellectual labor. From as far back as I can remember, we always had books in our home and we children never missed a day of school. Second, teachers are influential and the two I remember most are Mr. and Mrs. Snowden who came from the East to teach on the Navajo reservation in the 1960s and 70s. They inspired me to read and learn about everything. Their love of teaching remains a source of inspiration and carried me through my undergrad and graduate programs. Third, professors are always crucial to a student's success and my mentors like Drs. Susan Deeds, Karen Powers, John Leung, and George Lubbick at Northern Arizona University provided me with sound mentoring that also led to my success in returning to my Navajo community to conduct historical-based research. Finally, today as a historian and a professor of American Studies, my

Dr. Jennifer Nez Denetdale is an acclaimed author and Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico where she teaches courses in Critical Indigenous Studies. She is also a strong advocate for Native peoples and serves on the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission.

colleagues, students, and my own Navajo people continue to inspire me to create research projects that are about critical Indigenous and Navajo Studies.

Q: You studied English as an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico (UNM), then went on to earn your masters in English and doctorate in history at Northern Arizona University, and now you are an Associate Professor at UNM in the American Studies department where you teach courses in Native American Studies. What methodologies, tools, and analyses in American and Native American studies have you found beneficial to your historical research?

A: I think I surprise myself by continuing to rely on my background and experience as a historian. I continue to research and write using my training in history. At present, I have been working on a book manuscript in which I examine the making of the modern Navajo Nation and how concepts of citizenship, nation, and family have been influenced by Western notions of democracy. I also use historical method in my classrooms and the community work that I do and oftentimes students and Navajos appreciate learning how to work with archival materials. Indeed, Navajos and other Native people are appreciative when I share archival resources for appreciating and interrogating the Native past.

Q: Many *NMHR* readers may be familiar with your great-great-great-grandfather, the Navajo chief Manuelito, but less familiar with his wife Juanita. In your book *Reclaiming Diné History: the Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (University of Arizona Press, 2007) you interrogate the Navajo histories that focus on Chief Manuelito and leave out the life of Juanita. In trying to recover Juanita, what did you learn about the ways in which Navajo women create history?

A: The book *Reclaiming Diné History* was really my foray into appreciating a Diné perspective on the past. I was interested in interrogating how American historians constructed histories of Navajos that are shaped by American notions of narratives and history. That initial investigation then led me to consider how women have become invisible within modern tribal nation-building, which is one of the consequences of the imposition of Western forms of democracy onto tribal nations and peoples. I have continued my research into better understanding Native and Navajo women's leadership roles and how these have shifted under American colonialism. I also find Indigenous queer critiques very useful for illuminating how federal Indian policies and their connection to tribal nation-building focused on replicating U.S. heterosexual patriarchy as normative.

Q: As the first Diné to earn a doctorate in history you must be a source of inspiration to young Navajo scholars. What advice do you have for young Native scholars trying to write indigenous histories in general and the lives of Native women specifically? What types of histories would you like to see more of?

A: As the first ever Diné to earn a doctorate in history, I share my love of history and education with my own nation, communities, and with other tribal nations. At the present time, there is one other Diné woman who earned a doctorate in history, AnCita Benally, from Arizona State University (ASU) in 2006. Three Diné have earned Master's in history—one from Northern Arizona University, Marius Begay; Terry Yazzie from Prescott College; and Zonnie Gorman from UNM. I often present lectures and workshops that offer my communities an introduction to Native and Navajo histories. I also make sure that I include Indigenous feminisms and gender in my workshops and lectures. I recently attended the Organization of American Historians conference at the invitation of my colleague Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. She wanted our panel to reflect on how Native people's experiences under American colonialism is still not considered genocidal or a form of ethnic cleansing. Frankly, I'm surprised that we still have to have these sorts of debates. That there would even be questions on whether or not the United States enacted genocidal policies and ethnic cleansing against its Indigenous peoples tells me that the Native histories continue to be written from an American exceptionalism positioning. I look forward to the time when we Indigenous historians claim the field of Indigenous histories.

Q: What have you read recently that you would recommend to scholars of Southwest and/or Native history?

A: I read on so many topics, but lately I've been interested in the development of capitalism within tribal nations such as the Navajo. I have been keenly aware of how Indigenous resources like water, coal, and uranium, for example, have been appropriated for the benefit of the larger American society. Historian Andrew Needham's history of the making of the modern American Southwest, *Powerlines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton University Press, 2014), illustrates very well how Navajo natural resources were expropriated for the benefit of urban areas like Phoenix and Las Vegas and that while these urban spaces relied upon Navajo resources, Navajos have not benefitted from natural resources development. Another book I am reading is Judith Nies's *Unreal City: Las Vegas, Black Mesa, and the Fate of the West* (Nation Books, 2014), which is also about the theft of Navajo and Hopi natural resources, principally coal, to provide cheap energy to urban landscapes. Both of these studies

are useful for understanding how American colonialism continues to underpin the United States relationships to Indigenous nations like the Navajo nation.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I am currently working on several projects, including a book manuscript tentatively titled, *The Navajo Nation, Gender and the Politics of Gender*, in which I examine the political, cultural, and social processes through which the modern Navajo Nation was created. These modernizing forces have shaped the Navajo Nation into a model of democracy that mirrors American forms of democracy, thereby replicating gender inequalities, racialization that sustains racism, and discrimination against Navajos and Natives. My book includes an examination of internalized colonizations as I explore issues of gender discrimination within the Navajo Nation and how this discrimination can be sanctioned as being “part of tradition.” I am also working on a biography of the Navajo Service photographer Milton Snow who took over twelve thousand photographs of Navajos during and in the aftermath of the Livestock Reduction, beginning in the 1930s. Another project I am working on is an essay on the Navajo Scouts. I recently came into some primary documents related to the Scouts. My great-great-grandfather was a Navajo Scout. He was the son-in-law to Manu-elito, the Navajo leader.

Q: As a life-long resident of the Southwest, what would you like people to understand about the history and cultures of New Mexico?

A: Histories and cultures of New Mexico . . . I am really more interested in how American colonialism continues to structure relationships based upon the exploitation of people of color and Indigenous peoples, how gender is constructed to align with hetero-patriarchal values in ways that sustains disparities and inequalities for women and our Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, and Queer communities. I am interested in having people be conscious of how racism, discrimination, and inequalities still affect us every day and in institutions like education, religion, business, etc. Also, how do we create alliances across our differences? Those, I think, are the crucial issues and questions of the day.