

Art as a Spiritual Expression for Indigenous Well-being

by

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ABSTRACT

Art is a form of spiritual expression that is thriving in many Indigenous cultures. It can take many forms, meanings and have a multitude of emotional, mental, physical and spiritual effects on its creator as well as its audience. Amongst American Indians, art has been a method for maintaining holistic well-being intended to heal and cope with traumatic experiences. In this thesis, I examine the western societal and cultural influences that have led to the loss of cultural identity and examine approaches and practices that aim to re-establish a resilient connection to identity and well-being using art as a spiritual catalyst. Literary research and articles were reviewed related to the issue of art as a form of spiritual expression in Indigenous cultures. An autoethnography was conducted with the intent to record and reflect on the wellbeing of the researcher in relation to her artistic expression. Journaling and vlogging were used as research methods and painting, sketching, and beading were used as artistic methods. Over the course of six months, over 50 videos with 30 hours of raw footage were recorded; averaging 2 hours per day. The results are reflected in the researchers free-flowing and emotionally driven reflection of experiences that have driven her art work. This thesis supports the establishment of art as a form of spiritual expression for transforming the current western focused health care paradigm to one that recognizes, values and employs Indigenous insight, methodologies, worldviews, culture and spirituality.

DEDICATION

For Indigenous peoples healing from mental, physical, emotional and spiritual harm. May art reawaken our spiritual expression for future generations to embrace and celebrate our individual and collective experiences as human beings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want thank my family for their limitless love and unwavering support, and for gifting me with my first easel and paints. I thank my auntie for sharing her knowledge of beading with me. I have a deep appreciation for the many artists I have crossed paths with over the years. To them I say, may you continue to create with integrity and teach your craft for future generations to come. Lastly and most importantly, thank you to my committee members whose support, insight and valuable perspectives guided me throughout the research process.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In chapter 1, I review the importance of this topic and an overview of the literary research that has been conducted in relation to art for wellbeing. The subject of my interest is art and its ability to connect individuals spiritually to their higher power through the creative process; art within the context of Indigenous belief systems and values. The purpose is to highlight and merge art and traditional healing as a vital form of creative expression for Indigenous wellbeing. The study is based on an auto-ethnography; a personal recollection of my experiences with art and how it has helped formulate my spiritual understanding and connection.

The importance of this topic stems from the lack of emotional and spiritual support from within the Western health care system in relation to Indigenous worldviews and cultural practices such as that of balance. Balance being the physical and mental (masculine) and emotional and spiritual (feminine). Westernized systems demonstrate a patriarchal control focused only on the physical aesthetic and mental stability while completely disregarding the feministic qualities of emotion and spirituality. In essence, creating an imbalance that has infiltrated all levels of our government, health, justice, economic, education and societal systems.

The literary research focuses primarily on Indigenous worldviews vs. Westernized systems and art as healing for Indigenous communities. Scholars such as Cyndy Baskin, Patricia Cochran, Vanessa Simonds and Scott Morgenson have all contributed literature to the decolonization of Westernized systems in an effort to embrace and highlight Indigenous worldviews throughout the research world. Their insight is a call to action for many Indigenous nations to challenge the methods founded by dominant Western

science. Their intent is to validate Indigenous worldviews as having a valuable say in how research is conducted within tribal communities while offering viable solutions for outcomes.

Phoebe Dufrene, David Hodges and Helen Burt focus on art as a viable solution to the many problems plaguing Indigenous communities in an attempt to heal and bring about balance. Their contribution to the literary world discusses the relationship between traditional healing and artistic practices such as song, dance, sculpting and visual arts. As Indigenous communities continue to heal, Westernized health care systems are deemed inadequate in their ability to address wellness as a whole, particularly spirituality.

The intent of this study aims to address the use of art in relation to balance and wellbeing by the acknowledgment of past experiences, reflection and understanding through the researchers autoethnography. The objectives of this study are to offer insight into the researchers personal experiences, both negative and positive, through narrative and art, in an attempt to identify unhealthy habits in order to build new healthier habits. Certain questions were raised through the process of this study in relation to the researcher's wellbeing such as: "How do I or how do I not currently take care of myself mentally, spiritually, emotionally and physically? How did I or how did I not take care of these four areas in the past? How do I need to take care of these four areas in the future?"

The Balance diagram shown in figure 1 is of particular interest to the process of this research. The diagram is based on the medicine wheel but was redesigned by the researcher to fit her own concept of balance within her subjective reality. The balance diagram is solely intended to represent the researchers personal understanding of balance within her own reality and is not intended to represent that of another's.

The methods used include vlogging, journaling, sketching, painting and beading. The videos were recorded randomly over a six month period and served as an open video journal for the researcher to record her daily habits, feelings, thoughts, emotions, memories, stories and future goals. This form of self-expression allowed for the researcher to reflect on her day to day experiences and after a six month period gauge her progress in correlation to the balance diagram. Her art work served as a another artistic outlet in which the researcher reflected on her spirituality as a Diné woman determined to comprehend the modern world and struggling to maintain a connection to her cultural upbringing while using art to help navigate her emotional, mental, physical and spiritual discovery.

Several important outcomes of this study include the researcher's acknowledgment of her past, identification of healthy and unhealthy habits, willingness to change and build new habits, and building a foundation within her own home to practice and support her spiritual connection to her culture through artistic expression. All of which supports the overall wellbeing of the researcher and adds to the need for Indigenous perspectives to be deemed valuable and valid within western paradigms.

The term *Diné* meaning 'The People' will be used throughout this thesis in place of the word Navajo.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following review of literature focuses on the response to and understanding of culture after ceremonial practices were liberated with the 1979 American Indian Freedom of Religion Act (IRA) and the importance of Indigenous worldviews within Western systems as a credible source for Indigenous wellbeing.

The 1979 American Indian Freedom of Religion Act legalized the practice of traditional religious ceremonies such as dancing, sweat lodge and peyote; ceremonies that had been previously outlawed by local and state regulations. Prior to the laws forbidding American Indian religious practices, access to traditional healers became extremely difficult, therefore leaving tribal members seeking traditional healing to often rely on Western diagnosis and treatment from non-tribal practitioners.¹ Although the reawakening of ceremonies attracted younger generations of American Indians to take part, their internal conflicts became an immense problem as they struggled to identify with tribal values while battling with their conformity to Westernized schooling and churches.²

After generations of conformity American Indians are often confronted by denial and lack of pride in being of American Indian ancestry. The pressure to adopt mainstream culture, religions and value systems have had detrimental effects on the ability to function in modern and urban environments. The lack of cultural knowledge and participation has created guilty feelings and negative views of American Indians by American Indians for lack of support and connection to traditional belief systems.³

The adaptation of culture to meet current times and environment has created a mixture of traditional practices that conform to modern and urban settings, in an attempt to maintain cultural connection and appreciation. Cultural framework, or that environment within which a person is nurtured, affects a person's insights of well-being.⁴ Within the context of Indigenous worldviews, culture is born to reflect the shared value systems that promote healthy perspectives.

Healthy perspectives for Indigenous nations stem for their ability to validate themselves through their methods and practices that do not correlate with Westernized methods. Unfortunately, this has not been the case for many tribal communities, as research is conducted to value Westernized methods thus creating a predisposition towards Indigenous peoples associating them with negative outcomes ultimately perpetuating stereotypes.

Cyndy Baskin discusses the importance of Indigenous worldviews in *Strong Helpers' Teachings: The Values of Indigenous Knowledges in the Helping Professions*. She emphasizes the importance of Indigenous worldviews as being the, “foundation that guides how ones sees the environment/land, people, communities, challenges, causes of problems, and possible solutions. It provides principles, values, and ethics for research, teaching, and practice.”⁵ Indigenous worldviews value the need for community over the individual, holistic approaches to healing, the inclusion of spirituality, mediation, family focus and connection to land. Culture is what grows out of the Indigenous worldview. “Cultures are expressed through languages, ceremonies, governance, clan system and yes, food. Complex, ever-evolving, and adapting to environments and circumstances, cultures make little sense out of context and, unless one lives that culture, can be easily misunderstood.”⁶ Within the Indigenous worldview, the holistic approach focuses on four aspects of a person; the spiritual, physical, mental and emotional; all of which impact each other during the healing process. It is also important to understand the fine line between respecting Indigenous spiritual practitioners and appropriating traditional practices by non-Indigenous practitioners.

The processes in which research on Indigenous peoples is collected embraces Western-European Centric methods over the value systems, insights and knowledge of the people being researched. In Patricia Cochran's *Indigenous Ways of Knowing: Implications for Participatory Research and Community*, historically researchers of non-Indigenous descent conduct their findings on Indigenous subjects with underlying political agendas intended to serve the support of colonization.⁷ The most detrimental myth when conducting research on indigenous people is that they represent an obstacle to be overcome and they are indifferent subjects that need aid from outside professionals.⁸

Indigenous people are often referred to as wards of the state based on past research that has deemed them incapable of thriving within their own communities without the help of government intervention and control. It has become a common pattern for health researchers to document substantial problems using unfitting approaches of classification, with a consequential exaggeration of the damaging features of these populations; leaving communities to feel negatively branded when these studies are published. "No community wants to have the reputation of having the most alcoholics or the most people with mental disorders."⁹ Statistics generate stereotypes and in the case of Indigenous nations have been detrimental to the advancement of tribal societies and communities within modern day America.

These stereotypes have infiltrated the national education systems perpetuating the American Indian as being an impoverished, addicted to alcohol and lacking any valuable contribution besides land and resources. The racist implications that are a result of past research when based in Western methods is detrimental to the Indigenous person's healing.

Vanessa Simonds discusses the destructive patterns of Western research in *Adapting Western Research Methods to Indigenous Ways of Knowing*. In the past non-Indigenous researchers have weakened communities, fostered labels that strengthened internalized racism, and acted on their own behalf for the benefit of their careers, and/or Western systems of science, in turn bringing no noticeable assistance to the communities dealing with major health problems. Numerous tribes have experience with outside researchers exploiting tribal members for their information and offering nothing in return. These practices are still relevant to today's research methods.¹⁰ The decolonization of research replaces Western methods with Indigenous processes by validating Indigenous perspectives, experience and knowledge as having impactful and invaluable contributions to the world of research.

Research methods emphasizing Indigenous voices, truths, beliefs and justifications, analytically observes the fundamental norms of research and contests the broadly established trust in Western methods as the only factual science. Accepting Western principles and approaches as the only fact base disregards Indigenous devices and insights by demeaning them as myth or legends.¹¹

Scott Morgensen discusses the importance of acknowledging Indigenous perspectives and the effects it will have on colonization in *Destabilizing the Settler Academy: The Decolonial Effects of Indigenous Methodologies*, Indigenous worldviews and way of life disrupt the ideology of colonial rule, in both academia and Western society, which draws Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together to work towards decolonization.¹²

Indigenous research methods offer an alternative way of conducting research processes. They are elusive and progressive styles that accentuates spherical and cyclic viewpoints. The main focus of Indigenous methodologies is to reinforce a more understanding, considerate, and moral approach which values Indigenous insight.¹³ The prioritization of Indigenous methodologies allows for a balanced view and connection to culture and healing that Western medicine lacks to incorporate or acknowledge. It validates the Indigenous perspectives as being crucial to the research process.

Indigenous belief systems in terms of health share certain norms: (a) complications exist in interactions with individuals and life-forces; (b) synchronization and stability in the clan and environment are essential; (c) recovery must include the whole group and not just a single person; (d) culture, spirituality, and traditional practices are significant parts of restoration; (e) the mentor is a valued elder of the clan or community; and (f) the process of healing is based on cultural beliefs.¹⁴

In “Art and Healing for Native American Indians”, Phoebe Dufrene embraces the significance of blending American Indian healing techniques with treatment methods in order to find the best solution for therapeutic intervention. Since most contemporary American Indian people identify as products of both the Western and their own traditional cultures ¹⁵ the need for cultural understanding within western healthcare, serves as an equitable approach from both sides. Rather than depending on verbal models of interaction, public services working with Indigenous populations must consider utilizing spiritually artistic forms of expression such as dance, music, drama and visual art. These forms of creativity are already integrated into traditional practices as instruments for healing and spiritual connection.¹⁶

One of the main purposes that Indigenous healing shares with Indigenous tradition overall is the creation of a symbolic realm that provides safety, comfortability and familiarity for an individual.¹⁷ In its many forms, healing remains a major cultural strength to this day as Indigenous medicine people are being recognized for their unique gifts by the Public Health Service as a part of the hospital's cultural initiatives.¹⁸ Traditional healing and medicine is becoming more utilize as modern technological treatment lacks certain tools needed to support the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health. A new awareness of these areas plays a crucial role in the onset, analysis, healing and recovery from sickness.¹⁹

Dufrene describes art as not being a separate aesthetic to Indigenous cultures but rather as an element of life. Dancing, poetry and visual arts are considered a united practice that embraces all forms of expression as an aspect of public life. Art is essential to ceremony, as ceremony is the Indigenous model of practicing wellbeing. Painting, dancing, praying and living are indistinctive of one another in their connections to the emotional, spiritual, mental and physical wellbeing of the practitioner.²⁰

Medicine people, throughout North and South America, share their visions through art as a visual component in ceremony. Art, healing and spirituality are interwoven and united with the purpose of healing one's return to the ancestries, identifying conflict and manipulation of evil, loss and renewal, and restoration of the cosmos.²¹ Song, chant, poetry, storytelling, carving and painting represent and are utilized to share a sacred consciousness intended to symbolize nature, human beings and the spirit world as reflections of each other.²²

Traditional healers store images from ceremony through memory which is then passed on from generation to generation; verbally, visually and genetically. Songs, stories, prayers, and ceremonial imagery are utilized to restore balance and symbolically bring an individual back to the source of ancestral energy. Indigenous doctrine does not detach recovery from art or belief.²³

In, “Utilizing the Arts for Healing from a Native American Perspective: Implications for Creative Arts Therapies”, Dufrene discusses art as a component of life and not as a detached visual archetype. Today, modern technology threatens the traditions of the past, while many are attempting to pass on the cultural wisdom of the Indigenous ancestors to the peoples of today. By returning to traditional medicine, the bridging of culture and time is formed instilling the art of balance.²³ Healing encompasses psychological, social and spiritual difficulties in an effort to embrace recovery.

Ceremonial healing within communities consist of systems that develop their power from spiritual elements when applied with humility, love, respect and caring.²⁴ Traditional healing using natural medicine and ceremonial knowledge is amazingly similar across the world. Despite the diversity of cultures, generational migration and the dispersal of peoples across time, a basic premise in the relation of art and traditional healing form a consistent process.²⁵ From East to West, Indigenous peoples have used symbols of animals to assist in healing practices such as eagles, bears and other animals carved into wooden masks for ceremony; other materials such as hornet’s nests, bear skin, and gourds are also used. In Diné culture, ceremony involves sand paintings, songs and prayer to help an individual identify and connect with the cosmic and spiritual forces that once created the world by guiding them to find balance and wholeness.²⁶

In comparison to Eastern religions, Indigenous cultures such as Diné practice mandalas. Tibetans and Diné have developed an artistic form of mandalas unique to their own cultures using sand to project visual representations of stories and prayers. In North America, Indigenous cultures have utilized the medicine wheel for thousands of years representing a ceremonial circle. The medicine wheel represents the earth, it has horizontal and vertical lines through the center which represent paths to the four cardinal directions. Each of the four areas are marked by different colors; black, white, red and yellow. The four colors symbolize certain qualities; white in the north is for mental; black in the west is for the physical; yellow in the east is for spirituality and red in the south is for the emotional wellbeing. The use of color symbolism for each direction is different for some tribes however the understanding and teachings of the medicine wheel is universal.²⁷ In Tibetan and Diné ceremony, a similar circle is constructed with large four-sided designs oriented to the four directions intended to bring in the powers from each direction to the center of the mandala designed to convey important transformation to the participants; it is then erased and remade during each ceremony.²⁸

Art is not only highly valued for its cosmic power, but there this a spiritual basis for artistic verdict among Indigenous people, that if the art is well made, it is considered made with good spirit rather than being labeled attractive.²⁹ When art is considered to have reached its highest level of creation, it institutes a state of harmony between opposing powers within the boundaries of its physical domain.³⁰ The sacredness of traditional medicine has since become secular due to popularity and lack of understanding. Traditional practitioners that have a strong understanding of the sacredness of ceremony also have respect for the grander systems and energies that

govern life by acknowledging the absence of control. In essence, people have no control over the fabric of their lives being that superior energy systems power their movements and decisions. Traditional medicine people understand, respect and acknowledge this level of consciousness and trust these energies to help in changing situations when asked for by prayer; asking for drive within the energy system.³¹

The revival of Indigenous culture and traditional medicine marked a period of, universal decolonization and geopolitical withdrawal by Western controls. The changing climate of Indigenous peoples entrusted their sense of wellbeing to their own heritage and in turn health professionals came to acknowledge the value of traditional medicine as a resource.³² Using art as a form of healing has gained popularity as a human service profession that provides emotional support and explores problems through visual and verbal expression. Counselors that utilize art in their profession acknowledge the creative process, methods, material, and connotations as thoughts of an individual's growth, capabilities, character, interests and fears. The increased acceptance of art for healing indicates that the artistic process can be considered a tool for the emotional reconciliation from conflicts and the fostering of personal wellbeing, awareness and development.³³

In "Moving from Colonization toward Balance and Harmony: A Native American Perspective on Wellness", David Hodge discusses the ineffectiveness of mainstream mental healthcare for Native American clients and as such should be abandoned and rebuilt on the foundation of Indigenous knowledge and methods. Balance and wellness are the outcome of the multifaceted relationship among the mental, physical, emotion and spiritual position, progressions and surroundings. When all four areas are addressed equally, the body, mind and spirit is said to be healthy.³⁴ Within the Indigenous context

all events, both positive and negative are conceptualized in relationship to the medicine wheel in which each event is viewed in relationship to all four areas. “Each area has equal weight. Wellness occurs when each area is functioning in harmony with the other areas. Although balance and harmony are related, intertwined constructs, they can be distinguished. Balance is a natural state that results from the normal processes of stimuli and response, drive and drive satisfaction, and complex system interactions”.³⁵

The Western mental health standard is subliminally expected to mirror the world as it is rather than embracing an individual perspective of experience.³⁶ It is the dominant paradigm that speaks for and overarches the entire mental health field. Western science and dominant culture have created a health care system that regards services between medical providers, counselors, physicians and their patients as a private matter.

Indigenous culture, however, requires health care to acknowledge cross cultural care and cultural identity in order to reverse increasing rates of psychologically based mortality and disease by rejuvenating self-value, a sense of belonging and cultural appreciation.³⁷ The western approach to health is a state of well-being that incorporates multiple areas of a person’s life such as physical and mental/emotional ailment but does not acknowledge spiritual wellness or illness. Health is a means of reaching human well-being within that accepted limitation in which a person finds him or herself. It is the manner of achieving an awareness of personal welfare at any moment in time within one's recognized confinements and/or setting.³⁸

Counselors who are non-Native and/or not a part of the community must be cognizant of their own cultural preconceptions when working cross-culturally. It is essential for practitioners to know primarily one’s own ethics, viewpoints, mindsets and

prejudices.³⁹ For example, communication with the Creator or other metaphysical magnitudes of the spiritual world can indicate positive well-being in many tribal cultures. Contrary to the context of western culture, such events are often fabricated as signs of psychopathology, with hearing voices commonly agreed to be an indicator of schizophrenia.⁴⁰ Spirituality is observed to be fundamental to wellness. “We are not so much humans on a spiritual journey as spirits on a human journey– a journey in which our spirits will continue to exist in the hereafter.”⁴¹ Indigenous peoples have consistently defended their abilities to practice ceremony during and throughout colonization based on a belief system that honored their worldviews as valid and important. “AI/AN peoples traditionally hold a relational worldview.

Wellness, in all four dimensions with the addition of social/contextual influence, is actually a balance and a harmony between intrapersonal, interpersonal and extra-personal environments.”⁴² In order to achieve a well perceived sense of harmony it requires the effort of active pursuits to create a more optimal balance. “This process entails the use of self-discipline and some forms of cultural, spiritual, or mental practices or therapeutic interventions, such as ceremonies. Ideally, the process creates a condition in which each of the quadrants generates positive energy. The energy of the whole system then becomes greater than the sum of its parts. When in harmony people thrive, are resilient beyond expectation, and contributes in a synergistic manner to those around them with their energy.”⁴³ The conduction of ceremony and practice of traditional beliefs throughout a person’s life incorporates stronger sense of self in relation to community.

Unfortunately, Western medicine is dominated to focus only on the physical and mental illnesses of an individual through medication, physical therapy and counseling.

“Mental health professions are typically trained to isolate problem areas in human functioning, for which interventions are then developed. The problem is commonly thought to exist with or within the person in some sense. A practitioner working from a cognitive perspective for instance, attempts to correct a client’s unproductive thought pattern. The problem, for this perspective, is with the client, specifically her or his schema. Viewing the problem as residing with the person can foster a milieu in which the person becomes completely identified with the problem, as occurs when people are called schizophrenics”.⁴⁴

From an Indigenous perspective, “healers focus on understanding challenges through the complex relationships among spirit, body, mind and context. Rather than using linear cause-and-effect framework, healers approach challenges using a relational, intuitive framework which all variables are understood to be interconnected. Because of the interrelationship among variables, changing one area results in changes throughout the larger system.”⁴⁵ “The interconnected nature of problems is often difficult for mainstream mental health professionals to understand because of years of socialization that have privileged Western scientific knowledge claims over spiritual knowledge.”⁴⁶ Western science has often irrationalized spiritual philosophies and branded spiritual marvels as illogical. Undeniably, merged into the dominant and privileged worldview as an undeveloped, assumptive level is an anti-spiritual predisposition.⁴⁷

In, “Issues in Art Therapy with the Culturally Displaced American Indian Youth”, Helene Burt discusses the use of visual methods to support imagery as a form of communication highlighting the cultural significance of nonverbal interaction which places visually-oriented importance of Indigenous language. Art focuses, confirms and

summons visually oriented styles of communication.⁴⁸ Western science's system for the diagnosis and treatment of the mental wellbeing of Indigenous peoples is unjust based on cultural incompetence and the need to re-evaluate the central models when understanding Indigenous human development as a unique and diverse population.⁴⁹ Western culture's beliefs about mental illness support European centric ideals created by European-American male theories and do not adequately address the wide range of minority populations. The bias of these ideals is manifested in the existing development theory, which supports separation-individuation. This theory reinforces and highlights the separate self as an independent, self-reliant and controlled being. Individualism does not correlate with the traditional teachings of Indigenous cultures and in fact contrasts with their beliefs of interdependency, which shows commitment to close relations and tribal community as opposed to the self.⁵⁰

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

“As I have come to understand it from listening to the Elders and traditional teachers, the only person I can speak about is myself. That is how the Creator made all of us...All I have to share with you is myself, my experience, and how I have come to understand that experience”⁵¹

-Patricia Monture-Angus (Mohawk)

The purpose of this thesis is to support to the validation of Indigenous perspective within Westernized systems and to support artistic expression of a spiritual catalyst for the wellbeing the Indigenous peoples.

An Auto-ethnography is an amazingly difficult method to use when constructing research. Being sufficiently introspective about my feelings, motives and/or the

contradictions within my experiences has required me to be very observant of the world around me. The demands of auto-ethnographies require the act of self-questioning and confronting things about one's self that are less than flattering. The more honesty within an auto-ethnography, the more confrontation of fear, self-doubt and emotional pain. With this comes the vulnerability of revealing myself and not being able to take back what I have said as well as having no control over how the reader will interpret my work. It is hard not to feel like my life and my work is being critiqued and can, at times, be humiliating.⁵²

This thesis is an evocative auto-ethnography intended to be free-flowing and emotionally driven with my own personal accounts of experiences that have driven my art work. "Evocative auto-ethnography has no universally-accepted format or methodology. Auto-ethnographies are simply to be written in a format that best suits the researcher's needs. The research can be presented in a number of formats, including but not limited to, short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essay, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing and social science prose."⁵³ For the purpose of this study I begin with a traditional qualitative stance by explaining the methodology as well as the data collection methods used.

MY REASONING

I have chosen narrative storytelling to present a view into my artwork because this design is the most common process for people to comprehend life's experiences. Describing and sharing emotionally driven and meaningful accounts is an important part of human connections. My story is an unfinished and highly fragmented interpretation of my reality, experiences and culture around me.

My journey with art so far has been an influential part of my growth and experience. I began painting shortly after my son was born in 2012 and have since created numerous pieces that speak to my internal emotions and understanding of my own reality.

UNDERSTANDING AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

In order to explore my experience as a Diné artist and to add my voice to the various bodies of literature on art as an Indigenous methodology, I chose to use auto ethnography. “Auto ethnography is a method for describing and analyzing (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)”.⁵⁴ It is a qualitative method that describes a culture and a researcher’s interactions within his or her natural setting or culture. It is a collection of personal stories that shapes our understanding of a cultural experience through subjective interpretation of an individual. However, it is not about concentrating only on the self but about searching for empathy of others in a culture and society through the self.

The debate surrounding auto-ethnographies centers around the methodology’s usefulness and its lack of objectivity. Because my research is deeply personal and subjective in nature my focus is on the mental, spiritual, physical and emotional circumstances which cannot be authenticated or shown to be dependable.⁵⁵ Auto-ethnographers study the culture within their surrounding environment, trying to identify and interpret the social climate and patterns seen in everyday life; the study of the norm is considered unique and well-intentioned. “Often what is unknown or unexamined is within the everyday realm of our personal experiences and our connections to larger social narratives that are unexplained”.⁵⁶

In other methods of research, the researcher does their best to maintain a separation between themselves and the sample population, however, in auto-ethnography, the researcher is the population. The collected data develops that narrative account which is formulated in order for the reader to begin to understand an inner realm that cannot be perceived or critiqued from an external vantage point. This particular method of research applies the researchers' autobiographical data to question and translate their cultural assumptions, in this way the researcher and her research are greatly interwoven. Auto-ethnographers narrate in detail and explore a group within a common, understood culture, such as a family, making analyses about the patterns that the researcher experiences, hears and sees.⁵⁷ "The researcher can provide those whom are outside of the culture with a detailed account with which to understand the examined culture. —To portray culture requires the researcher to hear, to see, and, most important for our purposes, to write of what was presumably witnessed and understood during a stay in the field. Culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation."⁵⁸

My purpose for writing my auto ethnography was to consider the personal motivators behind the creative art process and to reflect on how I have dealt or not dealt with my own trauma, emotional regulation, cultural identity, motherhood, familial responsibilities and maintenance of balance. I wanted to offer my own perspective as a valid and valuable form of knowledge intended to support Indigenous worldviews and methods while supporting the artistic process in relation to traditional healing.

Auto-ethnographies are completely subjective; rationality is informative and reliant on perspective and the considerations we bring to the observation. Our personal

concepts limit the position of claims within an occurrence. From our individual paradigms, we regulate how acceptable the stories are.⁵⁹

DATA COLLECTION

I acquired data by observing myself and reflecting upon those observations while in the process of creating art. Personal reflections are a useful tool because they expose the reader to hidden, abstract and/or particular experiences like mental developments, emotions, reasoning, masked actions, overlooked actions and socially controlled behaviors. Interpretations of self, permit the researcher to document her/his rational thoughts and behaviors within a detailed setting in relation to the research topic. The data collection is more focused on the active relationship between the researcher and the culture through the art creation process and less attentive on time needed to create or on the amount of data required to create an art piece.⁶⁰ I used a video blog otherwise known as vlogging to record cognitive thoughts, memories, emotions and self-reflections.

VIDEO BLOG

I set aside time sporadically at least two to three times a week during the last hour of each day in which to record my reflexive video blog about the day's events. This time was set aside in order to allow myself to record while the days emotional occurrences were still fresh in my mind. However, I also wanted to be able to record whenever I felt the need to and, in a setting, that allowed me to quietly reflect and safely and openly share my emotions, thoughts and feelings.

The video entries were randomly recorded over the course of six months and were considered an outlet for my feelings and thoughts during times of solitude. The goal was to share as much of my thoughts and feelings as I was comfortable sharing and to

describe with as much detail as possible, recollecting smaller details in order to recognize patterns as more entries were recorded.

The video entries should not be seen as simply a documentation of a personal story but rather a reflection and interpretation of lived experiences. The work becomes natural by comparing the narrative to the act of creating my art in which I focus on my own experiences instinctively to look more deeply at interactions between myself and others.

Along with the video recordings, I collected literature research that was reflective of my topic such as the use of art within American Indian mental health and works related to trauma and American Indians. This literary research includes journal articles, dissertations and published books; presented in the bibliography of this thesis. Data collections began at the start of September 2017 and ended March 2018.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of data for this auto-ethnography begins with the reflection of creating art whether complete or in-progress. The analysis is an emotional journey for the researcher while recalling events of the past. The researcher focuses in on the most memorable moments and events within the data collection period. The recall of this emotional data is done by writing down the details and events through narrative; seeking moments of change within the surrounding environment⁶¹ and re-watching vlogs to track emotions and thought process. I have reflected on my personal transformation by creating the balance diagram seen in figure 1.

The balance diagram was created by me as a visual representation of my own personal understanding of balance within my reality. Moving from left to right within the

diagram indicates a change from an objective view of truth (masculine) to a subjective viewpoint (feminine). This study focuses on behaviors and truths within all areas in an attempt to acknowledge, accept, forgive and reconcile with unhealthy truths.

Over the course of six months I recorded over 30 hours of vlogs, painting and beading sessions totaling 50 videos. Because my process was not kept to any particular schedule, I was free to record at my own leisure which allowed for my recordings to be more in-depth and personal. In correlation to my artwork, my reflections revealed certain emotions and thoughts that I was trying to express. The reviewing of these reflections from over a year ago to date has been somewhat difficult; witnessing the person I once was and understanding the person I am today, it is a testament to positive growth. After reviewing my videos, I found myself trying to understand the concept of time in relation to balance; how much time had passed since I recorded my first video and what has become of me since then. The narrative of this thesis reflects the topics discussed within my vlogs.

BALANCE DIAGRAM

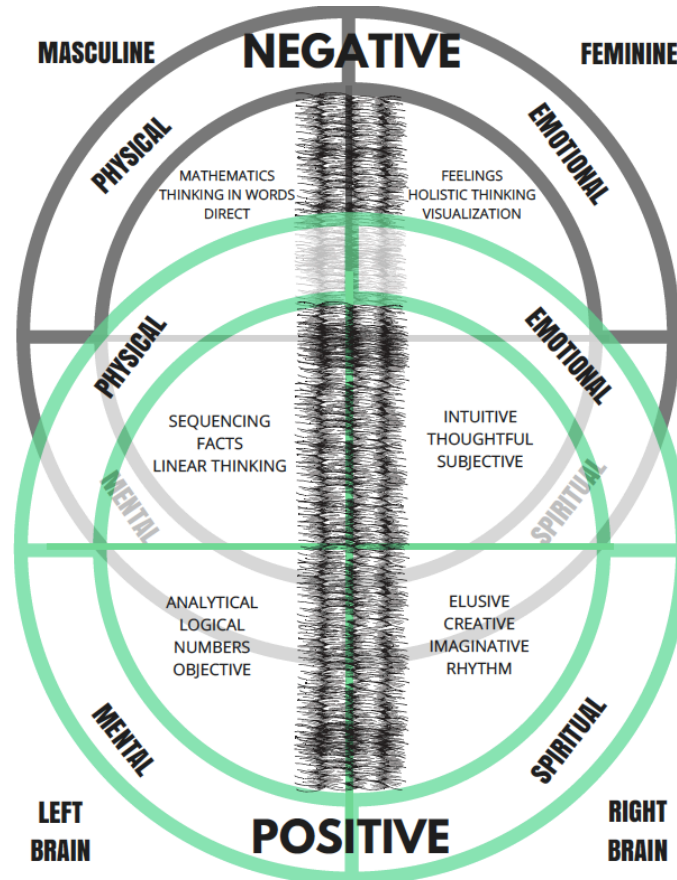


Figure 1. Balance Diagram

This figure is based on the medicine wheel⁶² but was redesigned by me in an effort to visually represent my personal understanding of balance within my own subjective reality. I used this diagram as a tool to gauge my emotional, mental, spiritual and physical experiences and habits, both negative and positive, in relation to my past, present and future.

In this diagram, the four areas represent the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional. The physical and mental represent the masculine or left brain and the spiritual and emotional represent the feminine or right brain. Along with further representation of balance being positive/future (feminine) and negative/past (masculine). Masculine is

identified as being analytical, logical and direct, and feminine as being subjective, elusive and intuitive.

The balance diagram was meant to assist in my reflection, present environment and future goals in relation to my well-being. I viewed my past as being masculine because it is already set in stone as my memories are direct and straightforward whether or not they are positive or negative. I view my future as being feminine because it is elusive and yet to be created. My present is represented in the within the center of this multi-faceted diagram, intended to be maintained by actively engaging each area and remaining cognizant of each areas effects on one another.

I used the paradigm to help identify my healthy and unhealthy habits and practices within each of the four areas as well as identify habits and practices that I would like to start incorporating in order to build balance, for example:

Physical

- Exercise for endorphins and to “get out of my head”
- Eat healthy foods with Omega -3 and Vitamin B for brain function
- Drink a gallon of water each day for proper hydration
- Rest and get adequate sleep
- Go for a walk/stretch
- Try a salt bath to detox and relieve stress

Spiritual

- Attend ceremony
- Spend time in nature
- Spend time in prayer; meditate
- Smudge with sage or cedar

Mental

- Spend time alone for mindful reflection
- Create art
- Try a guided meditation or yoga practice
- Turn off phone and other electronics (laptop, TV, iPad) for a short amount of time

Emotional

- Journal to help process
- Talk with a friend or loved one
- Make a list of things I feel grateful for or that make me happy

- Allow myself to cry

CAVEAT: ORGANIZATION OF REFLECTIONS

The narrative is organized from the start of a time in my life that I always refer back to and into a series of stories that I feel demonstrates my transformation from negative to positive. The stories are not necessarily presented in chronological order; instead, they are given in an order that makes sense to me as the researcher. As I begin to reflect on the process of this thesis I am confronted with the organization and transcription of my own personal thoughts, feelings and experiences. Experiences that have shaped my perception of the world around me, my interactions with people and my habits. I want to reflect on my life and how art has been interwoven as a support system during both emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually rewarding and difficult times. Through the balance diagram shown in Figure 1, I will reflect on each area of my life in terms of positive, negative and the four areas of my emotional, physical, spiritual and mental well-being.

CHAPTER 4: MY REFLECTIONS

“Native womanhood is not about simply playing certain roles, or adopting a preset identity; rather, it is an ongoing exercise that involves mental, physical, spiritual and emotional elements of our being.”⁶³

My reflections stem from the videos I recorded, after re-watching the content, it became clear to me that my past was very much a part of my present in terms of how negative I felt towards my memories. It became apparent to me that in order to move forward in a healthy way and to be comfortable in my present existence, I needed to acknowledge my past, both positive and negative experiences, accept that I had gone

through those lived experiences, formulate a way to forgive them and reconcile with myself. This by no means happened overnight and I believe is a lifelong process depending on how I plan to approach these sensitive issues. It is important to note that I do not feel healed, I feel that I am still healing and while the majority of this narrative is focused on the negative, it is because I am still in the process of forgiving myself for it. While I am grateful for the positive experiences I have had so far such as the birth of my son, having a loving family and still being able to practice our culture, I am still in the process of acknowledging my blessings.

The start of this narrative focuses on a time in my life, around my early-20's, after I am moved to Mesa, AZ from Albuquerque, NM in March of 2010. I had been in a dark place with no vision for my future and no comprehension of my present. It was very difficult for me to reflect on this time but was well needed in order to see how far I have come, spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically. This 8 year time frame (2010-2018), although a short amount of my life, holds my greatest lessons in terms of healing, finding balance and finding a way to cope. It is written in a way that makes sense to me.

I remember being stuck, I remember asking myself, "what am I doing here?", "why do I feel this way?" I would sleep all day, ignoring all the signs that perhaps I might be sick. I had no energy to do anything or go anywhere, I did not want to see anyone or do anything. I ignored my family and hid from friends. I was pessimistic in my thinking and often jealous of other's happiness. I put those closest to me down and resented them for my failures. I had no vision of my future, detached myself from my present and ran from my past. I could not see past the weekend as my need for drink and

smoke overpowered my ability to think about anything else. I often ran from confrontation and still do.

Emotionally, I was cold hearted. I did not care for others and often hurt people with my words. I was closed off and guarded, never letting anyone see the real me being that I didn't even know who the real me was. I often felt numb to my actions as if I could do no wrong and had a big enough ego that I was always right; naïve enough to think only about myself.

Mentally, my thoughts had gone dark, I could not control them after a certain point and they ultimately scared me. My mind was deteriorating and I could not find clarity. I was impulsive in my decision making and dominated over my own rational thinking with actions that reflected my wants rather than my needs.

Physically, I continued to pollute my body with alcohol. I rarely exercised and ate whatever I felt like, as long as it catered to my taste buds. I critiqued my physical beauty with a microscope and fine-toothed comb. My physical aesthetic beauty was all that mattered to me; as long as I looked good, I was ok and nothing else mattered.

Spiritually, I was disconnected from any higher source. I despised Christianity and did not have a strong enough connection to Diné culture to practice it. I prayed whenever I wanted something.

I lived fifty feet away from my mom in the same apartment complex and only saw her when I was feeling selfish. Selfish with my time and attention; ego has no remorse. I was arrested for driving under the influence. I spent the night in jail and asked my mom to pick me up. She said my life was going in the wrong direction and that I had been thrown off my path by my own self. Still, she forgave me, hugged and kissed me, and

told me that she loved me. I was angry, depressed, jealous and bitter. I sat on the couch day in and day out, hiding from friends and family, dormant in a colorless reality, accepting karma's punishment.

My relationships rapidly developed into infatuations that left us not truly knowing who the other person was but rather engulfed in each other's physical beauty. We did our best to make it work but could never connect emotionally, mentally or spiritually with one another. Our communication was limited as we were interested in different things and did not always support each other in them. I would often put my significant others down for their lack of commitment and understanding. I was constantly jealous and insecure which led me to be controlling and verbally abusive. I would belittle them as men and overpowered our relationship by putting them down in front of family and friends; which in my mind, I believed to be "harmless" teasing. We were a constant power struggle as I forced my opinions and gave very little slack for compassion and empathy. My expectations of them were not being met, I resented them for not being able to deliver and for not being the men that my grandfather would have approved of.

My personal understanding of men has been significantly affected by the women in my life. I grew up in a home that resented men, mainly my father, for his abusive behavior. I grew up being repeatedly reminded that men were beneath me; I had no respect for them. I did not care to understand them nor did I take the time to listen to them; automatically creating my own perception of who they were and what they stood for. The only positive male role models in my life were my maternal grandfather, a few select uncles and, despite my mother's continuous attempts to paint a negative picture of

him, my father. I placed him on a pedestal where he could do no wrong because I pitied him.

As a child, my father was very loving and although he was not around for the majority of my upbringing, he made it a point to be a good father whenever we did spend together. His anger, however, got the best of him and at the age of 61, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and PTSD from his active service in the Marines during Vietnam. Up until that point I never understood the angry outbursts that occurred out of nowhere when something would trigger him; perhaps a memory, or a feeling.

In the spring of 2012, I became pregnant and with instantaneous confidence acknowledged my blessing. By the time of my son's birth, I transcended consciousness from girl to mother. Motherhood is a delicate decision entrusted to guide and nurture the future. Women are the epitome of creation and should be valued as such. Based on my past, however, I had very little experience with boys and no understanding of how they learned or what they were like. I had to change my perception of the male and learn to give men the respect that they deserved. I had to do this because I wanted to understand my child and build a foundation for him that would support his wellbeing and purpose as a member of our family and community. I needed to find balance. I needed to give respect to my masculine side in order for it to compliment my feminine side and vice versa.

To start off 2013 in a good way, his father and I had a date night. We went to a brush bar; we paid \$50 for an easel, paints, canvas and were given the choice to re-create a famous painting or to paint on our own. I chose Van Gogh's, *Starry Night*. I left there feeling excited, renewed and replenished about this new experience. For my birthday that

May, I asked my family to support my new found hobby and they gifted me with my first easel, paints, brushes and canvas.

The brush strokes, vibrant colors and textures became an escape. It was a new beginning of self-love, exploration, growth and ultimately, sobriety. When I needed to take a break from life and focus on something else, I turned to my easel and paints. I became immersed in my creations, carefully trying to comprehend each symbol, amazed by the stories that were beginning to unfold before my eyes. Creating art allowed me to detach from certain thoughts and feelings that made me feel inadequate, undeserving and unworthy. By allowing my intuition to guide my actions I allowed myself the freedom to create with no limitations, and ultimately return to my true self.

Creating art has led me to the doors of many great opportunities that I never would have imagined for myself. I am grateful for the people I meet and the stories they share along the way. Life is the intricate web that I find myself in as a human being, premeditated and predetermined to cross paths with those I am meant to encounter, learn from, love and endure. This journey of struggle and beauty has led me to a world of genuine strength.

Art is an all-encompassing multimodal approach to the senses, it involves sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing. The art of playing music, paint brush strokes, clay molding, cooking and dance involves almost all if not a few of each of the senses; it grounds the self in the present in order to experience the now. I have used art to ground my own thoughts and escape my material reality when the stress of bills, work, school, parenting and social responsibilities become too overbearing; painting has been an outlet for me to shut those demands out and focus on my present.

Throughout my youth I have encountered many traumatic events that I nor my family were prepared to handle. Spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically we suffered during times of death, financial hardship, alcoholism, domestic violence and overall loss. We had no coping mechanism in place to help us not necessarily heal but replenish our spirits, instead we simply moved on with our lives and hid our emotions in order to stay strong for one another.

As a Diné, my concept and confrontation of death and trauma has been diminished to taboo, in which we fear conversations that involve those who have passed on or even the topic death for fear calling it upon ourselves or attracting it to those closest to us. This particular taboo, stems from historic events such as the Spanish invasion resulting deadly foreign diseases and Diné Long Walk; events in Diné history that hold much despair, trauma and pain; too difficult to discuss that the best possible solution was to not talk about it; to leave it alone and get back to life in order to stay strong for one another.

Generations after, the rippling effects of trauma has resulted in an intergenerational wound of silence that many are suffering from today. The mental, spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing of Indigenous people are compromised due to alcohol, drugs, violence, poverty, loss of culture, and loss of identity. My personal experimentation with drugs and alcohol lead me down an extremely difficult path that tore at my spirit, numbed my emotions, poisoned my physical body and darkened my mental state. The verbal, mental, emotional and physical abuse that I inflicted upon others including myself resulted in guilt, resentment and shame.

My spirituality has stemmed from a mixture of sporadic traditional teachings and my own surface exploration of other cultures and religions. As a child, our mother did not force any religion in our home nor was our family deeply rooted in Diné culture. Instead, she resented Christianity and gravitated toward Diné philosophy without being fully engulfed in it. Since then I have adapted my understanding of Diné teachings to fit my current lifestyle and environment; in a way merging my contemporary way of life to meet my traditional practices and vice versa.

Today my spirituality is the understanding of wellbeing based on balance. The feminine and masculine; a delicate maintenance of my holistic wellness that I must constantly maintain based on needing and wanting a healthy and positive future but still healing and coping with an unhealthy and negative past in order to embrace and appreciate my present. Not only focusing on my internal state of being but also the external such as, encouraging another's emotional state; supporting another's mental and physical welfare and creating spiritual awareness; all of which can be accomplished through healthy conversation and art.

While working at Community Bridges (CBI), a behavioral health and substance abuse non-profit, I was given free creative control to facilitate my own expressive art program for CBI clients. I conducted groups with individuals detoxing off of drugs and alcohol and those who were considered seriously mentally ill (SMI). My main objective was to introduce art as a healthy outlet. I often tried to relate to my clients by telling my own story and how I found sobriety through art, that it was a healthy release for me to take my mind off of my troubles and get back to taking care of myself.

I enjoyed my time in those groups, the clients were generally open to sharing their life experiences and grateful for the new art experience. While this was the perfect position for me I was not clinically trained to take on the emotional, mental and spiritual turmoil that was released within the group discussions. Within six months I found myself in a disturbing place that I had known all too well; questioning my existence and little to no energy to do anything about it. I became drained as I tried to keep up with the demands and responsibilities that my clients had placed upon me to help them navigate their own internal struggles as I too was trying to navigate my own. After a year I chose to leave the position in order to take care of myself and re-evaluate my career goals.

The introduction of art in my life has ultimately strengthened my identity as a Diné woman, realizing how much my culture can offer in a Westernized world that does not genuinely appreciate it. Western methods do not take interest in Indigenous cultures losing their chance to gain valuable insight as more generations of elders are lost. The lens of artistic expression in a therapeutic setting brings balance, reflection and the intent to becoming more conscientious of the self-generating confidence, a transition from an unhealthy to healthy lifestyle and the resolving of internal and external conflicts.

Contrary to westernized medicine designed to cure or Band-Aid an ailment, metaphorically speaking, the incorporation of art for wellbeing assists an individual as a work in progress; supporting self-realization and self-transformation. Utilizing the assistance of traditional healers in the arts supports the method of creativity as medicine in which medicine people are adapting their healing techniques to meet contemporary life in relation to Western medical settings.

The basis of Eurocentric curriculum centralizes industrial models of education focused on repetition and reformed memory conceptualized for communities in poverty contradictory to Indigenous view of poverty as the constriction of education based on Western models is considered poverty. Indigenous views emphasize education as being taught in any setting; not necessarily in a classroom. It incorporates natural learning at one's own pace in accordance to one's own interest in relation to community, clan and self.

Bureau of Indian Affairs modeled their boarding schools after Eurocentric education systems with teachers there were foreign to the community. Schools based on the domination of learning in accordance to the United States government. A government system based solely on masculine traits modeled after the Iroquois confederacy leaving out two vital aspects, emotional and spiritual. Today our systems are based on masculine and emotionless environments that are meant to dominate, enforce order and control the lives of millions. For generations, the masculine energy has dominated over the feminine energy causing imbalance and the destruction of Earth, water and the human spirit focused solely on an economy that values the consumption of natural resources as commodities and material objects over the expression, healing and cultures of a people.

Today Indigenous art has become a commodity with the appropriation of symbols, designs and sacred images of holy beings not meant to be sold. Unfortunately, this has become a billion-dollar industry and ironically a way for Indigenous people to make a living. The creation of items such as pottery and rugs were tools intended for use rather than decoration; pottery held seeds, rugs kept warmth. Today these prized items are sold to mostly rich white men and women during Indian markets and museum

auctions for thousands of dollars to the highest bidder, buying art with no spiritual understanding or connection to the piece but rather their attractiveness to the aesthetic beauty of it; taking advantage of an Indigenous person's creative spirit for their own gain.

My paintings reflect my ability to heal myself. The time and energy that goes into the creation of a painting is a direct result of a good day and a bad day. I have come to consider my creative process as my own personal ceremony which reflects my spirituality. I understand that I am not the direct source of the creations that I bring into being and am only the facilitator, a willing and skilled instrument of the higher beings that I serve.

I have learned that the consequences of my decisions and actions hang delicately in what I understand to be balance. My feminine and masculine energy is interwoven to represent my spiritual, emotional, mental and physical self; destined to be maintained by the level of comfort that I experience within my own state of mind. The creative process has taught me that self-care is vital to my well-being.

Over time, the act of designing and painting re-built the confidence, security and self-esteem that had been weakened due to self-harm and trauma. Trauma echoed through my life exposing itself in negative thoughts, talk, habits and abuse. For myself, creating art is a rebellious act that allows for a detachment from the reality that has been sold to me. By discovering hidden talents and allowing myself the freedom to create with no limitations, I return to my true self.

My current state of reality within the confinements of concrete jungles, the illusion of time and digital screens forces me to disassociate myself from life in an effort

to cope with daily demands. I can very easily lose myself in the depths of a disillusioned world unless I am determined to return to my unique humility.

MY ARTWORK

My artwork is an extension of my reality. Each piece represents a time and place in my life that I have tried to make sense of. The act of creating each piece has help me release stories, thoughts, memories and emotions that I did not know how else to tell. I respect each piece has having a part of my spirit in it.

I pray before each work of art and when finished release myself from it with a spirit line at the top of the canvas on the outside border. The line represents my ability to let of the painting to allow for others to enjoy and hopefully find some spiritual comfort in it as it has comforted me.

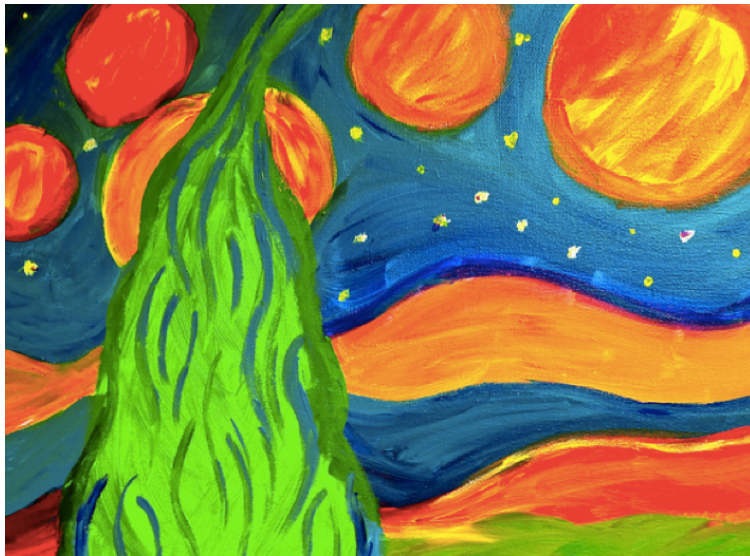


Figure 2. One Starry Night - Acrylic on canvas - February 2013

After my son was born, his dad and I planned a date night in an attempt to rekindle our relationship. We attended a brush bar and for \$50 they gave us an easel, canvas, some paints and a selection of sample masterpieces to recreate; I chose Van

Gogh's, *Starry Night*. While my son's dad has always been very good at sports, I had yet, up until that night, to find my calling. I cannot describe the feeling I had when I first began painting but I noticed a change in my focus and for once I was not thinking about my troubles.

My son's dad said he had noticed a change in me as well; he said he'd never seen me so focused. I remember becoming entranced by the colors, the movement of my hand on the brush going back-and-forth mixing colors on the canvas and ultimately doing my best to re-create what was in front of me.

I remember thinking about the cedar tree that my grandpa had planted in front of our home in Crystal. He prayed to that tree and took care of it every day so that it could help protect and bless our family. We had just lost him the year before and as a family we were still healing. He was our medicine and our role model. I thought of that tree and the surrounding mountains.

I thought of the time when I was a little girl and we were driving back from Flagstaff and I asked him, "If you were an astronaut and you got stuck in space, what would you do?", to which he replied, "I would probably jump from planet to planet until I was back on Earth." The five red circles in the painting reminded me of that conversation. The tree looks as though it is flowing off the canvas. I saw this as my grandpa's spirit leaving and going to find a new home on a different planet. I left there feeling relaxed and proud of my creation; I gifted my very first painting to my son.



Figure 3. Rosa - Acrylic on canvas - June 2013

My maternal grandfather was the foundation for our family. He loved his children and grandchildren equally. This painting was a tribute to his memory. The flower image was tattooed on his right wrist. When asked what it meant and why he got it, he would smile and say nothing. Rumors spread that it was to cover up another woman's name who was not my grandma. To imagine the woman that my grandfather loved enough to have covered up with an image that, to him, reflected her beauty and their love. Several family members, including myself have gotten the same tattoo as a reminder of his kind heart and understanding of true love.



Figure 4. Balance - Acrylic on canvas - November 2013

I wanted to create a painting that reflected my understanding of balance. After watching a YouTube video about sacred geometry, I began to question my own balance. My masculine side and my feminine side; how was I masculine? How was I feminine? I believe all people have both a masculine and feminine side. It is simply a matter of keeping both in balance. At that time, I felt as though my masculine side had been overpowering my feminine side. I was very controlling and dominant over situations that I could not control and when things did not turn out the way I had wanted them to or my expectations were let down, I became angry and frustrated. I would react to situations with angry outbursts and was always arguing in order to be right. I saw this ultimately as a fear of the unknown and lack of trust in situations. Why was I unable to trust that things would work out? I had built a guard up and did not allow myself to venture out of it nor did I allow anyone to venture in. I was having to come to terms with some hard truths about my past, things that I had done and said to people that were hurtful and painful. My ego was a bully.



Figure 5. Sobriety - Acrylic and mixed media on canvas - May 2014

On April 27, 2014, I stopped drinking alcohol. Prior to that day I had been questioning what the purpose of alcohol was; why I was drinking it; what it was doing for my body, my career, my life, my son. I could not think of any positive excuses for it. I was a social drinker before I became a mother and for a while after. I drank with friends and at clubs where we danced and woke up with horrible hangovers; I did not believe I had a problem. When I was little I swore off alcohol and said I would never drink it because I witnessed firsthand the effects it can have on a family.

When my sister was fifteen she overdosed and had to be resuscitated twice; afterwards my mother found sobriety and my father left the reservation to get help. He has been sober going on almost 20 years. When I asked him why he quit drinking he always said the same thing, “I loved alcohol, but it didn’t love me”. I created a painting to reflect me finding sobriety. The woman leaping to freedom at the top and the lost souls still swimming inside the bottle. The man and the woman at the bottom are either looking at their reflections or are there to support the person trying to find sobriety; it is up to the viewers interpretation.



Figure 6. Protection - Mixed media on canvas - work in progress

In 2016, I was given the opportunity to create and facilitate my own expressive art program at Community Bridges, a substance and behavioral health organization. I was grateful and optimistic about the chance to make a change in others’ lives the way art had made a change in mine. During my classes I would try to relate with my clients by telling

them about my past with alcohol and how becoming a mother and finding art has helped me find sobriety. And that my ultimate goal within the program was to introduce art as a healthy outlet.

After each session, we would go around the room and discuss what this art making experience was like for them. They would share intimate details about their life experiences that I could not relate to entirely but empathized with based their life experiences and coping with mental illness and/or substance abuse. After six months of facilitating the program I began to notice a change in my own behavior from the positive to the negative. I was irritable, angry, tired and had no energy to keep moving forward. I had come to terms with the fact that as a provider, self-care is vital when dealing with populations that have experienced higher levels of trauma.

I did not know how to take care of myself and ultimately disconnected from my clients, whatever spiritual, mental, emotional and physical distress that was coming out in my sessions I was bringing home to my son. After careful reflection and consideration, I decided to ask my mother for help with ceremony. While I am cautious to keep parts of the ceremony discreet as they are sacred, this painting represents a small part of story that was told to me about Black God in the North. He represents protection and wears a suit of armor made out of jet-black arrowheads. He is the protection against bad spirits and negative forces.

The painting is masculine in nature with the sun in the middle whom is also, as I have been told, masculine and protective over women; sometimes jealous, forcing Diné couples to get married at night so that he does not get jealous and curse their marriage. The painting reflects that time in my life and is a reminder to me that if I am taking on the

responsibility of working with certain populations of people, I must protect myself mentally, spiritually, emotionally and physically. The Sun and arrowheads are beaded using size 11 seed beads and the lane stitch.



Figure 7. Bad Medicine - Acrylic on canvas - May 2018

As I explore my understanding of healing, I look to the healing hand, a positive symbol of hope used by the Anasazi. After my experience with negative forces affecting my thoughts, habits and way of life; I chose to create a painting that represented the negative spirituality as a way of balance. To reflect on my ability as a Diné woman that I have control over my reactions to certain situations that may be deemed unfair. As a descendent of healers, I have to acknowledge my negative way of life if I am to maintain balance. The thoughts that I have about people and about myself as well as the words I speak to or about people and to or about myself can all be used to either hurt or love. This

painting is reminder to me that healing artists have the power to heal or hurt themselves and/or others.



Figure 8. The Black Truck - Mixed Media on canvas - work in progress

My maternal grandfather Thomas Begay Sr. was the foundation for my family. He loved each of us equally and always made it known through his humor, storytelling and smile that we were loved. He practiced the traditional way of life the best way that he could and was always patient and humble; as were his parents. I chose to create a painting that celebrates his memory and the memory of my uncles, his two sons that have passed on as well, in order to comfort my family as we are still healing but also to serve as a reminder to live in a way that will reflect their integrity, humility, honesty, unity and leadership. I plan to bead the truck using seed beads and the lane stitch.



Figure 9. Womanhood - Acrylic on canvas - April 2018

I created these two pieces during my 2017 fall semester after reflecting on the intergenerational trauma and resiliency that Indigenous women have had to endure in order to stay relevant in this world. The top painting represents a Diné woman facing a Phase II Diné chief's blanket. Although these blankets were predominantly worn by men I wanted to reflect on the adaptation of culture and inevitable ending of patriarchal systems that have diminished the Diné woman's role within the matriarchy of Diné culture; including the taboo that if a Diné woman is ever to become the president of the tribe, the world will cease to exist. The lines within the painting of the blanket I have also come to interpret as prison bars, representing the entrapment that Diné women are constantly battling.

The second painting reflects the walk to Hwéeldi (Diné Long Walk) and the death that ensued. The Diné woman represents all of the women lost through the multiple acts of genocide. Her feet resemble roots being left for her children and future generations to learn from and remember who they are. The crosses above her body represent her transcendence into the spirit world and the release of her energy into the metaphysical. I

wanted to create a painting that would comfort my understanding of death and grief while reminding me of my ancestor's struggle in order for me to be here today.

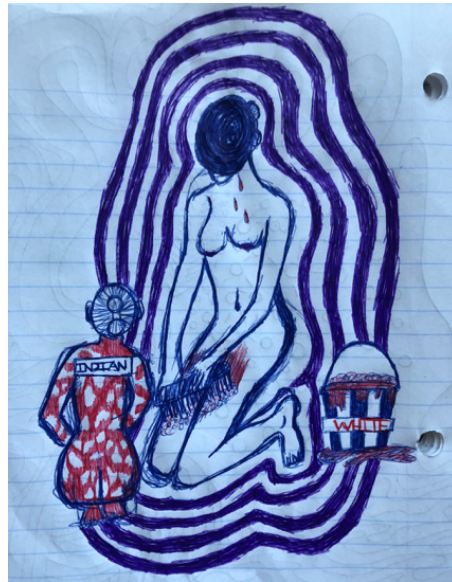


Figure 10. Internalized Oppression - Pen on notebook paper - November 2017

I drew this in Dr. Marley's Historical Trauma, Healing and Decolonization class during our discussion about internalized oppression. Up until that point I had never heard the term before but had definitely experienced it with in my own life and my family. As a child, I was constantly teased by friends and family for being very dark skinned compared to other children, especially during the summer. I was very self-conscious about my skin color and wanted to be lighter, like my sisters. In my early teens, after moving to the city, I remember scrubbing my skin as hard as I could in order to make myself lighter and would wear long sleeve shirts and pants in the summer to keep from getting darker. I have since learned to love and respect my skin; as I begin to play with the idea that the darker the melanin in one's skin, the more direct relation to cultural intuition, insight and wisdom is intact.

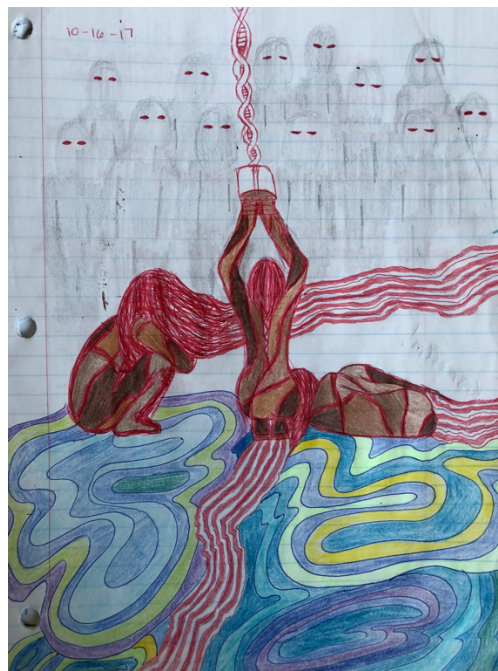


Figure 11. Three Sisters Image 1 - Acrylic on canvas; Image 2 - Pen and pencil on paper -
Dec 2017-April 2018

I first drew this image during Dr. Marley's Historical Trauma, Healing and Decolonization course. I was reflecting on the pasts of my sisters and myself. I have two older sisters who have done their best to shelter and protect me while enduring their own

battles. I am constantly in awe of their ability to keep moving forward despite their past trauma's. I wanted to create an image that all Indigenous women could relate to and reflect on subjectively; in support of the missing and murdered Indigenous women. The image is of three sisters, the youngest kneeling down, the eldest chained in the middle and the second eldest laying down with her head rested on the eldest sister's lap. The red and white lines symbolize the Indigenous blood spilt by the United States government and also resembles the stripes of the American flag. The dark figures in the back staring at the women represent white colonization and the degradation of Indigenous women by white males. The chain that is holding the eldest sister's arms can be considered shackles but I also wanted it to resemble the passing of innate ancestral knowledge from generation to generation as well as the intergenerational trauma.



Figure 12. Vulnerability - Colored pencil on paper - February 2018

I wanted to create images that reflected my identity as a woman and the vulnerability of being comfortable in my own skin, while balancing humility and power. I wanted to diminish my ego and dissolve my idea of beauty in order to empower femininity.



Figure 13. Maaiitsoh – Acrylic on Canvas – November 2015

I started this painting with my son, I asked him what I should paint and he dipped his fingers into the colors I had out and gently touched the canvas. I decided to continue that process and used the stippling effect placing random colors in random areas. The motion of my hands during this creative process reminded me of the stories that my mother would tell me of my great grandmother and how she was a hand trembler or medicine woman. This motion with my hand connected me back to that medicine as I reflected on my art as being a form of ceremony and healing for me. When I felt the painting was complete and as I do with all of my other painting's I closed it off with a spirit line; similar to Diné rug's, intended to release a person's spirit or energy in order for the piece to offer the creative energy that remains with it as a form of healing for viewers. After it was completed I noticed the image of wolf looking sideways that was not planned

or intended. The motions of my hands during the creative process pays respects to the Diné Hand Tremblers – medicine people.



Figure 14. Fingerprint Clearance Card – Mixed media on canvas – April 2016

I wanted to create a painting the embraced art as being mindful and mindless. This painting reflects on the intricate web we call life; representing the seven billion people in this world who cross paths with each other every day and the decisions and choices we make from birth that leads us to encounter certain people and situations at certain times in our lives, which also leaves me to ponder the divine practice that is out of our control. It is our fingerprint that makes us unique. The fingerprint was hand beaded using the lane stitch and size 11 seed beads.



Figure 15. Mold Her – Acrylic on canvas – October 2018

My mother is the only woman in her immediate family to have had the Kinaalda ceremony done during her transition from young girl to woman. Before the 1979 American Indian Freedom of Religion Act was passed many families practice in secrecy, determined to maintain the balance and continuance of a culture that has consistently fought extermination by the US government and Christianity. This painting honors my mother's transition into womanhood as a young girl being molded by her guide. The teachings that come with this ceremony are vital to the consciousness of our youth as they begin to understand themselves and ultimately their purpose. As matriarchs may we continue to listen to White Shell woman in all that we do to create harmony and balance.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the writing of this thesis has allowed me to deeply reflect on my present reality; to appreciate my blessings and understand where I need to improve in order to let go of unhealthy habits and build anew. My intent since the start of this thesis was to embrace the truth around me, no matter how uneasy that made me feel.

This process has helped me to reflect and interpret my present reality as I made sense of my experiences. In summary, the experience of using art as a form my spiritual expression has brought me to the realization that:

- Art has helped me transform and transition into a clearer understanding and acceptance of self as a Diné woman living in a contemporary world.
- Diné culture is valuable and holds teachings, stories and practices that I cannot find in Westernized religions.
- Art has opened a new window of perspective in connection to my surrounding world, the people and my place in it.
- I must also come to explore, adapt, adopt and engage new forms of traditions as the cultures of world continue to evolve.

From this narrative, healing artists, policymakers, and public health administrators should enter into conversations about the direction of the Indigenous healthcare system, where it has been, where is currently stands and what purpose it needs to serve.

A suitable next step would be for another healing artist to take on creating a narrative of her/his journey as they unravel the system around themselves and the personal growth and consequences they face. The narrative would best be presented as a duo-ethnography, with an administrator providing the second voice for events. In duo-ethnography, two or more researchers work in union to dialogically review and inquire about the meanings they give to social matters and epistemological paradigms.

By having both a healing artists and administrator critique the same experience, the reader would be able to see a clearer picture of the interaction rundown between tiered levels and the way data plays a key role in how we interpret the responsibilities we take on. As more people become aware of the organized chains entangling healing artists, the more likely change could occur sometime in the future to enable the tribal healthcare system to be for all tribal members to learn.

“It is time to consider transforming service provisions, rebuilding it upon Indigenous understanding of reality. Instead of dressing secular Western frameworks up in culturally competent garb, it is time to construct Native practice modalities from the ground up. New helping models-built on a Native pre-suppositional foundation rather than an Enlightenment pre-suppositional foundation – must be constructed.”⁶⁴

For the tribal healthcare system to move forward in an operational and effective manner, four distinct changes will need to be made. First and foremost, artists and healers alike will need to gain a voice in the tribal healthcare system that is being provided to the community. This voice must lead over that of the policymakers who lack an artistic and healing background. It needs to be a voice that is respected by others in the profession, administrators of all levels, and government agencies.

Secondly, all voices in tribal healthcare system must come together to strategize a new commitment for the system that is fair and just for all tribal members. The purpose must change from preserving the status quo to permitting every person the chance to progress their mental, emotional, physical and spiritual status.

Third, the same voices must form clearly defined positions for the actors in the new system to accept new artists and healers entering healthcare to appreciate their place as

change agents. Lastly, all actions taken by artists and healers must become visible to the mainstream public. It is the job of tribal members to hold healing artists responsible and to monitor the activities of everyone involved, including political groups trying to restructure or alter policies. Those affected most by policies should have the greatest say.

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