

A Prayer for Shík'e dóó Shídiné'e dóó Diné Bikeyah (My family, friends, and Nation)

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1492, 1518, 1639, 1755, 1763, 1837, 1870, 1929, 1950, 1960, 1980, 2020

The first pandemic of the Americas was when the settlers landed here.

Epidemics plaguing Europe sailing with the colonizer

Both hand in hand,

Looking for their next victims

First, targeting Two-Spirit

Then elders, women, and children

The structure of disease gives no mercy

It feeds on what it contacts,

And they watch as it takes over

Watching as if it will not consume them

These acts of violence are intentional,

They do not care.

If you are Brown or Black,

They do not care.

Throughout time,

disease has scattered across our homelands

The disease they brought with them

Crafting new ones as our guards are down

First, affecting our spirits

Then our bodies

Breaking us down internally

Our blood still on their hands

that they try to make invisible

Documented and recorded.

Natives have always been the first to be impacted

The Americas were discovered to let it happen

Causes and cases rendered invisible

Nonexistent

As they wish we were to them

A Prayer for Shík'e dóó Shídiné'e dóó Diné Bikeyah (My family, friends, and Nation)

Yá'át'ééh Creator,

Shí éí Souksavanh Tom Keovorabouth yinishyé. Kinyaa'aanii nishli. Nááts'ózí Bashishchiin. 'Áshjiihi Dashicheii. Nááts'ózí dashinalí. I am of Towering House Clan, born for the Slanted Eye People, my maternal grandfather is of Salt People, and my paternal grandfather is of the Slanted Eye People. Originally, I am from Chinle, Arizona but grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, and recently moved to Oregon to start a Ph.D. program in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. As a second-year out-of-state Ph.D. student, there was not a day that I did not think of my family, friends, and Nation back in Arizona. And ever much so during this pandemic. I want to recognize that there is a place of privilege for me as I write this piece, because I am afforded resources that are not necessarily provided if I were home on the reservation, which is another reason for offering this prayer.

As classes moved online due to the COVID-19 crisis, I made the decision to return back home to Phoenix, Arizona, to be around family during these times. Diné Bikeyah (Navajo Nation), my traditional homelands, have been hit with massive numbers of COVID-19 cases, one of the largest in the United States. Although I am currently in Phoenix, I want to recognize that as Indigenous peoples, the emotions and outcomes that our Nations endure will always live within, among, and around us. We are connected beings. The hurt that our Nation feels, we feel, regardless of our displacement. Right now, more than ever, we need hope, purpose, and resiliency as individuals to continue to thrive as Sovereign and Self-Determined peoples.

I have decided to structure this prayer by unpacking several critical conversations that have been sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic, including 1) the displacement of Indigenous peoples and land, 2) mental health and well-being with the importance of Nadleeh and traditional ways of healing as praxis, and lastly, 3) Indigenous Sovereignty in relation to Black Liberation. Each of these sections have been fueled by real conversations that I've had with friends, family, and colleagues during this time. I want to acknowledge the vast array of topics, while at the same time emphasizing the interconnectedness between all of them for Indigenous peoples during this pandemic, before, and beyond.

Displacement of Indigenous People and Land in relation to COVID-19

In the United States, we, as Native and Indigenous peoples have been removed, displaced, and replaced many times before, much of which is not told within United States history. Since settler contact, we were seen as inferior and as “savages” who needed to be controlled and/or killed. Abigail Echo-Hawk, who is a citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, the director of the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), and the chief research officer for the Seattle Indian Health Board, recently stated that “the system of colonialism in the United States has created, and continues to increase risk factors for, poor health outcomes in Native communities” (Wade, 2020). Reflecting on this, Wade writes, “the U.S. government removed many Indigenous communities from their lands and confined them to reservations.” Although we were able to return to our traditional homelands, the borders of the Navajo Nation were and are still a colonial construct to simply confine us to one area in hope that we die off. Not only have we been confined to reservations, but many have been impacted by the Relocation Act of the 1950s, which forced Native American

people from reservations to urban areas such as Phoenix, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, to name a few, which are now additional centers where COVID-19 cases are rising.

I want to reiterate Echo-Hawk, that the conditions of Native and Indigenous communities in the United States and many other settler-colonial states such as Canada and Australia have "poor health outcomes in Native communities" because that is the nature of the settler-colonial state. We can see this within the health discrepancies in our own communities. We are not seen as people in their eyes, we are non-human, so they do not care or even acknowledge our Treaties. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), "in 23 states with adequate race/ethnicity data, the cumulative incidence of laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 among AI/AN [American Indian and Alaska Native] persons was *3.5 times* that among non-Hispanic white persons" (Hatcher et al., 2020, my emphasis). I intentionally emphasize 3.5 times because it shows that Native and Indigenous people in a settler-colonial state are intended to be impacted by health disparities and inequalities that render us useless and, therefore, disposable.

The term "biopolitics of disposability", which was coined by Henry Giroux, describes "a new kind of politics . . . in which entire populations are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and cosigned to fend for themselves" (Giroux, 2006, p. 174; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013, p. 69). In the eyes of white supremacy, Indigenous and Native American people are a prime example of the biopolitics of disposability. We saw this from the day settlers first landed in the Americas with their use of genocide on us, we see it today with the federal government's lack of support to Tribal Nations, and we see it again, now with the high rates of COVID-19 cases among Native Americans and Indigenous communities.

In mid-September, the Navajo Nation President and Vice President stated that they would be offering the Navajo Nation as a trial vaccine testing center—that our people can be one of the first to be trialed. This sparked many heated conversations among not only Diné people but also other Native and Indigenous communities. Krisst (2020) writes: “The common sentiment among many people who responded to the post was that they don’t want to be used as ‘lab rats’ or ‘guinea pigs.’ ‘Hell no!’ read several responses”. Since the establishment of settler institutions on this land, Native and Indigenous communities have been experimented on for the benefit of the white settler-colonial state, exactly because we are seen as disposable. One of these instances was the Havasupai Tribe of northern Arizona. The tribe discovered that their DNA, that was meant to be used for research on diabetes, was being used in research beyond their consent and for purposes taboo in their cultural community, sparking a lawsuit, *Havasupai Tribe v. Arizona Board of Regents*, which the tribe won (Garrison, 2013).

We need leaders who are thinking of the betterment of our Nation, our people, ancestors, and future generations, ones who do not replicate the settler-colonial America but rather a decolonial one. To heal as a nation, we do not need to be the guinea pigs of these trials. We will no longer be rendered disposable by governmental structures, and I encourage the tribe to continue to support the Nation’s people through financial, mental, and spiritual means. I understand the importance of the vaccine, but since they are still in the trial phase, I urge the Navajo Nation President and Vice President to halt their decision until vaccines are finalized; then and only then, should they advocate for us to receive a supply of the vaccines.

Indigenous Mental Health, Nadleeh, and Traditional Praxis

As Native and Indigenous peoples, we have weathered waves of genocide, both physical and cultural, and this trauma has been passed down from generation to generation, affecting our mental health today. The pandemic accelerated during Mental Health Awareness month, which is in May, where many people have and continue to navigate their mental health alone. In 2018, I was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder and anxiety. I have allowed myself to understand but not be defined by it, while letting my community know that it is not weak to speak out about mental health. I would suggest it's actually encouraged! As someone who is navigating my own mental health myself, I believe that more than ever, we, as a community, need to stand in solidarity with each other as we wait these eight months in quarantine (and maybe more by the time this is published).

We have been impacted by the virus not only physically and mentally but also spiritually. The pandemic has radically shifted many things in our lives, isolating us from others, and heightening our emotions. We must, I believe, begin to understand our health more holistically. Within Native and Indigenous communities, “the suicide rate is particularly high among young Native American males ages 15 to 24. Accounting for 64 percent of all suicides by American Indians and Alaska Natives, the suicide rate of this group is *2 to 3.5 times* higher than the general U.S. rate” (Alcántara & Gone, 2007; General (US) et al., 2001; Leavitt et al., 2018). As peoples, we have been heavily impacted by colonization and assimilation, making us believe that we are disposable, thus worthless, when we are not! This is a time where we need to be there for one another and care for each other.

We need, therefore, to dig into our Indigenous teachings and philosophy as a means of healing. As a Queer Indigenous, Two-Spirit person, I want to recognize my ancestors and family's traditional teachings. Nadleeh (Two-Spirit) in Diné must be honored and recognized on the Diné Nation and beyond as a traditional praxis of understanding the world. By doing so, we begin to appreciate the balance between masculine and feminine energies of how gender and sexuality flow through each of us to achieve Hozhó, the Beauty Way. The ingrained homophobia and transphobia must end! We are Diné. The people. Five-fingered beings. All living and breathing energies who matter. To reach Hozhó, we must learn from and listen to Nadleeh people as a traditional healing praxis. Encompassed within Hozhó lies mental and spiritual medicine and such medicine can begin to address the harm that has been done to our people. Nadleeh and Hozhó go hand in hand to begin to decolonize the mental health stigma put upon Indigenous communities that begins to pave the way to become *balanced* in order to get us all to the Beauty Way.

Indigenous Sovereignty is Black Liberation & the 2020 United States Election

While the pandemic is going on, there have been many accounts of violence, and a long history of them as a matter of fact, that have impacted our Black relatives in the United States—from Ahmaud Arbery to George Floyd to Breonna Taylor. Harm has been done. Black and Brown People have been dying at the hands of white supremacy, and I want to reiterate as a Two-Spirit Indigenous person that #BlackLivesMatter. We are more than the law; it's just a white man's tool trying to define who we are when we already know who we are!

And to my Indigenous communities, I want us to realize that Indigenous Sovereignty cannot exist without Black Liberation. We need to be there for them, as they are for us in times of need. We

cannot exist as a Sovereign or Self-Determined Nation until we acknowledge the long and harsh history of genocide and enslavement in America by eliminating anti-Blackness rhetoric in our conversations, history, and stories. We are K'e (Family), and we need to begin to act like it. We cannot exist without the other and vice versa.

If change is going to come, we have to make it. It's what our ancestors dreamed for us! Now we must do it, and we are doing it. For example, look at the recent 2020 United States Election where Arizona and Georgia flipped from Red to Blue, or from Republican to Democrat, in favor of President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. This is a monumental time, demonstrating the power of Black and Indigenous voices. Our voices were heard and are valid. Arizona, which has voted red in the past six Presidential elections, was disrupted by the 60% - 90% of roughly 67,000 eligible Diné voters who voted blue (Ramirez, 2020; Saxena, 2020). As a Nation, this shows our possibilities. We grouped together as a community to have a dialogue about the harms that have been done throughout our history and to demand support during this crisis. We will no longer be rendered disposable! Let's use this momentum to continue enacting change onto our Nations and beyond, continue to fight to eliminate COVID-19 from our homeland, fight for what is right, and envision a future where Indigenous Sovereignty and Self-Determination are the foundation of the United States of America.

Lastly, to tie everything together, I am reminded, with the passing of Chadwick Boseman, of our possibilities of Indigenous and Black futurity through Wakanda and King T'Challa. *Black Panther* (2018) represented that intersection between Indigenous Sovereignty and Black Liberation that we strive for. Boseman, as Black Panther, inspired not only the Black community but also many

Indigenous communities, such as myself, to be better human beings and know that there is beauty and power within us as Black and Indigenous folx. Let's keep him forever in our thoughts as we aim for that future. Our future. Our decolonial future of Indigenous Sovereignty and Black Liberation (re)built on a nation that was forced upon us.

Rest in Power, Chadwick Boseman.

As my Great Grandma Fannie often taught us, praying is not linear. And as many topics discussed in this prayer, I offer this as just that, a prayer of care and love for my community. While vast, they are all interconnected such as we are all interconnected. I with you, and now you with me. So, I want to offer this final piece of the prayer to address the impacts of the Coronavirus crisis at hand, as I ask Creator and our communities to look to the land and our teachings as medicine. But, Remember to wash your hands (for 20 seconds), wear a mask, stay six feet apart, smudge daily or as much as possible, and carry yourself with Radical Love (Joliv  tte, 2016).

*Our ancestors have endured survival and resistance.
Relocation, signing treaties, reservations into allotments, boarding schools, relocation. . . again.
The traumas of the past carried into today
We must forgive
Forgive our ancestors
And forgive ourselves
They say, "history repeats itself"
And it does.
"They Came, They Saw, They Named, They Claimed" (Smith, 2012)
As Native and Indigenous peoples,
we are resilient.
We are not to blame for the conditions in which we live.
These conditions are products of assimilation and genocide.
Our warriors picked and chose their battles.
Keeping in mind their children, their grandchildren, and their great-great-grandchildren
The sacrifices of yesterday is the resiliency of tomorrow.*

*We are the warriors now.
Deciding our own battles
Battles fought through writing, through activism, through taking care of each other.
We are warriors of this land.
The land that nourished our existence
It is now our turn to give back.
We are now the ones to survive and resist
For our children, our grandchildren, and our great-great-grandchildren*

*Hózhó náhásdlíí'
Hózhó náhásdlíí'
Hózhó náhásdlíí'
Hózhó náhásdlíí'*

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