The Politics of Hair: Challenging the Colonial Legacy of Hair Codes and Defending Diné Hair Sovereignty

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Religion Honors Thesis April 29, 2025

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On his first day of kindergarten, five-year-old Diné[1] (Navajo) student Malachi Wilson was sent home early (2014). Neatly braided down his back, Wilson's long hair defied F. J. Young Elementary School's mandate that "boys' hair shall be cut neatly and often to ensure good grooming."[2] Although the school eventually gave Wilson a religious exemption for his long hair, many other students were not given the same consideration. Just last year, an eight-year-old Diné boy in Kansas was forced to cut his hair to comply with his elementary school's hair codes. The pervasive and pathological mistreatment of Diné and other Indigenous students' hair has motivated this essay. The very existence of hair codes reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the cultural and spiritual significance of hair—particularly for the Diné people. In the Diné language, it is impossible to say the word "leg" or "hair" because these elements of the body must linguistically be possessed. For example, the Diné stem for hair, – atsii' cannot occur in speech unless there is a prefix, such as shi – (my) or ni – (your), to designate possession. Such an indication is significant because components of the body, like hair, carry the potential to exert negative and positive influences on an individual throughout their life. In this essay, I refer to the knowledge system that informs Diné people's conceptions of hair and its dual influence as hair cosmology. Hair cosmologies emerge from mythological stories of human construction and bodily effect. These myths encode communal laws that regulate the manipulation, protection, decoration, and maintenance of one's hair, thereby establishing a framework for hair cosmology. Yet, Indigenous communities' ongoing engagements with these mythological principles –

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[1] Colonial authorities imposed new names on Indigenous communities because of convenience. This essay makes an active endeavor to utilize these communitie's self-prescribed names. It must be acknowledged that not all members of an Indigenous group abide by these names, opting for their colonial counterparts. Nonetheless, choosing to refer to these groups by their self-prescribed name is an essential decolonial tool that delineates self-definition as an Indigenous model of resistance.

[2] Rebecca Klein, "Native American Child Reportedly Sent Home from Kindergarten Because of Long Hair: The Hairstyle That Got This Student Sent Home from School," *The HuffPost*, September 2, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/malachi-wilson-hair_n_5753982.

through ceremony, daily practice, political action, etc. - are equally vital in shaping their hair cosmologies.

American boarding schools exploited Diné hair cosmologies by forcibly cutting students' hair, laying negative influences on their senses of self and identity. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the U.S. established more than 523 government-funded, and often church-run Native boarding schools. American boarding schools' explicit objective was to "Kill the Indian, Save the Man."[3] Indigenous bodies were deliberately manipulated to contort to colonial standards of civility. These schools borrowed many practices from military discipline. Students were forced to speak English, cut their hair, follow a military dress code, and adhere to strict daily regimens. The shearing of students' hair, along with a variety of other practices, worked to eliminate their connections to personal and communal identity. While the violent history of American boarding schools is considered a chapter of the past, these schools' practices have been repackaged, utilized by today's educational institutions in the form of hair codes. Schools, while teaching us about particular subjects, also teach us how to behave as American citizens. Schooling teaches us about the rules of society – how to behave in social settings, how to handle conflict, how to enter the workforce, etc. Schools work to mold students into civilized bodies, yet American notions of civility base themselves on colonial traditions. The boarding school experience, consequently, is not some "tragedy of the American past." Contemporary hair codes reflect the same assimilationist logic that drove boarding schools. These codes' continued existence exemplifies how the myth of a "post-colonial"[4] world conceals the ways educational institutions continue to regulate Indigenous bodies and modes of expression.

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[3] "US Indian residential School History," *The National Native American residential School History*, https://residentialschoolhealing.org/education/us-indian-boarding-school-history/.

[4] Post-colonialism represents the period after the settler colonial project. While the term is often used to describe the U.S. because there is no active conquering of land, it is an inaccurate one. Nothing about our world is post-colonial. Colonial structures continue to dominate political and social arrangements just as Indigenous peoples continue to fight the settler colony for sovereignty.

Many Indigenous communities value their hair because it gives expression to identity and selfhood. This essay focuses on the Diné community because of the immense cosmological importance they place on hair. Investigating the ways hair codes impede on Diné people's hair sovereignty, while looking toward their voices as roadmaps for building decolonial futures, scholars in Indigenous studies can break down the colonial binaries that define 'good hair' versus 'bad hair'; what is acceptable in a school setting versus what is not. By forcing Indigenous children to cut their hair, American boarding schools sought to erase their cultural identity, imposing forced assimilation into a Christian, Western way of life. Short hair served as a visible tool of dehumanization, working alongside rigid dress codes, language restrictions, and religious conversions to transform Indigenous students into "acceptable" adults. The ongoing practice of forcing Diné children to cut their hair serves the same purpose: to disconnect Indigenous people from their ancestral communities and assimilate them into the colonial project.

This essay focuses on the ongoing violence faced by Indigenous peoples, particularly Diné individuals, because of their hair. It is organized into three sections. The first section focuses on Diné myth and ceremony to illuminate the cosmological significance they place on hair. It opens with examples of hair's significance across the world's religions. These examples highlight that hair holds immense significance across varying cultures, communities, and religious traditions, while also positioning hair sovereignty as a concept with cross-religious and cross-cultural applicability. This section then narrows its focus to examine the significance of hair within Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. While these Indigenous groups have varying hair cosmologies, several commonalities exist amongst them. These commonalities provide a framework for contextualizing Diné hair cosmologies and simultaneously underscore

the wider significance of hair sovereignty across Indigenous communities. Finally, this essay moves into its discussion of the Diné, who regard hair as a crucial component of their mythological origins. Diné myths lay the groundwork for their notions of personhood, shaping how the Diné conceive of themselves and their relationships with the universe. These myths treat hair as an extension of the human soul, and affirm its interconnectedness to Diné identity and bodily construction.

The first section also examines Diné ceremonial practices, specifically the Kinaaldá ceremony, a female puberty rite that uses hair as a tool to transform girls into the living embodiment of Changing Woman.[5] While male ceremonial rites exist, they are relatively secret compared to female ceremonies. Consequently, this essay does not provide any examples of male-specific ceremonies, although men's hair appears in other sections, like mythology and boarding school experiences. This essay offers an overview of the Kinaaldá ceremony, drawing on the work of cultural anthropologists like Maureen Trudelle Schwarz. Schwarz argues that the Kinaaldá 's ceremonial power comes from synecdoche, the idea that "parts of the body (hair, fingernails) and bodily secretions (saliva, blood, skin oil, urine) retain lifelong influence and can thereby affect the well-being of the individual from whom they originated for a long time after their detachment or expulsion."[6] Synecdoche denotes that the choices Diné people make to control, contain, and harness the power embodied in their hair represent the fundamental epistemologies that govern the Diné body. In the Kinaaldá ceremony, Diné girls come to embody Changing Woman by physically and spiritually caring for their hair. The objects used to brush

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[5] Changing Woman is the Diné creation deity, credited with giving birth to Áłtsé hastiin (First Man) and Áłtsé asdzaa. (First Woman). See:
"Changing Woman's Story," *Natural History Museum of Utah*, 2006, https://baskets.nhmu.utah.edu/collections/stories/changing-woman-story#:~:text=Asdz%C4%85%CC%81%C4%85%CC%81%20N%C3%A1dleeh%C3%A9%20(Changing%20Woman)%20is,the%20Din%C3%A9%20(Navajo)%20universe.

[6] Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, "Snakes in the Ladies' Room: Navajo Views on Personhood and Effect," *American Ethnologist* 24 (1997): 603, https://www.jstor.org/stable/647085?seq=1.

the girl's hair, along with the handmade items that adorn it, work as tools for knowledge transfer. A weaver will inevitably have saliva, sweat, and hair become embedded in her craft. These bodily substances carry the weaver's qualities and knowledge. In this way, the weaver's knowledge is inseparably linked to their body and its substances. Her knowledge imbues every element of her body. As a result, these bodily substances retain their connection to the weaver's knowledge, even when they are disconnected from the body. When the Kinaaldá girl wears the weaver's dress, she comes into contact with these substances, thereby transferring the weaver's knowledges to her.

To supplement the work of cultural anthropologists like Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, this essay explores interviews and memoirs from Diné people. In these accounts, Diné women emphasize that hair brushing and styling are integral to the Kinaaldá ceremony because the rite involves a visual mirroring of Changing Woman to ascertain her qualities. While the Kinaaldá is the most exemplary of Schwarz's theory of synecdoche, almost every Diné ceremony has synecdochic properties. This essay will focus on Blessingway rites and Chantways as additional examples of synecdoche.

The second section of this essay examines how hair codes have historically been used against Diné communities, particularly within the American boarding school system. Most academic research on Native boarding schools focuses on the experiences of Christian teachers, many of whom were involved in the violence Indigenous children faced.[7] While documents written by boarding school administrators overwhelmingly dominate the archival record, Diné people have consistently written about their experiences, crafting a rich body of literature that

[7] Standing in exception is Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, who writes about Southwestern tribes' experiences in residential schools. His book "Education Beyond the Mesas" specifically examines the Hopi people and uses one-on-one testimony to evaluate residential school practices.
Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert, *Education Beyond the Mesas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).

offers insights into their lived realities. Thus, Diné voices provide the framework for this essay's discussion of boarding school grooming policies. Their works illuminate how haircuts violated the sovereignty of Diné children by stripping them of their cultural identity.

The final section of this essay will explore how contemporary Diné people characterize their relationships with their hair. Diné people describe their hair as a symbol of community survival and identity despite colonial attempts to impose dominance on their bodily autonomy and self-actualization. Diné authors frequently address the ongoing issue of hair codes in elementary schools, explaining how these practices fundamentally undermine Diné sovereignty. By highlighting Diné experiences with their hair, this essay argues that hair codes target and actively undermine Diné hair sovereignty.

Hair Sovereignty

At the center of this project is the concept of hair sovereignty. "Sovereignty" is a popular buzzword among scholars of Indigenous studies, yet it has come to mean more than one thing. The term was originally conceived by Western political philosophers, and it served to legitimate states' political authority over colonized citizens.[8] The concept of Westphalian sovereignty appeared in late medieval Europe following the transition from feudalism to territorial statehood. Westphalian sovereignty expresses the notion that sovereignty is inseparably bound to territory and statehood. In this sense, because the state retains sovereign power over the territory, it also has sovereign power over the peoples who occupy that territory. As Westphalian sovereignty gained a foothold in European political discourses, so too did the notion of worldly conquest. Philosophical justifications for settler colonialism found legitimacy in Westphalian sovereignty. Colonial powers believed that Indigenous bodies, like the lands they occupied, were

[8] Harald Bauder and Rebecca Mueller, "Westphalian Vs. Indigenous Sovereignty: Challenging Colonial Territorial Governance," *Geopolitics* 28, no. 1 (2023): 156.

commodifiable and conquerable objects. As colonial forces continued to expand, the Indigenous peoples within the confines of the "state" could either accept their position as conquered subjects or face death. Westphalian conceptions of sovereignty were made to justify the subjugation of Indigenous peoples, calling into question the term's usefulness for Indigenous self-determination. Is Indigenous sovereignty the same as the sovereignty conveyed by European political philosophies?

Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), of Indigenous Studies at the University of British unequivocally believes that the answer is no. In his contribution to *Native Studies Keywords*, Coulthard attempts to divorce Indigenous sovereignty from its Westphalian logics. He argues that some Indigenous peoples' attempts to be "recognized" as sovereign subjects of the state bolsters the colonial project by implicitly assuming that Indigenous sovereignty relies on the accommodation of settler governance. By reducing Indigenous peoples' struggle for sovereignty to lawsuits against the oppressive power, Coulthard argues that scholars of Indigenous studies promote the "fiction of colonial sovereignty."[9] To adequately address this issue, Coulthard proposes that Indigenous people embrace Indigenous forms of power and craft a new version of sovereignty. He identifies Indigenous forms of power as the tools by which Indigenous peoples disrupt the "dividing, alienating, and exploitative governmental powers...that [fuel] colonial politics inside and outside Native communities today."[10] Although Coulthard does not explicitly describe what Indigenous forms of power look like, it is evident that his vision of sovereignty is inseparable from the disassembly of colonial ideologies and institutions.

Other Indigenous scholars have drawn from Coulthard's work and attempted to define sovereignty from a fully Indigenous lens. Irene Watson, Professor of Law at the University of

[9] Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja, *Native Studies Keywords* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2015): 9.
[10] Teves et al.: 9.

South Australia, claims that defining sovereignty involves confronting the question: *Are we free to roam?* Watson, like Coulthard, believes that the simple recognition of sovereignty does not do enough to protect Indigenous lands and bodies from colonial brutality. She advances that Indigenous peoples cannot seek accommodation or approval into colonial spaces; instead, they must become the composers of their own reality. Yet, Watson believes that sovereignty cannot be wholly achieved until Indigenous peoples reconnect with their communities, values, and traditions. Assimilatory policies and the policing of Indigenous peoples' bodies and minds, Watson claims, has formed a divide between Indigenous peoples and their community worldviews. The disjunction between Indigenous peoples and themselves obscures the possibilities for sovereignty yet simultaneously leaves space for creative possibilities. By working collectively to find new ways of articulating and expressing identity, Indigenous communities create traditions that both honor ancestral teachings and embrace the diversity of opinion and expression within Indigenous peoples today. However, as Watson explains, this goal cannot be realized until Indigenous peoples "cleanse [themselves] of colonial ideological tainting" and realize a fully sovereign psyche.[11]

One important facet of sovereignty is that scholars of Indigenous studies often distinguish between internal and external sovereignty. Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk) defines external sovereignty as a politically focused proclamation "of sovereign power vis-a-vis the state."[12] This form of sovereignty takes shape within the geopolitical landscape to assert a community's sovereign capacity to create and use its own government, educational, and economic institutions, and judicial processes. Conversely, to be internally sovereign, Alfred claims, Indigenous peoples must extricate their minds of colonial influence and actualize sovereign possession of body and

[11] Teves et al., 11.
[12] Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 39.

soul. While scholars of Indigenous studies often place external sovereignty above internal, Leanne Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) argues that both are consequential to the decolonial project. Sovereignty is not about ownership, Simpson argues, it is about *tewatatha:wi* – how we carry and express ourselves in space.[13] She claims that sovereignty is a responsibility, a duty to carry oneself in a holistically Indigenous way. Internal sovereignty creates a community model for *tewatatha:wi* while external sovereignty works to make that image reality.

Diné political scientist David E. Wilkens defines sovereignty as the "collective will of a people [which] creates an intangible force that empowers people towards political, economic, and cultural integrity."[14] He argues that the first step towards sovereignty necessitates a return to Diné values, religiosity, and customs. The most powerful tools for exhibiting one's Dinéness, Wilkens claims, are visual and auditory cues like hair, language, and clothing. By reclaiming one's Dinéness, Wilkens maintains that Diné people can subvert the colonial institutions that work to break down and assimilate Indigenous visual expressions of identity and community solidarity.[15] Building on Wilkins's ideas, Diné author Lloyd L. Lee argues that sovereignty encompasses Diné peoples' ability to "freely determine their political institutions and the way they govern," and begins with a "critical consciousness individual who identifies oppressive elements in Diné communities and works to change it."[16] He further defines sovereignty as a felt experience. The political and social manifestations of sovereignty are simply outward articulations of the sovereignty felt within the Diné people's personal psyches. Lee maintains that

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[13] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "The Place Where We All Live and Work Together," in *Native Studies Keywords* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015): 22.
[14] "Sovereignty," *Navajo Government Development*, 2013, https://ongd.navajo-nsn.gov/Portals/0/Homepage%20Webpage/Sovereignty%20Day_opt.pdf?ver=AR5xra4Ptjc_j_H23pUzLQ%3D%3D.
[15] "Sovereignty," 2013.
[16] Lloyd L. Lee, *Navajo Sovereignty: Understandings and Visions of the Diné People* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017).

Indigenous peoples have been psychologically conditioned by the colonialist project to reject their community traditions and values to assimilate into whitestream society. Unless Indigenous peoples actively choose to eliminate this corrupted mindset, sovereignty can never be realized. Colonialism is the antithesis of Indigenous sovereignty, Lee argues, making complete rejection of its institutions and values essential to Indigenous self-determination.

Hair sovereignty is an integration of all of the various frameworks for Indigenous sovereignty described here. Borrowing from Alfred's description of the "two faces of sovereignty," this essay posits that hair sovereignty also functions on an institutional and individual level. The most overt institutional imposition on Indigenous peoples' hair sovereignty is school hair codes, which directly enact violence on Indigenous bodies and ways of expressing identity. Dismantling school hair codes necessitates the reconstruction of educational institutions to eliminate their colonial underpinnings and return the sovereign authority to Indigenous nations. Indigenous hair sovereignty can never thrive under institutions that are manufactured to destroy it. This essay explores the ways Indigenous peoples destabilize colonial institutions and forge realities where they are free to embody hair sovereignty. The concept of internal hair sovereignty is best expressed by *tewatatha:wi* (Mohawk), how we carry ourselves in a wholly Indigenous way. By using visual markers of Indigenous identity, like hairstyles, to display cultural pride, Simpson maintains that these communities destabilize colonial attempts to govern Indigenous bodies and minds. Yet, hair not only exemplifies a visual tool for community distinction, but also the cosmological connections between Diné people's hair and their ancestry, communal identity, and notions of personhood. After centuries of colonial rule, it is impossible to imagine a world where colonial institutions have disappeared and hair sovereignty is wholly actualized. Nonetheless, hair sovereignty emerges as an act of world building. By embracing

their natural hairstyles and rejecting the settler project's attempts to encroach on their hair sovereignty, Diné people visually embody the world they seek to create, one of Hózhó. Hózhó means to "walk in beauty" through balance and harmony with the universal structure.[17] Hózhó materializes when Diné individuals remain in balance with both the land and the cosmological forces that pervade their world. In this way, Hózhó is a com

prehensive worldview, constituting the principles, values, and practices that define Diné ways of being in the universe. Hair is a mechanism by which Diné people produce Hózhó within their body and souls. Existing in Hózhó requires cleansing the body and consciousness of colonial domination. Once the body and mind have been cleansed, Indigenous peoples are able to conceptualize truly sovereign political and social systems, thereby giving them the tools to construct sovereign worlds.

Hair's Significance Across the World Religions

The significance of hair is not limited to Diné worldviews. These examples showcase that hair carries religious significance across many communities. While this section only describes a small fraction of the many stories that emblemize hair's significance in world religions, these examples reflect hair's capacity to embody identity and catalyze self actualization – a recurring theme throughout this essay. Similarly, these examples illustrate the widespread significance of hair sovereignty. Many religious communities express diverse, yet equally significant, relationships with their hair. These communities regard hair as a conduit for both experiencing and expressing personal religiosity. Consequently, hair sovereignty emerges as a reflection of any community or person's ability to exist in their own identity and articulate their relationity to the world. For example, Scottish anthropologist James Frazer describes Rotenese (inhabitants of Rote Island, an island of Indonesia) religion, in which Rotenese parents will cut their child's hair

[17] "Hózhǫ́," *Mercy Volunteer Corps*, 26 Jan. 2016, https://www.mercyvolunteers.org/2016/01/hozho/.

at a young age. The first hair is regarded as a danger to the child because "young child[ren] are almost universally supposed to be in a tabooed or dangerous state."[18] The hair is consequently shaved, "removing the taboo" and "destroy[ing] the separable parts of the child's body…that are infected."[19] These same practices appear in childbirth, where birthing mothers shave their heads and burn the strands to destroy negative taboos. In these examples, hair functions as a vessel for diseases and malicious influences that wreak havoc on the body. Haircuts are utilized as purificatory rituals, symbolically removing the dangerous forces that permeate peoples' hair. Other religious groups combine ceremonial baths with these haircuts. At some Hindu places of pilgrimage, Frazer explains, men who commit serious crimes shave their heads and plunge themselves in a sacred river, from which, "they emerge new creatures, with all the accumulated guilt of a long life effaced."[20]As this example shows, for these Hindu communities, haircuts function as ceremonial tools for curating new identities.

Another example of hair's significance appears in the experiences of Satpal Makkar, a member of the Sikh religion. Makkar has never been to a barbershop or felt a razor graze across his face. Makkar maintains that respecting God "includes never shearing any hair on his body, [as] doing so would mar the perfection of God's creation."[21] Like other baptized Sikhs, Makkar dons the dastar, or turban. The dastar symbolizes the values God expects men to follow, like modesty, respect, and self-control. The physical act of wearing his dastar evokes personal feelings of modesty within Makkar's personal consciousness. He explained that the dastar represents "a symbol of honor that is literally considered a member of the Sikh's body." Although a Sihk can remove their dastar at home, Makkar maintains, they must continue to

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[18] James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: The Roots of Religion and Folklore* (Crown Publishers Inc, 1981): 206.
[19] Frazer: 206.
[20] Frazer: 207
[21] Paul R. Kopenkoskey, "Theology of hair: How many world religions see it as sacred part of identity," *mLive*, 26 Nov. 2011, https://www.mlive.com/living/grand-rapids/2011/11/theology_of_hair_how_many_worl.html.

respect it because it "protects [their] hair."[22] Makkar contends that each part of an individual's body belongs to God, the hair most especially. Hair directly connects to a person's life force – their brain. Every individual's brain, just like one's hair, is independently curated by God and epitomizes His vision for that person's existence.

While this section only describes a small fraction of the many stories that emblemize hair's significance in world religions, these examples reflect hair's capacity to embody identity and catalyze self actualization – a recurring theme throughout this essay.

The Importance of Hair for Indigenous Peoples Across Turtle Island

While the Diné people serve as the focus of this essay, Diné hair cosmologies do not exist in a vacuum. Across Turtle Island, Indigenous peoples place hair at the epicenter of their conceptions of selfhood and actuality. While Indigenous peoples have varying understandings of hair's significance in both self identification and actualization, some tenets remain consistent among them. These commonalities provide a lens for conceptualizing Indigenous hair cosmologies generally. To situate the Diné peoples' place within the expansive web of Indigenous hair cosmology, this segment will focus on the commonalities found within these differing understandings.

Almost universal amongst the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island is the notion that hair is necessary for the actualization of a wholly Indigenous identity. For example, the Dilzhe'eh (Tonto Apache) peoples' mythological stories equate hair with a person's selfhood. In these stories, the Holy People (gods of Dilzhe'eh creation) sought to make the earth come to life. To do so, Black Water gave the earth blood in the form of oceans. Then, Black Metal gave bones to the earth in the form of mountains and cliffs. Black Thunder, noticing that the earth was dull and

[22] Kopenkoskey, 2011.

susceptible to the cold, gave the earth hair in the form of grasses and trees.[23] Finally, Black Wind gave breath to the earth in the form of a breeze. Once she was given these four qualities, the earth came to life. To the Dilzhe'eh people, the earth is female, with "her head to the east, feet to the west…and four great beings (limbs) support[ing] her."[24] When the holy people formed the earth and gave her life, they set the cosmological blueprint for human creation. The ideal Dilzhe'eh person, in both bodily composition and visual presentation, embodies the mythological model set by the earth's divine construction. Not only is hair a rudimentary component of life, but also a means by which the Dilzhe'eh people conceptualize bodily expression and personal meaning. In the Dilzhe'eh peoples' origin myth, Black Thunder loathed the dullness of the newly formed earth and gave her "hair" to decorate herself. He explained that the earth must properly care for her hair because it was her only tool for identity-cultivation and creative expression.[25] As a result, the Dilzhe'eh people see hair and hairstyles as both divine imperatives and means to express personal identity.

Like the Dilzhe'eh peoples, the Nuche (Ute) consider hair to be a vital component of life. For example, in a conversation with ethnographer Marvin Kaufmann, a Nuche interviewee explained how, if an individual sought revenge against someone, they would slice off their hair, symbolically killing them.[26] In the Nuche worldview, hair is an extension of life and growing knowledge. As a Nuche person gains experience and wisdom by living, their hair grows. Consequently, slicing off a Nuche person's hair is equivalent to destroying the visual manifestation of their life and experience. Similarly, it fundamentally destroys how a Nuche person remembers and conceptualizes the experiences that define personal identity, as hair

[23] Grenville Goodwin and Janice Thompson Goodwin, *The Social Organization of the Western Apache* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942): 1.
[24] Goodwin and Goodwin: 24.
[25] Goodwin: 25.
[26] Marvin Kaufmann Opler, "A Colorado Ute Indian Bear Dance," *Southwestern Lore* 7, no. 2 (1941): 27, https://research.ebsco.com/c/lpmkjz/viewer/pdf/uy3ynnl6sj?route=details.

functions as a place to shape and reshape self-identity and knowledge. In other words, if they lose their hair, they lose their access to wisdom, memory, and self expression; which is analogous to death itself.

While the Nuche value hair for its capacity to preserve and visually exemplify life experience, sometimes it is cosmologically necessary to receive a haircut. For many Indigenous groups, haircuts are imperative during times of mourning. The Apsáalooke (Crow) people, for example, warn that if a person leaves their hair long after a close death, they will taint their memories and thoughts with traumatic feelings. A person can avoid corruption, however, by receiving a haircut, which eliminates an individual's connection to negative life experiences and memories, enabling them to articulate new possibilities for life. Similar themes are conveyed by the Chatiks si chatiks (Pawnee) people, who utilize haircuts as tools for emotional purification in times of mourning. During these periods, an individual keeps their short hair loose, never tying it back. By keeping their hair loose, the individual allows all malicious thoughts and feelings to slip out of the body.[27] Once the body has oozed all of its negativity out, the individual's life can continue, symbolized by the appearance of new hair growth.

Many Indigenous communities also utilize haircuts to properly prepare the deceased for spiritual transition. The Ashiwi (Zuni) people, for example, consider human souls the most vulnerable when they are transitioning to the spirit world. Consequently, relatives of the deceased are required to complete specific rites, namely a burial ceremony. In this ceremony, the deceased person's hair is cleansed with yucca, cut as short as possible, massaged with cornmeal, and positioned to the west toward Kothluwalawa, the final resting place of deceased Ashiwi ancestors.[28] After relatives bury the body, they join in songs and prayers to guide the soul of the

[27] George Amos Dorsey, *Notes on Skidi Pawnee Society* (Chicago: Field Museum Press, 1940): 105.
[28] Virgil J. Wyaco, *A Zuni Life: A Pueblo Indian in Two Worlds* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998): 37.

deceased to Kothluwalawa. For the Ashiwi, the intentional manipulation of the deceased person's hair is imperative to the successful completion of a burial ceremony. Cosmological understandings of the composition of Ashiwi bodies position hair and hair pores as conduits for the movement of wind. For many Indigenous groups, wind is a physical emblem of the soul. The wind is the collection of energies that allow people to move, talk, think, and feel. In Ashiwi belief, the winds, the indispensable energies that allow people to experience life, utilize pores as a bridge to move in and out of the human body.[29] If the deceased person's hair is not cut or positioned toward Kothluwalawa, their wind will become trapped or lost. Similar to Ashiwi peoples, the Oceti Sakowin (Dakota) perceive hair as a conduit for winds to move in and out of the body. In her ethnographic accounts of Oceti Sakowin life, Ella Cara Deloria (Aŋpétu Wašté Wiŋ) describes hearing stories of a father who "kept a lock of his son's hair always against his [chest] where his heart beat might lend it motion and life."[30] She claims that the father's behavior was an unconscious attempt to "keep a ghost." By carrying an object that once housed his son's winds, the father sought to re-imbue them with life. A common funerary practice among the Oceti Sakowin is to cut the hair of the deceased and form hair bundles. These hair bundles came to represent the "ghosts" of the deceased, and relatives were expected to value them as family. This example illuminates how the Oceti Sakowin revere and value hair because it functions as an extension of the soul, a theme that resonates with many Indigenous groups.

Another nearly universal aspect of Indigenous hair cosmologies is anchored in Schwarz's concept of synecdoche. Synecdoche proposes that parts of the body, namely hair, influence a person's well-being even after they separate from the body. Concerns about sorcery in Indigenous communities emerge from an understanding that hairs, whether they are connected to

[29] Frank Hamilton Cushing, *Outlines of Zuni Creation Myth* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Press, 1896): 360.
[30] Ella Deloria, *The Dakota Way of Life* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1988),:174.

the body or not, will always have an effect on the person. For example, to prevent sorcerers from accessing their hair, the Shis-Inday (Mescalero Apache) people ceremonially burn all hair clippings. If a person fails to properly dispose of their hairs, sorcerers can come to possess and utilize them to cast evil spells. To the Shis-Inday, sorcerers are capable of giving someone a deathly illness by simply exposing themselves to that individual's hair clippings. The Ashiwi peoples convey similar fears of bodily illness because of sorcery. Ashiwi medicine men complete a yearly winter solstice ceremony where individuals can eliminate evil influences by destroying the link between the self and the bodily objects sorcerers come to possess. The capacity for sorcerers to utilize bodily objects as talismans for malicious curses illuminates how Indigenous peoples consider hair to be inextricably connected to physical and mental well-being. It is also exemplary of the synecdochic concepts that come to define Indigenous understandings of selfhood and bodily effect.

Because of hair's synecdochic connection to an individual's physiological well-being, many Indigenous peoples consider hair washing a purification act. For example, the Dilzhe'eh peoples obligate ceremonial participants to thoroughly cleanse and brush their hair before services. They believe that, through everyday activity, people acquire dust and debris in their hair, which effectively clouds the mind with "mental junk." Individuals' hair is symbolically tied to their thinking processes.[31] The winds that govern contemplative and analytical thought, for the Dilzhe'eh, find shelter in an individual's hair. Consequently, the cosmological wisdom and power (winds) evoked by ceremony cannot properly permeate an individual's body unless they are cleansed of these mental blockers. In this way, hair washing also functions as a purificatory device. The Apsáalooke (Crow), similar to the Dilzhe'eh, believe that dirty hair can impede a

[31] Grenville Goodwin, *The Social Organization of the Western Apache* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942): 558-60.

person's ability to both absorb and think critically about new information. The Apsáalooke maintain that dust in an individual's hair not only blocks their mental processes, but also jeopardizes their health.

When individuals experience severe illnesses, Ashiwi holy men begin with intensive hair washes to eliminate any malicious influences that have amassed over time. In the ceremony, relatives scrub the ill person's hair with yucca, which "billows up like clouds and compels the rain to fall and purify."[32] Among many Indigenous groups, hair is symbolically connected to water, as hair (when worn down) resembles falling rain. Venerated because it nourishes and supports life, water can cleanse the body of impurities. For the Ashiwi people, cleansing of the hair is the vehicle by which an individual can purify the entirety of the self.

Scalping is a touchy subject. Most scholars of Indigenous studies would likely ignore scalping altogether, yet this essay presents it as an striking example of hair's cosmological power. This essay cannot explain away the phenomenon of scalping in Indigenous communities. It is an indisputable fact that many Indigenous communities treated scalps as treasures of war and victory. Historically, colonial powers have used the example of scalping against Indigenous communities to exemplify the supposed "barbarity" and "savageness" of their practices. However, the colonial empire's virtue signaling is ironic considering the degree of brutality its violence against both Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities has inflicted. This essay presents one example of scalping that demonstrates how hair serves as a vessel for life. The example comes from Ruth Underhill's *The Autobiography of Papago Woman*, and centers on Maria Chona, a Tohono O'odham woman. In a war expedition, Chona's father killed an Apache man and brought home the scalp. After each member of the family was purified by ritual

[32]Elsie Worthington Clews Parsons, "Mothers and Children at Zuñi, New Mexico," *Man,* 19 (1919): 172, https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=nt23-008.

bathings, the scalp was adopted into the family "like a relative."[33] Her father's guardian took the Apache's hair from the scalp and formed a little doll man. Chona explained that, "My father was not afraid of that enemy's hair. He said to it: 'My child.' Then he gave it to my mother and she took it in her arms and said: 'My child.'[34] Chona's father saw the Apache man's scalp as a vessel for the human soul, and adopted it into his family. In this example, hair symbolically takes on the energies and forces that comprise a person's sense of existence. As a result, the scalp represents more than just a physical trophy, it embodies the very essence of one's soul.

Diné Mythology

This section explores references to hair in the Diné people's mythological stories, called the Diné Bahane'.[35] The primary source utilized is Paul G. Zolbrod's *Diné Bahane': the Navajo Creation Story*, as it offers the most comprehensive version of these mythological stories. This section does not cover the entirety of Diné Bahane'. Instead, it introduces its "plot" and zooms in on the moments hair is mentioned. Overall, the Diné Bahane' tells of the Níłch'i Dine'é's (Air-Spirit people) and inevitably Diné community's ascension into five successive worlds. The Níłch'i Dine'é's initially lived in peace in the first world; however, they began to fight and commit adultery with each other.[36] Eventually, the four chiefs of the world banished the Níłch'i Dine'é, giving them four days to find a new world to live in. At the end of the four days, walls of water appeared in all four directions, and closed in on the Níłch'i Dine'e. Having nowhere else to go, the Níłch'i Dine'e took flight. They found a hole within the sky, and crawled into the second world. The Swallow people, the native inhabitants of the second world, allowed the Níłch'i Dine'e to live amongst their communities. They were like family for a time, calling each other

[33] Ruth Underhill, *The Autobiography of a Papago Woman* (Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association, 1936): 18.
[34] Underhill: 18.
[35] "Hózhǫ́," *Mercy Volunteer Corps*, 26 Jan. 2016, https://www.mercyvolunteers.org/2016/01/hozho/.
[36] Paul G. Zolbrod, *Diné Bahane': the Navajo Creation Story* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987): 34.

grandparent, grandchild, mother, father, sister, etc. However, one day, the Swallow peoples' chief banished them, claiming, "We treated you as friends and as kin. And this is how you return our kindness! No doubt you were driven out by the world below for just such disorderly acts. Well, you must leave this world, too; we will have you here no longer."[37] While many written accounts do not explicitly describe the moral transgression committed by the Níłch'i Dine'e, it is implied that one of the Níłch'i Dine'e had sexual relations with the Swallow chief's wife. The Níłch'i Dine'e took off into the skies, finding a slit and emerging into the third world. The Yellow Grasshopper people occupied this world, and they initially refused to speak to the Níłch'i Dine'e. Yet, over time, the groups respected each other and regarded themselves as family. They lived in harmony for twenty-three days. However, on the following day, the Níłch'i Dine'e repeated their previous offense, with one of them having sexual relations with the Yellow Grasshopper chief's wife. The Yellow Grasshopper chief ordered the Níłch'i Dine'e to leave the third world, and the Níłch'i Dine'e were forced to take flight again.

When the Níłch'i Dine'e's arrived into the fourth world, hair emerged as a visual tool for distinction, marking the Níłch'i Dine'e's distinctiveness from another community they met, the Pueblo people. At first, the Níłch'i Dine'e did not observe any living entities in the fourth world, only four snowy mountains – one in each cardinal direction.[38] The Níłch'i Dine'e successively sent two scouts to the east, south, and west, but the scouts found no traces of life. Finally, two scouts were sent to explore the north. When they came back, they claimed to have found a strange race. These people cut their hair squarely in the front and lived in underground houses. They were farmers and gave the scouts food for their journey. They also educated the scouts on how to practice discipline, so that they would not be banished from this world, as they were from

[37] Zolbrod: 40.
[38] Zolbrod: 41.

the third world. They showed them how to live as Hózhó. These people are considered to be the Pueblo people. In the Diné Bahane', the Pueblo people are not named directly; rather, they are identified by their squarely-cut hair. By linking this specific hairstyle to the Pueblo people, the story mythologically links hair-style to communal identity. In Diné thought, "k'é" embodies "all that is positive within relationships," such as "compassion, cooperation, friendliness, unselfishness, and peacefulness."[39] Maureen Trudelle Schwarz argues that the principle of "relatedness" governs the Diné peoples' moral and cosmological existence. Those who are genealogically Diné receive the most moral consideration according to k'é. "Affinal exchange" is the next principle of valuation.[40] Christopher Vecsey explains that "those to whom one is related by birth clan, and those to whom one is related through marriage, are given the greatest ethical consideration, along with oneself."[41] Conversely, non-relatives, and especially non-Diné, are excluded from top moral consideration. In the value system established by k'é, "Athabascan speakers are less alien than other Native Americans, who are less alien than non-Indians."[42] Hair serves as a tool for fostering communal solidarity and sustaining the principle of k'é. In the myth above, hair symbolizes communal identity and highlights the Pueblo peoples' distinctiveness compared to other "alien" peoples. Diné conceptions of k'é emphasize hair's role in both affirming and distinguishing their communal identity amid a world of diverse human and non-human connections.

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[39] Louise Lamphere, Eva Price, Carole Cadman, and Valerie Darwin, *Weaving Women's Lives: Three Generations in a Navajo Family* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007): 42.
[40] Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *I Choose Life: Contemporary Medical and Religious Practices in the Navajo World,* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008): 297.
[41] Christopher Vecsey, "Navajo Morals and Myths, Ethics and Ethicists," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 43, no. 1 (2015): 93.
[42] Vecsey: 93.

The myth of Áłtsé hastiin[43] and Áłtsé asdzaa's[44] creation positions hair as a quintessential component of Diné people's bodily composition. Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa are formed in the Haashch'ééh Dine'é, or Holy People's, likeness, making their construction cosmologically significant. Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa's bodily construction is treated as a model for successive generations of Diné people, and hair is integral to their design. In the fall of their first year in the fourth world, the Níłch'i Dine'e heard a voice calling from the east.[45] They listened and waited four times, then suddenly found themselves standing amongst four mysterious persons. These persons were the Haashch'ééh Dine'é, or Holy People. The Haashch'ééh Dine'é made hand gestures toward the Níłch'i Dine'e. However, the Níłch'i Dine'e failed to understand them. After four days, Bits'íís Łizhin, the Black Body, spoke in the Níłch'i Dine'e's language, claiming that the Haashch'ééh Dine'é, "want intelligent people, created in their likeness, not in yours. You have bodies like theirs…But you have the teeth of beasts! You have the mouths of beasts! You have the feet of beasts! You have the claws of beasts!"[46] Bits'íís Łizhin claimed that the new people would share the Haashch'ééh Dine'é's features, one of those features being hair. After twelve days, the gods set one holy buckskin on the ground, facing its head west. They placed two ears of corn on the buckskin, one yellow and the other white, facing east. On top of the corn, they laid another sacred buckskin, facing its head east. Under the white corn they placed a white eagle feather. Similarly, beneath the yellow corn they placed the feather of a yellow eagle. Finally, Níłch'i łigai, the White Wind, blew between the buckskins. As the wind blew, the Haashch'ééh Dine'é circled the objects four times. Once they finished walking, they removed the topmost buckskin. The ears of corn vanished, and in their place lay a man and a

[43] First Man in the Diné Bahane'.
[44] First Woman in the Diné Bahane'.
[45] Zolbrod: 43.
[46] Zolbrod: 43.

woman. These beings, called Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa, represent the earliest ancestors of the Diné. They were formed in the Haashch'ééh Dine'é's exact image, serving as models for ideal physical form. The Haashch'ééh Dine'é shaped Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa with all of their qualities, like hair, hands, feet, and mouth. When the Haashch'ééh Dine'é fashioned Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa, they included hair as a necessary element of Diné bodily composition. Hair was seen as a vessel for knowledge, thought, and memory. Consequently, the Haashch'ééh Dine'é commanded Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa to only cut their hair during times of mourning, as hair, or knowledge, could be destroyed or corrupted by the painful memory of death. To move on from grief, Diné individuals had to "cut off their memory [(hair)]," with the newest growth signifying a new life after mourning.[47] The Haashch'ééh Dine'é taught them how to care for themselves and how to behave like Hózhó. All of these qualities characterize the nuances of Diné bodily construction.

Hair takes on a generational quality in the creation of other humans, as Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa continue to create humans in the Haashch'ééh Dine'é's exact image.[48] They first set out to create a man. They made his feet, toe-nails, and ankles from the soil of the earth. His legs were lightning, his knee made of white shell, his body formed from white and yellow corn, and his veins woven from blue corn. His heart was made from red obsidian and his skin came from every animal and species of flower pollen. His body's movement was the wind, his hair was his knowledge, his saliva became the light rain, and his tears formed the steady rain. They formed his hair from "all kinds of water: rains, springs, lakes, rivers and ponds…of the black cloud and the male rain, the sky, and the female rain."[49] All of the bodily components given to the man, as

[47] Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *Molded in the Image of Changing Woman: Navajo Views on the Human Body and Personhood* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997): 147.
[48] Alieen O'Bryan, *Navajo Indian Myths* (New York: Dover Publications, 1993): 102.
[49] O'Bryan, 102.

well as the materials they are composed of, are mythologically positioned as integral components of a fully realized Diné person. Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa recognize the intrinsic importance of their hair and work to pass on this feature to succeeding generations of Diné people. Similarly, Diné people's hair is compositionally equated with water – the essence of life itself. Just as water nourishes and sustains all living entities, hair embodies and carries forward the vitality of the Diné people.

Yet, while some myths characterize hair as a necessary component of Diné body construction, others emphasize hair's vulnerability. For example, the creation of pubic hair reveals the dangerous aspects of hair. In the myth, Áłtsé asdzaa gave birth to five pairs of twins.[50] The first pair, unlike the others, were neither male nor female; they were Nádleeh. Each of the twins, except for the Nádleeh, married each other. Eventually, the twins grew ashamed of their incest and ended their marriages. Áłtsé asdzaa was happy that the twins dissolved their immoral incest but grew worried that men and women could end their marriages too easily. So, to solve her plight, she created sexual organs. She made a penis of turquoise. She then took a cuticle from a woman's breast, mixed it with yucca fruit, and placed the mixture inside the turquoise penis. She named the organ 'aziz. Conversely, she made a vagina from white shell and placed a red-shell clitoris within it. She then took a cuticle from a man's breast, mixed it with yucca fruit, and placed the mixture inside the vagina. With her task complete, Áłtsé asdzaa proclaimed that every boy would be given a penis and every girl a vagina. The day after, as a family was giving a boy his penis, the sky suddenly swooped down, embracing the earth. Coyote, one of the children engendered by sky and earth, emerged from the ground where the sky had met the earth. In many Indigenous mythologies, Coyote is a trickster known for unsettling the balance of the universe. The Diné Bahane exemplifies Coyote as an agent of chaos. He continuously disrupts Hózhó by

[50] Zolbrod: 48.

interfering with order and introducing conflict into the community. In this myth, Coyote noticed the family placing a penis on their son. He removed a few hairs from his beard and placed them on the boy's private place. He then did the same for a girl receiving her vagina, remarking on how nice it looks in that spot. While the community agreed with Coyote, Áłtsé asdzaa grew concerned that man and woman would be too easily drawn to each other. To prevent this, she commanded the boy and girl to cover themselves with clothes. In this myth, hair functions as a tool for disrupting sexual balance. Coyote makes pubic hair a permanent component of bodily composition, throwing the natural balance into chaos. Previously discussed myths have expressed the dangers of sexual desire for maintaining harmonious communities. This explains Áłtsé asdzaa's ultimate concern that pubic hair will throw the community into sexual chaos, and her efforts to prevent future conflict by requiring everyone to wear clothes. This myth draws an important distinction between two kinds of hair: atsii' (head hair) and aghaa' (pubic hair). While atsii' exemplifies communal solidarity, aghaa' represents hypersexuality. The term "Aghaa'" can also denote fur, wool, or fleece, imbuing it with an animalistic quality and linking it to the primal forces of nature. These two types of "hair" demonstrate that Diné peoples' hair is characterized as a component of the body with strong identifying force, exerting both positive and negative influences on the individual.

In the myth of Nádleeh's death, hair is marked by negative influences, yet it also becomes a vehicle for affirming personal identity. After arguing over which gender contributes more to the community, Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa break up. Áłtsé hastiin declared that the men will "cross the stream and live apart from the women," and that the Nádleeh would join them.[51] The nádleeh were inventors, always creating new things for the community. They created pottery, grinding stones, cups and bowls, baskets, and other utensils. Since the nádleeh were both man

[51] Zolbrod: 51.

and woman and built these items without women's assistance, they left alongside the men. Inevitably, men and women began to miss one another and sought to reconnect. While Áłtsé hastiin and Áłtsé asdzaa reconciled, uniting the community, problems continued to arise. The myth ends with the flooding of the fourth world, forcing the community to find a passage into the fifth one. This mythological context lays the groundwork for Nadleeh's untimely death. Nádleeh is a Diné name for a person who expresses masculine and feminine qualities. Within this myth, Áłtsé hastiin imposes masculine qualities onto the nádleeh. The obscurity behind the nádleeh's gender identity makes them pawns in Áłtsé hastiin 's game, but his perceptions do not necessarily reflect how the nádleeh understand themselves. After spending some time in this new world, the people went to the place of emergence and saw water swirling within the hole. Later the next day, one of the Nádleeh stopped breathing. Not having experienced this before, the people left Nádleeh alone for the entire night. Two men passed by the place of emergence and looked inside the hole. Deep below, the Nádleeh's body sat by a river, cooking tools beside them, silently combing their hair. The Nádleeh's final moments embody femininity, challenging Áłtsé hastiin 's initial understanding of the Nádleeh. While the Nádleeh can express masculinity, they also cherish the feminine aspects of life, symbolized by the kitchen tools and the act of brushing hair. These modes of expression are not incompatible for the Nádleeh, nor do they necessitate categorization. Moreover, the Nádleeh is the first to experience death. Even in death, the Nádleeh immediately begins to brush their hair. The scene plays out like the nádleeh's final moment of peace. The imagery, while terrifying for the two men, showcases that the Nádleeh saw hair brushing as a vital practice, so consequential that it must continue beyond death. Similarly, after seeing the image of Nádleeh brushing their hair, the two men die, emphasizing the intrinsic

danger associated with hair. In this way, death can be transmitted by sight alone, with hair acting as a conduit in this process.

Many of these myths express that hair retains the potential to both positively and negatively influence Diné people. For example, the myth of Coyote and his wife portray hair as both a means for familial bonding and a tool for deceit. Coyote and his wife fell in love in a highly unusual way. First, she asked him to slay one of the Naayéé, alien creatures that preyed on her people. Consequently, Coyote went and killed Yé'iitsohíbáhí, one of the Naayéé, and gave his scalp to the maiden. She then claimed that no one could become her husband until they died four times. Coyote replied that he was willing to die for her, but she must be the person to kill him. The maiden happily obliged, beating Coyote with a club. However, the maiden never struck Coyote's life force—his nose—allowing him to quickly return, claiming he had come back to life. The maiden beat Coyote three more times, yet he always reappeared, fully healthy. Coyote eventually married the maiden, but her twelve brothers disapproved.[52] Her brothers planned to eliminate Coyote and asked him to go on a hunting trip. After a successful hunt, they ordered him to carry the food back alone. As he walked through the canyon, he saw the Otter people playing hoop and ball. With each round, they wagered their skins (fur hair) and if they lost, they would dive into the lake and emerge with a fresh coat. Their skins represent a kind of scalp, given as a prize to the victor. As the Otter dives into the lake and emerges with a new fur coat, they adopt a new identity, leaving their former self with the victor. Coyote asked the Otter people to join the game, and they reluctantly agreed. Coyote lost the game, and despite pleading to keep his coat, the Otter people tore it from him. He jumped into the lake, but his coat did not regenerate. He returned to the Otter people and asked to play again. Because Coyote was without a coat to wager, the Otter people rejected him. Furious, Coyote started shouting insults at the

[52] This section comes from Zolbrod: 100-107.

Otter people. After enduring his insults for some time, the Otter people chose to kill Coyote.[53] They tore him apart, bit him, clawed him, and beat him relentlessly.

Coyote's death enraged the maiden. Late at night, she performed a ceremony, where she placed a bone awl in her jaw, transforming her teeth into tusks. Hair grew across her entire body, and she transformed into a fierce bear. From dusk to dawn, the Bear Woman wandered the canyon, killing all of Coyote's enemies. Her brothers became her final targets, and she used deceitful tactics to lure them to their deaths. She sat each of them down and brushed their hair. When the brothers looked away for a long moment, she would transform into the bear and devour their heads.[54] The final brother, however, caught on to her plans. The Bear Woman sat him down, just like the others, and began to brush his hair. Yet, Níłch'i, the Wind, spoke to him, warning him about his sister's tactics. By watching her shadow on the ground, the boy was able to see his sister transform. Each time her jaw began to grow, the boy asked what she was doing, and stopped transforming. They continued this process four times, but Níłch'i advised the boy not to let it happen a fifth time, as his sister would surely kill him. Before his sister could transform, he quickly ran away and impaled her vital parts, killing her. In this myth, hair brushing is represented as a bonding tool. Although Bear Woman uses hair brushing as a trick to lure her brothers to their deaths, the fact that the brothers fall for it illuminates the connective function of the practice. Yet, it simultaneously showcases hair's receptiveness to manipulation and chaos, and its capacity to upset Hózhó.

In the myth of Monster Slayer, hair – specifically in the form of scalps – is shown as a marker of triumph. By taking the scalp of an enemy, Monster Slay takes possession of their life, making it a valuable trophy. Monster Slayer and Born of Water are the sons of Changing Woman

[53] Zolbrod: 116-118.
[54] Zolbrod: 125.

and are referred to as the Hero Twins. When Diné men and women were separated in the fourth world, women had sexual relations with non-human persons, like cactuses. These sexual encounters led to the birth of monsters, called Naayéé'. These women rejected their monstrous babies, so the Naayéé' vowed to destroy and devour all of humanity. Monster Slayer devoted himself to murdering the Naayéé' after his father, Jóhonaa'éí (the Sun) presented him with weapons of war and told him to "seek…war out our enemies and…spill their blood."[55] Monster Slayer and Born of Water first took on Yé'iitsoh (Big Giant), striking him with lightning and scalping him. Monster Slayer then gave his brother a new name, Na'ídígishí, He Who Cuts the Life Out of the Enemy. The twins placed the scalp and other objects of war, like the flint from Yé'iitsoh's armor, into a woven basket and presented them to their mom, Changing Woman. Changing Woman rejoiced in celebration at the twins' great victory. Monster Slayer was thirsty to kill more of the Naayéé', setting his eyes on Déélgéed, the Horned Monster. After slaying Déélgéed, Monster Slayer scalped the Naayéé' and cut out pieces of his lung and bowel. He brought these trophies home to Changing Woman, who celebrated her son's victories.[56] Monster Slayer continued to slay and scalp the Naayéé' until they were completely wiped out of existence. The scalps of the Naayéé' are symbolic representations of their life, and Monster Slayer conceptualizes them as trophies of war. By removing their scalps, Monster Slayer takes ownership over the Naayéé's soul. Although the Naayéé' are physically dead, their souls live on within the scalp, which Monster Slayer now possesses.

Overall, hair plays a pivotal role in the Diné Bahane'. The story venerates hair as a cosmologically necessary component of Diné bodily construction and key marker of communal identity. Similarly, the myths identify a duality to hair. Hair fosters communal solidarity, purifies

[55] Zolbrod: 165.
[56] This section draws from Zolbrod: 177-192.

the body, brings forth rain, and strengthens familial bonds. Yet, it also carries the potential for oversexualization and deceit. Myth is foundational to the notion of hair sovereignty. Diné myth represents hair as a cosmologically essential component of Diné bodily construction and selfhood. In this framework, hair is an extension of being and deserves the respect and consideration given to any living entity. Moreover, hair functions as a means of asserting one's place in the world. Diné myth represents hair as a tool for embodying Dinéness, which means to situate oneself within a cosmological orientation and relational worldview of the world that is distinctly Diné. Myths construct the principles and qualities of Dinéness, while hair functions as a conduit for enacting this worldview. Myth, thus, supplies hair sovereignty with its cosmological foundations, emphasizing that the care, regulation, and decoration of hair are personal responsibilities tied to the preservation of Diné identity. Although hair undoubtedly represents one of the key themes discussed in Diné Bahane', these myths are suggestive rather than definitive. Mythology helps set the foundations for Diné cosmological thought and action, but hair's visual and symbolic power only come to life more vibrantly in ceremony, where the knowledges obtained by myth are actively utilized.

Ceremonial Life: The Kinaalda Ceremony

The Kinaaldá ceremony is a female puberty ceremony and stems from the myth of Changing Woman. In the myth, Changing Woman experienced the first Kinaaldá and gave women reproductive powers. During their Kinaaldá ceremonies, Diné girls' hair is manipulated to visually replicate Changing Woman, forming the necessary conditions for Changing Woman to assume control of the girl and bestow her with ceremonial wisdom, knowledge, and power. The myth of Changing Woman's first Kinaaldá lays the foundation for the Diné people's use of the ceremony, with hair serving as an integral part of the ritual process. As the myth goes, one

day, Áłtsé hastiin gazed at the mountain, Chol'i'i, and saw that it was veiled in clouds. At the peak of Chol'i'i, he saw a small fire. Áłtsé hastiin journeyed to Chol'i'i and found a crying baby, who, in a flash, became a turquoise sculpture. Lightning leapt from the baby as she lay on a cradleboard. Áłtsé hastiin carried the baby home, and Áłtsé asdzaa immediately welcomed her as their daughter. Eventually, the Haashch'ééh Dine'é visited and performed a ceremony, transforming the turquoise sculpture into Changing Woman. After the ceremony, the people noticed that the baby was not breathing. Black Wind entered the baby's foot and exited the top of her head, making a hair whorl. Then, the Blue Wind entered the hair whorl and exited from her toes. Changing Woman began to faintly cry. Within these hair whorls, ghosts enter and exit the body.[57] In a Kinaaldá ceremony, Changing Woman enters the girl's hair whorl and imparts the ceremonial wisdom necessary for the transition to Diné womanhood. The hair whorl is a passageway to the soul, and hair is a physical extension of that soul. The Kinaaldá ceremony capitalizes on the hair whorl's connection to the soul, using it as a conduit for Changing Woman and her transformative powers.

At the age of sixteen, Changing Woman received the first Kinaaldá. The Haashch'ééh Dine'e washed and combed her hair, then tied it low in the back. In a 1996 performance of Diné storytelling at Colgate University, Sunny Dooley describes how the Haashch'ééh Dine'e cleansed the fears out of Changing Woman's hair.[58] They dressed her in white shell shoes, deer-skin robes, and turquoise jewelry. All of the gods came, even Kay-des-tizhi, the Man Wrapped in Rainbow, who brought delicious food and valuable shells. The ceremony began with a race between Salt Woman and Changing Woman, which they repeated for four consecutive days. Afterward, they gathered together and sang the creation song. The community told Earth

[57] Schwarz, *Molded in the Image*: 83.
[58] Vecsey,: 103.

Spirit about the ceremony and he sent white and red paint. They painted Changing Woman's face. They drew a white line from her hairline down to her chin to summon the rain. They also covered her cheeks in red and drew two white lines on her chin. Next, she laid down on a pile of robes, her long hair covering her entire body. The Haashch'ééh Dine'e stroked her hair, face, and body to make it grow long and strong. They then commanded Changing Woman to bake a cake as an offering for the Sun. She ground and mixed corn to make a batter, cooked it, and offered it to the Sun. At the final stage of the ceremony, the community gathered to decide what name to give the girl. As they observed her, they saw her transform from young to old and back to young again. From then on, the community called her Estan-ah-tlehay, or Changing Woman. The series of activities Changing Woman underwent must be replicated by Diné girls when experiencing their Kinaaldá to fully embody Changing woman and receive her blessings. As a result, hair remains an integral part of the ceremony – not only as a visual link to Changing Woman, but also as a channel for personal transformation.

Cultural anthropologists like Schwarz argue that the Kinaaldá ceremony exemplifies hair's transformative capacity to ceremonially embody and gain power from Holy People. The Kinaaldá ceremony marks a Diné girl's transition into womanhood and links them to Changing Woman, who symbolizes "the ideals of [Diné] women, [as] she embodies beauty, strength, generosity, and humanity."[59] Through the Kinaaldá ceremony, Diné women receive Changing Woman's capacity for birth, a revered power that represents the endurance of the Diné people. The events of the ceremony mimic Changing Woman's first Kinaaldá, in order to channel her newly acquired power of reproduction. As her body developed the capacity to bear children, Changing Woman was shaped by Áłtsé asdzaa into the ideal form of a woman. The ceremonial

[59] Bazhinibah, "Kinaaldá: Coming of age in traditional Diné ceremony," *Native Times*, 2 July 2021, https://navajotimes.com/opinion/essay/kinaalda-coming-of-age-in-traditional-dine-ceremony/.

songs employed by the Kinaaldá call upon the land and the animate beings who permeate it to give the Kinaaldá (Diné girl) her reproductive capabilities. Through prayers to the inanimate world, the Kinaaldá receives the blessings of fertility and a reaffirmation that the cycle of life will continue.

Before each ceremony, the Kinaaldá has her hair washed, brushed, and dried to cleanse the hair of any bad thoughts and prepare it for new ceremonial knowledge. At her first hair cleansing, the Kinaaldá is physically molded into the shape of Changing Woman. The woman who brushes the Kinaaldá's hair will carefully press her hands against the girl's scalp and move down to shape and sculpt the hair. This process, known as molding, is utilized to help the girl visually expand her thoughts and knowledge-producing capacities, enhancing her receptivity to Changing Woman's wisdom. The winds of Changing Woman – her ceremonial presence and wisdom – flow into the girl's body via her hair pores. Consequently, the girl's hair is stretched long enough to carry Changing Woman's winds. By reenacting Changing Woman's Kinaaldá ceremony, the girl receives her winds and physically embodies her, taking on her wisdom, behavior, conduct, power, and more. She teaches the girl how to behave as Hózhó. Even after Changing Woman has exited the girl's body, she continues to carry these knowledges within her hair.

Diné women have consistently spoken about their experiences with Kinaaldá, and these accounts illuminate hair's transformative ability to cultivate and restore Hózhó. In her presentation at Colgate University, Sunny Dooley explained that, by embodying Changing Woman's iconographic elements, like her hair, Diné women become "part of the deity. Like Changing Woman and her hôzhô, Navajo women who undergo the blessing of Kinaalda have the capacity to change the world."[60] She claimed that Changing Woman comes to visit Diné girls

[60] Vecsey: 105.

when they experience a Kinaaldá. Kinaaldá serves as an invitation, bringing Changing Woman back to the community to share her wisdom. Moreover, as Dooley explained, through the Kinaaldá ceremony, girls demonstrate to Changing Woman that they are living in accordance with the teachings she has bestowed on them, honoring womanhood and respecting the sacred gifts she has shared. When Dooley experienced her Kinaaldá, she was given a list of "not-tos," because "how you behave during the Kinaaldá is how you [behave] through life."[61] Changing Woman, Dooley said, embodies Hózhó. She describes it as the condition where "everything from my fingernails to my split ends are in harmony with the universe."[62] When Dooley embodies Changing Woman, she fully experiences Hózhó. The ceremony's various components – the hair brushing, cake making, etc. – work to transform girls into visual embodiments of Changing Woman, creating the conditions necessary for Changing Woman to bestow her qualities and knowledge.

In their interviews with Charlotte Frisbie, Diné women echo Dooley's reflections, yet emphasize that hair functions as a means by which girls both invite Changing Woman and procure her ceremonial blessings. In her interview, one Diné woman described how her aunt washed her hair with yucca root, brushed it with a be'ezo (Diné hairbrush), and shaped it following the haatali's guidance. Once her hair was shaped, her aunt began to mold her body by moving her hands down the arms and legs. Throughout this process, she was unable to "scratch her head or body with her fingernails; [for] if she did, her flesh would be scarred and her hair would fall out."[63] Another woman described how, after every hair wash: "You tie [your] hair up with unwounded buckskin and let it hang down your back in a tail for four days, because that is

[61] Vecsey: 105.
[62] Vecsey: 105.
[63]Charlotte Johnson Frisbie, *Kinaaldá: A Study of the Navajo Girl's Puberty Ceremony* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967): 356.

the way [Changing Woman] began it."[64] She revered hair brushing and cleaning as a way to purify the mind. Cleansing the hair removed the dirt and impurities that clouded her thoughts, allowing her to more fully receive Changing Woman's knowledge.

After each brushing, the girl's hair is tied in a ponytail hairstyle, directly corresponding with the Diné conception of Changing Woman's Kinaaldá. Another Diné woman interviewed by Frisbie described the complex rules associated with a Kinaaldá girl's hair. She claimed that hair could never be curled, and the girl is not allowed to wear makeup for the ceremony. "If the girl observes these restrictions, she'll possess natural beauty, like Changing Woman."[65] While beauty can refer to the girls' visual resemblance to Changing Woman – which is integral to spiritual embodiment – it also symbolizes their adoption of Changing Woman's qualities, particularly her reproductive powers. Through visual transformation, the ceremony turns Diné girls' bodies into vessels for Changing Woman to exert her influence. The blessings invoked by the ceremony enter the girls' bodies through hair and skin pores, thereby implanting themselves into the girls' body of knowledge. If the visual and procedural aspects of the ceremony are performed correctly, Changing Woman's wind will enter the girl's hair whorl, bestowing on her blessings of fertility, strength, and beauty.

Yet, Changing Woman is not the only person who imparts blessings and knowledge in the Kinaaldá ceremony. Women within the community also strive to impart knowledge to the girls during their Kinaaldá ceremony, doing so specifically through hair. To keep their hair securely in place and protect it from foreign influences, the Diné tie it up in a Tsiiyéél. However, even the most cautious Diné cannot control every bit of bodily substance shed or eliminated in the process of daily life. The accidental shedding of hair can serve as a tool for knowledge transfer, as

[64] Frisbie: 357.
[65] Frisbie: 357.

exemplified by Kinaaldá weavers and their connection to the girls who wear their garments. Diné cosmologies express that a lifelong bond exists between weavers and their designs. Artifacts are imbued with life "through the entrance of the maker's wind, and the designs in artifacts are extensions of the artist because they are physical embodiments of the maker's thoughts."[66] As one Diné woman said in an interview with Maureen Schwarz, "You may think 'My hand is clean," but you have the body oils on your loom…Your hair, you know, gets in the way, gets caught in it. That is why it affects them."[67] Because of the lifelong connection between elements of weavers' bodies and the artifacts they create, they frequently need ceremonies to rectify issues that arise after their pieces are used. Beyond the accidental inclusion of hair in ceremonial items, Diné weavers can intentionally use their hair to transfer their best qualities onto those who wear their garments. The weaver selected to create the biil (two-piece woven dress) for a girl's Kinaaldá ceremony understands that her garments will transfer speckles of her body (hair, skin, saliva) to the wearer, imparting positive qualities like ambition, good health, and diligence. Similarly, these speckles carry the ceremonial knowledge of the Kinaaldá back to the weavers, connecting them to Changing Woman's presence through the Kinaaldá girl.

Maureen Schwarz's Synecdoche:

Maureen Schwarz employs the term "synecdoche" to explain hair's place in Diné cosmologies about the body. Schwarz defines synecdoche as the idea that bodily parts and secretions have lifelong influence over an individual's well being, even after they are detached from the body. Schwarz's essay, "Snakes in the Ladies' Room: Navajo Views on Personhood and Effect," establishes the foundations of synecdoche. In August 1994, news spread of an unusual incident on the Navajo reservation. Several snakes were discovered in the women's restroom of a

[66] Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, "Snakes in the Ladies Room: Navajo Views on Personhood and Effect," *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 3 (1997): 615.
[67] Schwarz, "Snakes": 615.

tribal administration building. Although the snakes did not touch or bite any of the women, the women's bodily excrements (hair, menstrual blood, mucus) were vulnerable to contamination. Schwarz claims that this incident raises such alarm for the Diné because of the concepts of homology, complementarity, and synecdoche. These concepts exemplify the complex connections between bodily parts to the whole. Parts share relation to one another (homology). The whole is composed of dual components (complementarity). Finally, each part is equal to the whole, so that any action taken on the part will have an equivalent effect on the whole (synecdoche). These concepts can be expressed as cosmological precepts: (1) the law of similarity conveys that "like equals like" – when brushing the hair, rain falls. The "law of opposition," conversely, expresses that opposites work on opposites - dualities in man/women, day/night, human/nonhuman, etc. Finally, the "law of contagion" communicates that "things that have once been in contact continue ever afterwards to act on each other."[68] Schwarz posits that these three precepts encapsulate Diné understandings of the body and determine the cultural logic underlying Diné concerns about bodily integrity and balance. In the Diné world, where non-human entities (snakes, baskets, coyotes) have essences of personhood, all persons (human or non-human) have an equivocal form. All beings are formed from moisture, air, substance, and warmth, and are brought to life by wind and energy. Diné people organize their universe according to homology and binary forms established in the Diné Bahane'. Human and non-human beings are in a continuous state of interconnection. However, this interconnection is not inherently hierarchical. A community's source of power, its people's knowledge, must be employed to regulate the effects between and among homogenous entities. To maximize or minimize effect, the Diné make choices based on knowledge. In the case of snakes in an administrative building, the Diné consulted medicine men to make informed decisions. In this

[68] Schwarz, "Snakes": 617.

sense, the Diné people draw on their understandings of Diné cosmological systems to make choices that maximize positive effects while eliminating harmful effects. Homology and duality exemplify the connection among all beings, while synecdoche shows how they continuously exert effects on one another.

Synecdoche posits that hair continues to influence the body even after expulsion. The synecdochic property of Diné hair makes it especially receptive to external influence, a quality that is both ceremonially advantageous and profoundly dangerous. One positive aspect of hair's synecdochic receptivity is its role in facilitating ceremony. For example, among the haatali (Diné medicine men and women), short hair is forbidden. When conducting a ceremony, the haatali behave as vessels for the Haashch'ééh Dine'é to take over and conduct the specific rite.[69] Long hair, tied up in a Tsiiyéél (hair bun), is a crucial element of the Haashch'ééh Dine'é's iconography. To embody the Haashch'ééh Dine'é spiritually and use their power, the haatali must visually transform themselves to reflect the Haashch'ééh Dine'é' iconographic elements, with long hair being crucial to this endeavor. When human beings were first formed by the Holy People, they were not allowed to cut their hair. "It is rain," one Diné elder said, "When it is raining you see sheets of rain, that is human hair…that is why the hair tie was created for [our] people."[70] Composed of male rain, female rain, and the moisture of the clouds, hair was formed by the Haashch'ééh Dine'é to visually embody knowledge.[71] Hair works as a communicative tool, allowing the Diné to reach out to the Haashch'ééh Dine'é and utilize sacred knowledge to confront their everyday realities. This idea is reflected in the sacred tradition that Diné people must wear their hair in a Tsiiyéél, except during ceremonies. Hair is allowed to be untied in ceremony because the Haashch'ééh Dine'é gains access to the human body through hair and skin

[69] Franc Johnson Newcomb, *Navajo Omens and Taboos* (Santa Fe: Rydel Press, 1997): 64.
[70] Schwarz, *Molded in the image*: 87.
[71] Schwarz, *Molded in the image*: 87.

pores. To impart their power and wisdom, the winds[72] of the Haashch'ééh Dine'é access the human body through pores and transmit the ceremonial knowledge necessary to bring about a specific outcome. While these examples illustrate the advantages of synecdochic connection, hair can also be corrupted. For example, in Diné myth, the Haashch'ééh Dine'é commanded the Diné people to only cut their hair in times of mourning, as their hair, or souls, could be corrupted by pain and sadness. Haircuts effectively "cut off [the person's] memory," with the newest growth representing a new life after mourning.[73] Synecdoche consequently has dual, contrasting properties: it functions as a conduit for ceremonial power while simultaneously making substances immensely vulnerable.

Leland Wyman and Clyde Kluckhohn organize Dine ceremonies into six categories: Blessingway, Holyway, Lifeway, Evilway, War Ceremonials[74], and Game way. [75] The ceremonies in the first four groups are characterized by a ritual, i.e., by "certain rules of customs that must be observed in conducting ceremonies, in singing songs, reciting prayer words, preparing cut stick offerings, [and] making sandpaintings."[76]Blessingway ceremonies, unlike Holyway, Lifeway, and Evilway ones, are not intended to cure or heal. These ceremonies, the Kinaaldá being the most famous of them, are employed to invoke positive blessings and ward off misfortune.[77] At their essence, these ceremonies call for "good hope" and community preservation. Holyway, Lifeway, and Evilway are all different types of healing ceremonies. The Holyway ceremonies work to restore health and balance to the patient by attracting the Haashch'ééh Dine'é. Lifeway ceremonies are similar to Holyway ones, yet specialize more in healing physical injuries, like

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[72] For the Diné people, "wind" refers to a person's soul or life-energy. For more information look here: James Kale McNeley, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981).
[73] Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *Molded in the Image:* 147.
[74] Because they are largely obsolete, War Ceremonials and Game Way ceremonies cannot be adequately described.
[75] Leland C. Wyman and Clyde Kluckhohn, "Navajo Classifications of Their Song Ceremonials," *American Anthropology Association* 50 (1938).
[76] Wyman and Kluckhohn: 8.
[77] Wyman and Kluckhohn: 8.

sprained ankles.[78] The final collection of healing ceremonies are Evilway ceremonies, which center on exorcising ghosts and chasing away evil influences. Holyway, Lifeway, and Evilway ceremonies are distinguished from the other types of rituals; they are "Chantway ceremonials since they all use a rattle and may therefore may be called chants."[79] One well-known example of a Diné Holyway ceremony is the Rain Chant.[80] The Rain ceremony stems from the myth of Male-Rain and Female-Rain. The two rains met on a sacred mountain, and as they united in love, all the vegetation began to flourish. [81] They gave life to the Rain Youth, who then passed the Rain Chant on to humanity. The chant tells of Male rain, who, after combing the rain feathers in his hair, descended from the mountain and presented rain to the world. As the medicine men perform the Chant, they comb the feathers in their hair and invoke the rain. Gender duality appears within the Rain Chant myth via the convergence of male and female rain. Their union produces Hózhó and creates the conditions for the rain to fall. Meanwhile, homology emphasizes that hair feathers and rain share the same composition, enabling them to exert continuous effects on one another, an example of synecdoche.

Evilway ceremonies commonly use hair-washing as a purifying act. Witches and ghosts continue to have synecdochic effects on the human body after exposure. Schwarz's notion of synecdoche emphasizes that each part represents the whole, so any action performed on the part will have an equal impact on the whole and the effect will continue indefinitely, even reiteratively. In the Enemy Way ceremony[82], cleansing a patient's hair simultaneously purifies

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[78] Wyman and Kluckhohn: 30.
[79] Wyman and Kluckhohn: 10.
[80] Wyman and Kluckhohn: 22.
[81] "Song of the Rain Chant," *Twin Rocks Trading Post*, 2024, https://twinrocks.com/legends/ways-chantways/song-of-the-rain-chant.html#:~:text=The%20Navajo%20ceremonies%20are%20called,Rain%20is%20the%20gentle%20shower.
[82] Wyman and Kluckhohn: 33.

their body and mind.[83] As the dirt is cleansed from the patient's hair, the synecdochic link between the individual and the malevolent forces afflicting them is severed. After the patient's hair is washed, the patient is brushed with red grease paint and charcoal, absorbing the evil from their hair and skin pores. Finally, the patient spends the night outside, making sandpaintings until the wind blows away the ash, or evil. Overall, Evilway ceremonies seek to minimize the effects of evil persons on Diné individuals and restore Hózhó. Within these ceremonies, synecdoche is seen as a catalyst for both chaos and Hózhó. Because of synecdochic transfer, people are vulnerable to evil influences, like witches and ghosts. Yet, the Diné also capitalize on the synecdochic connection to remove the evil from the body, thereby producing Hózhó. In this process, hair plays a significant role.

The Diné people take great care in the disposal of bodily substances like hair, as these elements can be polluted by outside influences that jeopardize Diné bodies. For example, when water is used for a ceremonial bath or for cleansing hair, it can never be poured in a place where it flows back to the individual. If it does, the individual will die and anyone else close to the water's directional flow will suffer from disease. After water is used to wash hair, it is no longer pure; it carries the dust and dirt we accumulate over our lives. Exposing an individual to tainted water risks transferring the harmful elements found in dirty hair. In a common Diné hair washing ritual, a Diné elder vigorously rubs yucca root over the girl's scalp. She then washes the hair in boiled water, running the be'ezo through it to collect all of the dead hairs. At the end of the ceremony, the dirty water is collected and poured around the perimeter of the Diné girl's home,

[83] National Museum of the American Indian, "Chapter 5: Strength Through Culture," *Smithsonian*, 2024, https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/code-talkers/coming-home/.

ensuring that she will always return to her family.[84] The discarded hair is gathered in a cloth, bundled up, and burned to prevent outside forces from taking hold of it.[85]

The safety measures taken by Diné people protect them from cosmological forces, like witches and ghosts, that attempt to harm them. Such beings, for example, can produce illness, cause someone to lose the capacity to speak, and lay generational curses.[86] For the Diné people, the "bathing and shampooing [of] the hair…symbolizes a change from profane to sacred, from the strange and doubtful to the controlled."[87] Synecdoche proposes that the Diné sense of self—awareness of individuality and personal agency—and the Diné idea of personhood—the cultural rules governing relationships between various persons— make the "human individual part of and dependent on the kinship group and community of life…[by] conflating the 'self' with the 'person.'"[88] Through ceremonial practices and communal prayer, the Diné people cultivate relationships with the inanimate beings that inhabit their world. The welfare of Diné people is indivisible from their bodily elements, as the connection remains in force even after their separation. Diné views on synecdochic personhood are essential to their understanding of the human body and the rules governing effect; with hair acting as a conduit for spiritual connection. Given the various forces that could harm the well-being of Diné people, it is necessary that their hair is properly maintained, cared for, and cleansed.

A Brief History of American Boarding Schools:

Indigenous studies scholarship emphasizes the boarding school experience as one of the cruelest chapters in American history. Because the history of these schools is widely known and discussed, the focus here is minimal. American boarding schools thrived on the humiliation and

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[84] Schwarz, *Molded in the Image*: 115.
[85] Flora L. Bailey, "Navajo motor habits," *American Anthropologists* 44 (1942): 212.
[86] Schwarz, *Snakes*: 607.
[87] Gladys Amanda Reichard, *Navajo Religion: A Study of Symbolism* (New York: Bollinger Foundation, 1950): 110.
[88] Schwarz, *Snakes*: 619.

degradation of Indigenous bodies, and this brutality took many forms. This section focuses on Indigenous people's personal accounts of boarding schools to illustrate that the humiliation and trauma caused by these schools continues to lay synecdochic influence over their lives. Although hair is not the explicit focus here, it later emerges as one of the many tools employed by boarding schools to break down students' connections to their communal identity and sense of self. This section will construct of boarding schools as agents of cultural genocide, who violated Indigenous bodies to humiliate them into assimilation.

Rows of white tombstones line the yard of Carlisle Indian School, each bearing the names of Indigenous students who died there. Roughly 1,800 Indigenous students in Oklahoma were brought to Carlisle. Many of them did not make it home. Opened in 1879, Carlisle became a blueprint for American boarding schools. Carlisle drew inspiration from Riverside Indian School in Oklahoma, America's first federally run Indian boarding school. Joe Wheeler (Wichita), a former student of Riverside, shared numerous stories with his grandson, Anthony Galindo. At Riverside, Wheeler was abused. When he arrived at Riverside, Wheeler said, "They cut my hair,... made me eat soap, and then they beat me for speaking my language."[89] Galindo claims that Wheeler never forgave the American government for boarding schools. The physical and psychological trauma from Riverside permanently stayed with Wheeler. In this way, his boarding school experience continues to lay synecdochic influence on his physical and psychological well-being. Galindo remembers Wheeler claiming that the American government's objective was to destroy his people through assimilation efforts. Richard H. Pratt, the founder of Carlisle, undoubtedly voiced these sentiments. "A great general [once] said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in

[89] Addison Kliewer et al., "Remembering the Stories of Indian Boarding Schools," *Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communications*, 2024, https://www.ou.edu/gaylord/exiled-to-indian-country/content/remembering-the-stories-of-indian-boarding-schools.

promoting Indian massacres," Pratt said in an 1892 speech. "In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indians there are in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man," Pratt claimed.[90] Pratt came up with the idea for Carlisle while serving as a soldier in Oklahoma. While moving seventy Indigenous captives through Oklahoma, Pratt encouraged locals to teach the prisoners English. After this experience, Pratt realized that by isolating Indigenous peoples from their families and tribal life and immersing them in white American society, they would assimilate. His realization catalyzed the creation of Carlisle. Carlisle was a mechanism of death. More than 160 children died while attending, most from disease. These deaths were not isolated tragedies, but the inevitable result of a system formed to destroy Indigenous souls and bodies.

Dr. Denise K. Lajimodiere discusses many of the punishments her mother, father, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles received at Marty Indian School. None of them spoke English when they first arrived at school. Lajimodiere's mother was forced to kneel on broomsticks for refusing to speak English. She was frequently beat on with belts, razor straps, rulers, and fists by the matrons. Her father was forced to put "lye soap…in [his] mouth which caused blisters, and [matrons] put pins through [his] tongue."[91] Every member of her family was punished with haircuts whenever they did not adhere to dress codes. After returning home, both of Lajimodiere's parents refused to speak a word of their tribal language. Lajimodiere expressed that, one day, her mom shook her head sadly and said, "I'm so sorry I didn't teach you our language." Lajimodiere recognized that her family was trying to protect her from the violence they faced for speaking their language. Yet, she feels that her lack of language causes her to miss

[90] Kliewer et al., 2024.
[91] Denise K. Lajimodiere, "Legacy of Trauma: The Impact of American Indian Boarding Schools Across Generations," *PBS*, https://www.pbs.org/native-america/blog/legacy-of-trauma-the-impact-of-american-indian-boarding-schools-across-generations.

out on the "deeper meaning within [their] tribal spirituality." In ceremony, she struggles to connect with the songs and prayers because she cannot understand them. The boarding school experience became a generational trauma for Lajimodiere's family. Yet, Lajimodiere actively works to overcome the lasting effects of this trauma by collaborating with elders to learn the language.

One of the most brutal punishments imposed by boarding schools was the forced cutting of hair. Haircuts, like many other punishments, was a means of humiliation. By shaving students' hair, school matrons took possession of their identities, symbolically severing their connections to their communities and souls. For example, Ramona Klein (Chipewa) remembers a "big, green bus" taking her and her five siblings away from their sobbing mother to Fort Totten Indian Boarding School. When they arrived in 1954, they were met by a matron who disciplined the students through hair shavings and paddle spankings. These disciplinary tactics left Klein feeling alienated from her people and her identity.Her hair was her essence, without it, she was incomplete. Labelle (Alutiiq) experienced similar feelings of alienation. At eight-years old, he was taken to the Wrangell Institute, along with his younger brother, Kermit. Both Labelle and Kermit immediately had their hair shaved. With their hair gone, the brothers were almost unrecognizable to each other. They not only lost their connection to community identity, but also to one another. Most of the children in American boarding schools went back home in the summer. LaBelle, unfortunately, did not. He lost all connection to his mother, her Inupiaq language, and traditions. When she passed away, he recalls, "I didn't – couldn't – cry at her funeral."[92] These narratives showcase how boarding schools functioned as weapons of assimilation. Assimilatory weapons took many forms, yet all were designed to humiliate and destroy Indigenous students' sense of cultural identity.

[92] "US Indian Boarding School History," 2024.

Diné accounts of boarding schools echo the perspectives discussed above, as they focus on haircuts' ability to inflict lasting emotional and psychological harm. As previously discussed, sorcerers and witches preyed upon Diné peoples' hair to cast spells and evil influences. Indian boarding schools functioned similarly, using hair to sever students' connections to their communities and identities. Just as sorcerers and witches utilize hair to command influence over Diné bodies, boarding schools sought to exercise control over students' sense of self. Haircuts in boarding schools also replicated the practice of scalping. As testimonies from Diné people show b\y cutting off their hair, boarding school matrons stripped students' of their souls and subsumed full control over their bodies and minds.

American Indian boarding schools targeted visible expressions of Diné identity, like hair and clothing, to break down children's sense of personhood and cultural belonging. Diné voices reveal the dehumanizing methods by which boarding school authorities altered Diné children to resemble "civilized" American citizens. In a 1976 study of Diné women, anthropologist Ann Metcalf interviewed Diné students from federal boarding schools. One woman discussed how, at just eight years old, she was taken to a federal school five miles away from her home. Her family gave her "settler" clothes so that she would not have to wear her traditional regalia. Her hair, however, was kept long and fashioned in the "old way."[93] On her first day at boarding school, she was forced to cut it. Matrons told her that there were not enough girls at the school who could braid it. "I regretted it," she said, "I did not feel that it was proper for the school officials to have cut my hair without…my permission."[94] Imposed hair codes struck at the core of her Diné identity, feeling like a direct assault on her sense of personhood. She lived, as she described, two

[93] The "old way" refers to the Tsiiyéél, a Diné hair bun. For more information on the Tsiiyéél, see: Jaclyn Roessel, "Tsiiyéél Powered Compliments," *Grownup Navajo*, August, 2016, https://grownupnavajo.com/tag/tsiiyeel/.
[94] Ann Metcalf, "From Schoolgirl to Mother: The Effects of Education on Navajo Women," *Social Problems* 23, (1976): 537.

lives: one as a Diné and one as an American. Over the course of her experience, however, she found that infringements on her visible expressions of Diné identity directly transformed how she understood herself. The assimilationist project conditioned her to regard her Diné identity as replaceable. Indigenous customs and cultural practices were deemed inferior to Western society. As a result, Diné children, in the colonial mind, had to be disconnected from their "primitive," Native upbringing and instructed in the ways of civilized society; they had to be assimilated into the colonial infrastructure.

Frank Mitchell, a Diné healer, explained in his 1978 autobiography how being forced to cut his hair severed his relationship with his family, leaving him with an intense sense of lost identity. While being groomed for a school trip, Mitchell had his hair trimmed for the first time. After being sent to residential school, the boys, "with their long hair, had lice. Some of them even had open sores on the back of their neck from them. So all [their] hair was…clipped."[95] Although Mitchell recognized the hair cuts were necessary to "get rid of the lice and nits," he also felt immense shame. When Mitchell arrived home from residential school, his family was sent into turmoil. "My goodness, look what they did to you," his family said, "They surely must have been abusing you. Look at your hair! They even cut your hair!"[96] At school, Mitchell was trained to eliminate his Diné identity, deepening the rift between him and his family. Home was supposed to be a safe space for Mitchell to embrace his Diné heritage; however, his trimmed hair left him feeling alienated and unable to reconnect with his cultural roots.

Mitchell's description of cultural alienation and disconnection worked to justify the disciplinary use of haircuts by matrons. Discipline in Indian boarding schools was almost always severe. School matrons punished defiant behavior with "public humiliation and psychological

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[95] Frank Mitchell, *Navajo Blessingway Singer: The Autobiography of Frank Mitchell, 1881-1967* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978), 59.
[96] Mitchell: 67.

abuse," subjecting students to "whippings, wearing a ball and chain, getting locked in dark closets, hard labor, and imprisonment."[97] Diné girls were subjected to especially cruel and humiliating forms of discipline, like public head shavings. Discipline of Diné bodily expression worked doubly: (1) to force Diné children to visibly present themselves as white, 'civilized' people, and (2) to dismantle their connections to Diné communities and knowledges, thereby destroying their sense of self. As one Diné girl describes, "All [my] hair was cut,...one priest shaved my head while the other tore off my clothes. I was so scared…That was my first beating."[98] The forcible shaving of her head disrupted her ability to connect with other female students. Hair brushing and braiding rituals brought Indigenous girls from various tribal backgrounds together, creating a shared space for communal celebration. However, when her hair was shaved, "Some [of] the girls would pick on you. You had to bear it up….When [your hair] was gone, it was gone."[99] The loss of her hair was more than just a traumatic memory; it was a means of cultural rupture. Because of her shaved head, she was denied access to the community activities that both formed communal bonds amidst harsh conditions and reconnected the girls with their cultural hair practices. Her account reveals how the disciplinary use of hair shaving was a deliberate method of cultural erasure, designed to isolate Diné children from their Indigenous peers and disconnect them from their cultural heritage.

Despite the disciplinary use of haircuts and hair shavings, Diné children found ways to resist these direct assaults on their hair sovereignty. For instance, when grooming time came, many would simply run away. Diné author Luci Tapahonso recalls that "with their hair cut or shaved… some [children] disappeared or ran away; many never returned home."[100] As a Diné

[97]Martina Michelle Dawley, "Indian Boarding School Tattooing Experiences: Resistance, Power, and Control through Personal Narratives," *The American Indian Quarterly* 44, (2020): 284.
[98]Alex Wilson, "Our Coming In Stories," *Canadian Women Studies/Les Cahiers de La Femme* 24, no. 3 (2008): 195.
[99] Wilson: 195.
[100] Luci Tapahonso, "For More Than 100 Years, the U.S. Forced Navajo Students Into Western Schools. The Damage Is Still Felt Today," *The Smithsonian Magazine*, July 2016,

student at a residential school, Tapahonso was forced to shave her head and learn English. Tapahonso fondly remembers gathering with the other girls every night to hum Diné ceremonial songs in the darkness. When her hair was cut, however, Tapahonso felt too ashamed to join the other girls and isolated herself.

Tapahonso also describes how various students used drawings as a means to reclaim their identity amid enforced conformity. Diné children frequently used creative expressions, like drawing, to craft their own resistance narratives. Joe Vigil's "I named the cowboy "Slim," is an example of this practice. Vigil employs the familiar motif of the horse and cowboy, an iconic symbol of the American West. However, the symbol is transformed to express Indigenous preservation, as Vigil draws himself as the cowboy. Horses emblemize the unconquerable Diné spirit. Vigil's hair is trimmed and he wears Western clothing, yet his identity is preserved through the symbolic image of the horse. Although boarding school matrons have visually erased Vigil's Diné identity, the drawing conveys that they cannot break his soul, as it remains entirely Diné.

Figure 1: Joe Vigil, "I Named the Cowboy 'Slim,'" *American Indian Quarterly*, 1968.

The boarding school accounts discussed in this section showcase that haircuts were weaponized by school matrons to break students' connections to Diné identity and ways of belonging. While Indian boarding schools have largely disappeared, their policies continue to adversely affect Diné communities. Schools no longer impose forced haircuts or shavings;

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https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/decades
-us-government-forcibly-placed-native-students-western-schools-effects-felt-today-180959502/.

however, institutionally enforced hair codes achieve the same objective. Biased hair codes too frequently prey on Diné students by prohibiting hairstyles that reflect communal identity and cultural heritage.[101] The ongoing use of disciplinary hair codes intensifies the generational trauma left by the boarding school project while also compromising Diné sovereignty and community values.

Contemporary Diné Views on Hair

Diné people today leverage social media to affirm their hair sovereignty. In response to Malachi Wilson's story, Diné writer Jacqueline Keeler turned to ICT News (Indian Country Today) as a vehicle to vent her frustrations and reflect on her personal relationship with hair. Keeler recalls how, in preparation for her wedding, her hair was washed with yucca root and brushed with a be'ezo. "The act of caring for the hair, one relative to another, like my grandmother and family did for me," Keeler wrote, "is an expression of love to me."[102] By continuing her family's hair rituals, Keeler discovered that she was able to embody the Diné term *nizhóni,* meaning beauty. Keeler describes how – through brushing rituals – she strengthens her bond to her community and affirms her Diné identity; she cultivates beauty. She asserts that: "Hair cannot be viewed as separate from [identity and beauty]. The care we give it, the washing, the adornment… it represents that we are part of our people, that we are Diné."[103] However, Keeler finds that Diné people who are forced to cut their hair undergo intense cultural loss, as they lose visual markers of their identity.

Keeler's shi cheii (grandfather) personally endured this. Keeler remembers that her sci cheii always kept his hair short, despite being the most traditional Diné man she knew. After

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[101] "Hair, Discipline, and Race: A Call to Cut Discrimination Out of School Dress Codes," *Equity Alliance*, https://equityalliance.stanford.edu/content/hair-discipline-and-race-call-cut-discrimination-out-school-dress-codes.
[102] Jacqueline Keeler, "Why Navajo Hair Matters: It's Our Culture, Our Memory, and Our Choice," *Indian Country Today*, Sept. 2018: 1.
[103] Keeler: 6.

Keeler asked him why he kept his hair short, her sci cheii explained that during his time working in Oklahoma, none of the women knew how to tie his hair in a Tsiiyéél. Although she assumed her sci cheii simply preferred the American style, she "also [understood] that the pain of being separated from everything he knew…had marked him."[104] By cutting his hair, her sci cheii not only lost the tools to express his Diné identity, but also disconnected himself from his family and community. While school hair codes frame Diné hair as disruptive to the educational process,[105] Keeler argues that Indigenous hairstyles signify love for family, the support offered by the community, and a belief that Diné identity should always be embraced. By framing modern hair codes as a fundamental threat to Diné expressions of identity and intergenerational community, Keeler advocates for Diné hair sovereignty as a way to address these ongoing systematic challenges.

As Keeler describes, the cultural disconnection brought on by haircuts can cause significant emotional turmoil for Diné individuals. One such example is Mylon, a ten-year old Diné boy, who used to have hair down to his tailbone. After being bullied at school, however, Mylon chose to cut his hair. "They call me a girl," he said, "And they didn't want me to go into the boy's bathroom. They told me to go into the girl's bathroom."[106] With tears streaming down his face, Mylon clings tightly to his dad's arm. "It's been a tough day," his dad said, "[Mylon] kept saying 'I miss my hair.'"[107] His mom explained that the Diné people have always worn their hair long, viewing it as a source of joy and a symbol of their identity. For her, hair serves as a vessel for thought and knowledge, allowing the Diné people to access a wide range of spiritual

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[104] Keeler: 7.
[105] These school dress code policies more frequently affect male Indigenous students because of gender stereotypes surrounding boys and long hair. See:
Georgina Badoni and Uti Hawkins, "Native Boys with Long Hair," *Last Real Indians*, 2021, https://lastrealindians.com/news/2021/9/11/native-boys-with-long-hair-by-georgina-badoni-amp-uti-hawkins.
[106] "This Diné boy cut his hair due to bullying – but now he's trying to help others," *X*, March 2018, https://.x.com/watch/theoutnetwork/?h76yhht6788675399099.
[107] "This Diné boy cut…help others," 2018.

insights. As a way to raise awareness about hair sovereignty, Mylon created a compilation of YouTube videos, where he detailed his story on written postcards. He writes: “It’s okay to have long hair. The meaning of long hair needs to be taught. You need to listen.”[108] Through his work, Mylon advocates for the inclusion of Diné epistemologies in the Western educational system, enabling students to broaden their worldviews and recognize the cosmic significance Dine people attribute to hair.

On social media platforms like Twitter, Diné people engage in social advocacy to raise awareness and foster discussions about hair sovereignty. A Facebook page dedicated to Diné advocacy, titled *Navajo Tribes History*, shares a post highlighting the dangers of cutting hair. “Remember the ancestors weren’t allowed to wear their hair long,” it says, “Wearing our hair long is a way to honor what was taken from them, we heal our trauma by caring for our hair.”[109] The accompanying image depicts the back of a Diné man’s head, his long braid painted in yellow, red, white, and black – the colors of the four sacred mountains – bleeds as an unseen figure cuts it with scissors. Across his hair tie, the words “Never Forget” are written.

[108] “This Diné boy cut…help others,” 2018.
[109] Navajo Tribes History, “Remember the ancestors were…caring for our hair,” *Facebook*, Nov. 2024, https://www.facebook.com/share/p/7EuZirhTLkhsdgYdGFRDml/.

B.U. Martin, *Navajo Tribes History*, Facebook, 2024.

These words make explicit reference to American residential schools and illuminate why Diné peoples' must never forget their treatment at the hands of colonial oppressors and assert their self-determination. Schwarz's notion of synecdoche is invoked as the braid is constituted as an inseparable component of the body and soul. The individual's braid bleeds as it is severed, transforming the haircut into a symbolic act of murder. These synecdochic connections are mirrored by another Diné group's Facebook post, claiming: "Long hair is an extension of the nervous system…It can be seen as a physical Diné manifestation of spiritual growth. It is also a sign of bravery, strength, or virility."[110] The comments on their tweet emphasize that some users feel the presence of their ancestors in their hair, describing it as a form of knowledge transfer. As the users navigate life, their ancestors' winds[111] drop bits of knowledge and remind them to adhere to community values. Some users expressed that they could gauge their physical health by observing the condition of their hair. If their hair begins to split, for example, they know illness is incoming. The experiences of these Diné users illuminate how long hair is not only a visible marker of identity, but also a way for the Diné people to connect to ancestors and community. In Diné thought, elements of the body, such as hair, are inseparable from bodily effect and influence, in short, the principle of synecdoche. Each individual fiber is imbued with the capacity to possess knowledge and exert influence on a person's body. These qualities explain why haircuts are a cruel invasion of Diné bodily sovereignty, as they destroy the individual's capacity to retain ancestral wisdom and connect to community values. In this way, hair-codes fundamentally violate *k'e*, community solidarity. The community maintains *k'e* by embedding their lives within the worldviews and practices that make up Dinéness. Consequently,

[110] Native Patriot, "Long hair is an extension of the nervous system…strength, or virility," *Twitter*, Feb. 2024, https://www.facebook.com/share/?v=5676253790320997.
[111] Wind, in this context, refers to the soul, as discussed above (15).

k'e requires an active dedication to Diné community values, knowledges, and engagement. Hair codes fundamentally disrupt Diné people's connections to community identity, and in turn fracture the relational fabric that sustains *k'e*.

Overall, these two sections joined traditional Diné hair cosmologies with contemporary sentiments of Diné hair sovereignty. While myths and ceremonies set the groundwork for conceptualizing hair's significance to Diné peoples, the individual actions of Diné activists to decolonize the ontological position of hair push these cosmologies into the present. Similarly, these activists decolonize contemporary perceptions of the self, which are situated in individualism and personal autonomy. Diné perspectives forward communal identity and positionality as a means for understanding self construction and one's responsibilities within a web of relationships. Individuals are inseparable from communal effect and influence, and maintain cosmological obligations to maintain *k'e* by centering their relationships with human and non-human entities around compassion, trust, and solidarity. In this way, hair sovereignty not only comprises Diné peoples' right to decolonize and reconstruct institutions that infringe upon visual markers of community identity, it also represents an active assertion of relational and cosmological being.

Hair Sovereignty as a Cross-Cultural Experience

School hair codes pose a significant challenge for various marginalized groups in America. For example, Black students frequently face discrimination for wearing natural hairstyles such as Afros, braids, and locs. Given the widespread weaponization of school hair codes against Black hair in America today, any discussion of hair sovereignty would be incomplete without highlighting the Black experience. The disciplinary violence Black students endure bears an unsettling resemblance to that experienced by Indigenous students, revealing a

shared legacy of colonialism and systemic oppression that polices and punishes marginalized identities through hair regulation. This section emphasizes that the ongoing struggle for Indigenous hair sovereignty encompasses a broader fight against the racialized policing of hair.

Researchers have found that Black students face a disproportionate amount of dress code violations in comparison to the overall student population. Black students receive thirty-one percent of the recorded violations but comprise only twelve percent of the surveyed student population. The disciplinary records show that schools have forced Black students into "in-school suspension or disciplinary alternative education placement for months unless they cut their locs."[112] At Barbers Hill Independent School District, a small suburban district near Houston, school officials punished three Black students within a single month. De'Andre Arnold, Kaden Bradford, and Daryl George were forced to cut off their locs for violating the school dress code. Barbers Hill district leaders sought to justify their actions by claiming "Being American requires conformity."[113] The school district's reasoning places Black hair outside the bounds of "Americanness," effectively stigmatizing Black expression and self-identity. It also reflects a deep-seated racial bias that positions Black hair and identity as inferior or undesirable to whitestream American society.

There are numerous examples of Black students being punished for violating hair codes. In 2017, two 15-year-old Black girls in Boston received multiple detentions for their braided extensions. In 2018, a referee in New Jersey pressured 16-year-old wrestler Andrew Johnson to cut his dreadlocks or forfeit his match. And in 2019, an Atlanta elementary school displayed photos of braids and Afros as examples of inappropriate hairstyles. These examples reveal that

[112] Kristi Gross, "ACLU of Texas Finds 51 School Districts Likely Remain in Violation of the CROWN Act," *ACLU of Texas*, 24 July 2024, https://www.aclutx.org/en/press-releases/aclu-texas-finds-51-school-districts-likely-remain-violation-crown-act.

[113] Paige Duggins Clay, "Confronting Hair Discrimination in Schools – A Call to Honor Black History by Protecting Student Rights," *IDRA*, Feb. 2025, https://www.idra.org/resource-center/confronting-hair-discrimination-in-schools-a-call-to-honor-black-history-by-protecting-student-rights/.

hair discrimination in schools is a systemic issue, weaponized against marginalized identities because they do not conform to the white mold. According to educator Danii Oliver, “Hair discrimination is a way, shape, and form in which a person can be judged: whether or not they’re worthy to be in a space, whether or not they have a certain level of intelligence, and whether or not they have a certain level of hygiene.”[114] Many school districts wrongly characterize Black hair as “distracting,” "unkempt,” and “unmanageable.” By framing Black hairstyles as inappropriate, schools express that assimilation to whitestream society is necessary for academic success and progression. Black students are placed in a predicament, forced to choose between their education and their identity expression.

In pre-colonial Africa, hair was a symbolic tool employed by Indigenous communities to communicate age, class, ethnic group membership, marital status, religion, mental health, and education.[115] In these societies, hair affirmed identity and influenced social behavior. For example, if an individual’s hair was uncombed, it signaled to the community that the person was experiencing depression and required support. Additionally, women frequently used their hair to indicate significant life changes, like leaving romantic partners. Women in North Africa cut their hair into bobs when they split from their romantic partners to signify their newfound independence. Other communities of women completely shaved their heads, effectively removing all memories of their romantic partner.[116] African men had slightly different practices. Anthropologist Mark Gordan explains how men in various pre-colonial African tribes cut their hair “only for the mourning for a death of a close relative which meant that a mourner’s spirit was [destroyed] by the loss of a loved one.”[117]After cutting their hair, the strands were

[114] Natasha Marsh, “Why Are Black Students Still Being Punished For Their Hair Choices?*” PS*, 1 Aug. 2024, https://www.popsugar.com/beauty/black-students-hair-discrimination-49379472.
[115] Gale Ambassadors, “African Hairstyles – The “Dreaded” Colonial Legacy,” *Gale*, 23 Nov. 2024, https://review.gale.com/2021/11/23/african-hairstyles-the-dreaded-colonial-legacy/.
[116] Gale Ambassadors, 2024.
[117] Gale Ambassadors, 2024.

ceremonially cast into a river, "since they are a part of the earth they always put themselves back into the earth."[118] Hair was an essential component of self-actualization and identification in pre-colonial African communities. By taking on different hairstyles and haircuts, individuals communicated their struggles to the community and visually controlled immediate social expectations. For example, if the community observed an individual with a shaved head, they would recognize that the person was experiencing immense grief and would need to approach them with sensitivity. These visual cues functioned as a non-verbal language, signaling personal emotions, experiences, status, and identity.

Various aspects of pre-colonial African hair practices ground themselves in Schwarz's theory of synecdoche. Amongst several of these communities, braiding an individual's hair was seen as the highest form of bonding. For example, the Mende people considered braiding to be a vital time for storytelling. As the braider worked through an individual's hair, they shared origin stories. The virtues and morals woven into these tales became symbolically bound to the person through their braids, preserving the knowledge. After an individual's death, the Banyoro people "cut a small bit of their hair, back and front, and [threw] this on their grave," so that the soul can transition to the afterlife.[119] In this way, a Banyoro person's hair was revered as an extension of their soul and being. Once the individual was buried, all participants thoroughly washed their hair and bodies, believing that the negative forces of death could linger in their hair and ruin their crops.[120] Hair washings are almost universally used as purificatory rites among pre-colonial African communities. During times of illness, patients often have their hair washed to remove any negative forces believed to be causing the sickness. Communities like the Zulu, Ndebele,

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[118] Gale Ambassadors, 2024.
[119] "Bunyoro people and their culture," *Uganda Tourism*, 2024, https://ugandatourismcenter.com/place/bunyoro-people-and-their-culture/.
[120] "Bunyoro people," 2024.

Basotho, and AmaXhosa shaved their heads after a family member died. The psychological pain induced by grieving could infect someone's mind by clinging to their hair.[121] All of these examples illuminate the synecdochic connections pre-colonial African communities place between hair and the self, emphasizing hair's significant influence on both the physical and physiological components of the body.

African communities' hair practices were disrupted by the transatlantic trade of enslaved peoples. Upon first meeting newly enslaved Africans, European captors shaved their heads and referred to their hair as "fur."[122] This interaction marked the beginning of a long process of dehumanization, where African people's hair was treated as a symbol of their supposed inferiority. On early American plantations, enslaved Africans were often not permitted to bathe or wash their hair, forcing them to gain bugs and infections. Similarly, a texture-based caste system emerged where Africans with less curly hair were given privileges over those with tightly coiled hair. Privileges could include reduced outdoor manual labor, greater access to food, and sometimes better living conditions. Legal mandates in the South designated that enslaved women were not allowed "to expose their tightly coiled hair in public spaces because their hair was regarded as too unattractive."[123] Colonial appearance politics continued post-slavery. For example, during Jim Crow, hair was used to justify Black people's "denial of access to the academics and cultural institutions such as music halls, galleries, theaters, museums, even clubs."[124] Similarly, women with tightly coiled hair were far less likely to attain employment

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[121] Zanele Margaret Tshoba, "The psychological significance of shaving hair as a ritual during mourning within the Ndebele culture" (PhD diss., University of South Africa), Nov. 2024, https://uir.unisa.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/63f86030-6fe8-4f66-8b4b-fd767dad7b7a/content.
[122] Afiya M. Mbilishaka et al., "Don't Get It Twisted: Untangling the Psychology of Hair Discrimination Within Black Communities," *American Psychological Association* 90, no. 5 (2020): 591, https://research.ebsco.com/c/lpmkjz/viewer/pdf/xzjlx7jrkr?route=details.
[123] Mbilishaka et al., 2020.
[124] Gail A. Dawson, "Hair Matters: Toward Understanding Natural Black Hair Bias in the Workplace," *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 26, no. 3 (6 June 2019), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1548051819848998.

compared to those with straighter hair. Due to growing restrictions on access to public spaces because of their hair, many Black people turned to harmful chemical treatments and hot combs to straighten it. These practices broke down many Black people's connections to personal identity, creating a sense of dehumanization and self-alienation.

Despite colonial impositions of hair standards, early enslaved peoples developed ways to resist. Communities of enslaved Africans in Columbia designed braiding styles to communicate to other enslaved peoples.[125] For example, a braided style called *departes* was formed on the heads of women when they were attempting to escape. Similarly, some women developed intricate hairstyles that visually depicted maps of escape routes in braids. Other braiding patterns indicated certain obstacles a runaway could face. For example, a river was symbolized by a braid in the shape of a worm and a bantu knot represented a mountain. Tropas, thicker braids, were used to depict soldiers along the escape route. Some women even braided seeds and grains into their hair, seeking to plant them when they attained freedom. Enslaved peoples in the Americas developed similar forms of resistance, using braids as communication devices for runaway enslaved peoples.[126] In these ways, braids became visual tools for community survival, fostering a means of resistance and solidarity amidst brutality.

Black hair, specifically the Afro, also became a powerful symbol of the civil rights movement. The 1960's marked the first wave of the natural hair movement. Activist Martin Garvey encouraged Black women to embrace their Afro, declaring "Don't remove the kinks from your hair! Remove them from your brain!" Similarly, activist Angela Davis sported an Afro as a symbol of Black power and rebellion against whitestream beauty standards. Throughout this period, Black teens increasingly began wearing their natural hair. A 1972 study of Black teens

[125] Chante Griffin, "How Natural Black Hair at Work Became a Civil Rights Issue," *Jstor Daily*, 3 July 2019, https://daily.jstor.org/how-natural-black-hair-at-work-became-a-civil-rights-issue/.
[126] Griffin, 2019.

living in St. Louis revealed that ninety percent of Black men and 40 percent of Black women were wearing their natural hair, a significant increase from the 1950's and 60's.[127] Protestors demanding the Civil Rights Act of 1964 frequently wore Afros to signify their commitment to Black aesthetics and cultural pride. As white society attempted to delegitimize Black hairstyles, the Black community transformed them into resistance tools. In these examples, hair functions as a visual expression of cultural identity and unity, signifying a collective rejection of whitestream notions of attractiveness and acceptability.

Black people today continue to celebrate their natural hair as a symbol of identity, cultural pride, and resistance. For example, Black activists use media platforms to discuss their personal relationships with their hair. In an online magazine, Karey Riley, African American studies professor at the University of the District of Columbia, shared stories of growing up and watching his mom do his sister's hair. He explained, "I can recall the smell of the hot comb on the stove's open flame and hearing the quiet yelps from my sister because my mom may have burned her scalp trying to straighten her hair. But it was something they bonded over - the touch, the care, the patience and time it took."[128] Riley describes hair as a mechanism for familial bonding and a vessel for memory. Caring for another person's hair is an expression of love. When Riley's mom cared for his own hair, she shared stories, gave advice, and offered wisdom. These memories implanted themselves into the very fibers of his hair, transforming the act of haircare into a sacred ritual. In her book, "My Beautiful Black Hair," filmmaker St. Clair Detrick-Jules shares insights from her interviews with Black women about their hair. One woman interviewed by Jules claims, "Those of us whose ancestors survived the middle passage in the Americas are survivors and our hair is a reminder that we are survivors." She considers

[127] Griffin, 2019.
[128] Kamryn Z. Bess, "It's More Than "Just" Hair: Revitalization of Black Identity," *Folklife*, 7 Nov. 2022, https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/black-hair-identity.

hair to be a living testament to Black peoples' resilience and survival amidst assimilatory and genocidal pursuits by the American government. Other women express that their hair connects them to their cultural identity. In her interview, Naomi Alias explains, "I am Afro-Caribbean, but I grew up in the U.S…In some ways I feel like I've been cut off from my Black roots…[yet] I am always connected to my Black heritage through my curls. [My curls] are a reminder of my strength and the strength of my ancestors and everything they did to survive so that we can be here today."[129]Alias claims that the texture of Black people's hair is uniquely their own, and directly signifies that "I'm Black, and I'm proud of it." In this way, hair serves as an assertion of one's Blackness, a visible declaration of survival and continued resistance.

Many Black communities in America consider the salon and the barbershop to be sacred institutions, where community, culture, and identity are formed. Wil Shelton explains how barbershops are "sacred institutions that preserve the pulse of the community. In every Black barbershop and salon, the barber or stylist is far more than a service provider – they are custodians of culture, keepers of tradition, and guardians of the communal spirit that sustains Black life in America"[130] Shelton describes the barbershop and salon as places where Black men and women can protect themselves from the burden of systematic oppression and racial hostility. Barbershops, for example, serve as places of male affirmation, where masculinity is imagined and reimagined on Black men's own terms. Shelton argues that barbershops are places where Black men, often denied humanity in the white world, can self-actualize. Hairstyles, in Shelton's view, serve as visual representations of the soul. The decorative braids, beads, knots, or patterns woven into the hair reflect the person's sense of individuality and personhood. Consequently, the

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[129] Naomi Elias, "I Interviewed 101 Black Women About Their Hair," *allure*, 10 Nov. 2021, https://www.allure.com/story/good-hair-international-meaning.
[130] Wil Shelton, "Black Barbershops and Salons: The Custodians of Culture," *Advertisingweek*, https://advertisingweek.com/black-barbershops-and-salons-the-custodians-of-culture/#:~:text=These%20spaces%20are%20more%20than,nurtured%20but%20where%20it%20thrives.

barbershop and salon become places that catalyze Black self-actualization – revered spaces where identity cultivation serves to challenge the social norms and expectations imposed by whitestream society.

Epilogue

Hair sovereignty emerges as a tool for countering the assimilationist project, which targets visual forms of identity expression to delegitimize communities that oppose the colonialist agenda. Active endeavors by both Indigenous and Black communities to reclaim their hairstyles and practices exemplify hair sovereignty in action. Today's school systems have been weaponized by the colonialist project to dismantle students' sense of identity and impose a mold of civility. Yet, these communities continue to defy the colonial mold by using their hair to visually represent cultural and personal identity. This essay has not proposed a plan for the decolonization of schools or American social and political institutions, as these problems necessitate the cooperation of every Indigenous person to conceptualize what a decolonized, sovereign "America" even looks like. Instead, this essay presents hair sovereignty as a worthwhile research endeavor for scholars of Indigenous study, while spotlighting the harm caused by hair codes. Actualizing hair sovereignty requires schools to eliminate discriminatory grooming policies that impede on the self-actualization and identity of marginalized students. American educational institutions and facilitators must reassess and eliminate colonial respectability politics which delegitimize non-white features. Hair lies at the center of Indigenous peoples' sense of being. Consequently, schools' infringements on hair sovereignty equates to a frontal assault on Indigenous students' livelihood, knowledge, identity, spirit, and soul.

The word “synecdoche” originates from Ancient Greece and refers to a figure of speech that uses a part of something to refer to its whole. Consider the sentence “We need boots on the ground as soon as possible.” The word “boots” is used to signify soldiers. In this sense, the sentence utilizes synecdoche by substituting an individual part (boots) for the whole (soldiers). Maureen Trudelle Schwarz takes the term “synecdoche” and animates it, exploring how bodily parts and secretions, like hair, enact influences over the entire body. For Schwarz, synecdoche is more than a figurative device, it is an embodied and lived experience. Her conception of synecdoche is imperative to this essay’s discussion of hair sovereignty. The notion of synecdoche reconceptualizes our understandings of personhood. Diné cosmologies venerate hair as a representation and extension of the soul. A single strand of hair can influence and lay effect over the entire body, emphasizing that each part of the body is indivisibly bound to the whole. Hair, like the person it is connected to, possesses agency. It responds to the world, lays effect, acts as a conduit for wisdom, experiences emotions, carries knowledge, identity, and memory, and is continually engaged with all of the human and non-human forces in a person’s life. Synecdoche consequently illuminates why hair sovereignty is essential for the preservation and expression of Diné identity and personhood. Synecdoche similarly challenges us to reconsider privatized notions of the body. The Diné body is a site of interconnection, not only to other humans, but to the cosmological forces that permeate the earth and the cosmos. Hair sovereignty is crucial for fostering these relationships and for either maximizing or mitigating the effects cosmological forces have on the body.

This essay questions the boundaries of religious experience in Indigenous peoples’ lives. While myths and ceremonies lay the groundwork for conceptualizing Diné religiosity in practice, it is through communal identity and political engagement that religiosity takes on its fullest

expression. By visually asserting their Dinéness through hair and hairstyles, the Diné people fundamentally establish their interconnection to the human and non-human entities that permeate their lives. Yet, hair and hairstyles also represent the Diné people's continued resistance to the colonial project and its efforts to assimilate them into the whitestream. These religious and political dimensions to Diné hair expression cannot be understood in isolation from one another. Religious scholars must not reduce Diné religious expression to its "traditional" components, as Diné religiosity represents a holistic lifeway for seeing, organizing, and relating to the world.

The Navajo-English Dictionary uses the term "Diné binahagha'" to translate the word *religion*.[131] The dictionary equates Diné binahagha with ceremonies and lists various rites as examples of Diné religiosity. In their work, *A Taxonomic View of the Traditional Navajo Universe*, Werner, Manning, and Begishe expand on this definition.[132] In Chart 17, they present a classification of diné bá niilyáii, meaning the "things that were put (created) for the Navajo" by the Haashch'ééh Dine'é. Diné bá niilyáii is composed of two categories: Diné hináanii (that by means of which Navajos live) and Diné yik-eh yigáálii (that according to which Navajo live). Diné binahagha is categorized under the section " Diné hináanii" and is composed of the subsections ceremony, offering, legend or myth, song, prayer, and premonitions. In this way, Diné binahagha is intimately tied to and serves as a guiding frame for how the Diné people live their lives. Similarly, the Diné binahagha is positioned as a gift created for the Diné people by the Haashch'ééh Dine'é. However, while Werner et al. limit Diné binahagha to concepts like ceremony or myth, Diné people continually redefine what constitutes the Diné hináanii.

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[131] Martha Austin, *Saad Ahaah Sinil: Dual Language: A Navajo English Dictionary* (Rough Rock Az: Rough Rock Demonstration School, 1983): 5.
[132] Oswald Werner, Allen Manning, and Kenneth Y. Begishe, "A Taxonomic View of the Traditional Navajo Universe," in *Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1983): 589.

This essay posits that Diné people's atsii' (hair) ought to be situated as a component of Diné binahagha. Charlotte Frisbie describes Diné binahagha as the means by which Diné people influence the living entities that "have complex dialectical powers that enable them to act in favor or against humans."[133] By "living the Diné binahagha on a daily basis," the Diné people "keep [themselves] in harmony with other humans, nature, and supernaturals, and help…maintain the delicate balance between good and evil" – Hózhó. Hair is a necessary component of Diné binahagha because it is utilized as a medium for sustaining Hózhó. In the Diné universe, everything is imbued with a good and bad dualism, and Hózhó is "part of the continuum," the other end of which is Hóchxǫ – evil, chaos, ugliness, disease, and disorder.[134] Today, we exist in the state of Hóchxǫ. Nonetheless, Diné peoples' rely on Diné binahagha to assert their sovereign agency and restore Hózhó. Hair is integral to this process, as it openly resists the colonial powers that impede on Diné hair, political, and social sovereignty and consequently create the conditions for Hóchxǫ to manifest and destroy communal solidarity.

[133] Charlotte J. Frisbie, "Temporal Change in Navajo Religion: 1868-1990," *Journal of the Southwest* 34, no. 4, (1992): 460.
[134] Frisbie, "Temporal Change": 460.

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