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ARTICLE

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"The right to lead": Navajo language, dis-citizenship, and Diné presidential politics*

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Abstract

This article examines the 2014 Navajo Nation presidential primary election and language debate as a window into the politics of Navajo heritage language and identity. Using Facebook posts written in response to a videotaped hearing testing the fluency of one of the candidates that subsequently went viral, we analyse social citizenship and stigmatized language identities through the lens of critical Diné (Navajo) language consciousness. Focusing on generational differences between speaker groups that undergirded this debate, we analyse (a) the fluency test itself and (b) online and ethnographic responses to the fluency test. Using discourse analysis of Facebook posts of both heritage language and new Navajo speakers, we show how new speakers in particular express investment in their language and Diné cultural continuity and, through their emphasis on the heterogeneity of contemporary Diné communicative practices, offer an alternative template for ways to move forward in Diné language reclamation efforts.

Questo articolo esamina le elezioni presidenziali Navajo del 2014 e il dibattito linguistico fioritovi attorno come una finestra sulla politica della lingua nativa e dell'identità Navajo. Usando alcuni post pubblicati su Facebook in risposta ad un filmato (divenuto virale) relativo ad un test realizzato per mettere alla prova la fluidità nel linguaggio nativo di

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uno dei candidati, analizziamo come l'appartenenza sociale e le identità linguistiche vengano stigmatizzate attraverso la lente critica della consapevolezza linguistica Diné (Navajo). Concentrandoci sulle differenze generazionali tra i gruppi di parlanti Diné che hanno partecipato a questo dibattito virtuale, analizziamo (a) il test di fluidità stesso e (b) i commenti al test, sia quelli rinvenuti online che quelli relativi alle risposte dateci sul campo durante una campagna etnografica. Usando l'analisi del discorso sui post scritti su Facebook da parlanti principianti della lingua Navajo e da altri studenti della lingua, mostriamo come i nuovi parlanti esprimono un forte attaccamento nella loro lingua e nella continuità culturale Navajo e, attraverso l'enfasi sull'eterogeneità delle pratiche comunicative contemporanee Diné, propongono modelli alternativi per nuovi processi di rappresentazione e recupero del linguaggio native. (Transl. Diego Pani)

KEYWORDS

dis-citizenship, language reclamation, Navajo language, Navajo Nation, new speakerness, politics of belonging

Nine men are seated around an oblong table.[2] *Seated behind them around the room are male members of the press and a few Diné women. They are gathered to observe a Navajo Nation Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) language fluency test. Christopher Deschene, plaintiff Dale Tsosie, and a translator for attorney Bryan Lewis await the fluency test that will be administered to Deschene by Justin Jones, attorney for Hank Whitethorne, who filed the original complaint about Deschene's Navajo language fluency. Jones begins with a brief preamble in Navajo and then asks Deschene in Navajo where he is from and asks him to identify his clans (‘adóone’é). For the first of many times throughout the proceedings, Deschene responds with the phrase “nashintaa doo akot’ée da,” “You are testing me and that is not right.” Jones continues with the test, asking Deschene to explain how a resolution becomes law in the Navajo language, “without inserting English language anywhere in there” (Jones, 2:03). Deschene again responds “éí nashintaa doo akot’ée da.” “It's a yes or no question,” Jones replies. The hearing is brief and Deschene was subsequently disqualified by default judgment on 9 October 2014 for failing to comply with a test of his Navajo language fluency. His disqualification resulted in his removal from ballot as a candidate in the 2014 Navajo Nation presidential general election and the nullification of the more than 9,000 votes he garnered in the primary election a month and a half prior.*

1 | INTRODUCTION

Under current tribal law, presidential and vice-presidential candidates must swear that they both “fluently speak and understand Navajo,[3] and read and write English” (Smith, *Farmington Daily Times*,

21 April 2015). After placing second in the Navajo Nation presidential primary vote and in spite of having campaigned for months in both English and *Diné bizaad* (Navajo language), Christopher Deschene was subjected to a mandated public "fluency" test created by the Navajo Nation Department of Diné Education and administered by the Navajo Nation Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA).[4] On 14 October, the 2:48-minute video of this proceeding was posted to Facebook by *The Navajo Times*, a newspaper that serves the Navajo Nation. Garnering over 48,000 views, 1,500 "reactions," and 562 "shares," the video had more than 500 heated posts written within two weeks of the video being posted. Posters responded to the video with sorrow, resignation, allegations of hypocrisy, and alternating responses of frustration with Deschene and frustration with the "old guard" or "sore loser cheis" [maternal grandfathers], references to mostly older and predominantly male politicians. Comments centred thematically around language fluency and users' own heritage language speaking abilities, urban identified Diné living off-reservation, differences in social class among Diné and being "jaan" or "rezneck," the "brain drain" phenomenon on Navajo Nation, frustrations about being "Navajo enough," and the many internal contradictions of what it means to be Diné in the current political and cultural moment. This Facebook conversation offers a microcosmic view into generational and affective politics of Diné linguistic identity. At stake is the right to identify as Diné, to speak for others, to run for office, to enjoy the rights of political, social, and linguistic citizenship, in short, to belong. But what does it mean to be "Navajo enough"? What is the relationship between language and identity? What are the fears about language loss and, by extension, loss of identity and culture that underlie this debate about Navajo fluency?

While the contrasting life experiences of the two candidates are indeed a microcosm of contemporary Navajo Nation citizenry, they also represent different generational experiences of US settler colonial control over Navajo people that resulted in dispossession, disenfranchisement, and containment (Simpson, 2011: 1–2). These colonizing structures have also profoundly affected Diné language ideologies, language use in social life, and the ways in which Navajo language "fluency" and "native" speakers, once viewed as needing to be contained and dispossessed, are now understood "to epitomize the essence of the nation" (O'Rourke, Pujolar, & Ramallo, 2015: 7) in equally complicated ways. Yet settler colonialism, as Simpson also points out, is incomplete, and the sheer existence of Indigenous languages is a testament not only to settler colonial "successes," but also to its failures. Emerging as the top two candidates for Navajo Nation president in August 2014, Joe Shirley, Jr. and Christopher Clark Deschene are both highly educated, each having attended college and graduate school, but otherwise differing in age, upbringing, and heritage language abilities. Born in 1947 and raised by his grandmother on the Navajo reservation, Shirley hails from the central reservation town of Chinle, Arizona. Leaving the reservation for college at the age of 19, Shirley eventually earned a Master of Social Work from Arizona State University and is a former Navajo Nation president. He is 72 and regards himself as fluent in the Navajo language. During his campaign, Shirley frequently spoke in Navajo, including the singing of traditional songs in the Navajo language. Forty-nine-year-old Deschene was born in southern California to parents who moved there as part of the voluntary urban relocation programme. The voluntary urban relocation programme was aimed at the elimination of reservation life and the assimilation of Native Americans into mainstream American culture from 1952 to 1973 (Deloria & Lytle, 1984 [2013]). Deschene is a former Marine with a law degree and a former member of the Arizona State legislature; his grandfather was a World War II Navajo codetalker. Codetalkers created and used an unbroken, double code in the Navajo language to transmit radio messages during the war and are credited with aiding significantly in the taking of Iwo Jima, a strategically important territory for the 1945 Allied invasion of Okinawa. Thus, many Diné citizens and veterans see the use of Navajo during World War II as significant not only for the protection of US sovereignty, but for securing Navajo territorial sovereignty as well (Jacobsen fieldnotes, Chinle, Arizona, Navajo Nation,

2 February 2011). Today, codetalkers are ascribed tremendous status in the contemporary Diné social and political landscape. In contrast to Shirley, Deschene does not identify as a "fluent" Navajo speaker but instead refers to himself as a language learner and new speaker.

Shirley's generation experienced the continuation of assimilative policies like compulsory boarding school attendance and saw the enactment of policies of termination and relocation (Deloria & Lytle, 1984 [2013]). However, his was also the generation in which the Navajo Nation emerged as a leader in the enactment of tribal self-determination through the passage of the Navajo Nation's Bill of Rights (1968) and the founding of the first tribally controlled college (1968), among other achievements (Iverson & Roessel, 2002). The generation to which Deschene belongs did not experience firsthand the enactment of policies employed by the United States in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries to control Navajo people and eradicate Navajo language and culture. While Deschene's generation has largely been characterized by tribal self-determination, it was, however, also shaped by previous policies aimed at assimilation. Thus, while the policies that gave rise to programmes like urban relocation are long-dead, their effects on the cultural and linguistic lives of Navajos continue (Cromer, Gray, Vasquez, & Freyd, 2018). When asked why he does not speak Navajo, Deschene often responds that he is "a product of cultural destruction" (Allen, 2014), referring to the tremendous language and cultural loss resulting from urban relocation, itself a product of federal Indian policy and the concomitant goal of territorial dispossession under US settler colonialism.

The ensuing discourse about Navajo language and its role in Navajo governance bears unsettling similarity to blood quantum. Blood quantum is the amount of "Native American blood" inherited by tribal members from their parents. As Schmidt (2011, 2011) explains, the Colony of Virginia was the earliest to define "mixed blood" in 1705. It did so in order to restrict and/or limit civil and property rights of people who had one-eighth African or one-half Native American ancestry. The idea that Native American blood could be measured was officially integrated into the legal identity of Native Americans by the US in the late 19th century to determine who was eligible for tribal enrolment. Today, many US tribes continue to use blood quantum as the primary, or only, criterion for tribal membership (see also Spruhan, 2006). Blood quantum, however, is also used by Native and non-Native people as a measure of "authenticity" and a mechanism for exclusion across North America. Deschene became a symbol for younger, politically disenfranchised Navajos, many of whom are also not "fluent" Navajo speakers, who may have felt undercurrents of exclusion—social, symbolic, and linguistic—before (c.f. Lee, 2007, 2009, 2014a).

In response to Deschene's disqualification, Navajo Nation voters retroactively passed a referendum amending the qualifications for the office of Navajo Nation president. The new qualifications state that a candidate "must be able to speak and understand the Navajo and English language; and this ability shall be determined by the Navajo voter when he/she casts a ballot" (Smith, *Farmington Daily Times*, 21 April 2015). On the one hand, voting "yes" on the referendum was interpreted by more official media sources such as *The Navajo Times*, National Public Radio, and *The New York Times* as "loosening language requirements for top leaders" (Fonseca, 2015) and "allowing a non-Navajo speaker to be president" (Morales, 2014). Some Navajo people have similarly interpreted the referendum as a move *against* Navajo fluency (Zah in Lovett, 2014), or even as a devaluation of the Navajo language ("Blogspot," 2015).

If citizenship in its broadest sense is defined by belonging to a geographic place (Fleming & Morgan, 2011) and the constraints, rights, and pedagogies that this belonging entails, linguistic citizenship, or what Ramanathan (2013) has called linguistic dis-citizenship, is the literal implementation of these constraints on a citizen-speaker's body. Defined as language policies that serve to "draw borders and exclude" (ibid.: 2), dis-citizenship takes many forms. In the public sphere and on Navajo Nation, this includes decisions of access and participation, legitimate governance, social recognition, and distribution of resources (Devlin & Pothier, 2006: 2).

Analysing Facebook posts as a window into a broader debate—we also observed ethnographically across the Navajo Nation—we show how this social networking site (SNS) facilitated an important counter-narrative to "mainstream" media interpretations of the fluency test. We emphasize the difficulties of evaluating speaker fluency among native speakers of a language such as Navajo that has many varieties and no single definitive written standard (Adkins, 2013: 55). As a type of language reclamation work, defined as "a larger effort by a community to claim its right to speak a language and to set associations goals in response to community needs and perspectives" (Leonard, 2017: 19), we posit that the stakes of the debate—and the internal contradictions therein—were waged within the heightened context of language loss, catalyzing not only the heightened rhetoric but the decision to hold a publicly televised "fluency test" to begin with. As Davis (2016) and others (Leonard & De Korne, 2017) have noted, language endangerment does not occur in a sociopolitical vacuum: indeed, to frame it as such, as in the case of "testing" the fluency of a self-proclaimed "non-fluent" speaker such as Deschene, not only shames new speakers, it can also "promote the assignment of responsibility for contemporary realities" of language loss onto "those who often have the least agency" (Leonard & De Korne, 2017: 54).

We come at this article from different perspectives, and our collective positionalities in the stakes of this debate are complex and reflect differing political investments. A Diné woman and resident of Navajo Nation (Western Agency), Thompson is a voting citizen living on the Navajo Nation approaching the topic from her own life experience as a non-Navajo speaker, archaeologist, and Associate Professor of Anthropology at Northern Arizona University. Jacobsen, as a Scandinavian-American or *bilagáana* ("Anglo"), approaches the topic as an intermediate Navajo speaker, ethnographer, musician in Navajo country bands, tribal college instructor on the Navajo Nation, and Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology and Anthropology (Ethnology) at the University of New Mexico. We have both spent significant portions of our lives living on rural parts of the Navajo Nation as ranchers and community members connected to extended Diné families, and we each have also spent significant portions of our lives living and working "stateside" (Jacobsen, 2017: 3) and internationally as scholars, teachers, and researchers. Accordingly, our own linguistic, class-based, and scholarly identities are nuanced and reflect some of the heterogeneous communicative practices we discuss in this article. In addition, while we focus on the experiences of younger and new Diné speakers, we seek to acknowledge the validity of multiple language discourses, as each represents key generational experiences of settler colonialism, writ small. The generation Shirley represents has been faced with the triple task of preserving what's left of Diné culture, staving off destructive forces of assimilation, and paving the way for future generations with the goal of supporting tribal sovereignty, self-determination, and language vitality. Thus, speaking Navajo has been a central part of that mission. Deschene's generation, in contrast, was charged with the triple duty of learning their Native language, getting an education, and coming home to use that education for the Navajo Nation's benefit. Thus, learning Navajo "from the ground up" has been a central part of this generation's experience. While these two perspectives share much more than they differ—including a consistent focus on Diné language reclamation—they are sometimes portrayed as being diametrically opposed; it is this polarized discourse, and the double bind it creates for new speakers, that we seek to interrogate here.

2 | METHODS

Per our respective University Institutional Review Boards, this project did not constitute human subjects research. These posts are publicly archived, do not require a password to access them, and are considered "public domain." Accordingly, we feel the level of risk to the participants in this

conversation is low and have chosen to follow Bruckman's (2002: 230) "light disguise" guidelines. All posters were (and remain) unknown to us. We did not access any poster's personal Facebook page; however, recognizing that Facebook pseudonyms share the function of real names (Bruckman, 2002), we disguise the names of individual Facebookers discussed in this article but we do employ verbatim quotes.

We apply a discourse analysis approach to Facebook responses to the Deschene video in order to identify the recurrent themes present in this forum (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). Our analysis is limited to 429 of 545 "responses" written within two weeks of the day that the video was posted. In selecting posts to analyse, we eliminated posts that are intended to call someone's attention to the conversation (e.g. a post that only contains a person's name in order to "tag" that person). We also eliminated posts that express opinions but were primarily statements of support and agreement (e.g. "Well said…!"), and posts that indicate a side conversation (e.g. Post: "He might have to wait for rosetta stone to come up with the Navajo language package…"; Reply 1: "They have one set"; Reply 2: "nice…"). Following Duane (2017), we also paid close attention to radio interviews, articles published on the topic in *The Navajo Times* and also in other journalistic outlets including blogs, national and international newspapers, and news sites to aid in contextualizing the Facebook conversation.

We suggest that language is part of a much larger whole that we call identity, in which paying attention to the variation in Diné, English, and code-mixed versions of Navajo English ("Navlish" or "Navadlish") language use—the three main languages spoken on Navajo Nation—is essential to understanding the larger politics of Diné identity as it played out in the presidential debate and elsewhere (Leap, 2012). We focus ethnographically on new media as a site to examine, first, how these posts give a unique insight into Diné critical language consciousness (Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Lee, 2014b: 158; Paris & Alim, 2014), or the ways in which speakers show an awareness of "historical and broad oppressive conditions that have influenced current realities of Indigenous peoples' lives" (Lee, 2014a: 145). Second, we examine how younger, non-"fluent" identified Diné citizens creatively and passionately craft Diné identities and seek to actively reclaim a sense of linguistic citizenship and belonging within a polarized political and cultural field (Curley, 2014; Parrish, 2014). In so doing, we foreground the social identities of new speakers, intentionally shifting away from the historical focus on the "native speaker" as the sole arbiter of authentic linguistic knowledge, focusing on new speakers as a linguistic model in and of themselves (McCarty, 2018; O'Rourke et al., 2015: 10).

3 | NAVAJO NATION AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE STUDY

The Navajo Treaty of 1868 between the Navajo and the United States established a 100-square mile reservation in a portion of traditional Navajo territory. Today, the lands governed by the Navajo Nation encompass 27,425 square miles and are overlapped by three states: Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The Navajo Nation is home to 173,667 of 332,129, or 52.3% of total Navajo Nation citizens (Arizona Rural Policy Institute, n.d.). Arizona overlaps the largest area of the Navajo Nation, which is home to the largest portion of the reservation population (Arizona Rural Policy Institute, n.d.). The Navajo Nation is a sovereign nation and Navajo language is often understood to be a spoken/sounded expression of that sovereignty (Jacobsen, 2017: 20).[5]

The idea of a new speaker in a Diné context could be used to describe someone who "relearned" Navajo after moving back to the reservation from elsewhere, adults learning the language through formal training, or teenagers and elementary school students learning through Navajo language "apps" on their phones and through the numerous Navajo language cartoons, video games, and interactive

language programmes like EuroTalk and Rosetta Stone that now exist; it could describe those speakers who intentionally create an intensive, language-immersion environment for themselves, as did Jacobsen's former UNM student when she moved back to the reservation to live with her grandparents who are monolingual Navajo speakers.

An approach focusing on new speakerness allows us, rather than emphasizing enumeration or linguistic competencies, to foreground the social identities of speakers, as a category "subject to social negotiation and variation, and delineated largely by 'new speakers' themselves" (O'Rourke et al., 2015: 7). It also allows for the social agency of a speech community that, on Navajo Nation, have come to represent an important sociolinguistic group, representing just under one half of Diné citizens. As Boltokova notes about Dene Tha speakers in northwestern Alberta, "Standard methods for counting endangered language speakers fail to capture the heterogeneous linguistic practices of partially fluent 'semi-speakers,' who often constitute the majority of young speakers in endangered language communities" (2017: 1). In a tribal government where decisions are discussed in English and Navajo but written primarily in English, how is Navajo language discourse, we ask, used to simultaneously reclaim and erase Navajo speakers across the linguistic spectrum, and how is this used, in turn, to assess who is or is not Diné enough?

4 | DINÉ LINGUISTIC PRACTICES AND LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

As scholars across Native North America have pointed out (Davis, 2016; Meek, 2012; Nevins, 2013; Samuels, 2004; Webster, 2009), heritage language use and proficiency level often comes to stand in for the totality of Indigenous identity in what linguists have referred to as a process of iconization (Irvine & Gal, 2000), where "speaking Navajo" is conflated with "being Navajo" (Webster, 2009: 2). Moreover, the larger politics of Indigenous identity and language iconization are enacted not only on Navajo Nation but also across other Indigenous communities in North America and beyond (Bonvillain, 2015; Clifford, 1988; Fast, 2002; Kroskrity & Field, 2009; Meek, 2015; O hlfearnáin, 2015; Perley, 2012; Povinelli, 2002). By extension, in Navajo speech communities, partial fluency is sometimes conflated with being only "part" Navajo, and "full" fluency is associated with being more fully Navajo.

Navajo is a now a minority language within the traditional Navajo territory in which it was historically the dominant language (Adkins, 2013). For Diné bizaad, as for many endangered languages, there are shrinking domains of use in daily life. Before the 20th century, most Diné citizens living in and around the historical Diné homeland, Diné Bikéyah, were monolingual Navajo speakers, and only at the beginning of the Boarding School era at the end of the 19th century did a significant number of Navajo speakers begin to learn English. Diné participation in World War II and a transition to off-reservation, wage-based labour also significantly changed the Diné linguistic landscape into one that was English-dominant; according to estimates, before the forced relocation to an internment camp in southeastern New Mexico known as the Long Walk (1864–1868), there were 25,000 speakers (roughly the total population of Diné people at that time) of Diné bizaad, whereas in 2018 there are approximately 170,000 self-identified Navajo speakers (Yurth, 2012), or just over half of the total Diné population. Perhaps more significantly, changes in the linguistic landscape also created a shift in language ideologies towards speaking Navajo. Similar to the situation for Breton speakers in France's Brittany (Adkins, 2013: 57), by the 1940s, speaking Navajo was associated in many Navajo minds with limited social mobility and "backwardness," and speaking English was seen as a way to more successfully assimilate into Anglo-American society.

According to the 2010 US Census data, there are 166,826 Navajo language speakers in the United States. Of this number, 120,487 are self-identified "fluent" Navajo speakers on the Navajo Nation. Approximately 73.5% of this group is over the age of 18, and monolingual Navajo speakers comprise 8.6% of the 18 and older age range. In addition, Navajo is no longer exclusively or predominantly used by Diné people in public spaces on the Navajo Nation. Instead, Navajo can consistently be heard in spaces occupied by speakers aged 50 or older, such as at senior centres or municipal meeting halls known as Chapter Houses, within the Navajo Nation government, at outdoor flea markets, and at cultural heritage events, including the Navajo Nation fair, and at rodeos; Navajo is also featured on three bilingual AM format radio stations that broadcast across the reservation.

Since the late 1960s, a small percentage of children have studied the Navajo language at community schools, Diné-founded bilingual, bicultural, and bicognitive schools located across the Navajo Nation. Language ideologies toward Navajo have shifted, and knowing and speaking "your language" is now a point of pride and, in some cases, an expectation—by both Diné and outsiders—for what it means to be "Navajo" in the contemporary moment. This shift in language ideologies reveals a sharp generational divide, exemplified in the different linguistic skill sets of Shirley and Deschene, reflecting the impacts of settler colonialism's reach on language use in Diné social life (Simpson, 2011). There is now a Navajo language immersion school, Diné Tséhootsooí Bi'Olta', three schools (Native American Community Academy, Puente de Hózh, and the STAR school) that offer immersion experiences in Navajo, and a number of monolingual public schools across the reservation that now also offer limited classes in the Navajo language. Finally, Navajo can also be studied at tribally funded colleges across the Navajo Nation and is also offered at state universities in Navajo "bordertowns,"[6] including Northern Arizona University and the University of New Mexico, as well as at Arizona State University, the University of Arizona, and the University of Utah.

5 | AFFORDANCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN A DINÉ CONTEXT

Digital discourse studies in the context of social networks (Rambe, 2012; Thurlow, 2018: 1) afford us "novel potentials for indexing and constructing discourses and ideologies" (Duane, 2017: 77). Moreover, local digital networks, as spaces that largely escape editorial and institutional control, such as the control exerted by the fluency test mandated by the OHA, represent environments where "language variation, innovation, and change develop, where written language norms may be pluralized and localized, and standards challenged" (Duane, 2017: 77). Indeed, throughout these posts, Facebookers employ multiple linguistic standards—spoken and written—including playful uses of orthography in both English, Navajo, and code-mixed English-Navajo, and a sustained discursive emphasis on the internal variations of language use in Diné speech communities. We see this speech play (Peterson & Webster, 2013; Sherzer, 2010) and the productive interplay of Navajo and English, for example, in the more casual language used, where capital letters are used infrequently, in abbreviations such as "IDK" (I don't know) and "WTF" (what the f***), and in the teasing invocations of the term "*jaan*," a word used for rural-identified reservation Navajos.

We choose a social networking site as the focal point for our analysis for several reasons. First, we seek to show the "everyday" nature of this conversation and the ways it plays out both at the level of official tribal politics and in the daily lives of Diné citizens during moments when speakers were not in the limelight (De Bres & Belling, 2015; Cameron & Panovic, 2014; Duane, 2017; Thurlow, 2018; Wortham & Reyes, 2015). Second, in this analysis, we seek to emphasize the affective and class-based dimensions of formal language policy, including the fluency requirement, and how this impacts Diné

lived experience. Thus, this analysis should be read both as a primary site where this debate took place, among internet-savvy Diné users, and as a microcosm of a larger debate that also took place offline, in people's homes and in more intimate Diné spaces.[7] Part of what it means, therefore, to perform a linguistically attuned analysis of new media in relation to minoritized languages (Wagner, 2011) such as Navajo is not only to situate such statements in the Diné political arena but also to sharpen the focus on Facebook as new media worthy of close sociolinguistic attention and research (Burka et al., 2016; Lenihan, 2011).

Discourse analysis of Facebook posts in response to the posted video of the 9 October Navajo Nation OHA hearing indicates that the debate was primarily about who is Navajo "enough" and how differing Navajo and English language use indexes downward and upward mobility of Navajo citizens. Using Daniel's "Theme Detection in Social Media" (2017 in "SAGE"), we identified two primary themes: (1) the relationship between "fluencies," dis-citizenship, and linguistic "purity," and (2) urban Diné, new speaker identities, and language reclamation as enacted through these conversations on Facebook. Throughout, posters engaged a Diné-specific critical language consciousness through reference to specific components of Diné history and language policy and through reflecting metalinguistically on their own use of language in their posts. Front and centre in these posts, posters express a rawness, where the medium of Facebook provides what many posters identify as a much-needed forum for dialogue, civic engagement, and open conversation about what it means to be "Navajo enough."

6 | FACEBOOKERS RESPOND: WHO IS REALLY NAVAJO, AND WHO REALLY SPEAKS NAVAJO?

6.1 | Fluency, linguistic purity, and dis-citizenship

Diné citizens who don't identify as "Navajo speakers" connected what was happening with Deschene back to themselves and, in many cases, their own lack of "fluency" in Navajo. Often parsed along the lines of having "enough" Navajo language, language and speaking ability are quantified in ways that mirror how blood and having "enough" blood are also discussed and measured in Diné social spaces. This is a theme that also played out in Jacobsen's fieldwork, where blood quantum, being Navajo, and having the ability to speak Navajo were often conflated, as seen in the case of a middle-school student of mixed Diné and French ancestry, triumphant in the moment she realizes she speaks more Navajo than her "full-blood" classmate (Jacobsen, 2017: 13).

Many Facebookers also noted that the hearing officer's request that Deschene describe "how a resolution becomes a law *all in Navajo*" was unrealistic and didn't accurately reflect the speech of any contemporary Diné speech communities, even for so-called "fluent" speakers working in tribal government offices. Here, the focus on linguistic purity and insistence on language compartmentalization was a charge laid at the feet of the tribal council in particular. As linguists Robert Young and William Morgan noted in 1987:

> The tribal council has generally insisted upon linguistic purity, sometimes stopping speakers in the middle of their discourse to insist that they speak only one language at a time, but children and Navajo radio announcers, as well as bilingual speakers, generally tend to insert words and phrases from English into their Navajo discourse, especially if the person to whom they are speaking is bilingual.
>
> (cited in Field, 2009: 32)

Participants pointed out that contemporary Diné language use incorporates frequent Spanish and English loan words, thus questioning what "fluency" is and who defines it (see Peterson & Webster, 2013, for example). Indeed, posters point out that language, in fact, "is not a bounded and unified unit but rather a continuum of diverse idiolects and 'dialects' " (Doerr & Lee, 2013). For example, most monetary terms in Navajo originated in Spanish loan words, including *béeso* ["money"; from Spanish *peso*] and *gíinse* [$0.15; from *quince*]. As one male Facebooker, "L," points out,

> True fluency in language would disregard all adopted words from other cultures…e.g. The word for butter, money, as, etc. All came from English, Spanish/Mexican dialects, other tribes. So who would really REALLY know fluency?
>
> (9 October 2014)

Moreover, many posters pointed out, that English is used on infrastructure signage, commercial advertising, flyers on bulletin boards, and newspapers, and is the primary language of instruction in all monolingual reservation schools (Webster, 2015). As "S" notes about Navajo Nation signage:

> Everything in the NN is documented in english the schools on the reservation is taught in english the road signs the signs on stores all over the rez is in english. Most of the NN speaks english. If this language barrier is such a big deal then every document on the rez should be in Navajo all the schools on the rez should be taught in Navajo and all the signs.
>
> (9 October 2014)

Dis-citizenship and civic estrangement, defined as "legal citizenship that is complicatedly coupled with a persistent sense of estrangement from the rights and privileges of the contemporary public sphere" (Tillet, 2009: 114), and the idea that other presidential and vice presidential candidates may also not be "fluent"—in spoken or written Navajo, but also in English—also surfaced, where writers framed the hearing as a legacy of settler colonialism's divide-and-conquer mentality with Navajos challenging other Navajos' right to belong. Several people on 9 October reiterated the old adage that success in politics is about who you know and not what you know, which highlighted feelings expressed by many that Deschene and other non-Navajo speaking and educated tribal members were being treated as outsiders to the political process and excluded from social citizenship—a sense of belonging over and above one's political citizenship—within the nation itself (Marshall, 1950: 10–14; Tillet, 2009). Many posters indicated that the whole proceeding was a waste of time and resources while the Navajo Nation's endemic poverty, unemployment, and drug and domestic violence issues went unaddressed by the candidates. As Facebooker "J" notes:

> Can you believe the prejudice of Navajo against Navajo. Does it really matter if he can speak fluent Navajo. What should matter is CAN HE BRING THE BEAUTIFUL NAVAJO NATION TO THE PEAK OF THE MOUNTAIN OF BEAUTY THAT THE TRIBE SO TRULY DESERVES? CAN THE NAVAJO PEOPLE FIND MORE AND BETTER EMPLOYMENT? CAN THE NAVAJO PEOPLE COME TOGETHER TO SOLVE THE DRUG, ALCOHOL AND VIOLENCE PROBLEM THAT IS NOW PARALYZING THEIR NATION? If this man can be elected to do this job and does it, re-elect him. If not, elect someone else. The tribe is bigger than one question. Should it not be as big as the education this man seems to bring BACK to the land of his clans,

> the lands of his ancestors, the land of his tribe, the land of history, the land of the BEAUTIFUL AND HONORABLE "D I N E H."
>
> (9 October 2014)

While enrolment in a federally recognized tribe requires documentation that an individual has met the requisite enrolment criteria, in the case of the Navajo Nation, a citizen needs to document a minimum of one-quarter blood quantum, inherited from at least one enrolled parent (1 Navajo Nation Code 701). Despite this, enrolled Diné citizens living in cities expressed feeling particularly excluded and singled out by Deschene's treatment, perhaps because he, too, is urban-identified.

Other participants enumerated myriad ways in which English has become the mode of communication for commercial and political transactions. Both those living on the reservation and those who are engaged in political affairs on behalf of the Navajo Nation conduct day-to-day activities at many levels in English. As referenced earlier, most fluent Navajo speakers also do not read or write in Navajo (Jacobsen, 2017: xiii). This irony was highlighted by some who pointed out that, if an idealized "fluent," heritage language speaker is someone who speaks no English, this same speaker would be severely limited in their ability to learn Navajo Nation laws, policies, and governmental rules and regulations since most legal documents are in fact written in English. Particularly powerful in this forum is the way Diné citizens challenge other Navajos to turn their linguistic gaze inward (Paris & Alim, 2014), enacting a position of reflection and resistance to colonization, particularly as this has been internalized by youth (Lee & McCarty, 2017: 62). At the same time, posters acknowledged the lateral violence they were observing in this process and the fall-out in local communities on non-speakers and new speakers in particular. As two Facebookers note in response to one another:

> "L": You all should post your response in Navajo see how many of you can n can't we just all need to move on to bigger n better things for the reservation. He's said he was going to learn n try !! Idk I think he deserves a chance!!
>
> (9 October 2014)

> "J": So let me ask you this…when tribal leaders are ordering there egg mcmuffins and coffee from McDonald's in The NN Capital are they ordering in Navajo or English? When they are in Washington fighting for your tribe are they talking to political leaders in Navajo or English?? I thought so…the people voted this individual in, what happen to democracy? For the people by the people? After all isn't government(s) in this country based upon democracy?? Or did I miss something."
>
> (9 October 2014)

As Jacobsen shows in her fieldwork, the lateral violence of one speaker refusing to recognize the speech of another also results in multiple fluent speakers not seeing themselves as legitimate language bearers. These speakers, then, are often uncomfortable speaking to their children or grandchildren in Navajo (Jacobsen, 2017: 73–35; see also Adkins, 2013: 64–65; Peterson, 2006: 75–78).

Finally, many Facebookers also noted the range of their own abilities in Navajo, from fully "fluent," to semi-speaker, to being unable to understand any Diné bizaad. The majority of posters, however, fell somewhere between these two poles, with most, like Deschene, identifying as semi-speakers with "passive fluency" (Basham & Fathman, 2008). Two male participants noted about the fluidity of defining this inchoate thing that is "fluency":

> "M": FLUENT in Dine' Language??? You can only be fluent if you can't speak English and learn the way of the Dine' Law, Policy and Government in Dine language…Therefore the word Fluent needs to be re-defined.
>
> (9 October 2014)

> "L": Language is an evolving thing. There will always be differences because of location small differences in pronunciations may occur -so who decides what's fluent? It is a valid question.
>
> (9 October 2014)

In these posts, Diné citizens criticized not only the ideology of monolingual purism undergirding the fluency hearing, but also the divisive effects of the hearing on a sense of community and the ways it artificially divided "speakers" from "non-speakers." Emphasizing the disjuncture between those that speak versus those that read and write Navajo, posters highlighted the increasingly limited domains for Navajo language use and the sense of linguistic dis-citizenship experienced by those who do not identify as Navajo speakers. Finally, in these posts, we see a refusal on the part of younger posters to assume the blame often mapped onto them as non-speakers; rather, we see a choice to identify as speakers-in-progress and, sometimes, a re-assigning of responsibility for language fluency *back* onto older heritage language speakers. Crucially, we also see a recognition of settler colonial policies of dispossession and disenfranchisement and the direct effect this has had on Diné language vitality.

6.2 | Urban Navajos, new speakerness, and language reclamation

Facebookers also voiced concern that the complaint triggering the hearing was allowed to proceed so far after the established deadline for filing grievances, resulting in the nullification of over 9,000 votes for Deschene in the primary election. Although we were unable to substantiate the age of posters, many posts characterized the divide as one between the "older" generation—often portrayed here as self-serving, "out of touch," and hypocritical—and the "younger" generation, who feel held back and silenced by the older generation. In addition, many posters self-identified as members of the younger generation. This political silencing becomes a particularly powerful tool when applied to language use and who has the right to speak for whom as measured by one's heritage language abilities. Indeed, many posters cast Deschene himself and his candidacy as representing much-needed change coming to the Navajo Nation while accusing the older generation of being afraid of Deschene and the change from the status quo in tribal politics that Deschene represented. The Navajo Nation Council is described more than once in the conversation as a group of coyotes, or m2'iis, who trick and cheat their people and speak fluent Navajo while they do so. This comparison is used several times to justify Deschene's candidacy and highlight his efforts to become a better speaker of the Navajo language, something he repeatedly promised to do while on the campaign trail.[8]

Ambivalence about formal education and language learning in the school system is also apparent in the discussion as a whole. Several people referenced the song by Diné recording artist Arlene Nofchissey Williams, "Go, My Son," popular among many Navajo Nation Headstart children, and Diné Chief Manuelito's famous statement encouraging Diné students to "climb the ladder" of education and leave the reservation in order to return and help one's Diné people. Such advice was referenced by posters as being nothing more than a "sick joke" ("C," gender unidentified), with Deschene's fluency testing as the paramount—and most public—example of this failure to follow through at the level of tribal support.

Concurrently, some individuals pointed to the lack of consistent Navajo language, culture, and history educational programmes, and inadequate funding for those that do exist, across the reservation. As "S" notes:

> Chris is being unrightly scrutinized for doing what we were told to do all along by our elders and that is becoming educated and coming back to help our people. Remember "Go my son, go and climb the ladder"? That propaganda has now been debunked!"
>
> (9 October 2014)

Another Facebooker, "A," then responds:

> When they said "GO MY SON GO GET AN EDUCATION"… I guess what they meant was to keep going and don't come back because we won't let you run for Navajo Nation President….
>
> (9 October 2014)

Facebooker "D" articulates the challenges of language, leaving the "rez" and the politics of Diné exclusion:

> What happens to Chris effects people similar to Chris, including me. We leave and lose our language drastically. We face racism and culture shock. We come home and we face cultural backlash from our own people. It is altogether depressing and I'm ashamed that our Navajo people are doing this to Chris and people like him.
>
> (9 October 2014)

Many participants in the dialogue also noted that the older generation did not recognize the paradox of criticizing the younger generation for not speaking Navajo while at the same time having told them their whole lives to leave the reservation, achieve higher education, and come back. Posters also noted the irony of now being told, on the one hand, to speak Navajo, but not ever having been spoken to in Navajo by members of an older generation in their family. A few posters also referenced experiences of ridicule when attempting to speak Navajo for the first time in front of more fluent speakers as being the reason they stopped speaking or learning Navajo; this difficulty for new language learners in particular is also something that Jacobsen observed in her fieldwork in the community of Crownpoint (NM), Navajo Nation (Jacobsen, 2017: 48). Linking these same ideas to Diné civic estrangement, other responses reveal another important node in the politics of belonging and social citizenship, that of being perceived as "Navajo enough" by fellow Diné citizens. As "L" writes:

> So much for the NN going forward…I guess Ill stay in white america where at least Im not discriminated for not being navajo enough….at least I count!!
>
> (9 October 2014)

Other, urban-identified Diné—sometimes referred to as "urban Navajos," a term that, in our own observations, can carry significant stigma—noted many ways in which they are made to feel as if they do not belong, should not make claims to belong, or are not "real" Navajos. Resisting the tendency to conflate urban indigeneity with being "less" Navajo, a female Facebooker, "E," writes:

> URban Navajos are Real Navajo.!!! Let us vote!!!!"
>
> (9 October 2014)

Reflecting the very large Navajo diaspora (about 48% of Diné citizens live off-reservation according to the 2010 US Census) and using a Navajo word equivalent to "Go/go for it/go strongly/put in more effort" (yéego), as in "Go, Chris," another female Facebooker, "K," writes:

> Go Chris! Navajos on the east coast are rooting for you yeeegooo!!!
>
> (9 October 2014)

Finally, posters in their own writing frequently employed a wide variety of orthographies for both Navajo and English in order to amplify their concerns and claims. This frequently included employment of the Navajo term *jaan* or "john" (written in posts to emphasize the velar fricative pronunciation with an "x" indicating heightened affect—*jxaan*—and spelled colloquially as both "jawn" and "jyaan"). Defined as a rural-identified Diné, or "rezneck," who speaks English with Navajo inflection, *jaan* is a stigmatizing term that, similar to other race-and class-pejorative terms like "redneck" or "white trash," is also taken up by some Diné as a defensive or humorous badge of pride.

For example, in a post referencing the hearing video, "N" writes:

> TO THE POINT AT IT'S BEST!! Yep! Typical JAWn!!
>
> (9 October 2014)

Referencing "N's" perception regarding the challenges of upward mobility in social spaces where everyone feels they are fighting for a small piece of the pie, and intimating earlier embezzlement scandals involving Navajo Tribal Council members, "M" notes:

> We all Lie…WTF. But he hasn't done anything like being a Felon…Give him a chance! Man.. jawns are always jealous of one another and dnt bother to back up another!!! We need change!!!! Whats this world coming to! Give him A CHANCE! Quit being Ignorant!!!
>
> (9 October 2014)

Finally, a female Facebooker, "S," noted this about the fluency mandate:

> it is an archaic rule. time for it to disappear. **your choice: a nation, or a social club**.
>
> (emphasis in original)

Building on this idea of linguistic exclusivity and language fluency as a social club, journalist Jaynie Parrish noted in a moving piece published in *The Guardian*:

> I would give so much, just to be a fluent speaker. If there were a magic pill, I would take it. If there is a traditional Navajo ceremony that would really give me that ability—which I hear there is—I would do it in a heartbeat. So many parts of the Navajo world have been closed to me, and I want in on this secret club, to be let in on those stories, jokes, holy songs, prayers and play-by-play sports action in *Diné*.
>
> (2014: 1; 9 October 2014)

For Parrish, the quest for "full" identity is framed through the lenses of both biomedicine ("a pill") and traditional Diné medicine ("a Navajo ceremony"), where lack of fluency can be "fixed" by medical and/or spiritual intervention. Again, not speaking Navajo is described as indexing only a partial Diné identity, where gaining fluency through external intervention, Parrish suggests, would allow her to feel more fully and completely Navajo.

In the posts discussed above, urban identities, rural identities, new speakerness, and belonging to the "club" that is Navajo speakers not only converge to become a discussion about loss, settler colonialism, and the resulting language and culture losses associated with Indian relocation within one digital network, but these are also conversations of resilience and language reclamation, where processes of decolonization and reclaiming sovereignty begin precisely as they do, here: through raw, open, and honest conversations such as the dialogue we see occurring on *The Navajo Times* Facebook page.

7 | CONTEMPORARY CONTRADICTIONS OF DINÉ LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY

An oft-repeated argument throughout the debate was that the Navajo Nation president should be able to communicate with elderly Navajos throughout the reservation who may not necessarily speak any English. This argument, however, is premised on the idea that Navajo Nation speakers are by and large bilingual English/Navajo speakers, something which many scholars, Diné citizens, and Facebook posters alike challenged. As linguistic anthropologist Margaret Field notes about the erasure of non-speakers from Diné civic participation:

> the process of erasure is most obviously seen in assertions of the existence of community-wide bilingualism (or stable diglossia) on the part of government and academic institutions, which insist on or require a degree of Navajo fluency that many tribal members cannot meet.
>
> (2009: 44)

In fact, as Thompson has elsewhere noted, "the fact that (…) he's [Deschene] still learning is very representative of the people that he means to lead" (radio interview with NPR's Laurel Morales, 2014). Arguably, Deschene's passive fluency in Navajo positions him to understand the unique linguistic conundrum and vulnerabilities with which new speakers and non-speakers are confronted in a humane and pragmatic way.

Insisting on community-wide bilingualism erases new speakers and English-dominant speakers from the Diné civic sphere (Fast, 2002). Moreover, an examination of the language requirements for the range of elected offices on the Navajo Nation from local Chapter officials to the office of the president demonstrates that Navajo language fluency is unevenly required throughout the structure of elected officials. For example, the people elected to local offices required to be fluent in Navajo are Land Board candidates, Farm Board candidates, District Grazing Committee candidates, and Chapter Officers. These elected officials rather than the Navajo Nation president would arguably have the closest and most consistent contact with the general Navajo public, including the elderly. However, a Council Delegate who is a Chapter's link to the central Navajo Nation government in Window Rock may be fluent in *either* English or Navajo. Interestingly, members of local school boards and the Navajo Nation Board of Education are *not* required to be fluent in the Navajo language, a reflection of the pervasiveness of English-only policies within federally funded Indian education programmes.

While the goal or desire to reclaim Navajo language is equally important to all, the conversation remains polarized, more often—though not exclusively—pitting younger and new Navajo speakers against older speakers fluent in Diné bizaad. Important to this discussion are the ways in which the hearing itself also ignored key tenets of Diné Fundamental Law (Austin, 2009: 21), including the tenets of hozh= (balance/symmetry), k'é (universal system of relations), k'éí (kinship), and sa'2h naaghai bik'eh hozh= (SNBH, "long life and happiness") (Witherspoon, 1977). Central among these is the Diné (and Western Apache) philosophy of *t'áábí bee bohólniih*, wherein a premium is placed on an individual's ability to self-determine and choose one's own path, socially, linguistically, and politically (Nevins, 2004, 2013; Webster, 2013, 2015). Thus, a live, taped, and very public language test interrogating a speaker's stated linguistic abilities could be understood to directly violate the philosophical tenet of *t'áábí bee bohólniih*.

But the creation of a language test also ignores the key demographic of younger speakers wanting to be counted yet discounted, despite other skill sets, because of their "partial" linguistic abilities. Instead, we might shift our own focus from one of loss and endangerment to one focusing on "language vitality, enabling semi-speakers to be recognized and counted as rightful, valid speakers of endangered languages" (Boltokova, 2017: 1). If language reclamation is indeed a type of decolonization (Leonard, 2017: 19), then one way to understand the ensuing language debate on Facebook is as its own form of locally produced language reclamation, enacted on a daily basis on a widely used social media platform. Similarly, if erasure occurs through a process where "the larger whole is erased through the countdown, or 'lasting,' of those iconic few" (Davis, 2016: 45), we might view the OHA hearing as its own sort of "erasure" of new Navajo speakers, whereby, if Deschene does not speak "fluently," he is no longer "Navajo enough" (Jacobsen, 2017) and therefore cedes his right to lead the Navajo Nation as its commander-in-chief. Based on our findings, the OHA hearing ultimately seemed less concerned with finding a long-term solution to language loss or enfranchising younger non-fluent Navajo citizens, and focused more on the process some have referred to as "language shaming" (Haualand & Holmström, 2019). As Diné sociologist Andrew Curley expressed his concern about the approach the hearing took: "the Navajo Nation is legislating culture, which is not the same as sustaining it" (Curley, 2014).

8 | CONCLUSION

This example from the Navajo Nation shows us how discussions about contemporary Native American identity and language politics have the potential to amplify our understandings of the complicated intersections of language, cultural politics, generational differences, and settler colonialism's powerful, yet ultimately incomplete, reach in Indigenous communities more broadly. In the end, speaking Navajo is fundamentally tied to what it means to be Navajo, but, in a speech community where communicative practices are varied and heterogeneous, and where new and younger identified speakers will soon become the majority of Diné citizenry, it cannot be used as the only litmus test. To do so risks pitting young against old, alienating both heritage language speakers and the majority of Navajo citizens who Deschene represented and the many skill sets they have to offer towards the hopeful future of the Navajo Nation. If "colonial legacies, power structures, and worldview differences" (Leonard, 2017: 17) are the source of many such ordeals of language (Basso, 2013), one way we might respond to settler colonialism's uneven legacy in the present moment is to lend our own ethnographic ears and attention to the vibrant, creative, and resilient ways in which myriad Diné citizens—"fluent" speakers, non-Navajo speakers, new speakers, traditionalists, Christians, Native American Church participants, Latter Day Saints, "straight" and "queer," urban

and rural, blue collar and white-collar professionals—navigate the space of local digital networks and the critical consciousness with which they approach their own choices of language, citizenship, identity, and belonging. Ahéhee'.

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ENDNOTES

[1] To read all Facebook comments and to watch the video, visit: https://www.Facebook.com/navajotimes/videos/10152724318671233/?comment_xml:id=10152724410131233&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22.

[2] As a political entity, the Navajo Nation is comprised of Diné citizens. Diné means "the people" in the Navajo language. Because citizens of the Navajo Nation identify alternately as Navajo or Diné, often depending on the language being spoken, we use both Navajo and Diné throughout this article.

[3] For a complete timeline of events, see Spruhan (2015).

[4] Fieldwork for Jacobsen's ethnographic research was permitted through a Class C Ethnographic Permit (Permit #CO807-E), issued by the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department.

[5] "Bordertowns," following contemporary usage on the Navajo Nation, include towns that border the contemporary boundary of the legal entity known as Navajo Nation, but also include towns that are contained in the historic area of what was understood as a much larger area of Diné land, known as Diné Bikéyah.

[6] Indeed, the seed for this article emerged from one such conversation between the authors in which each of us noticed how intensely this debate was affecting relationships, senses of self, and thoughts on heritage language between and among family members, friends, and colleagues on the Navajo Nation during fall 2014.

[7] Interestingly, younger posters' reference to a coyote or trickster figure draws on a character from the Diné Creation Scripture, the *Diné Bahane'*, thus perhaps bolstering their own claims to authority by referencing a commonly known story grounded in the cultural capital of Diné tradition.

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