

EPILOGUE

“Ways of Seeing” (Teec Nos Pos, Arizona)

“**Y**ou,” says the pilot. “Please move forward. We need your body up here.”

I’m aboard a “puddle jumper” — a Beech 1900D — about to leave Denver for the Four Corners airport in Farmington, New Mexico. The plane has two rows of single seats, eight to a side. There is no bathroom, no flight attendant and — logic follows — no in-flight service. The boyish pilot gives us our basic instructions, including a brief shuffling of seat assignments to better distribute the weight throughout the aircraft. He then hops into the cockpit, into which we have an unimpeded view. “I just flew this route,” he says, looking back, “and it gets pretty bumpy when we head over the mountains. My advice to you is to sit tight, strap that seatbelt on and do your best to enjoy the ride.”

Despite being the largest sovereign territory in the United States — covering nearly 27,000 square miles, including all of Northeastern Arizona and parts of New Mexico and Utah — the Navajo Reservation is difficult to reach. The closest major American cities — Albuquerque, Salt Lake City, Denver — are several hours away. Even our aerial trek to Farmington leaves my colleagues and me 80 miles short of the final destination, Red Mesa High School.

We begin our descent with no sign of the airport — just a flat terrain, infrequent tree tops, long dirt roads and a sprinkling of mobile homes, each scattered randomly across the land like Legos.

The plane finds a runway and drops us off at the front door of the tiny commuter airport in Farmington. Once inside, I see the headline for the local newspaper. It’s October 2005, and although all the major papers are abuzz that day with the news of President Bush’s decision to nominate White House counsel Harriet Miers for the U.S. Supreme Court, *The Daily Times* leads with a local story: “Family Grieves for Local Soldier Killed in Iraq.”

The Navajo of the American Southwest speak dialects of a language called *Athapaskan*. Archaeological evidence indicates that descendants of the modern Navajo people did not live here in significant numbers until the sixteenth century. By the mid-1500s, however, the Athapaskans — an ethnic group that included both the Navajo and Apache tribes — and the more established Pueblo had become vital trading partners. The Spanish first mention the Navajo as a distinct group in the early 1600s. The phrase, taken from the Tewa Pueblo, whose settlement preceded the Navajo, means “thieves.” (Most names used to identify Native American tribes in English are epithets by which their enemies referred to them.) The Navajo refer to themselves as the *Diné*, or “The People.”

To continue our journey to the high school, we turn right out of the airport and onto Apache Street. Still close to Farmington, an adult video store is visible up ahead under a giant billboard: “Jesus is Watching You.” Other businesses line the sides of the two-lane highway: Wagon Wheel Pawn Shop. Valley Scrap Metal. Singleton’s Mobile Homes. Burger King. Navajo Food Distribution Program.

After 15 miles, the road stretches out straight ahead. There is nothing to see except telephone poles, an occasional house, and fields of sagebrush. In the distance, at the edge of the horizon, reddish-brown mesas, buttes and mountains greet the edges of the sky.

An hour and a half later, we turn into the small complex of buildings that make up the school. On one side of the street, rows of one-story beige trailers form orderly lines; these structures provide temporary housing during the week for most of Red Mesa’s teachers. On the other side of the street, a dozen or so grey houses provide a slightly fancier form of lodging.

Where is the school, we wonder? We see a large beige building in front of us, but there is no sign. The only door we find looks like it has been locked for decades. We stumble around the corner hoping to find Lorie Norton, the media teacher and our primary host. Instead we find John, a forty-something white teacher, wind-tanned and whiskered.

“You all looking for someone?”

“We are. Is this the high school?”

“It sure is — are you guys the Freedom people?”

John leads us to Lorie's room, which serves as a sort of media headquarters for the school. Filled with rows of computers and a newly formed TV recording studio, the room also houses the school's radio station — *KRMH, The Station that Jams the Nation*. Lorie and her daughter, Katrina, are waiting inside. "We were wondering if you'd ever find us," says Lorie. Katrina, wearing black glasses, a black AC/DC shirt, black shorts, and dark purple eyeliner, is more to the point. "If you find *anything* out here, you should be excited."

It's nighttime, so our work with the school won't begin until the next morning. Lorie and Katrina lead us to our lodging — half a trailer for me, and a small grey house for my two colleagues, Molly and Emily. Outside the house is a giant shovel. "The wind out here blows so much at night, you may need to dig yourself out in the morning," Lorie warns. My teeth crunch on the grit and sand. We look up before separating; a sky full of stars glitters brilliantly above.

The next morning, we cross the street separating our temporary quarters from the school's main building. It's still early — 7:30 — but a steady stream of school buses has been pulling up in front of the school for at least an hour. 28 school buses serve Red Mesa's 900 or so elementary and high school students, many of whom live several hours away on unpaved, remote, rocky roads.

Red Mesa's principal, Tim Benally, is waiting for us in his office. Forty-four years old and the father of four, Tim has been the principal at Red Mesa for four years. He speaks with a Navajo "accent" — a slower, breathier cadence than my own, with extended emphasis placed on particular words. His eyes flicker with energy behind his spectacles. His skin is deeply tanned and healthy-looking. He greets us with a giant smile and gives us a seat. "Do you feel lost?" he asks supportively. I nod. "That's what used to happen when I would go to the east coast. I could only see *this way*," he explained, pointing straight up and down, "but I needed to see *thiis way* (pointing straight out to either side). Which way was *eaast*, which way was *weest*," he whispers, smiling.

We ask Tim to describe his ideal outcomes, both for our visit and for his school in general. "In my lifetime," he says, "I know a Navajo will never be president. But I want our children to know that the power lies in their freedom to express themselves. There is some deep resentment here over what has happened over the years. There are two mindsets. One is about getting serious about education; in fact, one of the main dreams for people around here is to see their children graduate. That's always the biggest day of the year. I know it looks like there's no one here, but on that day you see the closest thing to a traffic jam we ever have.

"The other mindset is about reservation pride. A lot of the elders around here want parents to divert from the system and reconnect to their culture. Those mixed messages rub off on our kids,

who can alternate between feeling motivated and not feeling motivated. I want them to feel enthusiastic about using their First Amendment freedoms to have a memorable time in high school, and to prepare them better for their lives after they graduate; it shouldn't just be about sports."

The Navajo elders have good reason to doubt the intentions of the "system." When the federal government first assumed full control of native education, in 1871, the first schools were charged with removing all traces of their students' indigenous cultures and replacing them with more "American ways" of thinking and living. As former Amherst president Merrill Gates outlined in an 1896 address:

We have, to begin with, the absolute need to awakening in the savage Indian broader desires and ampler wants. To bring him out of savagery into citizenship we must make the Indian more intelligently selfish before we can make him unselfishly intelligent. We need to *awaken in him wants*. In his dull savagery he must be touched by the wings of the divine angel of discontent ... Discontent with the teepee and the starving rations of the Indian camp in winter is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers — and trousers with a pocket in them, and with a *pocket that aches to be filled with dollars!*

Although Gates was speaking a century ago, Indian Boarding Schools, funded by federal dollars, sought similar goals in the first few decades of the 20th century. Students received "civilized" names and uniforms. Their hair was cut and their heads and bodies were washed with kerosene and lye. They were forbidden from speaking their own languages or practicing their own tribal religions. Inspections and drills took place daily. Platoons were organized according to age and rank. Scores of Christian missionary schools popped up across the country as well, charged with giving Indian children both the spiritual tools they would need for salvation and the social tools they would need to thrive in the United States.

Beginning in the 1930s, federal Indian education policy shifted again, leaving teachers freer to emphasize the role of Indian culture and language. But the legacy of the first schools, according to Tim, still lingers. "Most of our students can't speak their native language," he lamented. "They understand what their parents are saying, but they only respond in English. I'm hoping that in the same way the First Amendment belongs to all cultures and ideas, we can figure out a way to reconnect the students to a deeper sort of cultural belonging and appreciation. I don't want them to feel they need to choose between being an American and being an Indian. How I'm going to make that happen, I don't know. But I know that I want to."

We leave Tim's office to take our first tour of the school. It is a small, stout building. The walls above the lockers are painted in traditional Navajo patterns and colors, dressing up otherwise nondescript hallways. Low ceilings make the halls feel smaller than they are. Signs are written in English and Navajo.

We walk a short distance from the main building, separated by a common courtyard in which several boys play a wind-challenged game of basketball, to the cafeteria and gymnasium. The district's seal — an amalgam of American and Navajo images — frames the side of the gym that's facing us. When we notice it, Tim's smile widens. "We just had our first real First Amendment success thanks to that," he announces. The district planned to paint the seal on the center of the school's indoor basketball court. Students were adamant it be the school's mascot — the Redskins. After compiling a list of names on a petition and stating their case, the students got their wish. "That happened without any provocation by the adults," Tim adds. "So we know their interest is there."

Tim asks us to talk to every English class about the principles behind the First Amendment. His hope is that after we leave, the faculty can build on their students' shared sense of awareness and understanding. Molly, Emily and I are led in different directions. We spend the next seventy minutes working with different classes, a ritual we will repeat five more times before heading home.

Each classroom has between fifteen and twenty-five students, whose ages range from thirteen to eighteen. In several classes, the students — mostly dressed in shades of black, blue or grey — are asked to write down a question they'd like us to answer. Most questions feel forced and disconnected from any real point of interest. We are unknown quantities, and who really has a question about the First Amendment on a Tuesday morning, especially if you got up at 4:00am to catch the bus to school?

One question repeats itself across several classrooms, and it *does* sound like a point of real interest. *What is your culture?* I'm struck by this question, both in terms of how important it is to Red Mesa's students, and how unprepared I feel I am to answer it.

Independently, we lead our classes through a discussion of the civic principles people must understand if a free society is to honor First Amendment freedoms for all people — individual rights, civic responsibilities (to guard the rights of others), and a commitment to debate differences with mutual respect. We notice how institutionalized the third 'R' is at Red Mesa. Respect is simply a part of the culture. One teacher confesses she worries it sometimes makes the students too passive. "We're a protest without a cause," she says. This dynamic also makes it difficult to engage the students in an open discussion about such an abstract set of concepts.

Another teacher comments on this point later: “Our kids have a lot of cultural shyness,” he says, “so they’re not always sure how and when to enter a conversation.” Later, as we eat seasoned beef and corn dogs in the cafeteria, we agree this will be one of the unique challenges at a school like Red Mesa. “Asking kids to behave differently than their parents is very tricky,” Molly says. “It can put them in a very uncomfortable situation. Perhaps our challenge is this: How can Red Mesa allow its kids to honor their families *and* still think deeply about the issues that matter to them?”

The workday concludes with a faculty meeting in the library. The room is long and rectangular, so the school’s 46 faculty members fan out across a series of individual desks and round tables, eating donuts and drinking Hawaiian Punch. The group is tired from the day.

After the meeting, we strike up a conversation with the two teachers closest to us. Kevin Martin, a tall man with a rigid posture and a workman’s hands, speaks first. “I’m not sure how the idea of encouraging more freedom fits here at this school, but I do know a pervasive issue on this reservation has to do with the value of its natural minerals. If we can help ensure that more parents and kids are aware of the issues at stake and how to make their voices heard, then that’s what I’d like to see.”

Later, we learn more about the issues Kevin references. The Navajo’s land contains some of the most valuable natural mineral deposits in North America — a fitting irony, since the land was initially given away because federal officials believed it to be worthless.

This bounty has had its cost. In 1922, outsiders first discovered the land of the Navajo had something they wanted — oil. As the major companies prepared their contracts, the Navajo — still operating under a decentralized system of mostly local governments — lacked structured protocols that would allow them to reach agreement. The lack of a central body left the Navajo susceptible to the companies, which sought to cultivate relationships with different interest groups across the tribe. The Navajo formed a tribal council in 1923, but the real problems came several decades later, when in 1951 the key ingredient of nuclear weaponry — uranium — was discovered on the land.

Extractive companies moved in quickly, neglecting to tell their Navajo workmen about the dangers of the mineral they were mining. Workers returned home with uranium dust on their clothes. Piles of radioactive waste sat near people and animals. Some of the waste entered the water supply. It took years before tribal leaders made the connection between their people’s health problems — and high incidences of certain types of cancer — and the mines. In 1990, Congress passed a law granting money to the people who had been hurt by uranium mining. But as Kevin pointed out, the issue was far from over.

Another teacher, an alert and sunny woman named Rebecca, shares a different obstacle. “People are afraid to speak up here,” she says, “which is difficult for me as an outsider. You don’t want to trespass and sound like a flaming radical — but you do want to help identify the correct channels and encourage the community to be more active.”

Our visit culminates with a barbeque along the edge of the San Juan River. As the adults lay out plastic containers of homemade dishes across a picnic table, a young boy named Dylan Blackwater takes me to see cave drawings of the land’s earliest human stewards. Alongside the still-colorful shapes of animals and hunters, drawn thousands of years ago, we see a modern addition: CUSTER DIED FOR YOUR SINS. Dylan takes my hand to lead me back to the group.

After dinner, I ask Rebecca, her ears and neck adorned with turquoise jewelry, to talk about her experiences as a non-Native teacher on the reservation. “I’ve been here thirteen years now,” she begins, “so I obviously have found a way to make it work. It’s lonely at times, but I just couldn’t handle life in the city, and living here, every day allows me to walk in beauty.”

I reflect on her comments on the short walk back from the car to my trailer that night. It is dusk, the wind is whipping around me, and the sky is a cosmic blue. Flashes of orange and magenta radiate from the tops of the mesas. I am alone. And I can see, *thiis way*, to the *eaast* and the *weest*, for miles.