Fields of the Future: Unraveling the Loom
A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center
S2E6: Larissa Nez—On Decolonizing Institutions

Introduction: This is Fields of the Future, an interview series by Bard Graduate Center. This season highlights the work of scholars, artists, and educators working with Indigenous textiles and textile history of the Southwestern United States and Mexico. Jessie Mordine Young speaks with Larissa Nez about her contributions to the exhibition *Color Riot* at the Montclair Art Museum, where she currently is an Art Table Fellow. They also discuss how, in her curatorial career, she is advocating for decolonial disciplines and talk about the individual and collective experience of life on the reservation during a global pandemic.

Jessie Mordine Young: Hi. I'm Jessie Mordine Young, a recent graduate from the Bard Graduate Center. I'm a Brooklyn-based textile scholar, educator, and weaver. I am calling in from the traditional homelands of the Lenape, Merrick, Canarsie, Matinecock, and Rockaway nations. I'm thrilled to be speaking with Larissa Nez on the podcast today. Larissa is a second year Public Humanities MA student at Brown University and a curatorial fellow at the Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity. Her research explores cultural heritage, repatriation, traditional ecological knowledge, tribal critical race theory, and public health, along with the intersections between modern and contemporary art within these subjects. She is working towards a curatorial career and advocating for decolonial and Indigenous pedagogies. Thank you for joining me today. Welcome, Larissa.

Larissa Nez: Thank you. Ahéhee, Jessie. I am so thrilled to be on this podcast and to talk with you.

JMY: Thank you for taking some time to allow me to learn more about your career and your interests. Could you start off by telling me a little bit about your area of interest within the academic world and share some of the projects that you've been working on either recently or at present?

LN: Definitely. in Navajo culture and tradition, it's customary for us to give our introduction in Navajo. So I'd like to take a little bit of time to do that:

Shí éí Larissa Nez yinishyé. Hashtł'ishnii nishłį, Dził Tł'ahnii báshíshchíín, Táchii'nii éí da shicheii, dóó Tótsohnii éí da shinálí. Ákó t'éégo Diné Asdzáán nishłį.
Direct translation: My name is Larissa Nez. I am of the Mud People, Born for the Mountain Cove People. My maternal grandfather is of the Red Running into the Water People. My paternal grandfather is of the Big Water People. This is what makes me a Navajo woman.

My name is Larissa Nez. My pronouns are she and her. and I'm a Diné citizen. I am of the Mud People and born for the Mountain Cove People. My maternal grandfather is of the Red Running into the Water People and my paternal grandfather is of the Big Water People. I was born and raised on the Navajo Nation in the Fort Defiance Agency, which is located in the northeastern

part of Arizona, in a small town, Sawmill, Arizona. I received my bachelor's in Art History and Sociology from the University of Notre Dame. And I'm currently a second year master's student in the Public Humanities program at Brown. In addition to being a graduate student, I'm also a writer. I'm a youth advocate, cultural critic. I am a runner, I'm a cyclist, and I'm also a curator. And I live in Providence, Rhode Island currently with my three pets. My research explores, as you mentioned, cultural heritage, at the intersections between Indigenous Studies, Black Studies, and critical theory as they relate to modern and contemporary art practices, and in the public humanities and in the formation of collections and archives. And so my research is really centered on thinking about the voices and histories and epistemologies of Indigenous people through contemporary art, exhibitions, as well as programs and initiatives in academic spaces and in cultural institutions.

For the last year, I've been very interested in investigating the development and application of critical Indigenous theory, as well as the Black radical tradition, as well as traditional Navajo knowledge, and methodologies to exploring public humanities and contemporary art history, as well as historical traditional art practices within Indigenous communities. And so this mode of analysis and, this methodology that I've been thinking about over the last year, it really is about cultivating a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary relationship between indigeneity, as well as what that means, with a historical lens, but also with a contemporary lens, and thinking about how that identity, is traced and represented in art and social movements and in archives and museums and contemporary art practices.

I'm really engaged with developing this framework, that is based on a lot of these ideological and epistemological concerns and conditions, with respect to thinking about, you know, the systems that we currently operate in and the world that we currently live in, which is so heavily, relegated to power and domination, through, living in a colonized world and what that looks like and what that means and how we are trying to survive with a decolonial and a feminist and queer and antiracist practices and all of that.

I was awarded two fellowships. The first was with ArtTable. And that was in partnership with the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey. And so in this fellowship, I was curating and developing museum education materials for the traveling exhibition *Color Riot* - which was originally curated at the Heard Museum.It's a really great exhibition. I've been so happy and honored to, you know, be welcomed in on that as a Navajo curator. Color Riot was co-curated by three, um, Navajo women. And so being a part of this legacy and of, you know, strong, powerful, acknowledgeable native women, was really, really exciting for me. And it was just such a great opportunity. And so *Color Riot,* features over 70 Navajo textiles, um, from 1860 to 2018. And it really focuses on the change in the hallmark of Navajo textile design- and weavers' individualism, , in those, different weavings. And so thinking about the history of textiles within the Southwest is, also along with the influence that these textiles were shaped by. It's been really crucial for me to be a part of this project and to think about what I wanted to add to it and what experiences that I wanted to take away from that. and also what knowledge I wanted to share with that, because it was so important for me to, you know, be featured in this exhibition and to have my voice incorporated in it in a really unique way.

JMY: What specifically did you find yourself wanting to focus on for writing for this exhibition, and for curating part of this exhibition? And also, how has that process of collaboration been?

LN: I was actually involved really heavily with the curatorial department, as well as the museum education department. And so I had all of these multiple roles and shoes to fill during my time with them. And so I was not only focusing on kind of the curatorial aspects of the exhibition, so thinking about what messages we wanted to send and what objects we wanted to include in the exhibition. In addition to The Heard Museum's own collection, that was the central kind of part of the exhibition itself- we're also creating a really unique space within the larger exhibition that we wanted to focus on. And so as the lead for this project, I was indebted with, you know, the burden of responsibility of kind of creatively shaping what that look like and imagining what that space could be and what voices and stories we could include in that. And it was an immense responsibility, one that I didn't take lightly. And so I was very cognizant about what voices I wanted to include, which perspectives I wanted to include, and how much of Navajo culture that I wanted to include.

With *Color Riot*, the focus is on the textiles, the designs, as well as the colors and, you know, the continued influence of, Western society moving into the 19th century, and how that shapes Navajo weavers, stylistic features, and the, the overall development of weaving and textiles in the Southwest. And so thinking about these designs and their adoption and, you know, the continued influence of capitalism and buyers' tastes and how that influence what that looked like, there was a huge part of weaving that was left out of the conversation, which included the Navajo cultural influence and the aspects of that that are so important and that continue to, you know, be, included in Navajo weavers', you know, practices. And so that was a huge, important part of the exhibition for me that I felt like needed to be shared. Um, which, you know, testifies to not only, you know, the continued creative aspects of weaving, but also the resilience of Navajo communities in shaping and continuing this creative process.

And so the room that we curated is actually called “The Legacy of Spiderwoman” [Diné Language] And so this room will feature a number of different community members and their perspectives around weaving. And so we have a classical composer who composed music about weaving. And we have, youth, we have elders, we have, you know, figures within our community who adopt weaving in terms of their contemporary art practices, but also, you know, wearing textiles. And so thinking about the importance of the rug dress and thinking about, um, the cultural aspects, including adding language and, thinking about youth development and, you know, continuing, our culture, as well as thinking about, you know, how do we keep it going in the future. And that was such an important role for me to have as a fellow. And, you know, academically, I think this will really shape a lot of the way that, you know, people move into these exhibitions, and they move through them, and what they take away. And so the interpretive aspect of it was really important, too, because I had a huge part in creating the labels, as well as all the headlines and creating all of the interpretive material that the docents use in, their tours, as well as, you know, the, educational materials that will be shared with, New Jersey students in elementary school there.

JMY: It's interesting, because when I was speaking to, some other makers about their practice, and they had expressed that with sharing knowledge and sharing their history and sharing their practice, which is a part of their family's story, there's often this expectation, from people who are not a part of the community that they are permitted to learn and understand everything, that is the textile practice, but so much of it is deeply personal. It is an intimate understanding that is cultivated through centuries of a community continuing on something and passing it down from one individual to the other.

And, I'm interested in learning if there were parts or moments when you were co-creating this exhibition, if you kind of took a pause and was like, "I want people to know this but, at the same time, I feel like some of this information, I, I would like to keep it to myself and not share it to, the broader general public"? Were there ever any moments of conflict that you experienced when you were co-curating this exhibition where maybe you realize that some of this information is so deeply personal that it doesn't necessarily belong in the exhibition space?

LN: Oh, yeah, there were definitely so many points throughout this fellowship where I had to continually come back to those questions and those issues. And I think it really came down to, you know, making sure that it was a collaborative process.And that I was not the only Navajo person involved in this exhibition. And so as I mentioned previously, we continue to consult with the Navajo, co-curators throughout this process. And we continue to have discussions with the Heard Museum, in terms of, you know, our own adoptions of the exhibition. And in the room that we were creating, uh, “The Legacy of Spiderwoman,” we really wanted this to be a space where there were multiple voices that were part of this exhibition-. development process. And so that included not just, the co-curators, and the Heard Museum, but also thinking about, you know, having cultural representatives from our communities, from the Navajo nation who are sharing their own voices. And so there was this really collaborative process that went into it. And as deeply empowering as it was, there was always that question of how much we should be sharing and why are we sharing it. And so I think a lot of this comes back to being a Navajo person involved with, you know, an institution, and, a museum that is, you know, doing so many great things for, building Native communities and inviting Native people to be in these spaces, it was so important for us to, you know, think about when we're centering Indigenous people and Native people in these spaces and incorporating their knowledge, that we're doing so in a respectful way and that there are protocols that we are following.

There are really general protocols for working with Indigenous people, but then there are also very specific community, um, and tribal protocols that we have to abide by. And so as a Navajo person in this space, as a curator, as a museum educator, I was really, like, relegated with the responsibility of saying, "No, this is not okay." There are certain things that we have to adapt so that we weren't oversharing and that I wasn't misrepresenting my people, but also misrepresenting our knowledge, and when I say misrepresenting, I'm thinking about, not just oversharing, but sharing- in a way that isn't beneficial to Navajo people- and so doing so in a way that exploits our own culture, and in doing so, actually harms our traditional knowledge, and not so much as, you know, sharing it for the benefit of the community, but it also is gonna impact our tribe and our people in a negative way.

In doing all of this, I had to really balance so many different issues and so many different questions. And so as much as, I appreciate going into these spaces and thinking of how this is an act of reclaiming our histories, and reclaiming our culture, and reclaiming, you know, these legacies of, artistic practice and establishing our voice in these spaces, we have to think about how do we heal, and are we healing in a way that is gonna be, long-term and not just, creating a presence in this space that is not actually conducive to that.

JMY: I'm interested in hearing your perspective on how people who are not of Indigenous descent and, institutions who are white-centered or colonial- representations above all, how they are able to either support or offer more opportunities, to individuals and communities who deserve representation and deserve to have a voice within a particular medium or art form. For example, if one was to be putting together an exhibition on Indigenous, practices, specifically here, in this example, Navajo art, I think it's imperative for the museum to offer curatorial opportunities and interview opportunities and share the stories of those from this particular community, and allow them to have autonomy over the exhibition- and make those choices, and also to provide adequate pay and to provide adequate visibility. What are some other methods or ways, do you think, institutions can essentially work towards course-correcting, predominantly colonial spaces?

LN: That is such an important question, thank you for asking that. And this is, you know, ongoing reflection and ongoing work, and as somebody who studies modern and contemporary art practices with, you know, Native communities and Native artists, you know, this has been ongoing since the '70s, you know, since a lot of, you know, modern and contemporary Native artists started to emerge and creating their own collectives and challenging institutions to take up these questions, but also to not only consider them, but to act on them. And so, you know, taking into account the history and, you know, the work that has been done from, you know, generations of Native scholars, and activists, and artists, and these, really, profound ways has really, I think, driven a lot of Native scholars to think about how, we are continuing that work in our own way, but also what methodologies that were taken up, in doing so.

And so I think one of the first things, you know, as scholars and profs in, like, predominantly white colonial spaces, as you mentioned, we have a responsibility to not only, think about these questions, but to continue to expand the canon of Native art beyond these traditional Western narratives and canons, and thinking about how Native artists and Native scholars are essentially refusing the binary of tradition and contemporary, and the harm that has caused in thinking about Native art, and Native artists, and Native communities, and relegating so many Native artists and traditional practices and aren't making practices to the past, rather than thinking about it as a continuum of the past and moving into the future, and also thinking about, you know, how, because of this history and this legacy of Native activists and artists, being so creative in adapting the methodology so that they are community-centered, but they also can be adapted and be used in advocating for, you know, Native scholarship to be advanced within the institution is really about, you know, acknowledging that art and art institutions, whether they're cultural or they're academic, you know, they're not mutual spaces, and that we have to continue to work on that and to continue to push for that.

In doing so, we have to establish a dialectical relationship and understanding between the historical, the contemporary, and the future, and what that looks like and what that means for Native people. And, uh, you can't do this without acknowledging and including histories and legacies of conquests and domination, settler colonialism, racism, and how resistance movements in academic, and cultural, and community spaces goes against these things, but it also ensures our survival and our futurity as Native people, and Native artists, and Native knowledge-holders. Central to each of these experiences is a considerable investment in uplifting our histories and voices. And in doing so, you know, we're recognizing and we're pushing for ourselves to be recognized as agents instead of objects within these histories, and acknowledging that we are contemporary people with thriving cultures and communities, and that we will continue to be so in the future.

And then another thing, I think, is that in doing all of this work, you know, it's continual work that is continuing to happen and that we all have to continue to push ourselves towards, but we have to how inclusivity, of Indigenous people in these spaces is also incorporating our methodologies and incorporating our own ways of going about this work. And so whether that's reclaiming our own histories or establishing our voice in these spaces, or even, you know, creating and coming into these spaces with an active presence, we have to do so in a way that is healing. And so there's this continual process of, you know, our histories and our knowledges, and our presence, you know, having a healing quality, and not just, not just so that we're represented in these spaces, but these spaces, you know, have legacies of, harm, and trauma, and distrust. And so if we're moving into these spaces as Native people, we also want to be healed in the process, and we also, you know, wanna engage in this process of healing. And I think that it's so important, for these institutions, generally, but also individuals within them, to recognize that. And then lastly, with that work, there are so many community organizers who don't have access to these spaces, and we have to think about them as well, and we have to think about our privilege and the role that we have in these spaces, and whether or not we are upholding and being complicit in maintaining these oppressive structures and systems, and in doing so, we have to critique a lot of the ways that we have upheld that and engaged in that through, you know, our daily continued practice, or through, you know, canons of, um, that have shaped the way knowledge is shared, the way that knowledge is distributed, and thinking about how that relegation of power and domination with knowledge, um, engages with history.

Um, and so we have to continually ask ourselves as scholars and professionals who's telling this history and where do these narratives come from, and how are they being shared with the public, and are we re-examining the methods to which they were collected and that they're represented, um, because there are so many shifting power dynamics and relations in these spaces that we have to continue to evaluate and continue to think about and be reflective on these practices, and whether or not they're resisting our perpetuating settler colonialism and white supremacy. And- and that really comes down to, you know, the language that we use, and the people who are included, and the relationships that we're building along the way.

JMY: There was something interesting you said about just, the way in which people have this essentially, kind of, to re-word it, it's like people have this anticipation of what they expect of Navajo textiles... specifically, and so it's a part of this larger issue of the heritage problem, where.. people place specifically around a particular time period, or "traditional" textiles. So, like, 19th century textiles at the height of, you know, a trade period. And it's like, so many generations of weavers have come since then, and there's been incredible development in individual style, in people's choice in how they want to make art individually. And it's problematic to just center our understanding around specific periods of making or specific styles of making, when collectively, yes, there's an incredibly, strong history of making within the Navajo community but each person also has their own practice and has their own art form. And so to give voices to contemporary makers today who have- have taken lessons from their elders or from others in their community and then interpreted the medium in their own way, it's important to show that work just as much as it is important to show work from the past.

And so having spaces where contemporary makers can exist and contemporary art can exist in modern art, and have that be enough... you know, it's part of that issue with, white-centered spaces... and,always trying to hark back to "traditional," because of the way that settler textile histories have occurred. So, I think what you said was really, really poignant. Speaking of contemporary, I think more recently there's been so many issues, with, sharing stories, and specifically with COVID-19 and with the pandemic, um, I know that the Navajo nation has been really hard-hit, and I'm so sorry, it's been a really challenging time. And I know you were recently featured in a few articles, and one of them was, “How To Support Indigenous Organizers Fighting Coronavirus in Native American Communities”, as well as, “As COVID Highlights Health Inequities, Pueblos Prioritize Local Agriculture”, and I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about these two articles and, the significance of them, and specifically how you were mentioned within those, those publications.

LN: Thank you for acknowledging that. I know that as we move through this pandemic and we think about, you know, the last year and a half, essentially, and, this idea that we're now out of the pandemic is now kind of circulating, and, you know, public mandates are changing, we're going back to work, we're going back to school, and I think it's so important to recognize that this pandemic is still ongoing, and that it's changing and shaping the way that we interact with one another. I really wanted to acknowledge that first, and thank you for, you know, your sentiments, and bringing attention to these issues.

So thinking back to over a year ago, in January of 2020, I moved back to the Navajo nation after receiving my bachelor's, at Notre Dame. When I moved back, I moved back for a position at the Navajo Nation Department of Education, where I was offered work. And then shortly after, you know, less than two months later, we had our first case of coronavirus, um, on the Navajo nation.And at that point, the Navajo Nation had issued an executive order declaring a state of emergency in our tribe. And so there were a lot of factors that were considered in trying to reduce the risk of exposure but also, you know, thinking about the consequential public health impacts of that. And so following this order, everything was closed. We went into lockdown. Our reservation went into lockdown. Everybody was required to stay home.

And so that changed the duties of my position and so I was no longer in this position with the Department of Dine Education doing early childhood work. but I had, uh, essentially been transferred to work at the Navajo Nation Emergency Operations Center, or the Health Command Center, as it was called in that early period. In that position, I was transferred a lot. I was doing a lot of different things. I was a research assistant. I was a health liaison. And at one point, I was even the Chief of Operations. With all of this work, We shifted in so many ways, our approach to this pandemic and trying to create more community education. And trying to help the, uh, public understand, you know, the detrimental impacts of COVID, and, you know, how widespread it could be transmitted.

In the early part of this pandemic, between March, when we got our first case, to June, which is three months later, there were over 6,300 positive cases of COVID. And then a total of nearly 300 deaths. And so this averages to about 73 new cases per day with an average of about three deaths per day. the impacts, at this point, within the three months that we got hit, they were detrimental. And we could feel it across the Navajo Nation. Like, there was not one person that I met who did not have a family member impacted. The personal weight and the personal burden and the effects of all of this was so traumatic for all of us. And at one point, the Navajo Nation had surpassed every state in the U.S. for the highest number of positive cases. And I think that's how we became, you know, a national sensation, I would say. And I say sensation because the focus on the Navajo Nation was so short-lived that, in the process of becoming a sensation, we had so much media attention on us. And so many people were wondering, you know, "How can we help? What can we do?" And, according to, you know, the American Indian Study Center at UCLA, if tribal nations were counted as states, the most infected state throughout the country would be native tribes.

And so the top five tribes were the Mississippi Band of Choctaw, the White Mountain Apache, the Pueblo of Zia, the Pueblo of San Philippe, and the Navajo Nation. at this point of the pandemic, with all of this media attention on the Navajo Nation, and thinking about how our communities, you know, were in such need for resources and supplies and for food and water, but also just, you know, health resources, I was really concerned with how we were building and forging communities of care. And building strong networks between tribal government, mutual aid efforts, and community organizing as well as, you know, at the national level. Like, what resources were we receiving at a national level? And part of this. I was also thinking about culturally specific messaging for Navajo communities. And making sure that cultural healing and protection was being established. And that was integral into how we were addressing COVID-19.

And so when I received word that these interviewers, uh, wanted to get in touch with me, I had to be very cognizant about how I was talking about the pandemic and what I shared. Because the last thing that I wanted to do was engage in harmful practices that establish savior mentalities with non-native people. And that painted our people as not being resilient or not being strong or not being a sovereign entity. That was the last thing that I wanted to do. It was at this point, you know, that I had to realize the power of my own voice and what I was sharing. In doing that, you know, I just didn't want to say, "This is what we need. This is what we need." I actually wanted to challenge people, non-native people and native people, to consider the

questions. You know, knowing that there are so many deeply embedded systemic barriers that face Navajo communities, how can we expect our communities to stay home for so long without, you know, food and water which are basic necessities?

And how can I expect families to support themselves and their households without adequate income? and, you know, thinking about all of this from a marginalizing racialized status, as a native person, these were questions that I was thinking about, like, as somebody who was living on the Navajo Nation at the time and seeing my people and seeing my elders and children, you know, live through this pandemic. And I wanted there to be a major breakthrough in our understanding that these issues with COVID, as well as, you know, the systemic socio-economic issues that we have faced for generations, were the result of colonialism and systemic racism. And anti-Indian policies, environmental racism, broken treaties. Like, there are so many layers to these issues- When you think about it, and so the reason our people were suffering so much during the pandemic was because of these issues, because we were never given the resources that we needed. And even as a sovereign nation, with treaties still with the United States government, with the political relationship to the United States government, not a racialized one, we were still never given or seen as, you know, a sovereign nation. We weren't seen as, you know, somebody who had a political relationship with the United States. And so, in both of these articles, my work and my voice on the ground is highlighted and my knowledge is highlighted in that way. But also the reason I even was able to speak to these media outlets was because of my social presence and voice at the time, which became this well known presence on Twitter and Instagram.

For example, the first thread that I made in March 2020, when we had just gotten hit with the pandemic, that thread on Twitter received over three million engagements. And it continued to build and do so over the last, you know, year and a half. And, as somebody who had that voice and that presence, I really, really wanted to continue to share that, we, yes, the Navajo Nation does need attention right now. But we need more than attention. We need to have our sovereignty acknowledged. Our people need our humanity recognized. That was the most important thing that I wanted to share, in these articles. And that, you know, continue to drive my work, in my community as well as, you know, after leaving, you know, to come to grad school at Brown. To continue to share that, you know, with communities out here. And to recognize communities out here because this is such a widespread issue among tribes. The top five hardest hit, communities were native communities. And so thinking about how COVID, exasperated these long issues, of systemic injustice- Against native people in our country, that is what I've continued to kind of fight for and fight against.

JMY: I'm so glad that you were able to, gain some visibility and offer some insight into this. But I always find it so frustrating that we live in a world where in order for something, to matter, essentially, it has to go viral (laughs) "matter". I mean, the basic things that people need is food, water, good health, and education but not even in the formal sense, like just experience. And, whether that be making with hands or, or connecting to soil or maybe it is learning how to, speak another language. Whatever it is that matters to an individual. And it's crazy how it requires mass attention through the digital sphere in order for people to gain support. And I

think that it's so interesting that you're building a career around this. And yes, it's important to have that visibility through a viral tweet so people finally "pay attention".

But, it's a bigger problem than that. Like you were saying, you have sovereignty as a nation. You have autonomy and you don't want that white savior complex to be a part of it. And then all of a sudden because of the way that you're able to advocate for your community, advocate for your people, it becomes this extra layer of complexity. Because it's like, we're here. We matter. And we're dealing with this at a rate that's really alarming. But at the same time, again, it goes back to all of these larger systemic issues that you need to realize. There needs to be more preventative measures so we don't become, a victim sort of situations that are really problematic as a result of climate change. crazy capitalism and, and corrupt government systems.

LN: Yeah I think that is so important to acknowledge. And I think, you know, with these larger conversations that are happening now about, you know, Black, Indigenous, and people of color being represented, I think that only encapsulates, you know, like one tiny step. But so many people engage with representation as if it's the end goal. And so, I continue to refuse that practice and that idea in my work. Because it really comes down to, you know, representation. But for who, and why? And who is the audience? it brings up these larger questions about how we engage with inclusivity and representation and equity in these academic spaces. But also, you know, if we're talking about community care and community health, that is a larger issue to consider. Because there needs to be a specific strategy to, as you said, prevent all of these larger issues from, you know, having such, like, profound effects on communities. But really engaging with the structural and systemic issues that even, you know, allow these inequities and these barriers in our communities to exist in the disproportionate way that they do. It's so important to think about that.

JMY: In one of the articles, it mentioned that, when you returned home, you had the opportunity to kind of reconnect with plants and, to experience, time with, I think, it was your grandmother? And being able to have an opportunity to learn about the plants from the area that you grew up in. And I'm just kind of curious if you could tell me a little bit about that, if you're willing? What it was like to kind of re-engage with nature, after being gone for so long?

LN: Yeah, it was so beautiful. Like, despite all the hardship and all of the trauma and everything that we were experiencing in our community at that time, I was very lucky to be with my family and to have my family be safe. And so when I was home, we were all just stuck at home. And, the part of the reservation that I'm from, there's nobody within, a, two mile radius who isn't my family. That we don't engage with. And so, so many, you know, native communities were closed off in these spaces. And without, even thinking about it, like, you don't really think about, you know, how, like, a pandemic can hit so ferociously and so quickly. And how it basically changes the way that you live and it changes the way that you interact with the world. And so, you know, when that happened to me and my family, we had the resources that we needed in order to sustain ourselves. Like, we had our garden. We had our animals. We had our livestock. And we had each other. You know, this continuation of this traditional way of life that Navajo's have had

and continue, you know, to adapt and continue to use in their daily life, actually really supported my family during that time.

Not only did we have our gardens where we had corn and squash and, you know, different vegetables and fruits that we were growing, we also had the opportunity to learn more about, you know, the natural kind of environment around us. And so I was going on walks with my grandmother and we were learning about traditional medicines and traditional plants and teas. And that was such a beautiful experience to have with my grandmother because as you mentioned, I had been gone, you know, creating my career and, you know, like, furthering my education and all of these things that our elders in our community pushed for us. But in doing so, you know, you don't realize the impact that that has on you and how much time you spend away from home and how much time you spend away from your grandparents and your elders. you know, you're essentially leaving the cultural hub of your community. And so, this time was really important for me to reestablish my relationship to my culture, my language, my traditional teachings, my ceremonies, all of which were, you know, so important for maintaining my mental health and physical health and wellbeing during the pandemic. And I'm so thankful and grateful for that because without that, I don't know how I would survive, you know, all of that time-

I had so many friends and relatives who were living outside of the Navajo Nation and they so desperately wanted to come home because they were craving that knowledge and that ceremony and those prayers and that presence of their grandparents. But knowing that they could, either spread the virus or that they could even get the virus, that was such a heartbreaking thing to witness because, you know, if I was away, so far away, I- I would definitely crave that as well and I was so lucky, you know, to have my sisters and my mom and my grandparents and, you know, my family there with me at that moment. And we were, you know, strengthening each other and protecting each other and that was, definitely one of, you know, the ways that I think I survived that entire pandemic.

And even when I came to grad school, I didn't go home for a year, so the entire academic year, Christmas I didn't go home, Thanksgiving I didn't go home. And so, I- I actually just went home for the first time a couple of weeks ago. And, you know, that again was a time for me to reestablish, you know, myself, to get grounded, to find this balance and to find this harmony within me. and that just connects back to my grandparents again. And, you know, the grandparents and my family are the people, they are, like, the spiritual heart of, you know, our family. And so, having that was just like having to go back to them, you know, anytime that I'm away is such a beautiful experience so I really- I'm really so grateful for that time. Going home after so long was so important for me.

JMY: Yeah. It's been such a hard year. To wrap up, I wanna ask how our listeners can further, broaden or deepen their understanding and appreciation for Navajo artists, scholars, educators, both, in the past and in the present? What are some of the best ways that they can also support these communities today?

LN: That's a great question. I think one of, you know, the most important question, for listeners to think about and, if they're trying to understand or have a deeper understanding and appreciation for Indigenous art and culture, is to examine the questions of why they're interested in the first place and thinking about why they feel drawn to it. so for me, as somebody who works with, you know, a variety and broad spectrum of Native artists, contemporary and historic, I think there's a deep realization that comes when you're connecting with Native art and Native culture in a museum setting or in an academic setting is to think about that there is a direct connection that these, I don't like to say objects, I like to say treasures. That was something that I learned from an Alaska relative at a conference I went to about, Native art and culture and history.

So thinking about how these treasures within these spaces and these texts that you're reading, how they connect back to traditional histories and ceremonies and stories and people, like real living people and real living cultures and histories. When you establish that connection, you're not only appreciating, you know, the culture and that art, but you're also appreciating the people who make the art, who continue to do so. and I think that is such an important part of appreciation and paying respect to these artists and their cultural influence and their background. Instead of just thinking about these treasures as something that exists within these institutions, you have to think about them being taken from their communities and from, you know, the centers that they thrive and that they exist in and now they exist in these institutions that are white dominated, that are separated and that isolate them from their oral histories.

In doing so, you're acknowledging that these treasures have a physical and spiritual connection to not only people and culture and, you know, the maker, but to secret places and plants and animals and spiritual beings and I think that is such an important acknowledgment to have because we are conditioned to think about art and treasures and objects, through a lens of, you know, western academic kind of socialization where we uphold anthropomorphic and western scientific and linear interpretations of these treasures. But on the other hand, you know, Native people and communities understand these treasures to be simultaneously connected to, you know, the material and the immaterial and the physical and the cosmic and there's just such a beautiful takeaway in that. you're not only, you know, appreciating the art, the culture and the people and establishing these broader perspectives, but you're also understanding that, you know, we are not the center of the universe. Like, humans are not the center of the universe.

And there's such a- t beautiful kind of experience to have in that. And when you make this connection, I think it establishes respect, but it also establishes your own relegation and your own position in the world and making you question that as well. And so, you're- you're realizing that these treasures have such a legacy and a power that speaks to each of you are so uniquely and differently, and so poignantly and fiercely at the same time. And so, you're reading beyond these treasures, you're reading beyond the surface level readings and you're looking at these treasures with a deeper and more engaging critical dialogue and you're recognizing that these exist, you know, whether or not you're there.

These treasures are not just there for your viewing pleasure, but they're dynamic and active, living beings. And, you know, so when, my grandfather, uh, he was a medicine man with our people, and he had been involved with, um, repatriation work for the longest time. And so, he had a partnership with the field museum to get a few of our chain masks back to our people. The people have a direct connection to these treasures and we feel the pain and the sadness of them missing their home and their people and their ceremonies. having that perspective and thinking about that and thinking about, you know, like Native people have these direct relationships to these treasures and how do you engage with that as a non-Native person, how would you engage with those histories, but now knowing that these treasures having a special connection to their people and that they feel pain, they feel physical, pain- Spiritual pain when they're away, how do you acknowledge that your gaze is violent? How do you acknowledge that it can potentially be harmful and that- you can actually do something about it and that your gaze can have an unexpected power to that too and that you can change the way that you engage with Native treasures and Native art and institutions. native, art is very much about aesthetics, but it's also about ethics. And, you know, that, there are so many, so many different layers to take away and there's so many things that you can learnabout, whether or not you think that, you know, you're- you're learning about Native- Native treasures as having, a living presence, but also containing living memories and thinking about the moments in which these were created and the possibility that we have in the future to engage with this work. That not only creates relationships between the maker and the tribe that they originate from, but also how non-Native people engage with them. There's this beautiful relationship between past, present and future that exists within these spaces and to experience that in a very complex way, is really, really, really, really beautiful and that's why I do the work that I do. (laughs)

JMY: That was so beautifully stated. it leaves me with a lot to think about- how I myself engage with material culture and treasures, not objects, and, specifically how I myself can work towards, bettering myself as someone who shares histories and stories of others within my own scholarship. Thank you so much. It's truly been a privilege, and a wonderful opportunity to be able to learn from you today, and to learn about your own work and practice. So, I really appreciate you coming on to the second season of Fields of the Future.

LN: I'm so happy to be here, so thank you for inviting me. And yeah, I'm so grateful. Thank you.