

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8s9910kt>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 35(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

2011-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

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# “Please Read Loose”: Intimate Grammars and Unexpected Languages in Contemporary Navajo Literature

*Anthony K. Webster*

But the linguist still runs his hands up the length of our tongues,  
perplexed that we even have a tongue at all.

—Sherwin Bitsui, *Shapeshift*

Some poetry lingers; the words continue to echo long after the performance.<sup>1</sup> Navajo poet Sherwin Bitsui’s “Chrysalis” is one such poem. I heard and recorded it numerous times during my fieldwork on the Navajo Nation during 2000 and 2001. Bitsui, like many Navajo poets, has a keen sense and ambivalence about linguists and anthropologists, about those who would document Navajos. Like many Navajo poets, Bitsui also has a complex of complicated emotions and felt attachments toward his languages. When Bitsui was in Carbondale, Illinois, for a poetry performance, one of the poems that he read notes that,

the beginning is always the argument  
arrangements, patterns  
who gets this portion of lamb  
who gets to speak English as a second language.<sup>2</sup>

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As Navajo poet Esther Belin provocatively asks, “How do I know when my language is no longer English or Navajo?”<sup>3</sup> The pivot in Belin’s question, the complement to Bitsui’s lines, is the first-person possessive and attendant noun “my language.” As Belin has explained to me, it is time to consider English a “Diné language.”

This article is about the ways that some critics (literary or otherwise) of Navajo poetry, have been “perplexed” that Navajos can own “English.” This article is also about the felt attachments that adhere to the uses of Englishes by Navajo poets: what I have elsewhere, following both Elizabeth Povinelli and Michael Herzfeld by degrees, called “intimate grammars.”<sup>4</sup> Philip Deloria’s insightful and provocative *Indians in Unexpected Places* takes up the issues of expectations and anomalies of Native American representations as they relate to practice.<sup>5</sup> Deloria asks us to investigate the “unexpectedness” of Native Americans, not so much for what they reveal about Native Americans, but rather for what they reveal about the ways that Native Americans have been imagined. Deloria singles out a number of such recurring tropes, “primitivism, technological incompetence, physical distance, and cultural difference—these have been the ways many Americans have imagined Indians.”<sup>6</sup> This article takes a discourse-centered approach to glimpsing something of the ways that Native American languages have been imagined as “unexpected.”<sup>7</sup> For some, the mere recognition that Native Americans had languages was unexpected. That Native American languages—as traditionally understood—have been constructed as “primitive” should also not be surprising.<sup>8</sup> But recent indigenous efforts, as a number of articles in this volume attest, have attempted to valorize traditionally understood Native American languages and encourage such languages to be maintained or awakened.<sup>9</sup>

Writing also became one crucial area in which American Indians were seen as “technologically incompetent” and in which a host of evolutionary scenarios denied that Native American inscriptive practices (from Lakhota winter counts to Tohono O’odham calendar sticks) were “true writing” (that is, like Western alphabetic writing). Native American inscriptive practices were (mis)judged—which then validated and licensed conquest and colonialism—by Western expectations.<sup>10</sup> As Mindy Morgan describes for writing practices on the Fort Belknap Reservation, writing in English became the technology of civilization; English literacy was the ideological sign (symbolic, indexical, and iconic) in which were wrapped metasemiotic stereotypes of civilization.<sup>11</sup> But note if you will, just how much a turn-of-phrase like “writing in English” may also obscure. What does it mean to write or speak in “English”? That question is at the heart of the expectations of languages and Native Americans.

American Indian Englishes have been the target of mockery and dismissal by dominant discourses. As Barbra Meek has shown, popular media—from

*Peter Pan* to *Pocahontas*—have imagined American Indian Englishes in stereotypical ways, reproducing racist images of Native peoples.<sup>12</sup> What is less well understood, and what I dwell on here, are the ways that the Englishes (written and otherwise) that Native Americans have used for expressive purposes have also been considered “primitive” and “incompetent.” The way, for example, reviewers of Blackhorse Mitchell’s *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navajo Boy* (1967) largely dismissed the work, because it was written in Navajo English (a local way of speaking and writing), as mere documentation or an incompetent attempt to write in some imagined “standard” English.

It is not just popular media that have aided in the marginalization and dismissal of local ways of speaking and writing that do not fit into idealized images of bounded and discrete languages. As Lionel Wee has noted regarding Singlish (a Singapore English), recognition by linguists, educators, and governments of interlanguage rights have been much more common than recognition of marginalized intralanguage differences.<sup>13</sup> Intralanguages like Singlish or Navajo English are often stigmatized and marginalized by outsiders (scholar and nonscholar alike) as are the speakers of such marginalized and stigmatized forms. Thus many outsiders (and Navajos) concede the importance of the Navajo language to Navajo cultural traditions but still consider Navajo English to be a deficient and dysfluent way of speaking and writing (this includes some Navajos).<sup>14</sup> This is a kind of Herderian conceit in which glottonymically nameable languages map onto ethnonymically nameable peoples.<sup>15</sup> To put this more pointedly, although there has been a great deal of concern with documentation of indigenous languages of late (a concern I share), this documentation has often been narrowly understood to the exclusion of local ways of speaking and writing Englishes (or Spanishes or Frenches or the like). For example, a recent set of articles in *Transforming Anthropology* compares African American English (AAE) with Native American languages (as traditionally understood).<sup>16</sup> Arthur Spears and Leanne Hinton state in the introduction to that volume that the “recognition of the right of Native Americans to maintain and promote their languages, and encouragement of the uses of Native American languages in the schools, is a complete reversal of the government philosophy . . . and is of course completely opposite to the attitudes toward the presence of AAE in the schools.”<sup>17</sup> However, this statement is only true if we ignore or erase the myriad of American Indian Englishes that currently are spoken and written by Native Americans. Here, echoing Belin, we might ask what it means to speak or write in a Navajo way. I argue that speaking and writing in a Navajo way, what some Navajos sometimes call *Dinék’ehjí yálti’* (he/she is talking the Diné way), does not necessarily presuppose speaking something called “Navajo.” This does not mean that I am unconcerned with

Navajo, but rather that we must attend to the myriad ways of speaking and writing that Navajos engage in. None should be dismissed *a priori*.

This article takes Mitchell's *Miracle Hill* and the ways that the book was framed by T. D. Allen and reviewed in the popular press as its case study.<sup>18</sup> I then turn to a discussion that I had with Mitchell about his book, specifically the poem "The Drifting Lonely Seed" (included in the book), and show the ways that Mitchell rejects the characterization of his work by Allen. In particular, I note how Mitchell performs the poem in Navajo English during our conversation. This, too, is a poem that echoes for me and for Mitchell.

### MIRACLE HILL AND "READING LOOSE"

Mitchell, with the help of Allen, published *Miracle Hill*, a semiautobiographical work that includes two poems, at the University of Oklahoma Press. The book created a bit of a sensation and was reviewed by N. Scott Momaday in the *New York Times* and by Dan Thrapp in the *Los Angeles Times*. *Miracle Hill*, through a number of book signings and reviews in major newspapers, was a very public book in 1967.<sup>19</sup> I first met Mitchell in the fall of 2000 while I was doing dissertation fieldwork on and around the Navajo Nation concerning the emergence of written Navajo poetry. Mitchell, having been one of the first published Navajo poets and one of the more well-known Navajo authors, was an important consultant for my work. He later became an important language instructor for me. He is a fluent speaker of Navajo and is literate in Navajo. He has written poetry, unpublished poetry, in Navajo. Since my initial fieldwork in 2000 and 2001, I have spent much time with Mitchell. During the summers of 2007, 2008, and 2009, I stayed with him at his house while I did further research on Navajo poetry and poets.

Written in 1963, when Mitchell was close to eighteen years old, *Miracle Hill* has since been reissued by the University of Arizona Press without the introduction by Allen.<sup>20</sup> *Miracle Hill* concerns the story of Broneco, a young Navajo boy, and the events that led him to go to boarding school and later to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.<sup>21</sup> It grew out of Mitchell's experience in the Bureau of Indian Affairs's Creative Writing Project, which was led by Allen and designed to teach Native American students English literacy through creative writing. On the cover of *Miracle Hill* we find a hand-drawn picture of Tsé Bit'áí—The Winged Rock (Shiprock), not the Miracle Hill of the title—and the following phrasing, "By . . . Blackhorse Mitchell and T. D. Allen."<sup>22</sup> In a review of *Miracle Hill* in *American Anthropologist*, Dorothea Leighton took this to mean that T. D. Allen, the pen name of Terry Allen, was the coauthor of this book.<sup>23</sup> Although

the language of the book is certainly Mitchell's (by degrees), as are the stories, according to Mitchell, Allen massively mediated what is in the book. Mitchell claims that Allen wanted a positive image of the boarding school and worked to make that so.

In the introduction to *Miracle Hill*, Allen makes a plea for readers to "please read loose."<sup>24</sup> Allen claims Mitchell lacks "grammar."<sup>25</sup> Many Native American languages were devalued and dismissed because Euro-Americans believed that traditionally understood Native American languages lacked grammar.<sup>26</sup> Allen has replaced the Native American language with Navajo English. In a later work, she will claim that Mitchell's grammar is "tangled" and that "writing in English presented almost insurmountable difficulties."<sup>27</sup> She is at pains to excuse Mitchell's English-language skills, claiming Mitchell's work is "more documentary than aesthetic or literary"—more, and this is her word, "primitive."<sup>28</sup> Allen likens Mitchell's work to primitive art. Allen, in essence, apologizes for Mitchell's literary voice. Allen goes on to claim that, "in spite of confused tenses and genders and sound-alike words, [Mitchell] was writing in sensory terms."<sup>29</sup> Rather than understanding the structure of Navajo English, Mitchell is "confused." According to Allen (and, as we will see, according to many reviewers), Mitchell's use of a regularized plural marking on the irregular noun *sheeps* is a mistake. Mitchell has explained to me on numerous occasions that he prefers the form *sheeps* for the plural of *sheep*. This is a decision that he has made. *Sheeps* makes more sense to him. It is not a mistake. Mitchell is aware of such negative evaluations regarding *sheeps* and other Navajo English forms (from phonology to lexical choices to syntax). I have seen him apologize for his Navajo English to audiences composed largely of non-Navajos. I have not seen him apologize for his Navajo English to audiences composed largely of Navajos. The plural marking on *sheeps* is an intimate grammar, an emotionally saturated use of language that runs the risk of negative evaluation by outsiders but that can create a common bond of sociality, an intimate sociality, among Navajos.<sup>30</sup>

Here is the danger of using Navajo English, which is what the book is written in: it opens it up to outside inspection and evaluation, outside scrutiny, based on criteria and expectations that are not local. Navajo English is a local way of speaking and writing that differs from mainstream English on phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and discourse grounds. Guillermo Bartelt provides a useful overview of some of the features of Navajo English.<sup>31</sup> Some of the features of Navajo English are carryovers from Navajo, forms of regularization of irregular mainstream English forms, and based on the distinctive historical trajectory of Navajo English as a local way of speaking and writing that does not completely overlap with the historical trajectory of mainstream English. Navajo English is spoken at the supermarket, at the tire

shop, at the trading post, in homes, and at the local mutton stand. It is written on signs on and around the Navajo Nation and in e-mails. Note that Navajo English is also—like English more generally—not a homogenous phenomenon. Rather it is—like all languages—a set of heterogeneous practices based on local registers and the unique histories of linguistic individuals.

However, because Navajo English is spoken and written by marginalized peoples, it can always be dismissed or devalued by outside assumptions concerning “standard” English and “aesthetic principles.”<sup>32</sup> Leighton Peterson provides a telling example of the way that the Navajo English–language skills of Elsie Cly Begay were dismissed by “media professionals” when discussing earlier versions of the documentary *The Return of Navajo Boy*.<sup>33</sup> A pervasive belief about languages in mainstream American culture is that linguistic differences equal linguistic deficiencies.<sup>34</sup> Here are the echoes of Deloria. The expectations for Navajo English are for an English that is “primitive” and “incompetent.” The expectation is that English is a foreign language for Navajos.<sup>35</sup> What is not taken seriously is the deep and perduring felt attachment that Navajos have toward their Englishes; that Navajo English can be an intimate and deeply felt grammar; and that Mitchell might be doing something with his use of Navajo English besides mere documentation.

Allen, however, does praise Mitchell’s handwriting. She reproduces a page of his “beautiful handwriting.”<sup>36</sup> Penmanship was a topic focused on at boarding school (as elsewhere), and Allen’s printing of the page seems to act as a display of technological competence to be marveled at (even Navajos that I know have marveled at the aesthetics of Mitchell’s handwriting). Although Mitchell may have mastered the graphic form of handwriting, Allen repeatedly makes clear that mastery is only ornamentation, superficial, for the reality is that “the thing you, the reader, and . . . Blackhorse . . . Mitchell don’t have in common is grammar. He has made the effort to meet you halfway. He has learned your vocabulary (with some fascinating use variations) and he has learned some bits and pieces of your linguistic patterns.”<sup>37</sup> Allen assumes that the language that Mitchell uses is incomplete. Rather than understanding the structuring of Navajo English, that there is no gender on pronouns in Navajo English, or that plurality is regularized on irregular and mass nouns in Navajo English, Allen presents Mitchell’s work as an incomplete (incompetent) attempt to write some putative “standard” English. Mitchell’s book is a failure to reach that standard. Allen does not take seriously the possibility that Mitchell was expressing himself in the language in which he was competent. Rather than being an incomplete attempt, it was a successful use of Navajo English for creative purposes. Rather than reading Mitchell’s work “loose,” perhaps we might read it seriously.



Even Mitchell's creativity can be explained away. Allen writes, "Imagery and sensory detail come through partly because of the author's not-quite-at-homeness with the English language. He does not translate literally from his thoughts in Navaho, but he does translate, and in the process a certain color and point of view are retained. Much of this happens out of something ingrained in a Navaho which is inherent in him and his language."<sup>38</sup> Here Allen articulates an essentialist position, positing something "inherent" in Navajos and their language that leads to the "imagery and sensory detail" found in Mitchell's work. That Mitchell might have been actively selecting his images and sensory details and then writing them down seems to be lost on Allen.

Later Allen conflates language with writing (common in the reviews as well). In discussing what Allen calls Mitchell's "aborted English," she explains some of Mitchell's language uses as being based on "trying to learn our words by ear."<sup>39</sup> She sees the written form as the "correct" form that speakers fail to "enunciate." This assumes that the written form is the language and that the actual speaking of language is, by degrees, a deficient form of the written form. This is a pervasive language ideology that conflates written discourse with spoken discourse.<sup>40</sup> It assumes that people are trying to speak as if they were writing and not that writing and speaking are two sometimes overlapping and sometimes distinct endeavors.

## THE REVIEWS ARE IN

After having laid out something of the ways in which Allen framed Mitchell's work, let us pause and look at the kinds of reviews that Mitchell's *Miracle Hill* received when it was first published. Many reviewers followed Allen's lead and apologized in one form or another for the language used in the book. Many took Allen's introduction at face value. Robert Ford states that Mitchell's "command of English is still not absolute, for he constructs some writing as would a Navaho."<sup>41</sup> Note that Ford assumes that Navajos are incapable of writing in "standard" English. Note that this implies a single "absolute" English. Ford praises the book for its "simplicity."<sup>42</sup> He then goes on to praise and echo Allen: "the editor-mentor declined to make any changes of a major nature. It was a wise decision for the lapses from grammar only add to the personality of the book." Mitchell's work is again a "lapse from grammar" that "only add[s] to the [childlike] personality of the book."<sup>43</sup> Or as Peggy Durham writes in the *Oklahoma Journal*, "Mitchell writes as a child would write—and while this may sound obvious in view of his inexpert command of English, this 'childishness' has nothing to do with his vocabulary. It has to do with his way of seeing and presenting."<sup>44</sup> This childlike view is—as Durham adds—not



marred by “Indian philosophy” or “rationalized bitterness toward the white man.”<sup>45</sup> Vincent Starrett, in the *Chicago Tribune*, writes this about Mitchell’s language: “if your reaction to a colorful high-stepping verb is merely an urge to conjugate it, if a pungent sentence merely stirs you to grammatical analysis, and if the word *sheeps*—to be more specific—irritates you even mildly, go back to your epics by writers who take the rules of grammar seriously.”<sup>46</sup> According to Starrett, Mitchell’s work should not be confused with an “epic” and Mitchell does not take “the rules of grammar seriously.”<sup>47</sup> But if Starrett suggests that Mitchell is not a serious writer, Maggy King, in the *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, argues that “the writer is the real McCoy—a real Navaho of today, telling the story of his life; and his struggle with English shows only how earnest is his desire to learn and improve.”<sup>48</sup> For these reviewers, Mitchell’s book satisfies the expectation that Navajos will lack a competent command of English and that such incompetence in English will also be linked with the childlike or primitive essence of Mitchell (and, by implication, all Navajos).

Other reviewers were less kind or less condescending. One review of *Miracle Hill* suggested that Allen should have done more editing.<sup>49</sup> Brian Garfield in the *Saturday Review*, writes that Mitchell’s “tale is not for the general reader. The language is too strange; there is little incident and less characterization; he does not even give enough information about his family and his people. [Mitchell] is completely silent, for example, about the dances and songs and sand-paintings of the Navaho.”<sup>50</sup> For Garfield, not only is Mitchell’s language “garbled,” but also the story is not even titillating or exotic enough.<sup>51</sup> Joan Seager, in the *Denver Quarterly*, takes Allen to task for not editing the book more thoroughly. She states that Mitchell’s “grammatical errors simply detract” from the quality of the book.<sup>52</sup> She goes on to state, concerning Mitchell, the fact “that he is also a Navajo could have been given finer and more valid expression by a narrative uncluttered with the errors of a foreign language imperfectly learned.”<sup>53</sup> Note that for Seager, English is clearly not Mitchell’s language; English is a foreign language. For these reviewers, Mitchell’s book fails because of his language (or lack of language) and because he does not adequately meet the expectations of presenting the exoticness of Navajos.

What is striking in these reviews is how preoccupied the reviews are about Mitchell’s supposed lack of English-language abilities. Most take Allen’s characterization of the writing process at face value. They do not ask more fundamental questions of Allen’s role in the shaping of the form and content of the book. Mildred Hart Shaw, in the *Daily Sentinel*, does note, “Mrs. Allen has written a patronizing, school-teacherish, unperceptive introduction to Mitchell and his book. It does no credit to either.”<sup>54</sup> Some reviewers, like Dorothea Leighton, do attempt to place Mitchell’s language use within the context of Navajo English. But, as I have argued elsewhere, although many critics claim

that the Navajo language is quite complex, they see Navajo English as relatively transparent.<sup>55</sup> It lacks complexity. Many reviewers, in one way or another, approached this book as an incompetent English, which highlighted the primitive or childlike quality of Mitchell (that is, Mitchell's English was "charming" and reflective of his "childlike" view of the world), or as failed English, which lacked enough documentation of Navajo exoticness (that is, Mitchell had failed at writing English, and he did not even provide enough exotica to make the book worth reading). Few took the trouble to see this book as something else entirely.

### "THE DRIFTING LONELY SEED"

In the introduction, Allen includes a poem that Mitchell wrote titled "The Drifting Lonely Seed."<sup>56</sup> Mitchell wrote the poem circa 1963. According to Mitchell, it is the first poem that he ever wrote. The following is an extended excerpt for Allen's introduction to *Miracle Hill* that purports to describe the creation of "The Drifting Lonely Seed." I quote it at length because I will contrast it with a discussion that I had with Mitchell during the summer of 2008 about the creation of this poem. I have replaced a nickname that Mitchell was known by at the time with his current name, Blackhorse, throughout the excerpt (italics are from the original).

One day I [Allen] said, "I think readers would like to know how you first decided you'd like to write. It was during orientation, wasn't it?"

"Yes," [Blackhorse] answered.

"Well, try to remember all about it," I suggested. "Your readers will want to know how you got started, and you have skipped over that part."

He sat at the long table in our writing studio with a pad of paper before him and his chin in his palm. Finally he asked, "What was that you gave us that day? A kind of seed or something, I think."

"I don't know for sure, but I believe it was a milkweed," I said. "Don't worry about its name, though. Don't you remember, I've told you not to label things? Remember your five senses. Give your reader your sense impressions and let him have the fun of imagining it as it was to you."

In a few minutes, instead of giving me the paragraph or two I was waiting for to insert into Chapter XV, [Blackhorse] laid a short poem on my desk.

"[Blackhorse]," I scolded, "I thought you were going to help me fill in—"

"I just wrote this to get wound up," he said.

The poem he wrote to get wound up was:

*The Drifting Lonely Seed*  
*From the casein dark-blue sky,*  
*Through the emptiness of space,*

*A sailing wisp of cotton.  
Never have I been so thrilled!  
The drifting lonely seed,  
Came past my barred window,  
Whirling orbit, it landed before me,  
As though it were a woolly lamb—  
Untouched, untamed, and alone—  
Walked atop my desk, stepping daintily,  
Reaching forth my hands, I found you,  
Gentle, weightless, tantalizing.  
I blew you out through barricaded window;  
You pranced, circled round me,  
Sharing with me your airy freedom.*

Thus wound up, [Blackhorse] went on to write what I had asked—how he decided that he wanted to write: “To put the past history in writing so it will always be remembered someday!”<sup>57</sup>

Allen presents Mitchell as failing to follow her instruction to write about how he began writing. Instead of doing as she had instructed, he writes a poem to get “wound up.” Allen clearly presents herself as the mentor here. She explains to Mitchell not to worry about the labels and that she will insert pages into chapter XV. Mitchell has explained to me that Allen was also concerned that overtly negative statements about the boarding school be excluded from the manuscript.<sup>58</sup> Allen “corrected” some of the language that Mitchell used in the text and limited the content of the manuscript. She was attempting to fit the manuscript into an image, a set of expectations, of what Mitchell, as a Navajo, should be. As Deloria notes, such expectations of Native Americans are “dense economies of meaning, representation, and act . . . the ways in which popular culture works to produce—and sometimes compromise—racism and misogyny.”<sup>59</sup> Mitchell, as he once explained to me, was and is trying through his work to express to a dominant society that he is a “human being.” Mitchell was trying to engage in a dialogue about such expectations. My understanding of Mitchell’s work has come about through conversations with him. This is why it is important for me not to summarize our conversations but rather present actual transcripts of those conversations.

I want to stress that not all of the critiques of the boarding school were overt. The poem that Allen claims Mitchell wrote to get wound up can certainly be read as a critique of the boarding school and as a meditation on being at home—away from the boarding school—with one’s sheep. Mitchell offered that reading to me. During the summer of 2008, the two of us were sitting in his living room. We were talking about poetry and, specifically, his

poetry. It was not the first time we had talked about his poetry, and it would not be the last time that summer. It was July 9, 2008.

What follows is a fragment of our conversation. The transcript begins 26:28 minutes into the discussion and concludes at 31:14 minutes and has been organized into lines based on pause structuring.<sup>60</sup> I organized the transcript into lines not to argue that Mitchell is speaking poetry but rather to highlight something of the cadence, rhythm, and discourse structuring Mitchell's talk. A space between lines indicates a longer pause; capitalization (except for the word *I*) signals loudness and emphasis; the use of a colon indicates lengthening (either of vowels or consonants); brackets provide information not on the digital recording; the use of parenthesis indicates an aside made by Mitchell; for ease of reference I number the lines beginning with 1; and BM stands for Blackhorse Mitchell and AW stands for Anthony Webster.

[transcript begins 26:28]

|     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| AW: | when you first started writing poetry                 | 1  |
|     | that was because                                      | 2  |
|     | you were in school                                    | 3  |
| BM: | mhm   | 4  |
| AW: | and you were I assume learning to write English       | 5  |
| BM: | RIGHT   | 6  |
| AW: | and so poetry was a way to learn to write English?    | 7  |
| BM: | I think it was mostly describing                      | 8  |
|     | or my thinking was I was trying to say something      | 9  |
|     | because a lot of times                                | 10 |
|     | when you're in a boarding school                      | 11 |
|     | your teacher does not allow you                       | 12 |
| AW: | mmm, I see  | 13 |
| BM: | they kind of don't allow you                          | 14 |
|     | and there you're trying to say                        | 15 |
|     | you want to speak a:nd                                | 16 |
|     | you don't, you don't have MUCH                        | 17 |
|     | you're, you're to sit there and learn                 | 18 |
| AW: | mhm   | 19 |
| BM: | that was the kind of thing                            | 20 |
|     | SO:   | 21 |
|     | the best way was I'm gonna write about                | 22 |
|     | like the dormitory                                    | 23 |
|     | NOBODY sees what                                      | 24 |
|     | what what what horrible things                        | 25 |
|     | or what the impact is to stay in the dorm at the time | 26 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| the bell rings and then they say, “stay in you can’t get out” | 27 |
| you go to your room   | 28 |
| and you’re sittin’ there                                      | 29 |
| you’re restless   | 30 |
| only thing you can do is look out the window                  | 31 |
| <br>  |    |
| BUT HERE  | 32 |
| look I can go in and out                                      | 33 |
| and you can too   | 34 |
| so: it’s the whole freedom                                    | 35 |
| but in the boarding school                                    | 36 |
| you have to   | 37 |
| you have TIME limit   | 38 |
| so those were just some of things that I’m                    | 39 |
| talking about   | 40 |
| and then when I’m WRITING                                     | 41 |
| it always has to do with                                      | 42 |
| freedom   | 43 |
| <br>  |    |
| and a:h I think the first first ah                            | 44 |
| [BM gets up, walks across room and gets <i>Miracle Hill</i> ] |    |
| first ah poem that I was working on                           | 45 |
| there was no chances  | 46 |
| [BM comes back and sits]                                      |    |
| there was no chance of like                                   | 47 |
| to ASK question   | 48 |
| even though the instructor say, “you need to ask question”    | 49 |
| AW: a:h   | 50 |

Let us walk through a bit of this transcript; I want to focus on the issues of language, poetry, and the boarding-school experience. Lines 1 through 3 are my attempt to summarize the previous discussion that Mitchell and I had directly engaged in. Mitchell’s “mhm” confirms my general summary. In line 5, I am checking to make sure that the language instruction was in English. Mitchell’s emphatic “RIGHT” confirms that the language was English and probably signals that this is an obvious point, for him and for me. In line 7, I ask Mitchell if he thinks that poetry was a way to learn English. Mitchell takes this as a question of why he was writing in English. My question in line 7 posits a reason for why Allen was having Mitchell write poetry. Mitchell instead begins to describe why he was writing poetry. Instead of taking Allen’s position—that poetry would aid in teaching Mitchell English—Mitchell counters by asserting that he was writing poetry for his own reasons. Reasons, I might add, outside of the control of Allen. As Mitchell clearly states in lines 9 through 12,

I was trying to say something  
because a lot of times  
when you're in a boarding school  
your teacher does not allow you.

In class, one was “to sit there and learn” (line 18); or again, “there was no chance of like / to ASK question” (lines 47–48). Note here that Mitchell emphasizes the word *ask* as well. Class was a place to be silent.<sup>61</sup>

Mitchell creates a contrast between the boarding school environment and the immediate environment in which we are situated. In line 32, Mitchell emphatically contrasts the *there* from line 29 with the *here* of Mitchell's home. He states in lines 32 through 35,

BUT HERE  
look I can go in and out  
and you can too  
so: it's the whole freedom.

He immediately then contrasts that “freedom” with “the boarding school” (line 36). In lines 41 through 43, Mitchell summarizes why he was writing in boarding school,

when I'm WRITING  
it always has to do with  
freedom.

He is emphatic about writing, and his use of *freedom* echoes with its earlier use in line 35. Mitchell was not writing to learn English; he was writing in English to express his desire for freedom. It is at this point (lines 44–47) that Mitchell stood up from his couch and walked over to a table and picked up his 1967 edition of *Miracle Hill*. He reiterates that “there was no chance to like / to ASK question” (lines 47–48). Let us take up the next part of the transcript here.

|                                |    |
|--------------------------------|----|
| BM: And so hunh                | 51 |
| if you're                      | 52 |
| if we're FREE to ask questions | 53 |
| in my                          | 54 |
| it may be different            | 55 |
| but in this case               | 56 |
| there was none                 | 57 |
| and after writing this         | 58 |
| the first poem                 | 59 |
| that I ever came up with       | 60 |
| she thought this was great     | 61 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| she didn't see what I'm trying to s:                        | 62  |
| STILL she didn't see what I was trying to say               | 63  |
| as a student  | 64  |
| so I wrote  | 65  |
| because I saw this  | 66  |
| cotton  | 67  |
| somehow it came past the window into the classroom          | 68  |
| and it was just   | 69  |
| I was watching it   | 70  |
| and then I thought, "wo:w"                                  | 71  |
| so this is what I did                                       | 72  |
| I put   | 73  |
| the DRIFTING lonely seed                                    | 74  |
| FROM the casein dark blue sky                               | 75  |
| through the emptiness of space                              | 76  |
| A sailing wisp of cotton                                    | 77  |
| NEVER have I been so: thrill                                | 78  |
| the drifti:ng lo:nely: see:d                                | 79  |
| came past my barred window                                  | 80  |
| whirling orbit  | 81  |
| it land before me   | 82  |
| as though it were a woolly la:mb                            | 83  |
| (see where I'm thinking)                                    | 84  |
| UNtouch, UNtame, and alone                                  | 85  |
| walk atop my desk   | 86  |
| stepping daintily   | 87  |
| REACHING out my hands I found you                           | 88  |
| gentle, weightless, tantalizing                             | 89  |
| I blew you out through barricaded window                    | 90  |
| you prance  | 91  |
| circle around me  | 92  |
| sharing with me your airy freedom                           | 93  |
| <br>  |     |
| now if she was intelligent                                  | 94  |
| she would have found what I'm saying                        | 95  |
| and she thought that was a gre:at pi:ece of writing         | 96  |
| <br>  |     |
| AW: what did she think it was about                         | 97  |
| BM: she thought I was learning my tense                     | 98  |
| AW: ah  | 99  |
| BM: grammar skills  | 100 |
| AW: she thought you were learning your tense grammar, I see | 101 |
| BM: she didn't see:   | 102 |
| my thinking is:   | 103 |



|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| listen to me                    | 104 |
| again                           | 105 |
| as an instructor                | 106 |
| she did not see what I'm saying | 107 |

[transcript ends 31:14]

In lines 58 through 71, Mitchell recounts his understanding of how and why the poem was written. He notes, not without irony, that Allen—who remains nameless throughout this discussion (which is a rhetorical device found in much Navajo discourse both in Navajo English and in Navajo)—“thought this was great” (line 61). In lines 62 through 64, Mitchell makes it clear that Allen was not approaching his poetry as the informed thoughts of an individual. Allen simply does not understand what Mitchell is trying to do. As he movingly says in lines 62 through 64,

she didn't see what I'm trying to s:  
 STILL she didn't see what I was trying to say  
 as a student.

The emphatic use of “STILL” was jarring when Mitchell and I were talking. “STILL” seems to evoke the frustration that he felt and feels toward Allen. “STILL” is the linchpin of his discussion of this poem and of T. D. Allen; it carries the rhetorical weight of his frustration.

Mitchell then explains that a piece of cotton had floated into the classroom, and he felt a connection with that floating cotton. Note that Mitchell was quite sure what the object was that came floating into the classroom. He also does not state that his writing the poem was inspired by Allen telling him to work on how he “got started.” Rather it was the connection he felt toward the cotton, the fact that the cotton was free, which had inspired him to write the poem.

Mitchell then “reads” the poem from the book. *Reads* seems too strong a word here, and I would rather replace that with *performs*. It is certainly not a verbatim reproduction of the language of the written poem. Note the contrast that Mitchell creates between the “airy freedom” of the cotton and the “barred windows” and a “barricaded window” of the classroom. The cotton is described as “UNtouch” and “UNtame” with the stress on the “un” in both cases (line 85). It is also described as “gentle, weightless, tantalizing” (line 89). The cotton is free, whereas “barred windows” and a “barricaded window” confine Mitchell.

In line 83, Mitchell likens the cotton to a “woolly lamb,” and in line 84 Mitchell makes a telling aside to me, “see where I’m thinking.” Mitchell and I have talked a great deal about the fondness that he had for sheepherding when he was a boy, the fondness for sheepherding that he has had for much of his life. During the time that Mitchell was out herding sheep he would often

compose songs.<sup>62</sup> The image of a “woolly lamb” is an expression of Mitchell’s desire to be outside with his sheep and of his desire not to be at the boarding school, not to be surrounded by “barred windows,” not to be at a place where he could not speak. It is an expression of a desire for freedom.

Mitchell’s most pointed critique follows directly after he has finished performing the poem. He states in lines 94 through 95 that, “if she was intelligent / she would have found what I’m saying.” Instead, Allen thinks it is a “gre:at pi:ece of writing.” Mitchell is ironic here and biting so. Allen has no idea what the poem is about, yet she is convinced that it is a great piece of writing. Similar to Mitchell’s handwriting, the content was beside the point for Allen. Rather, it was the mere ability to write that seems to be the important issue. If Allen was concerned about overt critiques of the boarding-school experience, this poem by Mitchell is a covert critique of the boarding school. As Mitchell notes in lines 41 throughout 43,

when I’m WRITING  
it always has to do with  
freedom.

This poem is a longing for freedom, freedom from the boarding school and the constraints of his teachers, including Allen. Mitchell has embedded this poem within the politics of the boarding-school matrix. With apologies to Durham, perhaps here are the echoes of “rationalized bitterness” toward white educational practices.

In line 97, I then ask Mitchell what he thought Allen believed the poem was about. Mitchell’s answer is telling. Instead of having anything to do with content, Mitchell believes that Allen was concerned that the poem showed that Mitchell was learning to use English tense and “grammar skills” (line 100). He reiterates his fundamental point in line 102: “she didn’t see.” He then adds, “my thinking is: / listen to me.” According to Mitchell, Allen did not listen. He states this again in lines 105 through 107,

again  
as an instructor  
she did not see what I’m saying.

Note in line 107, rather than contracting *did not* into *didn’t* as he had done in line 102, he gives both words independently. This adds emphasis to his statement about Allen’s inability to understand what he was writing.

## PERFORMING NAVAJO ENGLISH POETRY

Earlier I suggested that to say that Mitchell “read” his poem on that day in July would be to mischaracterize what Mitchell was doing. Although Mitchell got up, retrieved a copy of *Miracle Hill*, sat down, and opened the book to the page of the poem (that is, he displayed all the accoutrements of “reading”), he was performing this poem in his Navajo English.<sup>63</sup> According to Mitchell, Allen saw this poem as a display of the ability to use English tense. Note that, in lines 78, 82, 85, 86, 91, and 92, Mitchell does not use the past-tense marker *-ed*, found in the published poem (the past-tense form does occur in lines 80 and 90). Following Bartelt, I would argue that Mitchell’s use of what looks like an English present tense is a Navajo English imperfective mode and aspect marker.<sup>64</sup> As Bartelt notes, “much of the idiosyncratic tense usage found in Navajo English is a result of the use of English tenses as a vehicle for the expression of Navajo aspects and modes. Specifically, the English present tense seems to be used for the transfer of the Navajo usitative mode, imperfective mode, and continuative aspect.”<sup>65</sup> In a longer discussion of Mitchell’s *Miracle Hill*, Bartelt posits that Mitchell is discursively alternating putative English tense markers for mode and aspectual reasons.<sup>66</sup>

In line 78, the use of “thrill” indicates a momentaneous aspect in the imperfective mode. Its use brings immediacy to the moment of excitement. This immediacy is replicated again in line 82 with the use of “land” (again, I would argue, in the momentaneous aspect in the imperfective mode). In line 85, the use of “UNtame” and “UNtouch” evoke the usitative mode, suggesting that, unlike Mitchell, the floating cotton is always untamed and untouched. “Walk” (line 86) appears to be in the continuative aspect in the imperfective mode, as do “prance” (line 91) and “circle” (line 92). The use of a Navajo English imperfective adds immediacy to these events. It is interesting that the oral performance of this poem contrasts in its use of tense marking with the written version, the very grammatical feature that Allen was concerned about Mitchell learning. Mitchell also changes “forth” in the published version to the more informal “out” (line 88). In these and other ways, Mitchell asserts his authorship over this poem. These are his lines and his words to manipulate.

Today, Mitchell is a noted performer in the Navajo Nation and internationally. He has performed at the inauguration of a Navajo Nation president as well as in the Czech Republic. In such performances he often reads some of his poetry and performs his songs. He describes himself on his Web page as a “Diné Teacher, Artist, Writer, Musician” and offers for sale copies of the revised version of *Miracle Hill*, CDs of his shepherding songs, and a copy of *Mud*, the documentary about Navajo pottery in which he stars.<sup>67</sup> In all of these

works, Mitchell continues to engage with the wider world, to remind others that Navajos are “human beings.”

## CONCLUSIONS

One way to read *Miracle Hill* is as a love story. It is a love story between Blackhorse Mitchell and his intimate grammar, his English. One way to read “The Drifting Lonely Seed,” perhaps Mitchell’s preferred reading, is to see it as a critique of boarding school and a plea for freedom. These readings do not match the expectations, expressed by Allen and the reviewers, of Mitchell as primitive and childlike. They do not match the expectations that saw Mitchell’s English as “foreign” to him, “garbled,” “lacking in grammar,” and “confused.” The “primitiveness” of Mitchell’s work was read as iconic of his primitiveness, and the childlike language became iconic of his childlike nature. Ideas about language are read as iconic of speakers.<sup>68</sup> Thus the “confused” grammar is a sign of “confused” thinking. Such claims that Native American languages (English or otherwise) lack grammar or are confused are not new claims, and neither are the ways in which such claims about the confused nature of the grammar have then been read as iconic of the confused thinking of Native Americans.<sup>69</sup> The racist argument is essentially that so-called modern languages have grammar (often codified in writing) while so-called primitive languages lack grammar, and that this lack of grammar is a reflection of the lack of cognitive abilities of “primitives.” Mitchell is certainly not confused about why he wrote “The Drifting Lonely Seed,” nor is he confused about his language choices. Instead, this poem, according to Mitchell, is an argument for freedom and against the stultifying regimes of knowledge that the boarding school meant to inculcate in Mitchell.<sup>70</sup>

Recently, I have been much taken with Ellen Basso’s concern with the ordeals of language, a counterpoint to intimate grammars. An intimate grammar is one spoken even in the face of outside scrutiny. For Basso, ordeals of language are those moments when language is withheld, when, as Basso notes, “we permit our own voices to be powerfully affected by the language of the dominant.”<sup>71</sup> When, for example, some Navajos that I know avoid speaking Navajo in Farmington, New Mexico, in order to avoid racist comments or feign monolingualism in Navajo in order to avoid the scrutiny of their (Navajo) English or to disengage from outsiders.<sup>72</sup> Mitchell’s work asserts his love for English, his English (other work asserts his love for Navajo too), even in the face of outside scrutiny (for example, Allen’s introduction). Recognizing Mitchell’s literary uses of Navajo English means recognizing Mitchell’s linguistic competence;

recognizing Mitchell's "voice," that is, the moments when individuals can tell their stories in their way using all their preferred expressive options.<sup>73</sup>

Here we have a conundrum; other than Bartelt's work—and Bartelt is a sociolinguist (to be sure), Mitchell's work has not received much attention from outside literary scholars.<sup>74</sup> Not a word of Mitchell's *Miracle Hill* is in Susan Brill de Ramírez's *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*, nor is there a mention in Amelia Katanski's *Learning to Write "Indian": The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature*, and there is nothing in Robert Dale Parker's *The Invention of Native American Literature* (to pick three works that do discuss other Navajos).<sup>75</sup> A silence exists here, a silence predicated on an inability, I think, to understand what Mitchell is doing. Mitchell's book does not fit the expectations of literary critics. Or perhaps worse, Allen's introduction has been taken at face value because it confirms certain expectations.

At a poetry performance in 2001, Luci Tapahonso was quite clear that *Miracle Hill* was one of the foundational books for her. Although Tapahonso may be the most famous Navajo poet on the Navajo Nation, Mitchell's book is widely known and widely enjoyed by Navajos with whom I have spoken. A number of other Navajo poets have also commented on the importance of Mitchell's book to their believing that they could become writers and poets. When Navajo filmmaker Bennie Klain was looking at possible movie ideas, Mitchell's book was an obvious topic.<sup>76</sup> Some Navajos get Mitchell's book in a way that outside literary critics do not, which is partly due to the language and partly due to the fact that many Navajos can imagine themselves in the situations that Mitchell describes. They recognize themselves and their languages in Mitchell's work. As one Navajo consultant noted, Mitchell "writes the way I speak," and in writing that way, his book provided a degree of "comfort." Another Navajo consultant said that Mitchell's language "validated our language." And another consultant stated that they were "fiercely proud of the language" Mitchell used in his book. For some Navajos, Mitchell's use of Navajo English in *Miracle Hill* is not unexpected at all.<sup>77</sup> Rather it is deeply and intimately satisfying. The language of the book fosters a common sociality, a common social intimacy. This is the expressive work of intimate grammars.

Such appreciation also moves beyond Navajos respecting Mitchell's language. Recently, at a Native American Literature Symposium panel on the work of Dogrib (Northern Athabaskan) author Richard van Camp, Acoma poet and scholar Simon Ortiz called attention to the "beauty" of Mitchell's English in *Miracle Hill* (the conference was held in March 2010). Ortiz noted that van Camp was following in the tradition of authors like Mitchell. Ortiz encouraged literary critics to engage with Mitchell's work and his "beautiful

English." Ortiz, I believe, was calling attention to the silence that surrounds Mitchell's book by literary critics.

As Deloria notes, "The world we inhabit is the shared creation of all peoples, though the costs and benefits have been parceled out with astonishing inequality, as have the notions about who has been active in that creation and who has been acted on."<sup>78</sup> Understanding the dominant outside expectations of American Indian languages (including Englishes) and what forms those languages can take may suggest something of the ways astonishing inequalities have been naturalized. The recognition of American Indian Englishes as languages worth taking seriously, as "beautiful Englishes" and intimate grammars, would be one useful starting point in destabilizing such inequalities. To recall Belin's comments from the beginning of this article, it is time to understand Navajo English as a Navajo (Diné) language. It is long past the time when we were "perplexed that they even had tongues at all."

### *Acknowledgments*

Research for this project on the Navajo Nation was conducted under permits from the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Office. I thank them. I also thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the American Philosophical Society, and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale for funding various portions of this research. Many of the reviews of Mitchell's book came from Mitchell's personal collection. I thank him for giving me access. I further thank Leighton Peterson, Bennie Klain, Aimee Hosemann, Esther Belin, Gloria Emerson, Venaya Yazzie, Orlando White, Tina Deschenie, Jonathan Hill, Barbra Meek, and Paul Kroskirty for useful comments on ideas taken up in this article. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the arts session of the Navajo Studies Conference in Shiprock, New Mexico, in March 2009; at the session organized by Leighton Peterson and myself at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in December 2009; and at the Native American Literature Symposium in Isleta Pueblo, New Mexico, in March 2010. Comments from the audiences at all those venues were much appreciated. Finally, I thank Blackhorse Mitchell for his guidance and friendship over the years.

### NOTES

1. Sherwin Bitsui, *Shapeshift* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 64.
2. See *ibid.*, 29. Other works by Bitsui reflect this ambivalence. In the poem "The Northern Sun" Bitsui asks, "Is this what I deserve: a white anthropologist sitting beside me at a winter ceremony?" Bitsui, *Shapeshift*, 17. Bitsui has often teased me at poetry performances with this line.



3. Esther Belin, "Contemporary Navajo Writers' Relevance to Navajo Society," *Wicazo Sa Review* 22, no. 1 (2007): 74.

4. Elizabeth Povinelli, "Intimate Grammars: Anthropological and Psychoanalytic Accounts of Language, Gender, and Desire," in *Language, Culture, and Society*, ed. Christine Jourdan and Kevin Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 190–206; Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy* (New York: Routledge, 1997). I have developed the theme of "intimate grammars" more fully in Anthony K. Webster, "On Intimate Grammars, with Examples from Navajo English, Navlish, and Navajo," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 66, no. 2 (2010): 187–208; "Imagining Navajo in the Boarding School: Laura Tohe's *No Parole Today* and the Intimacy of Language Ideologies," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2010): 39–62; and "A Note on Navajo Interlingual Puns," *International Journal of American Linguistics* 76, no. 2 (2010): 289–98. See Paul V. Kroskrity in this issue for a useful critique of intimate grammars ("All Intimate Grammars Leak: Reflections on 'Indian Languages in Unexpected Places,'" *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35, no. 2 [2011]: 161–72). A useful precursor to intimate grammars and an inspiration for my work can be found in Dell Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 88–91. Hymes describes an instance of code switching from English to *kiksht* by Philip Kahclamet. As Hymes notes, "The key, however, in my opinion is the evidence that the switch is prepared for and seems literally a switch into *kiksht* for the sake of *kiksht*. . . . Moreover, my remembered impression . . . is that when Mr. Kahclamet realized that he was launched into oratory in *kiksht* that he became self-conscious, aware of surroundings [The Rainbow Cafe], and stopped" (91). This, for me, is an example of the intimacies of grammar.

5. Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004).

6. *Ibid.*, 4.

7. For useful discussions of a discourse-centered approach to language and culture, see Joel Sherzer, "A Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture," *American Anthropologist* 89 (1987): 295–309; and "The Kuna and Columbus: Encounters and Confrontations of Discourse," *American Anthropologist* 96 (1994): 902–24. I have applied this approach to Navajo poetry more generally in Anthony K. Webster, *Explorations in Navajo Poetry and Poetics* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009).

8. Dell Hymes's *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality: Toward an Understanding of Voice* (Bristol, PA: Taylor and Francis, 1996) is still the most thought-provoking discussion concerning the inequalities of languages.

9. See Deborah House, *Language Shift among the Navajo* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), for a discussion about the ways that some Navajos have valorized Navajo. See also Webster, *Explorations*, for a discussion of the ways Navajo poets valorize certain forms of Navajo and erase other forms (especially Navlish, a code-mixed form of Navajo and English widely in use among Navajos on the Navajo Nation). For a general discussion of these issues, see Paul Kroskrity and Margaret Field, eds., *Native American Language Ideologies: Beliefs, Practices, and Struggles in Indian Country* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009).

10. For a useful discussion of some of the issues involved, see Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). For a more general discussion of the power relations behind concerns with literacy, see James Collins and Richard Blot, *Literacy and Literacies: Text, Power, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

11. Mindy Morgan, *The Bearer of This Letter: Language Ideologies, Literacy Practices, and the Fort Belknap Indian Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

12. Barbra Meek, "And the Injun Goes 'How!': Representations of American Indian in English in White Public Space," *Language in Society* 35, no. 1 (2006): 93–128; and "Failing American Indian



Languages," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (2011): 43–60. See also Jane Hill, *The Everyday Language of White Racism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

13. Lionel Wee, "Intra-Language Discrimination and Linguistic Human Rights: The Case of Singlish," *Applied Linguistics* 26, no. 1 (2005): 48–69. I am not overly enamored with Wee's distinction between interlanguage and intralanguage. I find the boundaries between languages a bit fuzzier than his dichotomy suggests. However, as a useful heuristic it serves its purposes here. See Webster, "On Intimate Grammars."

14. As Jessica Ball and B. May Bernhardt ("First Nations English Dialects in Canada: Implications for Speech-Language Pathology," *Clinical Linguistics and Phonetics* 22, no. 8 [2008]: 585) note, there is a real danger in misrecognizing the local language skills of Native peoples as "true language deficits." Such concerns are not unique to Native Americans. See Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

15. See Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Michael Silverstein, "The Whens and Wheres—As Well as Hows—of Ethnolinguistic Recognition," *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (2003): 531–57. By the word *glottonym*, I mean a lexical-grammatical code that has come to have a recognized "language name." One project of modernism is to name various "things" (here really "sets of practices"), so that they can be counted.

16. See Arthur Spears and Leanne Hinton, "Language and Speakers: An Introduction to African American English and Native American Languages," *Transforming Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2010): 3–34. I think the comparison is useful but misplaced. A more meaningful comparison would be between African American English and American Indian Englishes.

17. *Ibid.*, 12. See, e.g., AnCita Benally and Denis Viri, "Diné Bizaad [Navajo Language] at a Crossroads: Extinction or Renewal," *Bilingual Research Journal* 29 (2005): 104, who note that "the presence of Navajo English—especially in schools—carries a certain stigma in contrast to Standard English, Navajo English enjoys considerable celebration in the expressive arts." This celebration, I should add, is largely by Navajos. For a discussion of some of the educational ramifications of speaking and writing American Indian Englishes, see William Leap, *American Indian English* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993).

18. Blackhorse Mitchell with T. D. Allen, *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967). The book has since been reissued as Blackhorse Mitchell, *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navajo Boy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004). Note that in the reissued version T. D. Allen's name has been removed from the cover, and her introduction has been removed as well. Note also the subtle shift from *Navaho* to *Navajo* in order to align more with current practices on the Navajo Nation. Terry Diener Allen, it should be noted, was also an author. She and her husband, Don Allen, wrote a number of novels and nonfiction works under the name T. D. Allen (which are also Terry Allen's initials) concerning the West and Native Americans. Perhaps the most famous of those works is T. D. Allen, *Navahos Have Five Fingers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963). That Allen already had a relationship with the University of Oklahoma Press is important in understanding how Mitchell's book wound up being published there. As one Navajo consultant pointed out, Allen did encourage Mitchell to write, and she did get the book published. As that consultant further noted, for whatever reasons that the book was published, once it was published it was no longer under Allen's control, and Navajos could and did make of it what they would. These are both good points to keep in mind throughout the discussion that follows. Allen, as this Navajo consultant noted, was paternalistic (or maternalistic) and sympathetic toward Mitchell.

19. N. Scott Momaday, "Bronco's Own Story," review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *New York Times*, November 19, 1967; Dan L. Thrapp, "Navaho Lad Pens Lyrical Novel," review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *Los Angeles*

*Times*, August 13, 1967. The *Navajo Times* also called attention to Mitchell and his book. However, in conversations I have had with Navajos of that generation, his book was probably more public off-reservation than on-reservation. In October 1967, there was a short review of Mitchell's book by Dick Hardwick in the *Navajo Times* ([Window Rock, AZ], October 26, 1967, Blackhorse Mitchell Collection). See n. 41 regarding the Blackhorse Mitchell Collection. In 1968, Mitchell's poem "The New Direction" was awarded a special prize in the Navajo Tribal Centennial literary contest, and the poem was published in the *Navajo Times* (Window Rock, AZ), July 1, 1968, B8.

20. Mitchell, *Miracle Hill*.

21. According to Mitchell, the protagonist's name should be Bronco. Mitchell has explained to me that he had wanted Allen to change this misspelling, but she refused. In later unpublished work that follows up on the events found in *Miracle Hill*, Mitchell spells the main character's name as "Bronco." Here Mitchell clearly asserts his authorship of this work in contrast to Allen's editorial practices.

22. Mitchell with Allen, *Miracle Hill*.

23. Dorothea Leighton, "Review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*," *American Anthropologist* 70, no. 3 (1968): 616.

24. T. D. Allen, "Please Read Loose," in *Miracle Hill*, by Blackhorse Mitchell with T. D. Allen (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1967), vii. As Paul Kroskrity noted in a review of this piece, "please read loose" is also a nonstandard form of English. Note that, although Mitchell's nonstandard English must be apologized for, Allen's use of nonstandard English does not become an "object of scrutiny." Minority populations are not licensed to use nonstandard Englishes, although dominant populations can and do use nonstandard Englishes without the attendant stigma. I borrow "object of scrutiny" from Bonnie Urciuoli, *Exposing Prejudice: Puerto Rican Experiences of Language, Race, and Class* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 178–79. See also Hill, *Everyday Language of White Racism*.

25. Allen, "Read Loose," vii.

26. See Hymes, *Ethnography*, 208.

27. T. D. Allen, "Emerson Blackhorse 'Barney' Mitchell," in *Whispering Wind*, ed. Terry Allen (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Company, 1972), 91. Let me add that Mitchell has stated to me that Allen never sought his consent to publish his work in this collection.

28. Allen, "Read Loose," viii.

29. *Ibid.*, xi.

30. Webster, "On Intimate Grammars."

31. See Guillermo Bartelt, "Some Observations on Navajo English," *Papers in Linguistics* 14, no. 3 (1981): 377–85; "Mode and Aspect Transformation in Navajo and Western Apache English Narrative Technique," *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 21 (1983): 104–24; and *Socio- and Stylolinguistic Perspectives on American Indian Texts* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001). I have discussed Navajo English in contemporary Navajo poetry in Anthony K. Webster, "Coyote Poems: Navajo Poetry, Intertextuality, and Language Choice," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 28, no. 4 (2004): 69–91; and "'Still She Didn't See What I Was Trying to Say': Towards a History of Framing Navajo English in Navajo Poetry," *World Englishes* 29, no. 1 (2010): 75–96. See also William Leap, "Written Navajo English: Texture, Construction, and Point of View," *Journal of Navajo Education* 11, no. 1 (1993): 41–48. For an overview of American Indian Englishes see Leap, *American Indian English*.

32. I borrow this notion of aesthetic principles and negative evaluations by outsiders from Anthony Woodbury, "Documenting Rhetorical, Aesthetic, and Expressive Loss in Language Shift," in *Endangered Languages*, ed. Lenore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 256. See also Hill, *Everyday Language of White Racism*.

33. Leighton C. Peterson, "Reel Navajo: The Linguistic Creation of Indigenous Screen Memories," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (2011): 111–34. Note that speaking in Navajo with subtitles in "standard" English matched certain expectations from "media professionals" about Navajos, but that letting Elsie Cly Begay speak in her local Navajo English did not match those expectations. Most non-Navajo audiences have no ability to evaluate Begay's use of Navajo (e.g., to recognize regional diacritics), but they can and do evaluate Begay's Navajo English as somehow compromised or dysfluent.

34. See Hymes, *Ethnography*. See also Dell Hymes, "Tonkawa Poetics: John Rush Buffalo's 'Coyote and Eagle's Daughter,'" in *Native American Discourse: Poetics and Rhetoric*, ed. Joel Sherzer and Anthony Woodbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 17–61; Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*; Hill, *Everyday Language of White Racism*.

35. See, esp., Meek, "And the Injun," on this point.

36. Allen, "Read Loose," ix.

37. *Ibid.*, vii.

38. *Ibid.*, viii.

39. *Ibid.*, xi.

40. See James Milroy, "Language Ideologies and the Consequences of Standardization," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5, no. 4 (2001): 530–55. On languages ideologies, see Paul Kroskrity, "Language Ideologies," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 496–517.

41. Many of the following reviews are quoted from a notebook collection of reviews that Mitchell kept. The reviews were cut out of newspapers, but there is incomplete information concerning the original publication places for many of the reviews. Hereinafter, I will cite the author of the review and note that the review can be found in Mitchell's collection of reviews. I will give the publication date when known and any other pertinent information. I also have a copy of that collection of reviews. I thank Mr. Mitchell for sharing those reviews with me and for letting me make copies of the reviews. Copies of the reviews are available upon request from the author. Robert Ford (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection, 1967). I am unsure where Ford's review appeared.

42. Ford (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection).

43. *Ibid.*

44. Peggy Durham, review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *Oklahoma Journal* (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection, 1967).

45. *Ibid.*

46. Vincent Starrett, review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 1967 (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection).

47. *Ibid.*

48. Maggy King, review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, August 19, 1967 (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection).

49. Anna Lee Stensland, "American Indian Culture: Promises, Problems, and Possibilities," *The English Journal* 60 (1971): 1195–1200. This review is not in Mitchell's collection.

50. Brian Garfield, review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *Saturday Review*, September 9, 1967 (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection), 37.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Joan Seager, review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *Denver Quarterly* (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection, 1968), 109.

53. *Ibid.*, 110.

54. Mildred Hart Shaw, review of *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*, by Blackhorse Mitchell, *Daily Sentinel*, Grand Junction, CO, October 15, 1967 (Blackhorse Mitchell Collection).

55. Webster, "Still She Didn't."
56. Allen, "Read Loose," xiv–xv.
57. Ibid.
58. See also Paul Zolbrod, foreword to *Miracle Hill*, Blackhorse Mitchell (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004), xix.
59. Deloria, *Unexpected Places*, 11.
60. My use of such a format follows from the arguments developed in Larry Evers and Felipe Molina, "Like This It Stays in Your Hands: Collaboration and Ethnopoetics," *Oral Tradition* 13 (1998): 15–57.
61. Other work by Navajo poets reflects the impression that boarding school was a place to be silent. See, e.g., Laura Tohe, *No Parole Today* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 1999). I develop this theme more thoroughly in Webster, "Imagining Navajo."
62. For a sampling of Mitchell's sheepherding songs, listen to Blackhorse Mitchell, *American Bar: Sheepherder Songs* (CD) (NativeNow!, 2002); *Where Were You When I Was Single? Old-Time Sheepherder Songs* (CD) (Window Rock, AZ: Cool Runnings Music, 2006); and *Don't Let Go* (CD) (Window Rock, AZ: Cool Runnings Music, 2008).
63. I am tempted to call this a "breakthrough into performance" following Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You*, 79–141. On performance, see Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); and, particularly, Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). I have developed the perspective of poetry performance among Navajos in Webster, *Explorations*.
64. See Bartelt, "Some Observations," "Mode and Aspect Transformation," and *Socio- and Stylolinguistic*.
65. Bartelt, "Some Observations," 382. The usitative mode indicates "actions or events that are performed, or that take place, repeatedly and usually, customarily," Robert W. Young, *The Navajo Verb System* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 161. The momentaneous aspect, to be discussed in the following text, indicates "a verbal action or event that takes place at a point in time—punctually" (Young, *Navajo Verb System*, 71).
66. See Bartelt, *Socio- and Stylolinguistic*, 97–98. Although I find much of value in Bartelt's discussion, I would disagree with Bartelt's rather straightforward acceptance of Allen's role in the construction of *Miracle Hill*. If this article does anything, I hope it suggests that the "writing" of *Miracle Hill* was a complex set of practices, and that Allen's introduction obscured much of that complexity.
67. See "Blackhorse Mitchell: Diné Teacher, Artist, Writer, Musician," <http://www.blackhorse-mitchell.com/index.html> (accessed June 8, 2010).
68. See Judith Irvine and Susan Gal, "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation," in *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, Identities*, ed. Paul V. Kroskrity (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 2000), 35–83.
69. See Hymes, *Ethnography*; "Tonkawa Poetics."
70. For a useful discussion of agency within a language ideological framework, see Paul Kroskrity, "Embodying the Reversal of Language Shift: Agency, Incorporation, Language Ideological Change in the Western Mono Community of Central California," in Kroskrity and Field, *Native American Language Ideologies*, 190–210. See also Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You*. It is certainly true that not all features of Mitchell's Navajo English are equally salient to him and within the limits of his linguistic awareness. But certain features clearly are, and Mitchell has built up certain felt attachments to such forms. On the "limits" of linguistic awareness, see Michael Silverstein, "The Limits of Awareness," *Sociolinguistic Working Papers* 84 (Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1981), 1–30.

71. Ellen Basso, "Ordeals of Language," in *Culture, Rhetoric, and the Vicissitudes of Life*, ed. Michael Carrithers (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 122.

72. Feigning monolingualism in Navajo dates at least to returning veterans after World War II as a response to "social exclusion" on the part of Anglo society. However, the feigning of monolingualism in Navajo was also a wider phenomenon than simply returning veterans. See Carl Voegelin, Flo Voegelin, and Noel Schutz, "The Language Situation in Arizona as Part of the Southwest Culture Area," in *Studies in Southwestern Ethnolinguistics*, ed. Dell Hymes and William Bittle (The Hague, the Netherlands: Mouton and Company, 1967), 439. Mitchell has explained to me that his grandmother had learned English at the mission school in Farmington, NM, but that she did not speak English to him. It came as a bit of a surprise to him that his grandmother spoke English (see Mitchell, *Miracle Hill* [2004]). See also Margaret Field, "Changing Navajo Language Ideologies and Changing Language Use," in Kroskrity and Field, *Native American Language Ideologies*, 31–47.

73. Hymes, *Ethnography*, 64. See also Jan Blommaert, "Ethnography and Democracy: Hymes's Political Theory of Language," *Text and Talk* 29, no. 3 (2009): 257–76. I thank Paul Kroskrity for pushing me to clarify this point.

74. Bartelt, *Socio- and Stylo-linguistic*.

75. Susan Brill de Ramírez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition* (Tucson: Arizona University Press, 1999); Amelia Katanski, *Learning to Write "Indian": The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005); Robert Dale Parker, *The Invention of Native American Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). The absence from Katanski's book is perhaps most striking, given that the topic of the book is "learning to write Indian" at the boarding school.

76. I should add that, when Mitchell was looking for a filmmaker to work on his book *Miracle Hill*, after meeting Bennie Klain, he decided on Klain because, as Mitchell noted, "he's a sheepherder like me," which is to say that Mitchell and Klain shared many experiences of growing up on the Navajo Nation.

77. This is not to claim that all Navajos appreciated the use of Navajo English in Mitchell's book. One Navajo consultant was rather dismissive of Navajo English and agreed with Allen's introduction that these were mistakes and errors of grammar. This is also not to claim that most Navajos had read the book. Another Navajo consultant, e.g., had not read the book, but liked the idea of a book "written by a Navajo for Navajos." Still another Navajo consultant had never heard of the book. However, the vast majority of Navajo poets and writers who I have worked with know the work and wish to promote it. Esther Belin, e.g., was working to get the book used for incoming freshman at Ft. Lewis College in Durango, CO. According to Mitchell, Luci Tapahonso and Laura Tohe were instrumental in getting the book reissued by the University of Arizona Press.

78. Deloria, *Unexpected*, 4.