



## Out in the Southwest Today

Out in the Southwest today  
Navajo teachers are preparing their lessons,  
out among the red-facing buttes  
and dry arroyos, out in the air that sees itself  
a hundred miles out of the Bisti Badlands,  
fantastic figures, straight from the earth,  
emerge and begin speaking.

What surrounds these teachers instructs them  
in the many ways a monster-slayer must work:  
listen well to the ancestors, name every fear  
and every blessing by their proper names  
(Thirst and Celebration), put on your turquoise  
and imagine with your students all  
that's sacred walks with them.





# Reflections on Navajo Teachers



I'm a former water lawyer and a Justice of the Colorado Supreme Court whose duties include authoring water decisions and whose hobbies center on poetry and Southwestern history.

I met Michael Welsh, a history professor at the University of Northern Colorado, when he interviewed me for the Poudre River oral history project in 2003. I called on him to write an article about the diverse ethnic contributions to the Arkansas River's water history, published in the 2004 *Citizen's Guide to Colorado's Water Heritage* by the Colorado Foundation for Water Education, for which I serve as vice-president and chair of the Publications Committee.

My wife, Bobbie, and I have taken poetry and creative non-fiction workshops with Dr. Kathryn Winograd since 1992. Kathy and I started judging the Colorado River of Words poetry contest for K-12 students in 2001 for the Colorado Center for the Book, now part of Colorado Humanities. Kathy, a Colorado Book Award winner for poetry, wrote a five-unit lesson plan curriculum for Teaching the Poetry of Rivers, in cooperation with the Colorado Foundation for Water Education and Colorado Humanities, which is available on the web page of both organizations [[www.cfwe.org](http://www.cfwe.org) and [www.coloradohumanities.org](http://www.coloradohumanities.org), respectively]. Her curriculum incorporates water history, culture, science, literature, journal writing, and personal landscape experience transformed into the forms of poetry.

I met Katie Gilbert, a Navajo Water Commissioner, at a Project WET water conference in April 28 – May 1, 2005, at Mexicali, Mexico, that unveiled the Colorado River publication "Discover a Watershed, The Colorado Educator's Guide." Katie is a high school mathematics and science teacher at Kirtland High School outside of Farmington, New Mexico in the Shiprock country.

When the University of Northern Colorado and the Navajo Consortium received a grant for teaching history and civics, Michael asked me for recommendations concerning faculty members, I suggested Kathy and Katie. I was happy to accept Michael's invitation to join the advisory committee for the Navajo Teachers project.

Why? I wear a Navajo turquoise ring bought from a pawn shop on the Navajo Reservation my grandmother gave to me in 1961 when I was beginning my senior year in high school in San Antonio, Texas. I first traveled through the Navajo Reservation in 1964 when my brother Will (the now-renowned young adult author) and I were on the staff of the Philmont Scout Ranch, the national camp of the Boy Scouts of America, located between Cimarron and Taos New Mexico in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. We saw Navajos hauling water for their families and livestock because their trustee, the United States Government, has not yet helped them build a 20th century water system, though the government long since helped to do that for other citizens.

I have traveled through the Navajo homeland on my way to raft the Colorado River and float Lake Powell with family and friends. I wear a Navajo turquoise bolo tie given to me by my daughter. I have walked into Canyon de Chelly and looked up to its highest rimrock. I knew that in 1908, with the *Winters* decision, the United States Supreme Court said to the United States Government, in essence, this: “You couldn’t have put the Indians on reservations and meant for them to farm and survive, unless you’d set aside sufficient un-appropriated water for their use in the future, which later settlers coming after the creation of those reservations cannot pre-empt.”

I was a European History major at the University of Notre Dame, graduating in 1966. I’m a student of European wars and European colonization of most of the world. Learning to love the country of the Navajo homeland, a great part of the vast Colorado River Plateau, is an essential feature of becoming a Coloradan, a New Mexican, a Utahan, or an Arizonan. I call it becoming four-cornered. The Utes, Navajos, and Hopis called this country home long before our ancestors came here. Their colonization by the Manifest Destiny United States is a North American legacy yet to be faithfully recognized and reckoned with.

The Navajo Teachers project is dedicated to learning lessons on the middle ground. Katie and Kathy are great teachers of the generations. Katie has served as a Navajo Water Commissioner negotiating with New Mexico, Arizona, and the United States for agreements that will turn her people’s tribal water rights claims into real water for their homeland. Kathy is a writer and teacher whose art is turning the tongues of men and women into story, song, and poetry of the personal and universal landscape of our Southwestern experience.



Jennifer Newman

*Navajo Teachers 2008 Workshop faculty (from left): Katie Gilbert, Jennifer Denetdale, Greg Hobbs, Kathy Winograd, and Michael Welsh*

The Navajo people have a glorious oral literature passed from generation to generation that dwells in the blessing of water and celebrates beauty in all its forms. I'm now five years into being part of this faculty, which includes Jennifer Denetdale, Navajo author, professor, and the first Ph.D. historian of her people. I've learned from working with the teachers in seminars on the reservation and in Denver that Navajos are smart, enterprising, resourceful, full of fun and good humor, love their families and homeland immensely, honor their ancestors, are full of stories — deft and naughty at times, sublimely spiritual at others — who were driven from their homeland and imprisoned by the U.S. Army at Bosque Redondo (Fort Sumner) on the Pecos River in New Mexico from 1863-1868, yet honor being citizens of their clans, chapters, the Navajo Nation, the states they live in on and off the reservation, and the United States.

They're the most populous tribe in the United States; more than half of them live off the reservation, mostly in urban areas of the Southwest. They're reserved in public and chatty in private. They are skillful students of the world around them. Their on-reservation teachers represent the best of them. These teachers are Navajo, Latino, Anglo, African American and a mix of these and other ethnicities who face great challenges in their classrooms translating all of the layers of intersecting United States/pre-United States Navajo history into the context of contemporary experience.

Their voices resonate richly of pain going back to the generation of the Long Walk when their ancestors were marched to Bosque Redondo and richly in celebration of returning to their homeland after the Civil War in 1868. To them history is always present and the present is always history. Their civics is strongly rooted in community. In the four-cornered landscape of the Colorado River plateau we all revere, our lessons are for and with each other.

