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# Power, Prayers, and Protection: Comb Ridge as a Case Study in Navajo Thought

ROBERT S. MCPHERSON

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Beginning in 2005, a five-year survey of cultural resources began to unfold in southeastern Utah along a prominent sandstone rock formation known as Comb Ridge. This visually dramatic monocline stretches a considerable distance from the southwestern corner of Blue Mountain (Abajos) in Utah to Kayenta, Arizona, approximately one hundred miles to the south. Geologically, erosion has carved this formation into a series of crosscutting east-west running ravines and added two parallel north-south washes—Comb Wash on the west and Butler Wash on the east. The 900-foot-high prominence, with its often knifelike edge has witnessed the passing of Native peoples since 12,000 BC.<sup>1</sup> The sixty-six-square-mile Utah portion of the ridge and the object of study, lying between the San Juan River in the south to Blue Mountain in the north, offers a particularly rich landscape in which humankind has interacted during prehistoric, historic, and contemporary eras.

My role in this venture was to provide ethnographic and ethnohistoric background for the field crews interested in the various cultures frequenting Comb Ridge and its environs.<sup>2</sup> I specialized in Navajo (Diné) and Ute (Nuche) history and culture throughout the past thirty years and worked with many Native Americans concerning their relationship to the land. One person I knew to be extremely knowledgeable was a friend and colleague, John Holiday, an elderly chanter, or medicine man, specializing in the Blessing Way. I had helped him publish his autobiography, was familiar with his depth of knowledge, and knew that he had lived in the area of Comb Ridge in his younger years.<sup>3</sup> Many of the local people—both Ute and Navajo—I had talked to previously had passed away, but John's sharp mind and clear recollection was available. I turned to him for much of the Navajo view of what this rock formation means to his people. This emic approach to what Native Americans think of the land and its sacred geography is an important concept to understand.<sup>4</sup>

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When Tewa anthropologist Alfonso Ortiz remarked that American Indian beliefs are “religions of place rather than history,” he summarized much of the Navajo thought concerning the Four Corners area.<sup>5</sup> Land tied to narratives from the past creates a bond to place that is often foreign to non-Native peoples. Formal etic study of these Navajo bonds reaches as far back as Richard F. Van Valkenburgh’s *Diné Bikéyah*.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, for my area of interest, he concentrated his efforts primarily in Arizona and New Mexico, missing Comb Ridge entirely. More recently, Laurance D. Linford’s *Navajo Places: History, Legend, Landscape* covers all four states in the Four Corners region and mentions Comb Ridge in passing but misses much of its meaning to the Navajo.<sup>7</sup> On a less specific but more theoretical basis, Klara Kelly and Harris Francis in *Navajo Sacred Places* discuss contemporary concerns that Navajo people have about sacred sites, the power that they hold, and how stories are tied to the land, much like the work performed by Keith Basso does for the Apache people in *Wisdom Sits in Places*.<sup>8</sup> None of these books, however, captures the rich variety of meaning attached to this single rock formation.

Based on previous discussions with Navajo elders, I realized that Comb Ridge would prove to be polysemic and multivocal.<sup>9</sup> Although this is undoubtedly true of other sites on land embedded with Navajo thought, there was no missing the importance of this place in Utah Navajos’ teachings. The richness in variety became apparent once the study got underway. From it came connections that tied this rock to major ceremonial knowledge and stories as well as Navajo classification and land use. John, as primary consultant, was more than willing to share this information and insight. As he explained on another occasion:

Once upon a time, we used to have a lot of medicine men who knew all the different types of sacred ceremonies and stories, but when you asked them about their knowledge, they would say, “What are you going to do with it? You are crazy and ill-minded.”

Here’s what I think. This is not so. It is a shame. All of these wise, knowledgeable teachings, sacred songs, prayers, and wisdom—everything there is to sustain life—they have taken to their graves. Nobody has that kind of knowledge to carry on these days. As for me, I will not do that. I refuse to do that. Whatever I have, my sacred songs, prayers, my voice, my wisdom, my acquired gift of knowledge, I want to share with anyone—young or old, male or female—who is wise and interested in learning. They can live by these sacred teachings and make it their beliefs. The wise ones who learn these teachings can pass it on for many generations to come. That is why I share it with those who want to learn just the way you are recording it now. I do not hide it.<sup>10</sup>

As we traveled about Comb Ridge, the landscape opened up to this master teacher who had lived, herded livestock, and traveled in its vicinity for many years. His recall was remarkable, his insight impeccable.<sup>11</sup>

We first stopped on top of Lime Ridge, a large hill on the west side of the monocline. John pointed to rock features, naming them and sharing a bit of

information about each. His teachings came from the narratives behind the Blessing Way. Elements of this ceremony accompany other rituals because it adds harmony and protection at the end of the healing process. Because the land figures into many of the stories, giving concrete relevance to sacred events, no single body of lore contains all of the teachings about a specific site.<sup>12</sup> Rather, there is a multiplicity of meanings. The Blessing Way, so familiar to John, derived from a different narrative with accompanying lessons than that of the Evil Way. When I asked him if he had ever heard about a particular teaching associated with Comb Ridge, he emphatically said no, explaining that it was contrary to what he had learned. Other people, however, were very familiar with this understanding.

A second point that became apparent with this initial stop emphasizes a characteristic difference between Anglo and Navajo thought. Although white people tend to focus on the point at hand—in this case Comb Ridge—John could not do it justice without expanding the geographical area of concern many times over. He certainly could speak to the specific, but for a real understanding, one had to talk about related geographical formations, in some instances hundreds of mile away. For example, although there are a number of different teachings about the Navajo emergence from the worlds beneath this one and how Comb Ridge figured in that creative process, John told of twelve holy beings who were among the first to arrive on the surface. Once the spiritual predecessors of the Navajo entered this world, the holy beings implemented their plan by creating a tangible space for the Five Fingered People (humans) to live.

First Man, “who always had the sacred arrowheads in his possession for ceremonies,” cut deep into the earth toward Alamosa, Colorado, in the east, to create a passageway for the water to drain. Today, this arrowhead rests as a block of volcanic rock outside Pueblo, Colorado. Next, First Woman carved the earth to the south, toward Albuquerque, New Mexico, with a “twisted metal” arrowhead-shaped volcanic rock now found near the Rio Grande. First Boy then tore the earth just outside of Bluff, Utah. The arrowhead, now seen as Designs on the Rock or Decorated Rock (Tsénaqshch’aañi, or Mule Ear) is a sharply prominent feature resting next to Comb Ridge and the slit it cut through which the San Juan River passes today. First Girl took a red arrowhead and sliced the ground to the north, placing the point outside of Naturita, Colorado. All four of these cuts drained the water to the cardinal directions, making the land habitable for the Navajo people. These arrowheads today are beacons of protection, surrounding the reservation encompassing hundreds of square miles.

A third point became increasingly important throughout the day. Even in the major, well-known narratives, there are important ties made on a local level that give local teachings relevance. Each Navajo community on or off the reservation has its own understanding of important sacred geography that ties the place and its people to the holy beings. Although other communities may or may not share the knowledge of these teachings, each has enough to link them to the main body of beliefs. For instance, all traditional Navajo people understand and depend on the four sacred mountains (Blanca, Taylor, San

Francisco, and Hesperus), but teachings associated with, for example, Blue Mountain or a particular hill or rock formation may be shared only locally. Yet all have power and are important.

As we stood upon Lime Ridge and looked to the east, John began instructing in earnest. The landscape transformed into a series of dominant themes with supernatural forces lying ready to be summoned on behalf of mortal beings. The entire landscape was filled with sentient beings. Those who know the stories understand how to control and utilize these powers properly; those who do not can be seriously harmed. John focused on snakes, lightning, arrowheads, wind, bears, the San Juan River, and boundaries. By the end of the day, these seemingly unconnected things melted into a cohesive perception anchored in power, prayers, and protection.

### THE POWER OF SNAKES

Snakes are a particularly powerful entity. During the creation of this world, Big Snake, a Holy Being, performed a number of tasks. When the Twins, Monster Slayer and Born for Water, visited their father, Sun Bearer, they found Big Snake, Bear, Thunder, and Wind guarding the entrance to this god's home. Big Snake and Bear also protected Changing Woman, wife of Sun Bearer and mother of the Twins. She, in turn gave these two protectors as pets to the Navajo people as they traveled about. Big Snake became a help and a hindrance. He hunted game for the travelers, who fed him from a basket of corn pollen, but also became increasingly tired and needed to be carried. He rested at a number of places, one of which is El Capitan (Aghaalá or Much Wool) in Monument Valley thirty miles distant, where one can still see the coil marks around the southern exposure of the rock. He became so heavy that his transporters left him behind.<sup>13</sup>

Big Snake appears in other stories. One tells of him crawling into a deerskin with all of the other deer coming to him as pets. A hunter showed disrespect to him, and so he hid all of the game animals by having the winds drive them into seclusion. Black God eventually restored the animals and sat with Big Snake in a ceremony to heal the now sickened but repentant hunter. W. W. Hill suggests another connection to hunting through what he called the Big Snake Hunting Way. Although much of the information concerning this rite is now lost, Navajo informants familiar with the practice described the hunters as "attack[ing] like snakes from ambush."<sup>14</sup> Big Snake uses magnetic powers to lure the game into striking distance and then envelops his prey.

A number of stories apply the motif of a beautiful woman marrying a snake, disguised as a handsome man, only to awaken to the real situation. Narratives associated with the Plume Way, Navajo Wind Way, Big Star Way, and Shooting Way feature Big Snake or snakes in some aspect. The Flint Way, Wind Way, Small Wind Way, Shooting or Lightning Way, and Star Way provide effective elements to counter the illness caused by snakes.<sup>15</sup> According to Gladys Reichard, "The Shooting Chant is armor against diseases caused by snakes, lightning, and arrows, but the Wind Chant features snakes as extensively; it protects against their power and the harm of storms."<sup>16</sup> Types of illness may

include leg and neck pain, crippling disease, urinary or reproductive tract sickness, and unnatural swelling of the stomach.<sup>17</sup>

Traditional Navajo belief suggests that snakes have great wisdom. Father Anselm Weber from the Saint Michael's Mission in Arizona, noted that snakes are associated with luck in gambling and "believe[s] them to understand human languages, to be good listeners, and to be able to turn to evil account what they have heard."<sup>18</sup> Because they are intelligent beings that control power, snakes should not be killed but only removed from one's presence. If they are destroyed, the person who dispatched them needs to have a ceremony performed to drive the snake spirits out of the body. Also, certain stories are not told until the frost is on the ground and snakes, spiders, and other warm-weather creatures are asleep so that they will not listen and be offended.

In August 1994, Navajo women using the restrooms in an administration building in Window Rock, Arizona, spotted a snake in a bathroom stall. The incident created a large stir, the reaction to which was widely publicized and studied on and off the reservation. Anthropologist Maureen Trudelle Schwarz analyzed the cultural reaction to the event.<sup>19</sup> Summarizing her findings, she determined that snakes are powerful beings that need to be treated with respect; the appearance of the snake was an omen for all concerned, and medicine men needed to interpret the message; all snakes are descended from Big Snake and hold part of his power; snakes affect humans particularly through body secretions, but also through hair, nail clippings, and so forth; when a snake comes in contact with these elements, it may gain control or influence over the individual; and in the time of the myths, snakes assumed the role of inflicting certain types of disease on humans. A final point is that in the Navajo universe, everything is either male or female, but within an individual, animal, or object, there are both male and female powers. The male power (*naayéé'jǫ́*) exerts the ability to harm and destroy while female power (*hózhóǫ́jǫ́*) is peaceful and benevolent. These forces can either help or harm. Yet male power can be as much for protection for good as for offensive action to destroy.

By now, it should be apparent that Big Snake and his earthly offspring control significant power. That power is represented in Comb Ridge and its surroundings. Within a ten-mile radius lies a half-dozen sites connected to Big Snake and his ability to protect; there are undoubtedly corresponding sites on other parts of the reservation. Some Navajo elders suggest that Comb Ridge is a frozen part of Big Snake, with its head pointing toward Blue Mountain.<sup>20</sup> Known as Arrow Head Big Snake (T'iish K'aa') or Big Snake, this reptile is said to have been able to fly through the air. Breathing for this creature transpired through the alcoves found along the ridge's side, the air passing in and out of these "vents." "Comb Ridge was not a rock when it was created, but was alive and moved around. The air pockets were formed to allow passage of air for it to live. They are a part of its body like lungs through which it breathes. These air pockets were placed along its rib cage. When it was created it was little, like a baby; then it grew. It became very big. All the rock formations were alive at one time." Falling rocks indicate that the snake's "backbone" is injured, in part because of the two highways that cut through it. The snake

cannot heal itself and feels disrespected. "It is still alive and can hurt people because it is never given any offerings."<sup>21</sup>

A snake becoming a solid rock formation is not novel to Navajo thought. Monster Slayer traveled the land searching for evil creatures to kill in order to make the earth safe. When he reached the Chuska Mountains in New Mexico, he found two huge snakes. He walked along the back of one, then stepped from one to the other and went on. "Since that time, the two snakes lie there, having turned to stone."<sup>22</sup> No exact location is specified for these two formations, but Comb Ridge (male) and the Hogback (female) near Shiprock, New Mexico, its paired mate, lie within sight of the Chuska Mountains. This pairing or mate illustrates not only the male/female dichotomy but also that most things in the Navajo universe have a counterpart.

Elder Martha Nez tells of a place near Comb Ridge called Tó'Adinidahaskaní (Place Where Water Collects). It is part of Big Snake, whose rattle is nearby. "They say that the tongue of the snake is at the other end, where it is smooth on the rock. Where the black rock ends, people say that is its hole. . . . The snake was returning to its hole, but was turned into stone before it reached home."<sup>23</sup> Lime Ridge shares strong ties with Comb Ridge and its connection to Big Snake. On both flanks of this massive hill are wavy patterns of variegated sand that look like a snake in motion. The horned snake on the western side of the hill is male, and its mate on the eastern side is female. They reside within the ridge and are in concert with Big Snake and his power.

On the surface of the hill, chert (a flint-like stone) is scattered about, said to be the scales or skin of Big Snake.<sup>24</sup> At the top of the hill that faces the Valley of the Gods to the west sits Sugarloaf rock formation. One story tells of it being a male hogan with disobedient children trapped inside by Sun Bearer. Others say that it is the forehead of Big Snake, his home, or a shield that protects him.<sup>25</sup> Most agree with John that

this ridge, where all the snakes once lived, is our shield against all bad and evil things. We bring our offerings in prayers and songs to this ridge when we need to. Recently, a man and his son came to me from Navajo Mountain to ask for a blessing of protection. His son left for the war in Iraq. Later his parents came to me and told of how their son wanted to thank me for saving his life. . . . That is how sacred and holy this ridge is to the Diné.

Behind Mexican Hat Rock lays Mountain That Is Coiled (Dził Na'neests'ee'ii), also known as Navajo Blanket. The pattern on the hill reflects the same design of the giant bull snake that lives inside. People who have tried to uncoil this snake have been hissed at with large puffs of air. Bad luck accompanies those who trespass this area and do not show proper respect. For instance, some people have drowned in the river below, said to be killed by the snake that slips down to the water. Big Snake can also wriggle over the ground without touching it and can harm a person mentally just by being near. When people disappear in this area, it is credited to the serpent; and when an oil company could not drill successfully at a site nearby, it was



because the snake kept pushing the drill bit out of the earth. Even white men have died here because of its power. Downstream two miles lies the Goosenecks, an entrenched meander formed by Big Snake's coils creating the river's sinuous path.<sup>26</sup>

There are other places that hold similar power and are just as dangerous. A hole on the east side of El Capitan once was the home of Endless Snake. This creature traveled on the rainbow and the wind.<sup>27</sup> Joe Manygoats, a medicine man from Navajo Mountain, describes the home of another huge serpent:

It is a large hole with a bare entrance way. The vegetation around it is all dead or dying. People are forbidden to go near this place. This creature is capable of retrieving objects from far away. Long ago a man living near Navajo Mountain lost his horse. He searched and searched until he found his tracks leading up to the creature's home; there were no tracks going out. Evidently, the creature got his horse. They say this animal lures its prey from a distance of a mile, by way of electrical magnetic current or something like that.<sup>28</sup>

Other sites with similar phenomena are found in Kane Valley near the old Vanadium Corporation of America mine and in Tsegi (Tséyi', or canyon), which is west of Kayenta.

Comb Ridge and its surroundings are places of power. Following traditional Navajo thought, Big Snake and those related to him have given the landscape identifiable, spiritually energized sites for healing and protection. John insists that whenever influenza or other sicknesses ravage the people, Navajos go to this location to make offerings and recite songs and prayers. Each place has an inner form, a spiritual essence human in form that communes with the person praying. Pollen and sacred stones, or *nt'łiz*, are accepted by this being.<sup>29</sup> The belief in an inner form extends to many natural phenomena including the four cardinal directions, wind, thunder, lightning, and water. The power from these sites heals colds, especially those that are fatal.

In time of war, combatants or their relatives come here to say prayers for safety. The first time this was done, prior to the Long Walk (1860s), a group of medicine men came to Comb Ridge and Navajo Blanket to create a supernatural, spiritual shield based in the power of Big Snake to protect the People. "That [Comb Ridge] is where the Diné language of protection came from—the sacred language of the code talkers used against the enemy. The prayers and sacred offerings were given to the mountain because that is where all the sacred 'shake offs' were derived from Thunder, Bear, and Air [Níłch'i]. It is all very sacred."<sup>30</sup> And that was why Slim Benally was assured through prayer that from Navajo Blanket, "beauty will come [his] way."<sup>31</sup>



## OF LIGHTNING AND ARROWHEADS

Closely associated with snakes are lightning and arrowheads. On the east side of Comb Ridge one sees serrated edges of rock that cut the sky. John believes that lightning could live in the points of the ridge or in pockets of rock along it. These pockets are also home to various types of wind. He described the lightning like a bird, whose dark green is the color of algae found in water. The electricity goes to the clouds and returns to earth just as a bird. When asked if Comb Ridge is mentioned in ceremonial songs, he answered that it is and that reference is made to illnesses caused by harmful things that come from the heavens, which can be healed by the powers of this rock formation.

Suzie Yazzie described an experience related by her grandfather, Hastiin Atine. This occurred in Mystery Valley, in close proximity to Comb Ridge. Lightning repeatedly struck a large oak brush-covered hill over the course of three days. The electricity became trapped in the roots of a large bush.

He [Hastiin Atine] said it was a very small round object that was very shiny. It was covered with tiny lightning currents, like electricity, and made a sound each time it lifted the mound. Some people were observing it from a distance. Everyone was questioning what would happen to it and what they should do. "I know what to do," he replied. He prayed and prayed as he dressed like a Yé'ii Bicheii dancer, then walked up to the mound. He laid down a deer hide and spread it on the ground. The hide he used was not from a gun-or-weapon killed deer. . . . He then sprinkled some sacred corn pollen and ground white corn powder, yellow corn powder, mixed corn powder, and blue corn powder all over the spread deer hide on the ground. Then he prayed and talked to the lightning object, which later came out of the mound of roots and fell on the deer hide. He scrambled over and quickly wrapped it up in the hide. Within the next few seconds, lightning struck the hide and took the object away.<sup>32</sup>

Many people there wanted the "shake offs" or residue from the captive lightning. Not until after medicine men performed a daylong ceremony, was the powder given to those who wanted its protective power.

The Shooting Way cures people who have come in contact with lightning-struck objects and other illnesses. Lightning, arrows, and snakes are central imagery in this story about Monster Slayer and Born for Water, who traveled about making the earth safe for humans. Armed with various kinds of lightning received from Sun Bearer, the Twins set about protecting the People. At one point in the narrative, Monster Slayer visits the home of the Rattler People, outperforms their chief, and receives different types of bows and arrows and sandpaintings with cures. Soon he goes to Striped Mountain, home of the Arrow Snake People, and then Coiled Mountain.<sup>33</sup> No geographic location is specified, but a case could be made for the area around Comb Ridge as the latter site. Snakes, arrows, and lightning provide a complementary mix threaded throughout this chant. The three

are integrated as part of the Shooting Way philosophy “‘concerning-the-shooting-of-objects-that-move-in-zigzags.’ Lightning, snake, arrow, or indeed any one of many other names might have been chosen; all indicate what the chant stresses.”<sup>34</sup>

John believes that this ceremony was “passed down through generations—only by the Holy Ones—it is not a man-made ceremony.” Although he does not practice it, he knows that special sand taken from Comb Ridge is used in it and other sandpaintings. The sand does not come only from here, but it is one of a number of sites that provides materials. In addition to the complex practices of the Shooting Way, medicine men leave offerings at lightning-struck trees and other places associated with lightning. Herbs and powerful songs, so powerful that they should never be sung while riding in a car or on a horse, are other ways of addressing lightning and thunder. When doing so, offerings and prayers are used, or else lightning will strike. “Lots of lightning prayers are said to calm it in some way. It is told to keep up in heaven as is the wind. This is why they are sung.”<sup>35</sup>

Decorated Rock, one of four giant arrowheads that released water covering the earth, is said to be “related [to the other arrowheads], just as we people are. We are one. They all live like we do all together as one,” according to John. Martha Nez believes that Comb Ridge is one of the four arrows that provide protection around the borders of Navajo land. Billy Yellow, a medicine man from Monument Valley, and Mary Blueeyes from the Bluff area agree. They view Comb Ridge as an arrowhead that extends all the way to Blanding, but it also is a ridge made out of arrowheads lined in a row. The undulating serrations caused by its peaks are separate arrowheads, each providing individual and collective power and protection.<sup>36</sup> Mary suggested it was made of flint, a word synonymous with arrowhead and identified with armor used by Monster Slayer.

The belief for this extends back to the protective flint armor and arrows given to the Twins by Sun Bearer. Prior to returning to earth to kill monsters, the boys received arrows made of chain lightning, sheet lightning, sunbeams, and rainbows as well as protective clothing made of flint. Thus prepared, they were ready to destroy the evil creatures, each of which had its own qualities and means of protection. Yé’iitsoh (Big God) wore armor that, once pierced by Monster Slayer’s arrows, shattered and scattered. That is why flint and chert are found strewn about the land. Then Monster Slayer said,

“Let us gather those flint flakes. Our people can use them for knives. They can use them for arrowheads. They can cut with them and hunt with them.”

“Yes they can,” replied the other.

“That way we can turn Yé’iitsoh’s evil into something good.”<sup>37</sup>

Arrowheads, knives, and other objects made of flint are synonymous with protection and safety.

Another monster, Walking Rock (Tsé Naagáí), crushed those who came close. “Monster Slayer made a trail of arrowheads for him. The series of points

went from Dennehotso through Kayenta and on top of Black Mesa. Today they call these arrowheads Comb Ridge and El Capitan. Some are black lava. Luckily, this monster ran into these arrowheads, which chipped away at his body, killing him. Monster Slayer collected the broken rocks that were part of its body and took them home as his trophy.”<sup>38</sup>

Man-made arrowheads flaked from flint hold special ceremonial powers to cure and protect. Just as snakes are related to Big Snake, so too are arrowheads connected to the world of the sacred. Monster Slayer gathered flint and learned the arrowhead’s protective prayers, whose power is invoked by medicine men on behalf of a patient. Flint’s hardness, its sound as it rattles, and its reflected light representing lightning give it power. Horned toads use it as protection against lightning and are able to fashion their own points. As mentioned previously, arrows are an integral part of the Shooting Chant whose theme highlights “things that move in a swift, squirming fashion; it is a chant in which lightning, snakes, and arrows are closely identified.”<sup>39</sup>

A person finding an arrowhead says a small prayer and inhales over it four times. The finder offers words like, “from behind this arrowhead bad ailments will not go” or “in the four directions black arrowhead will protect me.”<sup>40</sup> This keeps harm away. The recipient feels that “this is a very sacred, holy thing that came into my possession.” Fred Yazzie explained the thinking behind these protective powers. In his view, Ancestral Puebloans made these points. “The Navajo collect these arrowheads, which have already killed off enemies or dangerous animals. So the people think that because they have already killed these things, that power will ward off disease. They use them to shield the patient and others involved in a ceremony. When this protection is used, the unseen evil force goes back to where it came from.”<sup>41</sup> S. P. Jones summarized just how important arrowheads are in healing and protecting. When talking about Ancestral Puebloans and the things they left behind, he was not overly concerned, until he considered chipped points. “The arrowheads are ours. In ceremonies we hold them against our joints or put them with herbs and water to drink. They are sacred to us. . . . Lightning has an arrowhead. We are built as an arrow—our body is the stick part and our head an arrowhead. . . . May I walk in harmony, being shielded by my arrowhead. May I live a few more days.”<sup>42</sup>

### WIND AND HOLY WIND

Just as arrowheads protect, so too can Wind. As one of the four guards stationed outside Sun Bearer’s home, Wind can take many different forms and hold various powers. Reichard provides an extensive list of its functions. Wind gives life—the whorls on a person’s toes, fingers, and top of the head are proof that it is a life-giving force within the body; it is personified as a holy being and as a group of holy beings who assist but do not require an offering from man; Wind mentors and can forewarn of approaching danger; it also reports events and thoughts, be they good or bad; and Wind has a helpful and a destructive side.<sup>43</sup> The interconnectedness of Wind with life begins with birth and ends with death. When a child is born the winds argue as to which one is entering the body; once it does, this determines how long a person will

live. "The wind will already set a day that it will leave your body and a person does not live any longer than that."<sup>44</sup>

There are two different types of wind. The first is *níyol*, or the wind that is felt blowing against the skin. This is a physical manifestation of the second type, *nítch'i* (Holy Wind), which is the spiritual force or being behind *níyol* and acts in much the same way as the Christian deity, the Holy Ghost. Both are powers designed to aid, instruct, and warn. It is also something that man can appeal to and through. James McNeley's extensive study, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy*, examines many of *nítch'i*'s functions.<sup>45</sup> In relation to Comb Ridge, it is important to understand that there is a large body of teachings concerning Wind, and that only part of it is discussed here.

The alcoves and potholes found along Comb Ridge are Wind's home, and when the wind blows, it is moving inside. The round holes on top of the ridge are called [Wind's] Tracks on It, and the alcoves on the side are Tracks along Side of It.<sup>46</sup> John tells of hearing the winds blow within the ridge. Wind is present throughout. Anywhere along this one-hundred-mile stretch of rock, a person may appeal to Wind's power. Offerings and prayers are given to prevent Wind's harm. One time a group of people from Kayenta and Black Mesa came to John, fearing the onslaught of a destructive gale. He went to the head of Comb Ridge near Tonalea.<sup>47</sup> There he placed his offering of *ntl'iz*, uttered a prayer, and the clouds, wind, and storm dissipated. The Twins were the ones who accepted the offering of "sacred stones" and calmed the elements. John's prayer asked his "big brother [Monster Slayer] to have mercy on the people, to not come this way again" and to recognize "I am here below among these people."

During this ceremony he "prayed from 'head to toe,' because it is said that it [Comb Ridge] is full of holy wind spirits of all kinds. . . . These days nobody does the sacred offerings. Back in our ancestors' day, one would ride, ride, and ride their horse to Comb Ridge, just to say their prayers and place their sacred offerings."

Lack of respect can result in death. John told a short story of how fourteen Ancestral Puebloans ascended Comb Ridge with an object that allowed them to bore holes in its alcoves and the surrounding mesas. The tool went against "nature"; the winds became angered and "sucked out all the living Anaasázi from their dwellings and killed them. But the Diné were put inside the mountains—way, way, way inside the mountains and were not brought out until the destruction was over."<sup>48</sup>

The destructive power of wind has been a force to be reckoned with since the creation of the earth. In the beginning, First Man formed four different types of wind—White (east), Blue (south), Yellow (west), and Black (north)—then placed them in his garment to make them holy. He next stationed four young men, each one in a cardinal direction, to watch over these winds, and then created Striped Winds to the east and west and Twisted Winds to the south and north. "And they all are things to be feared."<sup>49</sup> Big Wind is the tornado and comes in the four colors. This wind can be a messenger of future bad news and may pick up belongings. The small whirlwind that circles about an open fireplace is called the Gossiping Whirlwind. It collects bad

conversation from the earth and brings it back to the holy beings. These and other types are holy wind people.<sup>50</sup>

Navajo Blanket, or Mountain That Is Coiled, is said to be the home of the Wind. In Gilmore Graymountain's mind, it has been "set aside" for this purpose and should be treated with great respect, just as it is for Big Snake.<sup>51</sup> Ada Black agrees. Speaking of Navajo Blanket, she recounts that it too is the home of different winds that made the swirling marks on its exterior. There are big winds and small ones, but either one can be approached because "it is right there [Navajo Blanket] that prayers are offered."<sup>52</sup> After Ada and her husband asserted again that the winds live there, she explained how they act and are handled.

Wind takes the lives of people and their homes. The big wind[s] [tornadoes and hurricanes] are very strong. When everything goes haywire, the big wind is given the right to take our lives. This is why it is very feared. The small ones, like a twister, are messengers. Sometimes it moves clockwise and other times counter-clockwise. They are like spies it is said. It also has a way of casting a spell. This type is called Young Female Twister [Ch'ikéé Naayis] when giving it an offering. If it ever goes over you and takes a possession, you just let it go. Do not take the object back. You sprinkle the corn pollen after it and say that the thing you took from me will have no meaning now; however, if you put a spell on me it is no more. The curse is given when the wind takes the sweat and dirt from your body. By taking it, the wind is able to steal your thinking and you become confused. Sometime, in the days that follow, when the people go in deceitful ways where it looks like there is no more hope, Big Wind has been given the right to take up their lives, just as he did with the Anaasázi. . . . If there is nothing wrong with your place, it won't come to your home or bother your livestock. Only when something is bothering your household will it do this. This is what was said.<sup>53</sup>

Wind has homes in other places. At Navajo Mountain there lies a barren spot where all of the sand has blown away. Thunderous noises come from this area called Where the Wind Blows It Out (Hahwiiyooii). Two days before violent weather sets in, Wind warns, through sound, what is to happen. On the south side of Navajo Mountain on the old trail to Rainbow Bridge, there lies a large hole that descends into a rock. A whirlwind attacks those who get too close. One man threw a rock down the hole to test for depth. Finally it hit the bottom, but immediately there arose a powerful funnel of air that came out of the hole and scared the Navajo away. It is forbidden to go near these kinds of places unless the site is approached after using Wind's sacred name. On the north side of the mountain there is another large hole that is also the home of Wind.<sup>54</sup>

The relationships among Big Snake and snakes, lightning and thunder, arrowheads and flint, winds and *nitch'i* are apparent, yet to see their integration truly and how this plays across the land, one needs to return to the sacred

narratives. A brief paragraph from the Wind Chant illustrates how all of them tie together and are manifest through ceremonial objects and religious sites. Briefly, a hunter near Cabezon Peak, New Mexico, killed a deer, ate some of its intestines, turned into a blue racer snake, and then crawled into the cave of Big Snake. His family became concerned and searched for him. Big Fly, a mentor, sent the father to the curly-headed Wind People who instructed him about how to redeem his son through ceremonial means. The family gathered all that was needed and met the Wind People at the mouth of Big Snake's cave where they could hear him moving about. The Winds made four hoops and set them nearby.

The Wind People and Thunder People were all dressed in flint armor and they prepared offerings to the Great Snake, and the boy's father was told to present these to the Snake, and that even if he was frightened, he must not run away. So he approached, lightning flashed, but he put down the offering in spite of his fear, and as he did so, a quantity of fighting snakes approached him, among them the blue snake which he knew was his son. The father caught the blue snake and threw him outside the cave to the Wind people and they passed him through the hoops, one after the other, and as he passed through them the snake skin split off his head, body, and limbs and he finally emerged in human form again and the people rolled the hoops toward the east.<sup>55</sup>

These symbols and powers are a part of the Comb Ridge landscape and imbue it with potency.

#### BEARS AND CHANGING BEAR MAIDEN

Bear is another powerful symbol that ties into Comb Ridge through nearby Elk Ridge. The Bears Ears is not only the home of bears but also is an important site in a rich body of lore. Bears' sacred names—Reared in the Mountains, Roaming in the Mountains, and Roaming in the Woods—reflect the connection to high, forested areas that sit above the desert floor.<sup>56</sup> Navajo teachings tell of how Bear joined Wind, Thunder, and Big Snake as one of the protectors at the entryway of Sun Bearer's home. Bear and Big Snake served as guardians of Changing Woman, Sun Bearer's wife and mother of the Twins. When the Navajo people traveled about after their emergence, these two animals protected them from enemies.<sup>57</sup>

On one occasion, the Arrow People attacked the travelers. Bear roared a warning then sang a song called "My-Home-Is-in-Danger." He next performed a protective ritual, circled the People four times, bit the enemy as they advanced, and chased the remainder away.<sup>58</sup> Once the Navajos were safe, Bear took plants and arrowheads and placed them on the ground as he sang:

I make a mark, they won't cross it.

Monster Slayer I am, they won't cross it.

.....

Black obsidian zigzag lightning darts four times from me stream out.

Where it goes dangerous missiles will be scattered.

I make a mark they won't cross.

I come back with lightning streaming out from me in four places.

I come back, dangerous things and missiles being scattered.<sup>59</sup>

Thus arrowheads, marked barriers, lightning, and the bear form a powerful protective force behind which Navajos live free from fear.

There are other protective qualities. When the People completed their travels, Bear became increasingly irritable and bothersome, so they sent him to the mountains. Each version of this story specifies which mountains, but for people living in the vicinity of Blue Mountain and the Bears Ears, these two places are connected as one and are the homes of bears. Speaking of the future, Black believes that when bears vanish, there will no longer be harmony in life. This is one reason why these animals are not killed. "They should be left alone so that there will be life in the future. Then, when the world is not right, they will become our shield. We will go behind them. We will walk the life path with these stories as our shield in the future."<sup>60</sup> She went on to say that servicemen going to war left prayers and offerings in these mountains and returned home safely. They were shielded from death.

Flint and arrowheads (*béésh*) are associated with bears. In prayers the two are linked: "With this arrowhead the bear will guard me," which means that the arrowhead will be the armor that will protect the bear as he encircles the patient and guards him or her.<sup>61</sup> The song of the bear is protection as well. "Even if you only knew this one song, you can be protected if you are staying by yourself. With that, it keeps the enemies away. The Bear's song is where the song of protection begins."<sup>62</sup>

The Female Mountain Way tells the story of two sisters who visited various locations in their quest to become reunited. One woman wandered to the Bears Ears and spent the night. There she met some bears, played with them, and then sat upon a bluff and sang a song of loneliness. The next day she moved on, but her example is still followed today. Bears figure prominently in the ceremony resulting from this story. It explains why bears of all kinds are associated with mountains and what to do when a person suffers from loneliness, sadness, or excessive weight loss. A medicine man may bring his patient to the Bears Ears, where songs of comfort are sung. Before and after a Blessing Way ceremony, people may go there for a short prayer and to dispose of yucca suds and materials from sandpaintings.<sup>63</sup>

Bears can also harm people. This powerful being is connected to evil, sickness, and death. The roots of the Evil Way ceremony (*Hóchxójí*) lie in the lengthy narrative of Changing Bear Maiden.<sup>64</sup> Despite small variations in the story that arise from the oral tradition, its main events tell of a young virtuous woman who lives with her brothers. She denies many suitors, but through Coyote's wily trickery, marries him and begins to change. She learns how to



transform through witchcraft into an evil, powerful bear, then tracks down and kills all of her brothers, except for the youngest one.

Wind (Níłch'i), who understands the wicked intent of her heart, whispers instructions to the brother and warns of her plans. He hides underground but is discovered. She offers to comb his hair, and as she does, he watches her shadow turn from a kindly woman to a ferocious bear. Younger brother shoots her with his bow and arrows but is warned by Wind that her life force (the element that prevents her from dying, no matter how "destroyed" she may appear) is hidden in the brush. He shoots the life force. From it comes a liquid that runs across the ground and toward her blood, which is also spreading. Wind warns again that if the two liquids combine not only will Changing Bear Maiden come back to life, but also she will be even harder to kill. Younger brother takes his knife and draws a trench in the ground, creating furrows on each side. He then carves up the body, gives each part an injunction to become something good for the Navajo people, and tosses them away.

This is the crucial part of the story. The body parts are scattered about today's landscape. When he cut off her vagina and threw it in a tree, it became a porcupine. He did the same with her left nipple, and it became piñon nuts; the right one became acorns, the glands within the breasts yucca fruit, and her entrails sorrel, dock, and other plants. He dragged her paunch to the water, which became alkali, while her limbs became various types of bears, which he sent off with a strict warning to behave. The head he threw away is now the Bears Ears, while the furrow dug with his knife is Comb Ridge and Wash.<sup>65</sup> By these actions good triumphed over evil, and the slain brothers came back to life. Awareness of this account shields those who know it. Oscar Sloan said, "It is behind this [story] I have seen life. Now I have gray hair. It is because of this I have seen gray hair."<sup>66</sup>

The Bears Ears is also a male guardian, one of a pair that protects Dibé'Ntsaa (Mount Hesperus, Colorado, mountain of the north), which is one of the four sacred mountains. The female counterpart to the Bears Ears is in the Carrizo Mountains, though no exact location is specified. It is said they talk to each other, one facing out, the other in.<sup>67</sup> Discussion of this being is found in the story of the Twins, who killed various monsters to make the earth safe for mankind. Tracking Bear, one of these evil beings, lived in the Carrizos and was destroyed very much in the same way as Changing Bear Maiden.<sup>68</sup> Bears as paired guardians are a common motif in the sandpaintings of the Mountain Way, where they protect an entrance from evil.<sup>69</sup> Florence Begay explains,

When the two bears are brought together, they take care of the mountain. For this reason, they have the *shashchín*—miniature bears made out of special stones such as turquoise and jet, which are used when prayers are offered. The ones who have these are the ones who hold special prayers to ward off evil. . . . It is like this within the Navajo boundaries. The bear is standing to guard and another bear is guarding the opposite side. For that reason, when a prayer is being

offered, there is a part that says the Great Dark Black Bear will stand guard; you will walk to protect or shield me.<sup>70</sup>

A different-colored bear may be called from each of the directions, bringing with it flint points to keep harm from the patient.<sup>71</sup>

Changing Bear Maiden is often associated with evil and mental illness. For instance, “when a person loses his mind or becomes insane . . . [or starts] to rattle their teeth or gnash them” a figurine of her and prayer sticks are carved and placed with offerings at a sacred site.<sup>72</sup> Individuals may have nose-bleeds, crazy thoughts, and dreams about mountains that enter their minds. The Mountain Way ceremony stops this.<sup>73</sup> Plants used to cure witchcraft and incest are picked on the Bears Ears. Once gathered, they are crushed and sprinkled around the home in a clockwise manner, the person being careful never to complete the circle, a protective barrier, and trap the evil in.<sup>74</sup> As with every power in the Navajo universe, that of the bear can help, cure, and protect or curse and destroy.

### CURSES AND PROTECTION

Witchcraft is a malignant power feared by the Navajo, and, not surprisingly, Comb Ridge is connected to it. The People, even medicine men, do not usually discuss this force because to know too much is to indicate the possibility of practicing it. Medicine men and those who are wealthy are often accused of using this power for their own aggrandizement. Admission of practicing it leads to being outcast and the power being turned against the person using it. Extensive studies on this topic explain the various forms witchcraft can take.<sup>75</sup> Only a brief glimpse is given here.

Wherever power for good lives, there is also the potential for evil. Metaphorically speaking, supernatural power is comparable to electricity—which can be helpful and harmful depending on its use and control. Snakes, wind, arrowheads, dinosaur tracks, water, bears, and a multitude of plants, animals, places, and objects have power for good and bad. The user determines how it is applied. John told of how he went to the head of Comb Ridge near Kayenta to perform a protective ceremony. In that same area, people say that witchcraft is powerful. Caves or cracks in the rocks may be entrances that open into an *‘ant’ijí báhooghan*, or witch’s home and meeting place. Incest, the murder of close relatives, the creation of corpse poison, and witches’ Sabbaths occur in these rooms, which are inaccessible to normal humans.

Skinwalkers, or people who control supernatural evil, are said to travel a route near Sand Island Bridge, which is very close to Comb Ridge. The trail passes by the white-tipped bluffs to the south on the way to a place where the San Juan River joins a side canyon stream. Not far from there is a home for the practitioners of evil.<sup>76</sup> A few miles from this trail sits Designs on the Rock, the arrowhead that carved a path through Comb Ridge. On one side of the top of the rock is a thin flat spot where witches’ meetings are held. Another site called Tsézhiih’íí’áhí, or Standing Black Rock, has strong powers used against people. The rock is bewitched and can cause starvation.<sup>77</sup>

In John's view, witchcraft sites are also connected to the Anaasázi and their ruins. Again, studies on the Navajo perception of the Puebloans show that there is an extensive lore concerning these people.<sup>78</sup> The Navajo see them as a gifted people blessed by the gods. They became complacent, ignored religious responsibilities, held nothing sacred, misused their powers, flaunted their knowledge, and turned evil. The holy beings, shocked at this behavior, destroyed them by wind, fire, and other means. What is left on the landscape for today's inhabitants are the remains of a blessed people who forsook their beliefs and were punished.

A final place of power is the San Juan River that cuts through Comb Ridge. Viewed as a northern boundary of Navajo land, it is one of four bodies of water that protect where the People live. Just as each of the Four Sacred Mountains has distinct characteristics, so do the San Juan, Colorado, Little Colorado, and Rio Grande rivers. The San Juan is male with the female Colorado River as its mate. At one time, the two met near Navajo Mountain, where the San Juan flowed over the Colorado, but today it is no longer possible because of Lake Powell.

The San Juan River is known as Old Age River (Sá Bitoooh), Male Water (Tooh Biká'ii), Male with a Crooked Body (Biká'ii Bitsíís Nanooldt'iizhii), Decorated with Abalone Shells (Bikáá' Hodiichíí), and One with a Long Body (Bits'íís Nineezí). It is a powerful river described as an older man with hair of white foam, a snake wriggling through the desert, a flash of lightning, and a black club of protection in order to keep invaders from Navajo lands.<sup>79</sup> To some, the sparkle on the surface represents the shine of lightning. Prayer and pollen invoke the spirit within, which may be connected to protection through "singing the ways of the snake."<sup>80</sup> Certainly its holiness is called upon to help the traveler obtain goods and enjoy safety. To Tallis Holiday, leaving an offering on the shore of the river helped him achieve his goals after he crossed.

When a person comes to the river, he offers his corn pollen for a good journey and prosperity. "I will receive many things with this small amount of money or trading items." The people pleaded with the river's holy being. A long time ago, the river was the boundary to keep the enemy out.<sup>81</sup>

Crossing to the north side of the San Juan River places the traveler in enemy territory. Before going to the far shore, a person offers a prayer asking that the spirit of the river wrap its protective shield about him before entering the land of the Utes and the white man. Begay recalls how Navajos prayed against their enemy: "The prayers were a tool to defeat evil or to hide behind for a safe journey."<sup>82</sup> In addition to protection, rain, grass, and other good things come to the person who beseeches. Now that this practice of prayer for protection and assistance is no longer being performed, the land is dry, rain has decreased, accidents have increased, vegetation is short and withered, livestock is dwindling, drowning is prevalent, and harmony is scarce. When people paid respect to Navajo boundaries, life was safe and happy.<sup>83</sup>

Boundaries separate sacred from profane space. The land, bounded on the south by the San Juan River, the north by Elk Ridge and the Bears Ears, the west by Navajo Blanket and Lime Ridge, and the east by Comb Ridge, holds tremendous meaning for the Navajo people. Snakes, lightning, arrowheads, wind, bears, Puebloan sites, witchcraft, and the river are not unconnected physical entities but powerful religious and philosophical things that lead directly to sacred teachings. Power, prayers, and protection are their theme.

Do the Navajo look at Comb Ridge and its environs as a physical barrier that is a spiritual boundary of power? Definitely. Black, among others, recalls, "Comb Ridge became a shield and boundary at the time the monsters were killed. The rocks were red and made into a ridge. It starts close from the Bears Ears. My maternal grandmother said a long time ago the boundary was made here."<sup>84</sup> When asked why there was a need for a boundary, she explained that after the monsters were killed, the People still feared they might be harmed. The holy beings created the boundaries to be used as shields through ceremonies. These shielding powers "will probably be used in the future. These are very powerful and when a person makes a prayer offering there, it will serve as a shield."<sup>85</sup> No single power dominates; they are all connected, each stemming from a different ceremonial belief and practice.<sup>86</sup>

John referred to Butler Wash on the east side of Comb Ridge, or the side where the Utes and white men live, as "outside" and Comb Wash as "inside." When Navajo people crossed the ridge heading toward Bluff, they left prayers and pollen at its height before descending. Travel is an important aspect of Navajo life, yesterday and today. Crossing from a safe haven to a place of potential danger requires spiritual precautions and supernatural help. Returning to the Twins traveling to see their father, a motif of travel, danger, and protection continues to this day. Manygoats, in recounting this tale, included many of the forces connected to Comb Ridge.

The Twins came to two large bears guarding the entrance to the Sun's home. They laid crisscross at the door. Again the boys used the sacred feather [with supernatural powers] to cross over these dangerous animals. On they went and came upon two huge snakes and they used the sacred feather to cross over the top of them and went on. Next they came to two thunder-beings who lay crisscross guarding the entrance. The boys spoke to the two thunders and used the feather to cross over them, too. Then they came to two lightning-beings that killed by flashing back and forth. They also guarded the entranceway. Once again, the boys spoke to the lightning and used the sacred feather to cross over them. Next they came upon two wind beings. It was Black Wind and Blue Wind. They lay crisscross guarding the entrance. Once more the boys crossed over. When they arrived at the door of the Sun, they encountered another guard. It was black flint. It made a "swooshing" sound as it mashed together like a pair of scissors. Once again, the boys used the sacred feather to cross over the flint stones. The two boys then reached their destination.<sup>87</sup>

These same types of creatures guard part of the northern boundary of Navajo land. Undoubtedly, there are other areas surrounding the reservation that have their own protective sites and powers. For the Utah Navajo, Comb Ridge is a special place of power for protection through prayer.

## CONCLUSION

John had taught a lot that day. In summarizing the major etic points derived from our discussion and supportive sacred narratives, one could include the following:

1. Although local knowledge may vary or emphasize different aspects from a broader regional insight, it is intertwined and supportive.
2. Interpretation of Navajo sacred geography is dependent upon the teachings and ceremonial knowledge of the individual.
3. Familiarity with one set of teachings does not exclude other possibilities but instead may often fortify and support their inclusion.
4. Interconnectedness of symbols on a local and a regional level strengthens their power.
5. All symbols discussed in this article are polysemic and multivocal.
6. Each symbol has a male or female counterpart that shares similar powers and functions.
7. A place or object's power is neutral, capable of supporting good or evil and protection or aggression, depending on how the power is used.
8. Classification of objects in Navajo thought may be done through either function or qualities, or, in this case, by movement.
9. Only those who understand the meaning and inherent power of the object have the ability to safely use that power.
10. All symbols are highly viable in today's world, providing protection and healing for those who understand their meaning and receive assistance from those who control the power.

As our SUV climbed onto the pavement after a day of dirt, we headed west. The sun, already low on the horizon, bathed the landscape in late afternoon light, accentuating the yellow, orange, red, and gray of the sandstone. Comb Ridge glowed in the rearview mirror as we glided up, over, and down Lime Ridge, passed the Valley of the Gods, then on to Monument Valley. John shared more experiences. The depth of teachings clung to my thoughts—the San Juan River, Navajo Blanket, Bears Ears, Lime Ridge, Sugarloaf, Comb Wash, the Ridge, alcoves, and Butler Wash were now not just names on a map but also places of power. Identified in narratives and through teachings, this area held significance far beyond the rocks, blue-green sagebrush, and a few stories. It was a portal of protection and a place to pray for the good things in life. As John said earlier that day, as he talked about a place on Comb Ridge,

You make sacred offerings here when you are in need of special blessings. It has the “forces” of the earth, the universe, the mountains, waters, rocks, mesas, and all the land that exists to the ends of the earth. We pray for peace, “*hózhóqgo*” beauty, and harmony for all living

things on this earth and the universe. We pray for the environment. We pray for our protection and to live without harmful obstacles getting in our way. These were the sacred prayers of our forefathers and we still pray the same.

So may we all.

### NOTES

1. F. A. Barnes, *Canyon Country Geology* (Salt Lake City, UT: Wasatch Publishers, 1978), 89, 100–1.

2. Final reports of the 5-year (now 6-year) project will not be completed for another year; the historical study is available: Robert S. McPherson, *Comb Ridge and Its People: The Ethnohistory of a Rock* (Logan: Utah State University, 2009).

3. John Holiday and Robert S. McPherson, *A Navajo Legacy: The Life and Teachings of John Holiday* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005).

4. The term *emic* refers to research strategy that studies local or “insider” explanations or meanings, and the term *etic* refers to strategies and categorization given by “outsiders” who are studying and classifying cultural phenomena.

5. Alfonso Ortiz, “Interview,” *Omni* (March 1990): 77.

6. Richard F. Van Valkenburgh, *Diné Bikéyah* (Window Rock, AZ: Navajo Agency, US Indian Service, 1941).

7. Laurance D. Linford, *Navajo Places: History, Legend, Landscape* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000).

8. Klara Bonsack Kelly and Harris Francis, *Navajo Sacred Places* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

9. Here *polysemic* refers to Comb Ridge having multiple meanings, and *multivocal*, or many voices, refers to how those meanings may have a variety of interpretations.

10. John Holiday interview with Robert McPherson and Baxter Benally, 9 November 2001.

11. The teachings in this article are a result of interviews with John Holiday conducted on 10 December 2004 and 15 April 2005. Unless otherwise noted, this is the primary source of information.

12. For additional information concerning Navajo teachings about southeastern Utah, see Robert S. McPherson, *Sacred Land, Sacred View: Navajo Perceptions of the Four Corners Region* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1992).

13. Gladys A. Reichard, *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 384; McPherson, *Sacred Land, Sacred View*, 29–30; Aileen O’Bryan, *Navaho Indian Myths* (1928; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1993), 171; Berard Haile, *Upward Moving and Emergence Way, the Gishin Biye’ Version* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 170.

14. Karl Luckert, *The Navajo Hunter Tradition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), 152–53, 173, 212; W. W. Hill, *The Agricultural and Hunting Methods of the Navaho Indians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1938), 113–17.

15. Donald Sandner, *Navaho Symbols of Healing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Press, 1979), 177–80; Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *Navajo Lifeways: Contemporary Issues, Ancient Knowledge* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 129.
16. Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 12.
17. Ernest Bulow, *Navajo Taboos* (Gallup, NM: Southwestern Books, 1982), 19–21; Schwarz, *Navajo Lifeways*, 127.
18. Anselm Weber and Leopold Ostermann, “The Natural and the Supernatural,” in *The Navajo as Seen by the Franciscans, 1898–1921: A Sourcebook*, ed. Howard M. Bahr (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2004), 566.
19. Schwarz, *Navajo Lifeways*, 111–33.
20. Slim Benally interview with Robert McPherson and Baxter Benally, 8 July 1988; Stanley Holiday interview with Robert McPherson and Frances Holiday, 9 November 2006; Martha Nez interview with Robert McPherson and Baxter Benally, 10 August 1988.
21. Stanley Holiday interview.
22. Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 467 (quote); see also Paul G. Zolbrod, *Diné bahane’: The Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 231.
23. Nez interview.
24. Benally interview; John Holiday interview, 2005.
25. Benally interview; Stanley Holiday interview.
26. Nez interview; Benally interview; Charlie Blueeyes interview with Robert McPherson and Baxter Benally, 7 June 1988; Billy Yellow interview with Robert McPherson and Evelyn Yellow, 6 November 1987; Tallis Holiday interview with Robert McPherson and Jessie Holiday, 3 November 1987.
27. Ada Black interview with Robert McPherson and Marilyn Holiday, 11 October 1991; Joe Manygoats interview with Robert McPherson and Marilyn Holiday, 18 December 1991; John Holiday interview, 2005.
28. Joe Manygoats interview.
29. Leland C. Wyman, *Blessingway* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1970, 1975), 25, 110.
30. The term *code talker* refers to young Navajos trained during World War II by the Marine Corps. They used their language and an internal code in order to transmit messages that could not be translated by the Japanese enemy.
- For further information concerning this event and the use of “shake offs,” see Holiday and McPherson, *A Navajo Legacy*, 190–92, 352–54.
31. Benally interview.
32. Suzie Yazzie interview with Robert McPherson and Marilyn Holiday, 10 November 2000.
33. Franc J. Newcomb and Gladys A. Reichard, *Sandpaintings of the Navajo Shooting Chant* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 33.
34. Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 10, 485.
35. Buck Navajo interview with Robert McPherson and Marilyn Holiday, 16 December 1991.
36. Yellow interview; Mary Blueeyes interview with Robert McPherson and Baxter Benally, 25 July 1988.
37. Zolbrod, *Diné bahane’*, 220.
38. Joe Manygoats interview.



39. Black interview; Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 512, 556.

40. Tallis Holiday interview.

41. This and the preceding quotation came from Fred Yazzie interview with Robert McPherson and Marilyn Holiday, 5 November 1987.

42. S. P. Jones interview with Robert McPherson and Sam Goodman, 20 December 1985.

43. Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 64–66, 497–99; Black interview.

44. Black interview.

45. James Kale McNeley, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982).

46. Stanley Holiday interview.

47. Tonalea or Red Lake is approximately 50 miles from Kayenta and the end of Comb Ridge. Previously, John identified a spot on Black Mesa. What appears as conflicting information is resolved in understanding traditional teachings about communicating with the holy beings. Every person and being has on its head invisible feathers that are both a means of sacred identification and of communicating spiritually. These are often depicted in sandpaintings. The feathers that protrude from and are part of the head of Comb Ridge are located in Tonalea.

48. During John's discussion of this event, he used the term *Nakai*, or Mexican, insisting that they were here before the Ancestral Puebloans, and that the pottery shards and ruins left around the land actually belonged to them. This is a very different point of view because most Navajos recognize the remains as belonging to the Anaasázi.

49. Haile, *Upward Moving*, 84.

50. Joe Manygoats interview; Black interview.

51. Gilmore Graymountain interview with Robert McPherson and Marilyn Holiday, 7 April 1992.

52. Black interview.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Joe Manygoats interview; Sally Manygoats interview with Robert McPherson and Marilyn Holiday, 8 April 1992.

55. Hasteen Klah with Mary C. Wheelwright, *Wind Chant and Feather Chant*, Bulletin no. 4 (Santa Fe: Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, 1946), 1–3.

56. Franciscan Fathers, *An Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navajo Language* (St. Michaels, AZ: St. Michael's Press, 1968), 174.

57. Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 384–85.

58. Hasteen Klah and Mary C. Wheelwright, *Navajo Creation Myth: The Story of the Emergence* (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, 1942), 118; see also, O'Bryan, *Navaho Indian Myths*, 170.

59. Pliny E. Goddard, *Navajo Texts* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1933), 177.

60. Black interview.

61. Tallis Holiday interview.

62. Mary Blueeyes interview.

63. Leland C. Wyman, *The Mountainway of the Navajo* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), 182–83; DJ interview with Robert McPherson, 1987. DJ was very traditional and wished to remain anonymous.

64. Published versions of this story are found in Haile, *Upward Moving*, 207–16; O'Bryan, *Navaho Indian Myths*, 40–48; Washington Matthews, *Navaho Legends* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 92–103; Zolbrod, *Diné bahane'*, 152–68; Sandner, *Navaho Symbols of Healing*, 175–76. For a chart comparing different versions of this story, see Leland C. Wyman, *The Red Antway of the Navajo* (Santa Fe: Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, 1973), 99–101. Unpublished full or partial accounts given by local people include those from the Benally interview, Nez interview, Charlie Blueeyes interview, Mary Blueeyes interview, and Oscar Sloan interview with Robert McPherson and Marilyn Holiday, 18 December 1993.

65. Haile, *Upward Moving*, 215; Wyman, *Red Antway*, 101; Charlie Blueeyes interview; Benally interview.

66. Sloan interview.

67. Black interview.

68. Wyman, *Blessingway*, 562–63.

69. Wyman, *The Mountainway*, 117.

70. Florence Begay interview with Nelson Begay and Robert McPherson, 29 April 1988.

71. Tallis Holiday interview.

72. Wyman, *Red Antway*, 20; Wyman, *The Mountainway*, 106–7.

73. Black interview.

74. Begay interview; Benally interview.

75. See Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944, 1970); Margaret K. Brady, *Some Kind of Power, Navajo Children's Skinwalker Narratives* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984); William Morgan Sr., *Human Wolves among the Navaho* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Publications in Anthropology 11), 1–43; Jerrold E. Levy, Raymond Neutra, and Dennis Parker, *Hand Trembling, Frenzy Witchcraft, and Moth Madness: A Study of Navajo Seizure Disorders* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987).

76. Mary Blueeyes interview.

77. Benally interview; Mamie Howard interview with Robert McPherson and Baxter Benally, 2 August 1988; Charlie Blueeyes interview.

78. See McPherson, *Sacred Land, Sacred View*, 77–127. Some of this and other parts of that book I have quoted liberally as it pertains to Comb Ridge.

79. Matthews, *Navaho Legends*, 211; Charlie Blueeyes interview; Begay interview; Black interview; Fred Yazzie interview; Joe Manygoats interview; Editha L. Watson, essay presented 17 March 1968, Doris Duke Oral History Project no. 796, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, 22.

80. Begay interview.

81. Tallis Holiday interview; see also Charlie Blueeyes interview.

82. Begay interview.

83. Sally Manygoats interview.

84. Black interview.

85. *Ibid.* Other people who have mentioned that Comb Ridge is a boundary include Charlie Blueeyes, Stanley Holiday, John Holiday, and Florence Begay.

86. Stanley Holiday interview.

87. Joe Manygoats interview.

