THE POWER OF *HOZHǪ́* BEYOND TRANSLATION SPOKEN WORD POETRY AND THE RESURGENCE OF NATIVE AMERICAN KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract – In the history of colonization of the North American continent, the imposition of colonial languages over native languages and the renaming and remapping of the landscape were used to eradicate Indigenous ancestral knowledge. Impeding the transmission of knowledge, language deprivation and language imposition affected the relationship of Indigenous people with their own identities, cultures, and land. The expression "Education for Extinction" used by D.W. Adams in 1995 can still be considered appropriate to describe the systematic attempt to annihilate Native American knowledge performed and 20th-century boarding schools in the U.S. and in Canada. Alongside the profound psychological and socio-cultural impact of such an educational system on Native communities, Native American scholars have also emphasized the role played by these institutions in fueling their resilience and awareness. Against this background, this article examines the significance of resurgence in the processes of transgenerational community healing, self-determination, and political empowerment, with a specific focus on the work of Lyla June Johnston. A performance poet, environmental scholar, and community organizer of Diné, Tsétsêhéstâhese, and European descent, she focuses on Indigenous ways of knowledge, which were devalued and marginalized for centuries by colonial powers, and places them at the center of an epistemic revolution that is not centered on the concept of survival. Along with other Indigenous scholars and artivists, she reclaims ancestral teachings and languages and fuels the debate on the possibility for non-Indigenous communities to embrace Indigenous knowledge, which is based on a more sustainable relationship between humans and the environment. In "Hozhó" and other poems, she combines the poetics and politics of resurgence using spoken word as an artivistic tool, a powerful cultural practice for Indigenous people who belong to the tradition of orality and storytelling.

Keywords: Indigenous resurgence; spoken word; artivism; Lyla June Johnston; Boarding Schools.

1. Introduction

In the autoethnographic memoir *Diné Bina'nitin Dóó O'hoo'aah/Education for Us, by Us: A Collective Journey in Diné Education Liberation*[1], Lyla June Johnston mentions four principles belonging to the Diné tradition that she finds valuable for a collective return to more sustainable societies: *k'é* (kinship), *ajoobah'* (humility-generosity), *hozhǫ́* (inner-outer balance), and *iiná* (birth-life) (2017, p. 18). A performance poet, environmental scholar, and community

[1] This is Lyla June Johnston's Master's Thesis, an educational memoir of her experiences working for the education liberation of Diné people, written in the style of autoethnography.

organizer of Diné[2], Tsétsêhéstâhese, and European lineages, Johnston draws on her Indigenous[3] knowledge to map a way out of the consequences of colonialism in North America, reinvigorating ancestral teachings and establishing them as alternative ways of being in the world. She supports the process of community healing from the intergenerational trauma caused by the forced education of Native American children in XIX and XX century Boarding Schools. By telling the story of the Diné people's forced relocation, captivity, and compulsory education, which followed the 1868 so-called "Treaty of Peace" with the American Government[4], she allows readers to reflect on what happens when communities are systematically deprived of self-determination and of the right to pass on their language and knowledge to the next generation. Her work aims to engage also non-Indigenous audiences, who are confronted with what she calls "a history of intellectual slavery" (Johnston 2017, p. 7).

Education for Extinction (1995) by David Wallace Adams and other seminal works have been published on the American and Canadian Boarding School systems[5], stressing the profound psychological and socio-cultural impact of these institutions on Native American people. As a result of the imposition of the English language over Native languages, and of the attempts at erasing Indigenous ways of knowledge – from costumes to hairstyle, from spiritual beliefs to cultural practices, from traditional names to food systems[6] – the students internalized the idea that their epistemology was uncivilized, inferior, or dispensable (Johnston 2017, p. 8). Nonetheless, Native American scholars have emphasized the role played by these institutions in fueling a pan-Indian identity (Davis 2001), and the necessity to also highlight the pedagogical resilience of Indigenous communities (Johnston 2017).

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[2] Known in Western culture as Navajo and Cheyenne, Diné and Tsétsêhéstâhese represent the ways these Nations refer to their own people, namely, the right terminology.

[3] As McCarthy and Nicholas argue: "We use the terms Indigenous, Native, American Indian, Alaska Native, Métis, First Nations to refer to peoples whose ancestry within the lands now claimed U.S. and Canada predates the colonial invasion and whose oral and written traditions place them as the original occupants of those lands" (McCarty and Nicholas 2014, p. 109). Quoting Patrick, they explain that the term Indigenous is a transnational category created in the context of United Nations human rights initiatives (Patrick 2012, pp. 30-31). In "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism" (2005), Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel explore Indigenous identity between old and new forms of colonialism. They observe: "It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world" (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, p. 597).

[4] As Johnston points out in her autoethnographic memoir, the Diné suffered tremendous abuses: "In the late 19th century, the basic right of every cultural group to transfer knowledge to the next generation was revoked from Diné communities. In 1864, roughly 9,000 Diné women, children, elders and men were marched at gunpoint by the United States Government from Fort Defiance, Arizona to Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. They were brought to a concentration camp known as Fort Sumner, where they were physically abused, starved, raped and/or killed. Only about 2,000 of these 9,000 prisoners survived. The survivors were released after four years of captivity in accordance with a 'treaty of peace' in 1868 (Iverson 2002). One major condition of their release was compulsory education for all Diné children in American designed and operated schools" (Johnston 2017, p. 7).

[5] Besides D.W. Adams, we can mention: K.T. Lomawaima (1994, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School*), B. Child (1998, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*), S. Hyer (1990, *One House, One Voice, One Heart: Native American Education at the Santa Fe Indian School*), and E. Burnett Home and S. McBeth (1998, *Essie's Story: The Life and Legacy of a Shoshone Teacher*). These authors have used archival research, oral interviews and photographs to examine the history of Boarding Schools from American Indian perspectives. See Davis J. 2001, "American Indian Boarding School Experiences: Recent Studies from Native Perspectives", *OAH Magazine of History* 15 [2], pp. 20-22.

[6] Children enrolled in these schools were forced to abandon their traditional names (which were substituted with Christian names), costumes, beliefs, and languages, and to assimilate to Euro-American principles completely.

Indeed, in her field research on Indigenous education liberation, which resulted in the above-mentioned auto-ethnographic memoir, Johnston observes the complexity and sophistication of traditional Indigenous pedagogical systems:

> When given the freedom to choose, my people tend towards a pedagogical style that is: intergenerational, geographically decentralized, experiential, ceremonial, ecological, traditional, communal, place-based, kinship-based, consensual, synergistic, healing, gendered, skills/craft-based, practical, outdoor, popular, methodical, systematic, self-led, self-sustaining, engaging, mobile, fun and easier to implement due to shared leadership and responsibility[7]. (ivi, p. V)

In line with contemporary resurgence practices, Johnston focuses on Indigenous ways of knowledge, which were devalued and marginalized for centuries by colonial powers, and places them at the center of an epistemic revolution that is not centered on the concept of survival. Most Indigenous communities are not "passive observers of nature but are instead influential facilitators of landscape scale abundance, rooted in an ethic of kinship and reverence" (Johnston 2022, p. III). Before colonization, Indigenous societies were complex organisms with articulated food and land management systems, based on a set of transnational principles: "reverence for the sacredness of life, non-humans are the equal and sacred relatives of humans, and a belief that human groups are divinely assigned to care for their respective homelands" (*ibidem*). Along with other Indigenous scholars and artivists[8], Johnston reclaims Indigenous teachings and languages and fuels the debate on the possibility for non-Indigenous communities to embrace Indigenous knowledge, which is based on a more sustainable relationship between humans and the environment.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Kimmerer 2013; 2020)[9], a popular work blending Indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the author's personal story, Robin Wall Kimmerer also focuses on the idea of a more sustainable relationship between humans and the land, one promising "medicine for our broken relationship with earth" (Kimmerer 2020, p. X). In the minds of colonial powers, she claims, land was just property and capital, whereas for Indigenous communities it represented identity, connection to the ancestors, a pharmacy, and a library (ivi, p. 17). Her idea of the land as "a gift, not a commodity" (*ibidem*) is revolutionary:

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[7] In her autoethnographic memoir, Johnston mentions two examples of Diné pedagogical resilience: The Rough Rock Demonstration School, which was founded in 1966 by Allan Yazzie after the Diné community demanded control over their children's education, and the 1968 Navajo Community College (now called Diné College), which became the first tribal college created by Indigenous People for Indigenous People. She also specifies that these institutions were federally funded and so influenced by the agenda of the state (Johnston 2017, pp. 8-9). In a more recent public talk, she speaks about contemporary University programs that are centered on Native knowledge systems, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHWc5BPK1DY (6.07.2025).

[8] The word "artivist" was used by Molefi K. Asante Jr. in 2008 to describe the works of those artists who challenge, confront, and resist injustice and inhumanity. The author highlights the responsibility that goes with artistic productions when they are intertwined with social causes. Also, Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre give a contribution to the topic, examining how artivists are committed to transforming themselves and the world. They define artivism as "a hybrid neologism that signifies work created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism […]" (Asante 2008, p. 82).

[9] R. W. Kimmerer is a scientist, professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. In 2015 she addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations on the topic of "Healing Our Relationship with Nature". She is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, and the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, whose mission is to create programs that draw on the wisdom of both indigenous and scientific knowledge for our shared goals of sustainability. https://www.robinwallkimmerer.com/about (20.01.2025).

> From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the 'gift' is deemed to be 'free' because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its roots, reciprocity. In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a 'bundle of rights', whereas in a gift economy property has a 'bundle of responsibilities' attached. (ivi, p. 28).

In this perspective, interdependence is based on relationships among people who have gift-giving and gift-receiving responsibilities to each other, including the land and all forms of life in the ecosystem. Reciprocity becomes crucial in this ethical framework, which is "intimately and self-consciously place-based and which emphasizes accountability at community level and the teaching of respect, reciprocity and nondomination among people, land and environment" (Elliott 2018, p. 7). Johnston's work reflects all this as she describes Indigenous traditional pedagogy as ecological, communal, place-based, kinship-based, and healing (Johnston 2017, p. V). In the following section, the concept of *hozhǫ́* will be described in its potential resurgence power within the context of Indigenous spoken word poetry.

2. Spoken Word Poetry in the Context of Resurgence

Resurgence is a term applied to a variety of land-based, self-determining, political, and cultural practices and movements performed by Indigenous individuals, collectives, and communities, which aim to generate liberated spaces. It must be understood in the context of decolonization: "If decolonization is a 'goal' – for Indigenous Nations to achieve a state of autonomy and restored relations with traditional land bases and territories – then 'resurgence' is one strategy for Indigenous People to pursue that goal" (Barker and Lowman 2024, p. 354). Going beyond the struggle for survival and recognition, resurgence "rests on an aesthetic axis of transformation that, by developing critical consciousness, undoing colonial fragmentation, and revitalizing our nationhood, restores strength and re-coherence to our lives and our communities" (Martineau 2015, p. 96). Resurgent movements, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson also highlights, "are trying to center Indigenous practices and thoughts in our lives as everyday acts of resistance, and grow those actions and processes into a mass mobilization" (Simpson 2016, p. 24)[10].

Indeed, part of Lyla June Johnston's research focuses on Indigenous pre-colonial land management and traditional food systems and on the theory of Indigenous Regenerative Ecosystem Design (IRED)[11], with the aim of stressing that the Diné possessed a complex

[10] Indigenous resurgence became popular in the second decade of the 21st century in connection with Indigenous-led movements, such as: the trans-Canadian and international protests Idle No More, the NoDAPL occupation and protest in the territory of the Standing Rock Lakota; and the ongoing Unist'ot'en reoccupation of traditional territories by Wet'suwet'en people in opposition to pipeline expansion and police incursion, among many others (Barker and Lowman 2024, p. 352).

[11] Some examples of IRED systems are: Shawnee chestnut forest management in Kentucky (Delcourt et al. 1998); Myaamia grasslands management in the Ohio River Valley (McCoy et al. 2011); Pacific Northwest clam garden management in British Columbia, Canada (Lepofsky et al. 2021); Náhuatl chinampa management in central Mexico (Merlín-Uribe et al. 2013); Piscataway oyster fishery management in the Chesapeake Bay (Rick et al. 2016); Bauré floodplain management in Bolivia (Erickson 2010); Pueblo alluvial farming systems in Southwest American deserts (Homburg et al. 2005); Maskoke buffalo habitat management in Southeast America (M. Briggs-Cloud, personal communication, July 8, 2022); Mebêngôkre (Kayapó) terra preta soil management systems in the Brazilian Amazon (Hecht, 1992); Amah Mutsun prairie ecosystems and biodiversity maintenance in Northern California (V. Lopez, personal communication, June 10, 2022); Southwest Indigenous fire and soil management

community organization and sophisticated ecological technologies. As opposed to the myth of the wilderness, there were numerous ways in which Indigenous people purposely cultivated the land, labored on it, shaped it, and used it[12]. Besides denouncing the colonizers' attempt to diminish and silence all this knowledge, Johnston outlines the necessity to correct the record and, most importantly, to unearth such knowledge. We should all learn, she argues, the invisible principle at the basis of Indigenous worldviews, which is based on being in service of nature rather than on mastering it. The resurgence of such knowledge is happening in many ways across Indigenous communities worldwide, and art is one of the means that is facilitating the process.

Spoken word poetry can be understood as a resurgence art form since orality and performativity have been fundamental components of Indigenous cultures and are now being reclaimed as powerful self-determination tools, also in the digital environment. As we see it nowadays, the expression "spoken word" specifically refers to poetry that is intentionally created to be performed in front of an audience, a form of art that may contain elements of storytelling, stand-up comedy, theater, music, improvisation, etc.[13] As spoken poet Kyle "Guante" Tran Myhre argues, if we consider the presence of storytellers in almost every culture in the world, spoken word could represent the oldest artistic practice that we know:

> Even though spoken word is very often characterized as a new, underground artistic phenomenon, or as a novel, radical reconceptualization of the relationship between poetry and its audience, it's important to note that spoken word has been around for as long as language has. It is one of the oldest artistic practices that we have. The griot, the storyteller, the person responsible for orally passing down information from generation to generation: every culture on earth has some kind of analogue to this. We can trace the current spoken word boom back through Hip Hop, the Nuyoricans, the Black Arts Movement, the Beat Generation, the Harlem Renaissance, deeper and deeper into history, and we'll get to the griot[14].

The power of spoken word lies in the empathetic real-time connection it creates between the performer and the audience, due to the physicality of language and body that can elicit feelings and sensations. Often used to publicly interrogate urgent social issues, it can also represent a form of community healing. In this regard, Lori M. Walkington states:

> For communities impacted by structural oppression, this empathy could lead to recognition of being human, of being valued, of being part of our society. It is through the ongoing process of receiving and giving empathy that healing may begin on an individual level, while addressing structural oppression through these communities may begin healing at a mezzo or community level (Walkington 2018, p. 63).

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in the Ch'ooshgai Mountain range (Johnston 2022); Haíëzaqv kelp forest and herring population management in British Columbia, Canada (Gauvreau et al. 2017); Kanaka Maoli management of Ahupua'a watershed systems in Hawai'i (Kagawa & Vitousek, 2012). (Johnston 2022, p. 277).

[12] See Lyla June Johnston's interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnS4HAsoLRM and the conversation on climate justice "Architects of Abundance: Indigenous Regenerative Food Systems and the Excavation of Hidden History" (which is also Johnston's PhD Thesis title) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4ErWX9rCbQ (20.02.2025).

[13] Slam poetry, in contrast, is spoken word performed at a poetry slam, which is a specific kind of event, a "competitive version of poetry readings currently staged in bars, bookstores, coffeehouses, universities, and theaters" (Somers-Millett 2005, p. 51).

[14] See https://guante.info/2016/09/26/ten-things-everyone-should-know-about-spoken-word-and-slam-poetry/ (31.10.2024).

Native American spoken word artists reclaim the tradition of storytelling and use it to restore Indigenous ways of knowledge, thanks to the power of this art form that comes "from the throat and the heart and the lungs and the guts of a person"[15], as Lyla June Johnston argues. The comments to the video of her performances online, as well as the live reactions of the people in the audience, show the degree of emotional involvement that spoken word allows if compared to the written word – even when it is read aloud. Spoken word poetry is an artivistic tool combining the poetics and the politics of resurgence, an act of self-determination based on language. Providing access to sets of knowledge that can support and guide communities in the process of decolonization, language plays a crucial role in this scenario (Alfred 2009).

3. The Power of *Hozhǫ́ Beyond Translation*

Hozhó is a complex philosophical, religious, and aesthetic concept, roughly translated into "beauty", which seeks to incorporate aesthetic qualities into life with the aim of making the most of all that surrounds us. Our thoughts and deeds constantly and actively cocreate such harmony, where the self is in continuous contact with the outer world and with other life forms[16]. Lyla June Johnston claims that *hozhǫ́* means being in alignment with and participatory in the process of life while we observe and acknowledge the beauty of the world[17].

Her standpoint is clear in her spoken poem "Hozhǫ́"[18], which is the focus of the following pages, and which starts by asserting that there are no limits to what *hozhǫ́* may encompass. Although there is not a direct translation of the term into English, *hozhǫ́* is inherently understood by every living being, Johnston maintains, a fact that may allude to the possibility of a deeper understanding among different peoples and different species that goes beyond language. In *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Simpson 2017), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson visualized a global web of relations interconnecting human nations, as well as animal and plant nations. Similarly, the above-mentioned scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer is famous for her commitment to creating a respectful symbiosis between Indigenous and Western ecological knowledge.

In the very first lines of the poem "Hozhǫ́", this transversal approach appears quite clear. The poet's grandmother reveals to her that *hozhǫ́* is all around them and that it is something that every living being can experience, beyond the mere act of intellectual comprehension[19]:

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[15] See https://abc7.com/lyla-june-our-america-indigenous-and-urban-native-american-heritage-month-2021-ouramericaabccom/11224395/ (28.01.2025).

[16] See http://doitinpublic.com/creating-harmonious-lives-hozho-and-lyla-june-johnston/ (01.07.2025).

[17] See again Lyla June Johnston's interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnS4HAsoLRM (21.02.2025).

[18] See 2012 Lyla June Johnston's performance of "Hozhǫ́" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tAo9puhnNs&t=3s (last accessed 5.2.2025). There is also another version filmed and edited by Shara Esbenshade at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZzPWKJvu7I&t=1s (5.07.2025).

[19] In her autoethnographic memoir Johnston directly challenges Western education, affirming: "I began to question everything I knew about teaching and learning. I started to challenge the normalcy of the content that was taught to me in schools – the Shakespeare, the Calculus, the moral-less, spiritless biology, the introduction/body/conclusion style of digesting and conveying information. I even questioned *the way* in which people taught me this content. I saw how these indoor, bookwork, English-based methods catered to my intellect, while sending my body, my emotions and my spirit – yes my spirit – into a state of atrophy. I began to wonder why these public and private schools taught me what they taught me and why they taught it the way they did" (Simpson 2017, p. 3).

It is dawn.
The sun is conquering the sky
and my grandmother and I
are heaving prayers at the horizon.
"Show me something unbeautiful", she says.
"Try it".
"If you can, then there is a veil
over your eyes and I will take it away.
You will see hozhǫ́ all around you.
Inside of you".
This morning my grandmother is teaching me the meaning of hozhǫ́.
There is no direct translation from Diné Bizaad,
the Navajo language, into English
but every living being knows what hozhǫ́ means. (italics mine)

As a quality that permeates everything, *hozhǫ́* does not have a direct equivalent in a European language but it is not confined to the realm of Diné knowledge:

Us Diné, we know what hozhǫ́ means!
And you, you know what hozhǫ́ means.
And deep down we know what hozhǫ́ does not mean.
(…) *Or like the day that the spaniards came*
climbed down from their horses
and asked if they could buy the mountains.
Now, we knew this was not hozhǫ́
because we knew you cannot buy a mountain
but we knew we could make it hozhǫ́ once again. (italics mine)

Here, the reference to the dispossession faced by Indigenous people, both historically and in the present, is important not only because of the intrinsic connection between colonization and resurgence movements. It allows us to explore the idea that harmony can be destroyed and restored, in contrast with the assumption that colonizers dismantled Native American cultures for good. Considered the "healing of broken bones", *hozhǫ́* represents the powerful prayer that has helped the Diné people survive colonization and genocide. It is also going to help them face future environmental disasters:

Hozhǫ́ is the prayer that carried us
through genocide and disease.
It is the prayer that will carry us through global warming
through this global fear that casts shadows on the walls of our minds. (italics mine)

The interconnections within the whole ecosystem are crucial in the description Johnston gives of what *hozhǫ́* represents for her and her people:

Hozhǫ́ is undeniable beauty.
Hozhǫ́ is in every breath that we give to the trees.
And in every breath they give to us in return.
Hozhǫ́ is reciprocity. (italics mine)

(…) *Hozhǫ́ is an experience.*
But it is not something you can experience alone.

The eagles tell us as they
lock talons in the stratosphere
and fall to the earth as one
during courting season.
Hozhǫ́ is a form of interbeauty. (italics mine)

The artist mentions reciprocity and interbeauty, which are crucial to exploring what resurgence may signify at a community level. Advocating for a reconciliation with the land and the traditions, Johnston and other artivists do not call for the recreation of a pre-colonial "ideal" order, whereas they support the renegotiation of the relationships with ex-colonial powers based on the rejection of a unique Eurocentric epistemology (Dhillon 2022). In this perspective, non-Indigenous people are expected to engage with Indigenous people in a more just and honorable way (Elliott 2018), aimed at going beyond recognition and preventing the perpetuation of inequities and discrimination. Indeed, as Barker and Lowman highlight, the proliferation of events celebrating Indigenous identity in Canada and the U.S. ended up undermining powerful grassroots movements in favor of initiatives supported by the same colonial powers (Barker and Lowman 2024).

Speaking the language of nature and tradition is crucial to pass on Indigenous knowledge to future generations and to build more assertive political and social practices[20]. Land-based education is a vehicle for resurgence, and it is transferred through the teachings of the grandmothers:

My grandmother knows this well.
For she speaks a language that grew up and out of the desert floor
like red sandstone monoliths that rise like the arms of the earth
reaching into the sky and
praising creation for all its brilliance.
(…) *Hozhǫ́ is remembering that you are a part of this brilliance*. (italics mine)

(…) *My grandmother knows this well.*
For she speaks the language of a Lók'aa'ch'égai snowstorm.
She speaks the language of hooves hitting the dirt on birthdays.
For my grandmother was a midwife and would
gallop to the hogaans where the women were in labor.
Now she is fluent in the
language of suffering mothers,
fluent in the language of joyful mothers,
fluent in the language of handing a glowing newborn to its creator. (italics mine)

(…) *My grandmother knows this well.*
For she speaks the same language as the male rain
which shoots lightning boys through the sky,

[20] In her autoethnographic memoir, Johnston clarifies the relationship between the people and the land: "It became clear over time that we couldn't learn our topics in 'any old place.' There were specific places where specific kinds of learning had to occur. Because our strategic framework was matched with the four sacred mountains, our learning was most appropriate in these places. Furthermore, to learn ancestral ecological skills and crafts, we had to be in the deserts of our ancestors where these ecological materials existed. I can study chemistry in Germany or Australia or Peru, but the traditional songs can only be learned in their full glory in the places that these songs talk about. We are an endemic culture and like an endemic species we cannot exist as we currently exist anywhere besides within the four sacred mountains" (Johnston 2017, pp. 112-113).

pummels the green corn children,
and huddles the horses against cliff sides in the early afternoon.
She also speaks the language of the female rain
which sends the scent of dust and sage into our homes
and shoots rainbows out of and into the earth. (italics mine)

(…) *This morning my grandmother is teaching me*
that the easiest (and most elegant) way to defeat an army of hatred,
is to sing it beautiful songs
until it falls to its knees and surrenders. (italics mine)

In this poem, *hozhǫ́* represents "the deepest essence of human existence that Diné people strive to recognize in every moment"[21], which results in a feeling of joy for the inherent beauty of creation. Alongside the other principles on which the Diné ground their worldview, it creates a system in which all things are acknowledged and honored as part of the family, weaving together individuals and communities, a system in which abundance and wellness are based on the sharing of resources. Thus, *hozhǫ́* is an untranslatable concept on a purely linguistic level, whereas it is possible to understand it on the emotional and spiritual levels, which are elicited by the live performance of the poet. Johnston reclaims the power of *hozhǫ́* underlying the necessity to value Indigenous ways of knowledge not only in the context of Indigenous communities but as principles that may inspire a more sustainable relationship of all life forms within the ecosystem.

This poem encloses the significance of resurgence in the context of Indigenous artivism since it explores some of the most crucial themes: the importance of possessing and passing on the powerful languages of traditions; the necessity of focusing on reciprocity and interconnection among humans, plants, and animals to face future global disasters; the acknowledgment of colonial destruction and of the capacity of rebuilding harmony by using Indigenous knowledge; the crucial importance of self-determination and community empowerment. Resurgence is not just a metaphor, it requires real change in the way Indigenous knowledge is considered and shared, as powerfully advocated for by Johnston and other artivists. It calls for a more collaborative politics of decolonization, which includes the restoration of Indigenous presence on the land and the revitalization of land-based economies and traditional food systems; the passing on of Indigenous teachings, including languages; the acknowledgement of the enormous potentialities of such ancestral knowledge in facing and solving contemporary global crises. In this scenario, the role of spoken word allows Indigenous artivists to use orality not to preserve ancestral teachings but to live them and embody them.

4. Conclusion

The spoken word piece "Hozhǫ́" was used here as a casket containing fragments of a bigger puzzle, which needs to be further investigated from a multidisciplinary perspective and in collaboration with Indigenous artivists and scholars. Indeed, as pointed out by Nicole Redverse – member of the Denínu Kų́ę́ First Nation and director of the "Indigenous Planetary Health" program at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry (University of Western Ontario) – "the knowledges do not exist without the Peoples themselves" (Redverse 2024, p. 278). Concerned about the risks of cultural appropriation, she stresses that Indigenous Peoples'

[21] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3VLiV7vank (5.2.2025).

intellectual property and the data-sovereignty rights of communities must be protected, and that Indigenous Peoples' voices must be amplified.

Resurgence movements need to be understood in their similarities and differences across the world to avoid dangerous generalizations, romanticization, and simplistic assumptions, considering also that decolonization can signify different things in different contexts. Although solidarity and alliance building with other movements is a common theme associated with resurgence, it is a heterogeneous process whose manifestations vary both spatially and temporally (Elliott 2018). Moreover, debates on the limits of resurgence (Lightfoot 2020), the role of recognition and transformative reconciliation (Tully 2020), and the degree of engagement/disengagement of Indigenous communities from the relationship with settler societies (Elliot 2018), are still going on. As observed by Adam J. Barker and Emma Battell Lowman:

> Common throughout these resurgence varieties are practices centred on drawing from and revitalising traditional practice, centring relationships to land and the more-than-human world and the imperative to act despite (rather than against) colonial resistance. Connected by these common traits, many place-specific approaches to resurgence have flourished […] Resurgence calls for Indigenous People to directly reconnect with traditional networks of human and more-than-human to generate situated power that can be used for both regenerating Indigenous social and environmental systems and confronting the ongoing invasion by settler colonial systems and infrastructures […] [It] locates the greatest possibility for Indigenous liberation in the revitalisation of traditional ways of interacting and governing, spanning the human and material environment; the creatures of the air, land and sea; and the spirits and metaphysical beings that often take on important roles in Indigenous cosmologies. Resurgence rejects systemic benefits in favour of a grounded and communal power generated through deep cooperation with and knowledge of place (Barker and Lowman 2024, pp. 359-361).

Place-specific approaches, such as Lyla June Johnston's, both generate situated power and confront settler colonial systems. In this specific case, the artivist insists on the idea that non-Indigenous people should collaborate with Indigenous people and learn from Indigenous teachings, which are precious and necessary in the context of our current global crises. Appreciating *hozhǫ́* in its complexity, without looking for a definite linguistic translation and accepting the instability that this position imposes, may be helpful. Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua refers to such a state of uncertainty using the Nahuatl word *nepantla,* which she defines as an in-between state, "the natural habitat of women artists, most specifically for the mestiza border artists who partake of the traditions of two or more worlds and who may be binational"[22]. Johnston's multilayered lineage, alongside the variety of her skills that range from music to poetry, from university research to community building, allows her to inhabit the space of *nepantla*. Her audience as well is challenged and encouraged to embrace a wider perspective on Indigenous knowledge that is not to be saved, protected, appropriated, or recognized – which are actions that still perpetuate asymmetry in the relations of power – but it is to be used to restore and foster a profound relationship with the Earth.

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[22] See https://nacla.org/article/chicana-artists-exploring-nepantla-el-lugar-de-la-frontera (5.2.2025).

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