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Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita

Jennifer Nez Denetdale

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Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita Jennifer Nez Denetdale In this groundbreaking book, the first Navajo to earn a doctorate in history seeks to rewrite Navajo history. Reared on the Navajo Nation in New Mexico and Arizona, Jennifer Nez Denetdale is the great-great-great-granddaughter of a well-known Navajo chief, Manuelito (1816–1894), and his nearly unknown wife, Juanita (1845–1910). Stimulated in part by seeing photographs of these ancestors, she began to explore her family history as a way of examining broader issues in Navajo historiography.

Here she presents a thought-provoking examination of the construction of the history of the Navajo people (Diné, in the Navajo language) that underlines the dichotomy between Navajo and non-Navajo perspectives on the Diné past. *Reclaiming Diné History* has two primary objectives. First, Denetdale interrogates histories that privilege Manuelito and marginalize Juanita in order to demonstrate some of the ways that writing about the Diné has been biased by non-Navajo views of assimilation and gender. Second, she reveals how Navajo narratives, including oral histories and stories kept by matrilineal clans, serve as vehicles to convey Navajo beliefs and values.

By scrutinizing stories about Juanita, she both underscores the centrality of women’s roles in Navajo society and illustrates how oral tradition has been used to organize social units, connect Navajos to the land, and interpret the past. She argues that these same stories, read with an awareness of Navajo creation narratives, reveal previously unrecognized Navajo perspectives on the past. And she contends that a similarly culture-sensitive re-viewing of the Diné can lead to the production of a Navajo-centered history.

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