

Tsan Nawenagahnt: Looking ahead in a good way

MA Portfolio Essay

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Preface: Personal Context

Growing up my grandparents always used to say to me, “Indians have forgotten how to visit with one another.” That statement did not sit well with me as a teenager because I felt that I was well versed amongst my peers. I thought I had the ability to have meaningful visits with peers and family. My grandparents demonstrated the art of communication to me in several ways, including their efforts to promote incorporated leadership cultural revitalization, and the state of the Shoshone language. As a result, I would always observe my Shoshone peers and colleagues on the Wind River & Fort Hall Indian Reservations with my grandparents’ statement echoing in my head. I would take time to have coffee or tea with people and just enjoy their company without any agenda in mind.

My grandfather passed away in 2009 and I was no longer able to observe how he and my grandmother interacted with one another. Watching my grandmother mourn the death of my grandfather, I became determined to seek an outlet to utilize the knowledge they had taught me. One random evening, I asked my grandmother, Leola Nagitsy, an Eastern Shoshone Tribal member, if she would go with me to sit in on a language class to get her out of the house. Thus, my introduction to Indigenous Studies began at the local Shoshone Bannock Language Cultural Preservation Department (LCPD) in Fort Hall, Idaho. That night back in 2009 my grandmother, who spoke a different dialect of Shoshone (*newe daigwa*), than those around her, sat amongst Shoshone Bannock speakers practicing the language of my late grandfather.

At the time I thought I was doing a good deed for my grandmother by bring her out of her home to get her mind cleared. It hurt me to see her sit there being sad over the loss of my grandfather so I would make it a point to spend some time with her one on one. What was happening instead was I began to relearn and understand the teachings that would shape my life.

Those teachings would be defined through *denniwappe*, life lessons, that have since guided me in my life.

The concept of *denniwappe* had been explained to me in the English language but due to my inquisitive nature, I knew that there were deeper meanings English could not describe. I would begin to turn to many Shoshone language teachers and mentors as I learned more about my grandparent's epistemological views of the world. The journey to understanding the world through a Shoshone lens has tested my patience and influenced my lived experiences because I now understand that the history of my grandparents is meant to be expanded and not mimicked. The realization was the fork in the road that led me to the Indigenous Studies Program (ISP) at the University of Kansas.

The Shoshone language has no formal writing structure and limited academic literature exists that can describe the challenges in learning *newe daigwa*. The community discussions regarding a formal writing structure for the Shoshone language have divided many Shoshone language learners. The writing structure for the Shoshone language is done phonetically, by writing how you hear something, and this model has many people debating which ways are best to teach the language. I now focus on *newe daigwa* because I began to learn the benefits of having a writing structure through my academic studies at KU, and in conversations with my Shoshone language mentors. One of the most important concepts I learned was from my Shoshone language mentor, Bryan Hudson. He introduced to me the concept of the vowel structure being an indicator of space. This diagram illustrates that concept. I will return to discuss this concept in more depth below.

Ego (Self)

iki	aiki	maka	oku	uku
Right here	Close to Touching	Mid-Point Neutral Zone	Horizon (still visible)	Out of Sight

Introduction

The narrative of Shoshone history typically has revolved around the Fort Bridger Treaty of 1868 (Shoshone Bannock Tribe, 2021). The Fort Bridger Treaty of 1868 is a treaty that is based upon the concept of perpetual friendship between the Shoshone Indians and settlers (Shoshone Bannock Tribe, 2021). The language in the treaty defines the boundaries of my family’s ancestral territory. The Wind River Reservation, located in the present state of Wyoming, is 2.2 million acres of land base that is in the central part of the state (Wind River Visitor Council, 2020). The Eastern Band of Shoshones rejected President Franklin Roosevelt’s Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA) which called for a United States styled governmental structure that included a tribal constitution (A Project of the Wyoming State Historical Society. 2019). Instead, the Eastern Band of Shoshone organized a traditional-styled government that is led by the enrolled members of the tribe, the general council includes six elected business council leaders who oversee tribal affairs (Eastern Shoshone Tribe, 2021).

The lifestyle of Shoshone people is defined through life concepts such as *denniwappe*, which inform epistemological frameworks that provide structure to Shoshone life. I recall learning these lessons sporadically throughout my lifetime. To give one example the experiential lesson of hunting was taught to me at my previous place of employment as we were prepping deer meat. An elder Bannock woman spoke to us about hunting and began to explain the cycle of prayer that connects what the animal has eaten to us eating the animal. That circular model

illustrates the role that food plays in our lives and how it transforms itself into medicine. She continues to link hunting, prayer, and healthy eating habits together as she ended her lesson by saying, “Nowadays at feasts, we pray for hotdogs, hotdogs are not medicine!” Her commentary on the prayer demonstrated to me that we have stepped away from traditional dietary knowledge and applied prayer to foods that do not contain Mother Nature’s medicinal plants.

Linguistics

The Shoshone language is part of the Numic branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family and shares commonalities with the languages of the Paiutes, Western Shoshones, Comanches, and Shoshone Bannocks. The different bands of Uto-Aztecan languages have their own respective orthographies and teaching methods for community members. The debate among Shoshones today revolves around how the language should be spoken and taught to present and future generations. Throughout my interactions on the Wind River Indian Reservation, and Shoshone Bannock Indian Reservation, I have found myself trying to find commonalities my grandparents share with other elders. When I began my journey in ISP at KU, I came across scholarship by Helen King (2001) who researched the cosmology and symbolism of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe. I have continued to reference her work throughout my writing because the research conducted included interviews done through Judith Vander (1997) that ties a Shoshone medicine man who was a family friend to my grandparents.

As I researched the Shoshone language, I begin to investigate the value system that is embedded in the Shoshone epistemological framework. The Words I focused on are family (*nawende*) respect (*suvokate*), prayer (*nanisuntehai*), and sing (*tenito'ai*). My Shoshone language learning experience began with learning how to count, say the names of animals and colors. Growing up my grandparents spoke in Shoshone but always made a point to follow up in

the English language with me or my brothers. In addition, I did not invest time in learning the language when my grandfather was alive.

When I met one of my language mentors, Bryan Hudson, he had a different approach to teaching the language than my grandparents. Instead of focusing on English translations, he begins his lessons with learning the sounds in Shoshone. Mr. Hudson utilizes the writing system that were put in place through the efforts of Wick R. Miller, an anthropologist who studied the Shoshone language. Miller is one of several linguists who have influenced my work.

Wick R. Miller had a linguistic career that extends over 30 years preserving and promoting linguistic efforts, especially with the Uto-Aztecan language (Mixco & Freeze, 1997). Miller had recorded various speakers and utilized best practices in digital language documentation (E. Meld, 2006). With his collection of recordings, he has made efforts to compose a writing structure that Bryan utilizes in the teaching of sounds and in breaking down instrumental prefixes. The Shoshone language community has various approaches to language learning. One is through listening without a writing structure, and the others include constructing phonetic writing structures based on dialects. The phonetic approach to learning the language is useful for the individual who wrote it, but it runs the risk of confusing other Shoshone language learners. I struggled with both aspects of learning because I respect both approaches.

Another important individual in Shoshone language pedagogy is Lynette St. Clair. St. Clair is from Fort Washakie, Wyoming, and is the Director of Indigenous Education at Fort Washakie School. Her dedication to the language has been met with praise and scrutiny because of her style of writing. In her passionate TedxTalk, she speaks of the lateral conflict that is counterproductive to the Shoshone value system (TEDxTalks, 2019, 03:15-05:21). Lynette

acknowledges that the lack of a formal writing system makes each learning experience unique. My experience with lateral conflict within the language at times discouraged me from wanting to learn. Lynette's message of needing "language warriors" who can dedicate themselves to the language and are strong enough to overcome hurdles of negativity resonates with me.

By navigating her way through the educational system, Lynette has been able to help create a language app called *newe daigwa*. This language app has opened the door for younger generations to hear the language being spoken by community members. Utilizing technology and social media platforms for Shoshone has given the younger generations what they longed for, a modern approach to language learning.

The Shoshone Language Reunion is based upon the bridging of technology with curriculums. The Shoshone Language Reunion is hosted by different Uto-Aztecan Numic language speaking communities every year (Shoshonean Reunion Committee, 2011). Activities during the reunion are based upon cultural teachings, traditional crafts, horse usage, and the history of the band-hosting reunion. I have been to various Shoshone Reunions and enjoyed hearing the community members come together and teach one another different aspects of culture under the conceptual umbrella of language revitalization efforts. My grandmother was the Shoshone Reunion president in 2003 and oversaw the events that year. I remember our home was set up like a big craft room with people sewing, beading, and cooking.

The community aspect of the reunion brought people together who respected family (*nawende*) and cultivated respect (*suvokate*) for one another. These terms are not just words but signify particular proscribed actions as well as responsibilities we have toward one another. By combining these aspects of learning and understanding we can then begin to understand the construction of words such as prayer (*nanisuntehai*). When you break down the word in

Shoshone *na* is of the self, *ni* is your voice, *sun* is your mind, and *tehai* is to acknowledge. Thus, this word is a combination of you, your voice, your mind, and an acknowledgement that you are praying.

Another factor to consider is that Shoshone language content is expanding on YouTube channels, and profiles different language speakers. For example, Alfred, and Brenda Jackson are an elder married couple from Western Shoshone Band who share their dialect (V Hanging Heart Media, 2021, 0-1:35). In combination with efforts made by other Shoshone language instructors, we now can teach one another as we go. The mindset that we must learn only one style is prevalent, but I feel in the future we will rely heavily on one another, even if others do not speak our dialect. The different views of the language becoming a written language still produce serious discussions when instructors share their style. As I mentioned earlier, Bryan Hudson, is a language mentor who utilizes structures that were created in the past such as the one by anthropologist Wick Miller. The University of Utah has a Shoshone Language Project (SLP) that utilizes Miller's recordings to preserve the language (Humanities Center at Great Basin College, 2014-2019). His dedicated efforts to create an orthography have given Shoshone teachers pedagogical materials in the language. The Shoshone language has gone through what Bernard Perley (2012) describes as "mortuary linguistics" when linguists document a language in efforts to preserve a culture (p. 140) The various efforts the Shoshone community is putting forth reflects a grassroots approach because they are utilizing the knowledge of elders and the materials they have available. My two main hopes for the future of the Shoshone language are that we do not lose the meanings of the sounds, and that we do not rely heavily on quick English translations.

Spirituality

Shoshone spirituality is exercised in different ways depending on the family one comes from. King (2009, p. 48) expands on an interview from John Tarness who explains how communication between tangible and intangible realms can be accomplished through the Sundance. The Sundance is a ceremony that allows individuals to cleanse themselves and pray for the sick, as well as pray for renewal, and the ability to cross into another realm of healing (Vander 1997; Vogen 1984). I have linked the concepts of singing (*tenito'ai*) to Sundance practices because singing is a collective practice during the ceremony.

My grandmother always spoke of the importance of singing and how songs come to fruition in one's life. As a teenager, I have a memory that I will never forget because it speaks to the medicine our voices truly have. Throughout my time growing up I had seen many Shoshone men approach my grandfather, Alfred Nagitsy, with hopes that they can learn a song or two. Out of ignorance, I asked my grandmother why grandpa could not just teach someone a song. I was given a lesson on the power of singing within the Shoshone culture. My grandmother explained how singing can lift the veil to enlightenment, visions, and medicine for the betterment of a community.

Throughout the process of compiling my portfolio, I have had many conversations with different individuals from the community I grew up in, Wind River Indian Reservations. With one individual in particular I have discussed how my experiences learning the Shoshone language have taken place in conjunction with the life lessons I have acquired. We have spoken about our language journeys and how the community has changed the more we move away from the language. I shared the same story about people approaching my grandparents for songs and wanting to record them singing with him. This individual I spoke with listened to me share my

memory and then said, “I was one of the men who asked your grandpa for a song.” I was surprised and excited because my memory and his memory solidified, between us, what singing means in the spiritual context. I have not had that type of conversation, nor experienced that depth of knowledge, since interacting with my grandparents.

Throughout my studies, I would often remind myself that research and articles often focus on pain and the feelings “lostness” (Tuck, 2009, p.412). I wanted to use the positivity of my family history to speak positive truths that uplift people and help explain what it means to be part of the Shoshone community. But to speak honestly about the community also means I need to acknowledge the lateral conflict that rots the root of who we are within the community. By examining Shoshone language and Shoshone spirituality I began to understand why many people fall into the trap of negativity that plagues many communities.

For the sake of minimizing the complexity of Shoshone language for non-Shoshone speakers, to illustrate this point I will focus on the following terminology: sing (*tenito 'ai*), pray (*nanisuntehai*), and speaker of the people (*daigwani*). I have observed how kinship attitudes are presently absent within the community. Not to romanticize what a Shoshone family is, but at one point in time there were checks and balances between genders and lessons that were teaching through the language. I began to investigate the word for prayer, which describes the mind, voice, and self-acknowledgment of each other. That state of prayer is a spiritual experience that demonstrates the power of voice and language. Yet the lessons that are embedded in the language are not being exercised because the meaning is not being taught. I experienced this attitude because I am Navajo and adopted into a Shoshone family.

It has taken years and understanding to apply the concept that my voice has purpose. My grandparents have given me the confidence about learning and understanding the meanings of

concepts such as kinship. It was not until I was an adult that I had outside voices debating who I was as a community member of the Wind River Indian Reservation (WRIR). I had to accept how people may view me as a Navajo, but my grandfather knew who I was, I was his grandson regardless of how people would debate my identity and the source of my knowledge. My experience exemplifies that fact that lateral conflict is a truth that an outsider such as me must learn to navigate. The older I get I turn toward the language to guide my thinking. I find comfort knowing that language does not discriminate against me because I was adopted; it requires me to live in the present.

I recalled earlier how my grandmother explained the importance of singing, and I view the language in the same manner. The language requires me to think about how my words will affect others, my family, and myself. I think now that may be the reason I am learning to speak later in life because I need to be ready for the lessons and language to guide me. Now that my grandfather has passed on, I spend my downtime thinking about what it means to actively engage in the Shoshone community. Through my studies at KU, I read and watched Dr. Yellow Bird talk about concepts of neurodecolonization. This idea of mindfulness ties in a healthy lifestyle with protecting spiritual practices in order to decolonizing ourselves (Yellow Bird, 2012, p.57).

One such spiritual practice is the Shoshone Sundance, an occasion when a member of the tribe fasts and prays for four days in a lodge for better health within the community (King, 2009, p.30). This relates to the practice of mindfulness described by Yellow Bird in conjunction with our creator and each other, (Yellow Bird, 2012 p.67). If one considers the word to pray, *nanisuntehai*, the combination of self and your mind with acknowledgement relates to what Yellow Bird describes as mindfulness. These concepts were important to spiritual leaders in the Shoshone community such as my grandfather.

However, many people in the community do not understand the language. This has resulted in cultural knowledge being divorced from the application of that knowledge, which has amplified individualistic concepts of community. I have experienced this throughout my life, I have come to understand that an enrollment number does not define me as a person in the community but being acknowledged by the community is what makes me part of the group. I have come to this conclusion through my understanding of the Shoshone language and elements of its spirituality.

Indigenous Geography

My journey through Indigenous Studies has focused on Indigenous perspectives. During my studies here at KU, I have kept my roots in Shoshone concepts of life through my writing by using the Shoshone language. The Indigenous Geography class introduced me to the idea of postcolonialism vs post-colonialism. The hyphen indicates the time that comes after interdependence from colonizing powers (Sharp, 2009, p.4). I focused on post-colonialism while writing about Shoshone community, and focused on post-colonialism because postcolonialism, no hyphen, is described as an analysis of Western-dominated systems throughout the world (Sharp, 2009, p.5). In my work I had to speak honestly about communities from which I come; I needed to acknowledge different ways Western knowledge has shifted peoples' traditional concepts of Shoshone lives.

While exploring post-colonialism I found the hybridity aspect of where I find myself expanding as an Indigenous person to be useful. Hybridity is formed when the sense of self expressed in public, where one is oppressed in different forms by colonizers, is mixed with one's spiritual self, expressed in private spaces. The result is the creation of a new third space (Sharp, 2009, p. 5). This reinforces the concept that Indigenous people walk two worlds, trying to

maintain their cultural world as well as being present in “Western America”. In addition, my family politics become more apparent during these lectures as we talked about geographies that include our bodies and minds. As a result, I now find myself walking the thin line between traditional and modern lifestyles. In this context I reflect on the life of my Navajo grandmother who was part of the Indian Relocation Act of 1956. This act was put into law in 1956 and described as the Adult Vocational Training Program, the new face of colonial suppression by the United States government that removed Indians from their tribal reservations into urban cities throughout the country (United States, 1992).

When I reflect on the lives of my grandparents, I recall hearing my grandmother speak about her younger life in California. She lived in Chinatown. In her younger years, my grandmother would become a seamstress and would adopt the urban lifestyle. As she aged throughout her life the urban influence was visible to many people throughout her community. She would perm and dye her hair in her kitchen in a style that was not a normal Navajo style. She made dresses that were not your traditional Dine-style cuts with jewelry that was more glamorously styled than traditionally placed. My grandmother was indeed living in the third space described by Sharp, hybridity. She would pass away in 2005 not knowing that her grandson would be creating his third place on the Wind River Indian Reservation.

When I think back on my time in the Shoshone community I recall having many discussions about what is known as the speaker of the people (*daigwani*). The general opinion in these discussions was that these individuals need to understand what expansion of oneself looks like. In my conversations, I heard common themes of shame of individuals not knowing either the language or history of the community. I looked at the political elements of the community as well as the spiritual elements and recognized the gaps between what a leader or *daigwani* is. In

my view an accurate understanding of the concept of respect (*suvokate*) has been lost or misinterpreted, and the Shoshone language needs to be taught on a wider scale to restore it. I have seen how parts of the community think that their rights to freedom of speech override the concept of respect (*suvokate*) as seen through a Shoshone lens. One example of this is in public forums when people speak from an individualistic space instead of from a collective space. What I mean by this is we have misplaced our trust in our *daigwani* because we do not respect each other because of perpetual lateral conflict. To reciprocate respect is one of the most challenging aspects of living in a community that attacks rather than nourishes its people. Thus, the election of Shoshone community leaders should not be a practice that is taken lightly. That is the reason why creating new approaches to the language is important. We need to reenforce what these roles are and what Shoshone words really mean.

The Shoshone language has now found a space that has been created by past Shoshone academic pioneers. Beverly Crum (2001) manages to explain spiritual concepts in her book *Newe Hubia (Shoshone Songs)* that combines poetry and song:

Haainna, Tuukwi'naa'an kwaiintsi, tempin ma namattsitwenemmi, hainna,

Tukkwi'naa'an kwasiintsi, Tempin ma namattsiwenenemmi, Hainna.

Behold the tail feather of the golden eagle stands there alive on a rock, Behold, the tail of a golden eagle, stands there alive on the rock, behold. (p. 150).

The teaching of the language combines the importance of teaching about nature and reinforcing in us the notion that we need to be present and cognizant of the world we inhabit. I liked how this book encapsulates songs while teaching about life, allowing future generations to pick up where she left off. This idea brings me back to consideration of the important work of Brianna Theobald, who wrote about Shoshone women in the mid-20th century who felt that navigating

white societal groups was a form of hybridity and maintaining who they were (Theobald, 2019, p. 136). My Shoshone grandmother was always active in my mother's education during that time in their lives. My mom was born in 1959 and my grandmother sat on many committees that oversaw how her daughters would be educated. She never lost the sense of who she was but accepted Western education and encouraged my mother, who later graduated from Brigham Young University, to do so as well. This post-colonial thinking was never in question, rather it was a lifestyle she understood because of the Shoshone concepts of being present and here (*iki*).

Scholars have acknowledged that Europeans typically view their experience in any given historical moment as the standard reference point for interpretation (Sharp, 2009, p.14). This fallacious strategy has been challenged by advocates who are repatriating tribal artifacts. In 2016, PBS Independent Films followed the journey of the Northern Arapaho Tribal Historical Preservation Office (THPO) as they repatriated objects that belonged to the tribes in Wyoming (The Nation, 2019, 0:10:07). One Shoshone elder in that documentary was Philibert McLeod who spoke about a beaded medicine pouch he carried with him during the Vietnam War. He explained how the hide and beads were prayed for and kept him safe while keeping him connected to his roots and reaffirming he would return home (The Nation, 2019, 0-10:07). Again, the concept of prayer and being present (*iki*) is demonstrated because that is what connects us to where we are in life.

What comes next?

Throughout my time in ISP, I have always reflected on jobs I had while working on the Wind River Indian Reservation prior to KU. My professional background with the community consisted of creating case plans for the Eastern Shoshone Department of Family Services (ESDFS) and the Eastern Shoshone 477 Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

(ES477TANF). My interactions with the community were in providing space where Shoshone people could receive services that gave them tools to succeed.

I have now realized that I failed in terms of providing a case plan that included a key component of purpose as a Shoshone man or woman. The Shoshone language was absent in the meetings that served the community at a program level. Therefore, going forward I am proposing a framework that is based on the Shoshone language. By utilizing Shoshone epistemology, I will incorporate the Shoshone concept of space between speaker and an object. I applied this method to goal-setting that allows its users to live in the Shoshone language and is user-friendly for Shoshone tribal programs. By applying Indigenous concepts to a community, it allows for any Indigenous nations to thrive on the moral compass that drives knowledge.

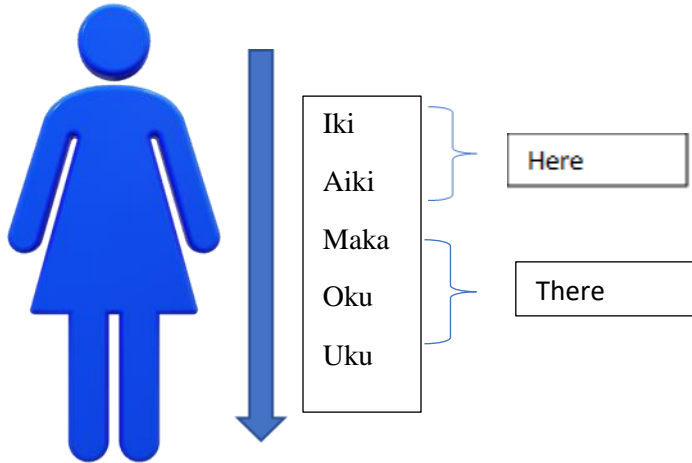
By organizing the Shoshone language structure (*iki, aiki, maka, oku, uku*) we can map goals that one strives for with (*uku*) being the furthest away, and (*iki*) is when the goal has been achieved. Once a goal has been achieved the concept of “*tenito'ai*” begins to present itself. The term which English translates to as “to sing,” describes how one’s voice has benefit and purpose for all in a ceremonial aspect. How this works regarding the Shoshone language is it teaches cultural aspects of space while incorporating western methods of goalsetting. By including these methods together in a toolbox, we can place Shoshone people in the space provided by the language. *Uku*, out of sight, is a place where we find and set our goal. *Oku*, horizon but still in sight, is where we start to plan our goal and plan our steps. In this way the concept of prayer (*nanisuntehai*) is reinforced. *Maka* (mid-point) of your goal is where you keep your positive thoughts when you have met your short-term goals. *Aiki*, close to touching, reminds us we are still a work in progress. In this phase, *aiki*, we must keep looking ahead positively, *tsan nawenagahnt*. Once your goal has been achieved and met, we enter here (*iki*). We reflect on the

process we have gone through to achieve our goal along with skills pulled from the language.

The word sing, *tenito'ai*, is used because it describes the purpose our voice has and describes how it is emerging and coming out for all. The chart below is how I propose to share this idea with the community after completion of ISP. I have spoken with Shoshone teachers who found this approach unique because it gives people lessons in the language as well combining Shoshone life lessons.

Ego (Self)

iki	aiki	maka	oku	uku
<p>Touching Intra Reflection once the goal is obtained. Reinforcing the concept of teni'toai (your voice is emerging out with benefit and purpose for all). You have achieved your goal and now you are to pay it forward. Educate and share the knowledge with others.</p>	<p>Close to Touching Working in progress tsan nawenagahnt which translates to looking ahead in a good way. You are still in the process of obtaining your goal, but you respect process.</p>	<p>Mid Distance Meeting your short-term goals. This is the time one reflects, reevaluates, and keeps positive thoughts while trusting the process. tsan suakande, having positive thoughts. This midpoint is important because it reinforces prayer and living a good life.</p>	<p>Horizon Plan your goal and set up your time frame. Organize on steps you will take to reach it. The concept of prayer nanisuntehai comes in. Your mind, voice, self is acknowledging each other.</p>	<p>Out of Sight Define and set your short- & long-term goals. Explain how you will get to your goal and why this is important to you. tsan nakantoi (good living) should be the foundation to your goal. Goals should make you a better person for the community.</p>



I am thankful to the Indigenous Studies program here at the University of Kansas for inspiring me to think beyond my own intellectual borders. I hope that my portfolio demonstrates how powerful Indigenous languages can be in understanding the world through language. My portfolio gives a glimpse into the Shoshone community through themes of spirituality, linguistic features, and epistemological grounding. Though at times throughout the conversations I have had based on Shoshone language, I have felt alone, I know that in my lifetime I have purpose and I will sing “*tenito’ai*” until my time is done. *Ussen daga* (that is it).

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