



The Fence Still Stands (Anítí t'ah ndi sizi)

by Alastair Lee Bitsóí

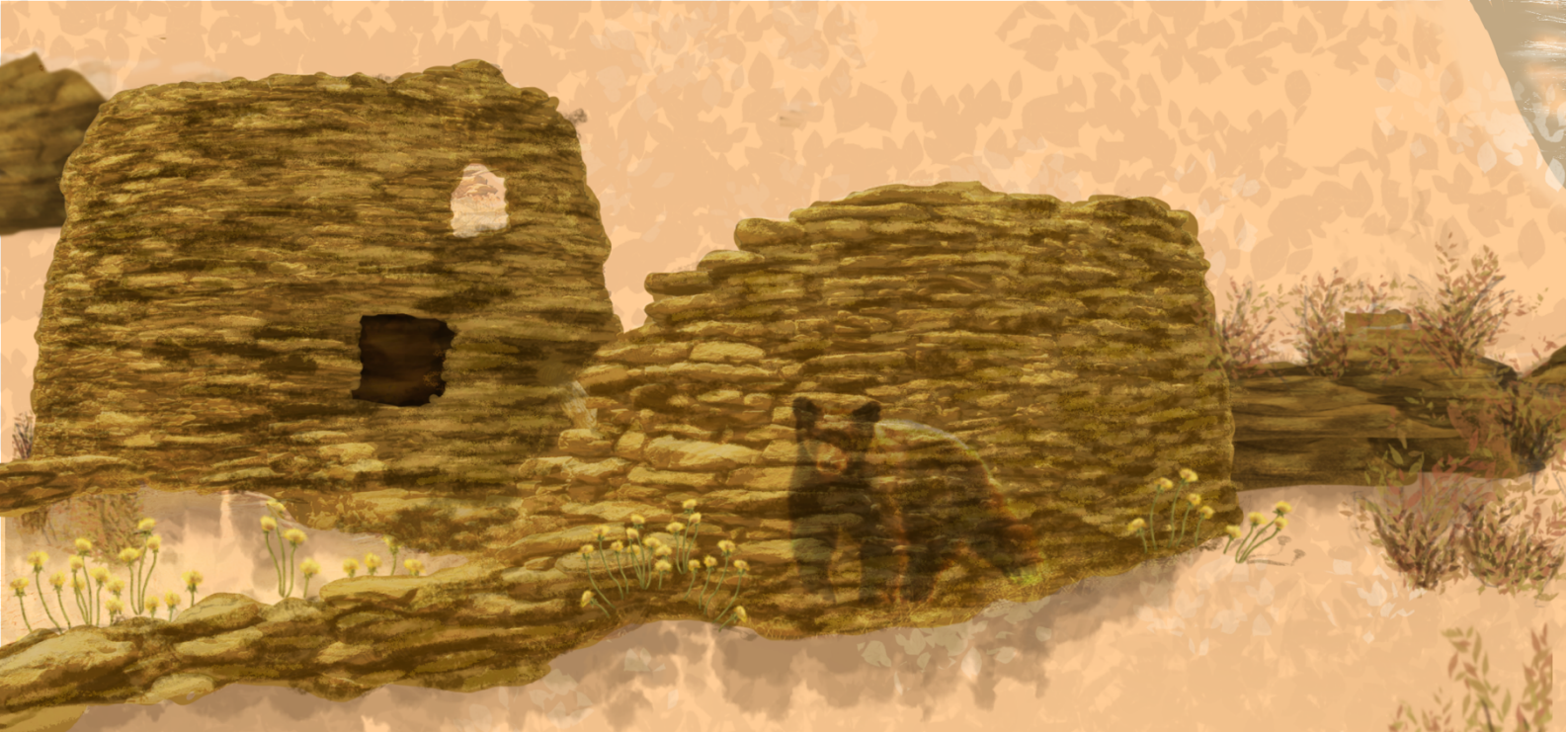
The barbed wire was being pulled by a pulley a quarter mile away, dragged across arroyos, grass, rocks, sand, and cacti to form a cross fence. Unaware of what was happening, I walked into its path. My father and uncles had designed this fence for rotational grazing across our family's more than 8,000-acre Range Management Unit (RMU). The barbs caught my face, flipped me over, and pinned me to the ground. When I opened my eyes, I saw stars. I could not breathe. I cried. I think I was around 12-years-old.

Conservation practitioners might call this unpaid labor. My family might call it ranch-hand work. Either way, it was child labor - a way of life for many Diné (Navajo) children tasked with completing chores as discipline and responsibility for their clans.

That cross fence still stands today.

Known as Tsé Ya Ti, or Down Across, our RMU is located about thirty minutes east of the Chooshgai Mountains in Naschitti on the Navajo Nation. This land has been held by my Kinyaa'aanii family for generations. Today, it is formally designated as an RMU by the Navajo Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Long before that designation, it was and remains home to my ancestors: people who raise sheep, goats, and cattle across the Naschitti Flats of canyons and grasslands and into the high country of the 9,000-foot Chooshgai Mountains.

This RMU is both rare and significant for Navajo ranching families with grazing permits. Across the Navajo Nation, which includes parts of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah, there are approximately between 7,000 and 10,000 authorized grazing permits for ranchers. Rangelands Gateway, which consists of rangeland specialists from land-grant universities and land-grant organizations, reports that the Navajo Nation has open range based on the sheep unit grazing system. Grazing permits are managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs



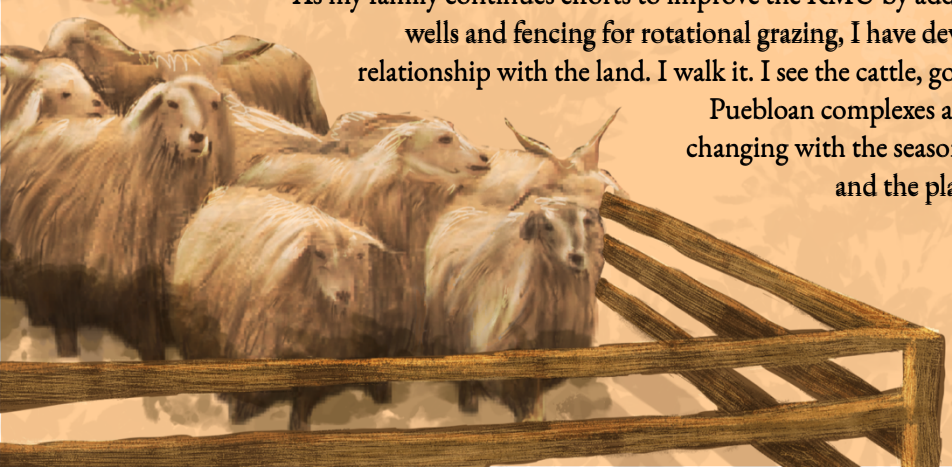
with livestock grazing in a family's historically designated grazing area, with some families organizing themselves to improve their grazing areas through a BIA/Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) approved RMU.


Meanwhile, my family's RMU is one of the few examples of Indigenous-led land management rooted in responsibility, balance, and existence. The RMU concept, developed in part by my father, Thomas Bitsóí II, his siblings, and my paternal grandmother, Irene Roanhorse Bitsóí, was created to reduce land disputes and livestock conflicts with neighboring families while improving stewardship through modern conservation land-use practices. Conversations to establish the RMU began in the 1990s with local grazing officials. Our family matriarch (my paternal grandmother, Irene Roanhorse Bitsóí) supported the decision not only because it fenced out neighboring animals and reduced conflict, but because it provided access to funding mechanisms through the NRCS. Most importantly, she supported the RMU designation of her aboriginal grazing lands because it preserved our family's relationship to the land.

The fences we built mark formal boundaries of my family's ancestral connection and reflect our grazing techniques and other ways of using the land, in line with modern notions of property and rangeland conservation. But, as is common among Navajo ranching families, our labors have inscribed these relationships in the landscape for several generations. Old wells, corrals, and houses, including ancestral complexes, all hold shared stories about our clan's past. Traditional farming techniques and movement of our sheep, goats and cattle - their grazing patterns, desired paths, the churning of their hooves - have shaped the ecology and textures of the landscape.

Tsé Ya Ti is land marked by the 'belly buttons' of generations of my family members that have buried theirs here since time immemorial. In Diné culture, burying a newborn's umbilical cord in the earth establishes a lifelong relationship between an individual and the land. It grounds a Navajo person in cultural identity and instills values of responsibility, reciprocity, and relational connection to Mother Earth. My own belly button is buried near one of the old sheep corrals.

As my family continues efforts to improve the RMU by adding basic infrastructure such as water wells and fencing for rotational grazing, I have developed my own ways to maintain my relationship with the land. I walk it. I see the cattle, goat, and sheep trails. I notice ancestral Puebloan complexes and Diné sites. I observe the landscape changing with the seasons and seek out our wild food sources and the places where our medicinal plants grow.





In addition, I've grown to acknowledge the diverse biodiversity of wildlife, including the snakes, lizards, quail, ants, coyotes, foxes, rabbits, badgers, and many other forms of life. And while horses are beautiful creatures, there is a problematic issue of ferals that continuously threaten the rangelands that as stewards requires round-up in this delicate climate.

The teachings that come from traditional farming are deeply attuned to restoring the RMU landscape. Too often, farmers and ranchers are treated as separate from 'nature', when in reality their work is interconnected. The values guiding my Kinyaa'aanii clan's efforts to heal and restore our grazing lands through modern conservation practices have since aligned with broader land protection movements. This includes elevating Indigenous voices to places like Bears Ears National Monument in southern Utah, and ongoing work that mirrors my own rematriation and queering of an eleven-acre farm on my maternal side, the To'ahani Clan. As a queer writer and human being, it is important to insert this perspective to the land because as human and non-human relatives it means being reciprocally alive with the natural world.

Having learned from the harsh experience of that barbed wire cross fence, I now approach the land with greater authority, respect, responsibility, and clarity. Tsé Ya Ti continues to shape my cultural identity, and today I stand in solidarity with my paternal clan's work to conserve and preserve our living cultural landscape for generations yet to come. The landscape does get its fair season of moisture during the summer monsoons, spring and fall rains and winter snow.

Recently, one of my bizhís - my paternal aunt - reminded me how rare and meaningful this connection is. This land has not just been shaped by our labor, but has also shaped the pathways taken by generations of my family, inspiring both cultural livelihoods, economic and academic pursuits far from home. These rangelands have influenced who I am today, and what I bring back to it as a modern farmer, a writer, and a protector of Navajo culture, language, and sovereignty.

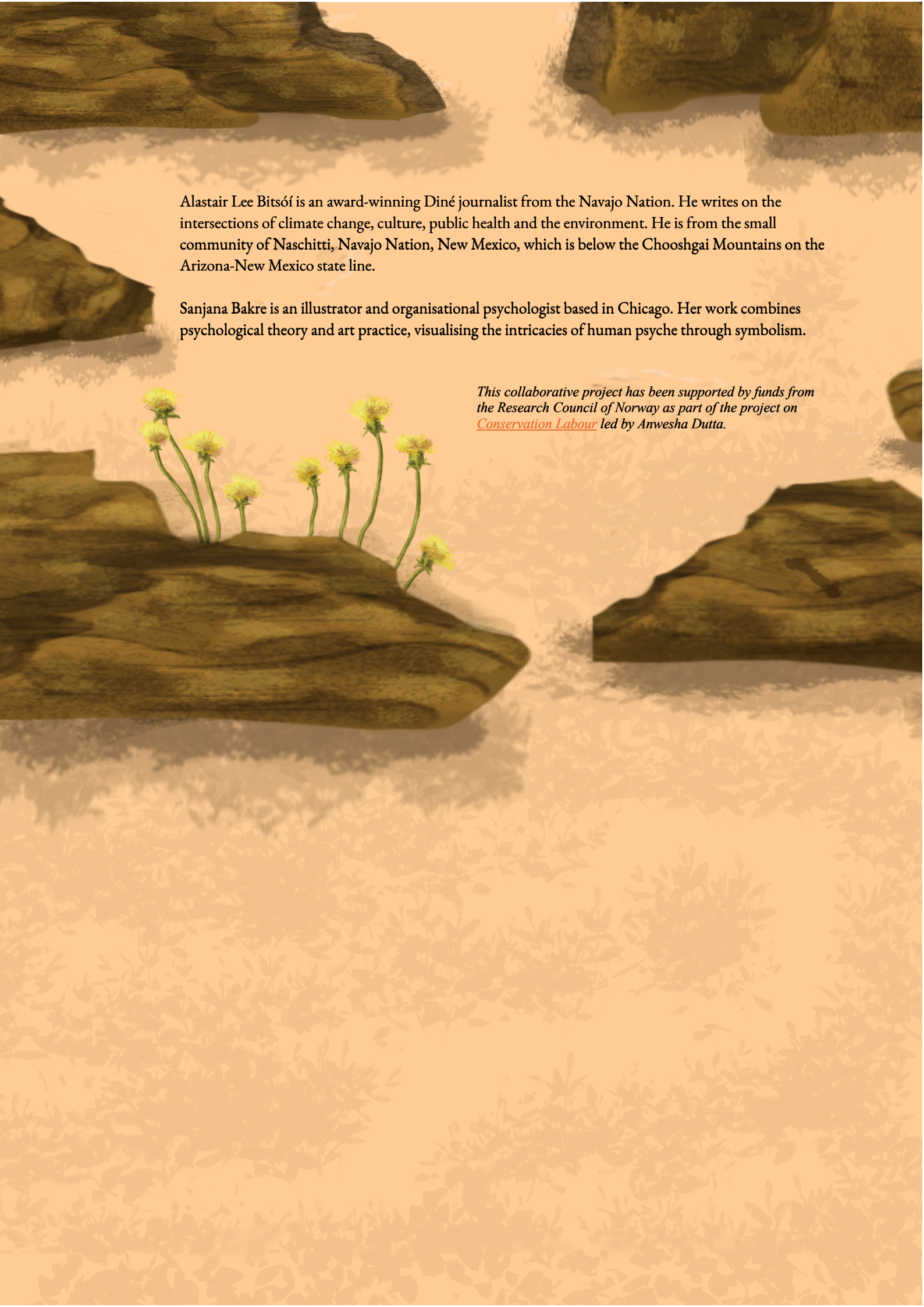
As I reflect on these ancestral truths, I have learned to approach even that barbed wire cross fence with more patience and understanding of how it still guides my life force. Maturity and respect for this way of life, though imperfect, offer pathways toward solutions for some of the world's most urgent challenges, including the revival of Indigenous, drought-tolerant food systems and land practices resilient to climate change.

Footnote

Recently, researchers Anwesha Dutta, Senior Researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway, and Emily Renn, PhD student in the School of Earth and Sustainability at Northern Arizona University, visited Tsé Ya Ti alongside Diné storyteller Sunny Dooley. They were joined by my cousin-brother Miles Bitsóí, who manages the daily work of feeding our family's sheep, goats, and dogs and hauls water for them. The visit focused on learning from the often unrecognized, unpaid conservation labor that sustains Indigenous landscapes. This is work grounded in kinship, responsibility, and survival that does not always come with external funding or formal recognition.

Illustrations by Sanjana Bakre





Alastair Lee Bitsóí is an award-winning Diné journalist from the Navajo Nation. He writes on the intersections of climate change, culture, public health and the environment. He is from the small community of Naschitti, Navajo Nation, New Mexico, which is below the Chooshgai Mountains on the Arizona-New Mexico state line.

Sanjana Bakre is an illustrator and organisational psychologist based in Chicago. Her work combines psychological theory and art practice, visualising the intricacies of human psyche through symbolism.

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