Nádleeh and the River: Third Gender and Interdependences in Sidney Freeland's Film *Drunktown's Finest*

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In a late scene in Sidney Freeland's 2014 film *Drunktown's Finest*, the family elder and medicine man, Harmon John (Richard Ray Whitman), sits down with his adult, transgender grandchild Felixia (Carmen Moore) to tell a Navajo story about the cultural importance of *nádleeh*. "A long time ago," he begins, "all the Navajos lived alongside the great river, the men, the women, and the *nádleeh* [which a subtitle translates as "third gender"]." After arguing about who was more important, men or women,

> they decided maybe they were better off without each other. The men rafted across the great river, and they took the *nádleeh* with them. For a while everything was fine. Then the men began to miss their wives and children, but they were too proud to go back so they sent the *nádleeh* back to check on things, and they returned with the message that things weren't so well with the women and that they missed the men and that they had no one to hunt. It became apparent both sides needed each other the men needed the women and the women in turn needed the men, and they both needed the *nádleeh*. To this day we carry this lesson, this balance. (minutes 79-81)

Harmon John leaves undefined what he intends with the word *nádleeh*, yet the viewer is left to assume that his grandchild, Felixia is *nádleeh*. More than that, the viewer does not get.

The *nádleeh* story, though it comes well into the film (minutes 79-81 of a 90-minute film), suggests an important theme running throughout—that of the

fundamental and inherent need for a place for the *nádleeh* in Navajo life and culture. And, given that the story does come late in the film, the viewer, while watching in the present moment, must look back mentally though what has just been seen in order to reconcile Harmon John's account of *nádleeh* and the river in the context of Felixia's experiences to which that viewer has just been witness. In that context, this essay delineates the ways in which *Drunktown's Finest* challenges heteronormative culture, on the reservation and in the border town, as it depicts and makes visible a range of views of the realities of Navajo people's experiences, including experiences centered on, but not limited to, issues of gender identity and politics. One of the central realities is the interrelatedness of different characters. Before analyzing the film's three interwoven plots, the essay contextualizes aspects of gender politics as it might play out in the film.

Although the film glosses *nádleeh* (with a subtitle) as "Third Gender," that gloss might not be as specific as it could be or perhaps as specific as is necessary. According to Wesley Thomas, writing in a different context, Felixia may well be more appropriately associated with what he terms the "feminine-male" a "fifth gender," as distinct, for example, from the masculine-female gender, that is "female bodied nádleeh/masculine females." (161). In her study "Navajo Worldview and Nádleehi," Carolyn Epple quotes one of her informants in the context of categories and definitions: "P.K.: In terms of types of queers, everyone is different here. Time and events and classification and categories, that's how you Anglos try to put everything. You get so caught up, you don't see people as humans responding to situations" (178). Furthermore, referring to her informants, Epple writes that "while *nádleehí*, as an identity, was acknowledged, the particulars of the identity remain variable… How then to define *nádleehí*? Presently, it would appear to be a nearly impossible task. Western epistemologies do not accommodate persons who are both herself and himself as well

as everything else" (184). Furthermore, according to Epple, Navajo culture understands everything in the universe as process, and thus "inseparability deals with the interconnectedness of the universe" and "individuals are also transformed into those processes" (176). One of Epple's informants declares that "the individual is inseparable from the air by which she or he survives or the ground on which she or he lives" (176). Because of the fact of this inseparability and this idea of process, Epple maintains, "we must adopt a different way of perceiving the universe, one that is processual, interconnected, and dynamic" (184). One option Epple offers, based on one of the informants, is that we see *nádleehi* "'as humans responding to situations,' that is, in terms of their interconnectedness" (184).

Alternatively, however, one might ask how important "labels" might be in an effort to more fully understand the implications of the filmic presentation of Felixia and of the challenges a transgender person faces. That is, in other words, how does the film portray the *nádleeh* character of Felixia? Director Sydney Freeland herself skirts the issue of labels. When, in an interview with Lauren Wissot for *Filmmaker Magazine*, she was asked about her character Felixia, Freeman reflected that

> labels are tricky. I am a member of both the Native community and the LGBT community. However, my goal with this film was to not go into it with an agenda. I simply wanted to tell the best possible story I could tell. My thinking is, if I can get someone from New York City to relate to the plight of a Navajo transsexual on an Indian reservation, then that kind of negates the need for labels. (Wissot np)

Despite this apparent feeling of ambivalence toward labels, however, in the same interview Freeland acknowledges the importance of casting a trans person for the lead role, reflecting on the discovery and casting of Felixia as extremely serendipitous:

> For the role of Felixia, it was very important that we cast someone who was transgendered. I'm very grateful to have met Carmen Moore, who is both trans and Navajo… [S]he brought a depth and authenticity to the character that very few people would have been able to. (Wissot np).

Cherokee scholar Qwo-Li Driskill offers an array of ways to understand some terminology related to *nádleeh* (though that particular word does not come up in the essay itself):

> The term "Two-Spirit" is a word that resists colonial definitions of who we are. It is an expression of our sexual and gender identities as sovereign from those of white GLBT movements. The coinage of the word was never meant to create a monolithic understanding of the array of Native traditions regarding what dominant European and Euromerican traditions call "alternative" genders and sexualities. The term came into use… as a means to resist the use of the word "berdache," and also as a way to talk about our sexualities and genders from within tribal contexts in English… The process of translating Two-Spiritness with terms in white communities becomes very complex. (2004, 52)

Driskill suggests that certain terms might not suffice—Queer, Transgender, Gay, for instance—and, in the context of colonialism, makes reference to "people with extra-ordinary genders and sexualities." As Native people, writes Driskill, "our erotic lives and identities have been colonized along with our homelands" (2004, 82). This linking and exposing of the interconnections between colonization, the land, and erotic lives and identities help viewers of a film like *Drunktown's Finest* see the same connections presented cinematically. Indeed, I argue here that these are central issues and questions that the film raises: what is the place of *nádleeh* on and off the homeland and what are the interdependencies between *nádleeh* and the hetereosexual characters in the context of settler cultural and political colonization?

An awareness of Navajo recognition of an interdependence is expressed succinctly in the documentary *Two Spirits* (2010), a film that documents the hate-crime murder of Fred Martinez. As Gabriel Estrada points out, the director Lydia Nibley documents the murder and thereby "affirms his/her Navajo sense of being a two-spirit 'effeminate male;' or *nádleeh*" (Estrada 168). The documentary, like *Drunktown's Finest*, includes a version of the Navajo story of the *nadleeh* and the river: "it was the *nadleeh*, it was the more effeminate less masculine men, that brought the sexes together, and that because of the *nadleeh*, our people survived. If it wasn't for the *nadhleehs*, we wouldn't be the people we are today" (qtd in Estrada 173). As Diné writer Carrie House writes, "We are significant balancing factors in the cosmos and world we live in" (qtd. in Driskil 2011, 217).

Drunktown's Finest tells the stories of three Navajo people on and off the reservation, in and around the New Mexican town of Gallup, named Dry Lake in the film. One plot involves the character of Sick Boy (Jeremiah Bitusui), a young Navajo man who is on the verge of joining the U.S. Army in order to support his family, but who, because he cannot keep himself out of jail, is ultimately denied admittance by his recruiter. After hitting a police officer, then later pummeling his mother's boyfriend, he promises his pregnant partner that he will change. A second plot involves Nizhoni (Morningstar Angeline), a soon-to-be eighteen-year-old Navajo woman who was adopted as a child by a white couple following the death of her parents in a car wreck. She is home in Dry Lake for the summer from Michigan where she has been in boarding school and to where she is to return to start college. In the meantime, she is doing community service and actively seeking—without her adoptive parent's knowledge or approval—the family of her birth parents, or "real" parents as she refers to them. A third plot tells the story of Felixia, the *nádleeh* grandchild of Harmon and Ruth John (Toni C. Oliver), living with them on the reservation just outside of Dry Lake.

Felixia is competing in a "Women of the Navajo" calendar competition (as a woman) and is having sex for pay with different men, men responding to the Facebook page, *Sexy Tranny Felixxxia*. In the course of the film, Felixia receives an offer from a man in New York, and the decision to leave the reservation and meet him there is what prompts Harmon John's telling the story of the *nádleeh* and the river, reminding his grandchild that there will always be a welcoming home for her on the Reservation with him and Ruth.

Having established contexts for each of these three characters in the opening sequences, the film follows them on and off the reservation as they move toward what interactions they do have among one another. As will be developed below, Felixia and Nizhoni discover that they are cousins, their mothers having been sisters; and Felixia and Sick Boy come together with each other at a party. These encounters only hint at the interconnections, the interdependences that the film implies, that all of the characters are subject to the same forces and cultural impositions of settler-colonialism. In this context, Andrea Smith's argument that practitioners of queer studies, as they move "past simple identity politics to interrogate the logics of heteronormativity," "have the task to uncover and analyze the logics of settler colonialism as they affect all areas of life" (43, 61). Similarly, Chris Finley argues for the importance of a "critical theory of biopower" because it has the potential to expose "the colonial violence of discourse on Native nonheteronormativity being used to justify Native genocide and the disappearance' of Native people" (Finley 40). By looking at representations of the intersections of Native and non-Native cultures in *Drunktown's Finest*, we can gain a sense of that tendency toward and resistance of that disappearance.

One can argue that the director makes erotics a way to understand the "dynamics of indigeneity." Freeland can be said to "foreground interdependence and vulnerability as positive principles of peoplehood" (Rifkin 35). Viewing the film in the

contexts of gender fluidity and structures of kinship helps clarify the interrelatedness of all three of the (only) apparently disparate plots as it simultaneously helps the viewer to rethink (colonial culture's) rigid gender boundaries. Freeman exposes those rigid, heterosexist boundaries, perhaps most obviously, through the character Sick Boy.

Sick Boy, having internalized many settler-colonial attitudes, is repulsed in stereotypical ways by anything that is not clearly heteronormative. It is thus instructive to look at how this masculine, heterosexual gender norming has been constructed. The internalization of extra-Indigenous norms is rampant throughout Native North America. According to Driskill, for example, "colonized sexuality is one in which we have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture. The invaders continue to enforce the idea that sexuality and non-dichotomous genders are a sin, recreating sexuality as illicit, shocking, shameful, and removed from any positive spiritual context" (2004, 54).

The viewer learns of Sick Boy's disinterest or lack of interest in the biological life of his little sister (over whom he has legal guardianship) when his partner Angela (Elizabeth Frances) tells him that the young girl is to prepare for her puberty ceremony.

Sick Boy: Why is Max wearing jewelry?

Angela: We're going to get a medicine man. He's going to do a puberty ceremony on her.

Sick Boy: What? When did this happen?

Angela: I would have told you if you weren't so busy running around punching cops.

Sick Boy: I'm just saying, can't this just wait until I get out of basic.

Angela: No. No, she just had her first period. It has to happen within four days of that.

Sick Boy: *Whoa. Way too much information*. (minutes 14-15) (my emphasis).

This early exchange clearly demonstrates that Sick Boy, though her guardian, wants nothing to do with any knowledge of the young woman's biological life. He lets his partner take complete responsibility. This brief scene early in the film also prepares the viewer for Sick Boy's response to other issues of sexuality.

At a grocery store Sick Boy meets Felixia, buying supplies for a party at a friend's house. He offers to drive her from the store to the party; once there, Felixia convinces him to stay for one drink, then two. In this sequence, as in others throughout the film, Freeland makes the choice to offer the viewer very stereotypical "male-gaze" shots of Felicia, emphasizing legs, hips, and breast cleavage. The director's shot-reverse-shot choices here offer the viewer a clear sense of how Sick Boy is seeing, Felixia. The filmography in this context exposes the cliché of the heterosexual male gaze at the same time it identifies Sick Boy's objectification of Felixia as female and as a sexual object. As this objectification is going on, Freeland uses dialogue to expose Sick Boy's heterosexism and homophobia. Once Felixia has accepted his offer of a ride and gotten into the car, he asks "Where're we going?"

Felixia: My friend, her name is Tracey?

Sick Boy: I know her. She hangs out with that faggot, Eugene, right? (minute 30)

Felixia seems to grudgingly accept Sick Boy's homophobia and chauvinism; that is, she lets him slide. But filmically the emphasis is on his gender prejudice in that the film exposes how out of place and inappropriate his attitudes are: "ahh . . . yeah," Felixia responds, hesitantly, and adds, with a sarcasm totally lost on Sick Boy, "That's funny." The viewer has been prepared to disapprove of Sick Boy's attitude in that there has been an earlier scene which shows Felixia and Eugene to be very good friends. Eugene prepares a fake ID for her, making the change from Felix to Felixia, opens his home and use of his computer for her, and proffers advice as a way to offer protection from disappointment and/or abuse.

These two moments in the film—Sick Boy's not wanting to hear about or even know about his sister's sexual maturity and his exposing his heterosexism—set the viewer up for his response to Felixia's physical body. The film indicates his initial physical attraction, as mentioned, with several filmic "male-gaze" shots of legs, hips, and cleavage. Felixia leads him into a bedroom, and they start kissing, but when he puts his hand between Felixia's legs, he is shocked. He springs back and runs from the house. In these ways, then, the film meticulously sets up Sick Boy as one who has internalized many of the settler-colonists' attitudes, prejudices, and chauvinistic behaviors. He is in ways a stereotypical, almost clichéd heterosexual man, gay-bashing, hitting on Felixia (whom he initially assumes to be a heterosexual woman) and being repulsed when he discovers she is not the "woman" he expected, all while his pregnant partner waits for him at home. At the same time the film shows him as homophobic and unaccepting of difference, however, it does depict him as compassionate in another context. In one brief scene he is seen sincerely helping his sister Max (Magdalena Begay) learn Navajo words, and again when he attempts to protect his six-year-old (half) brother from the child's abusive father. In short, his character is not black and white; Sick Boy does have some redeeming qualities despite his having internalized the male-heterosexual norms of settler culture. And ultimately, as we will discuss below, the film suggests he might be on the road to healing.

In the book *The Erotics of Sovereignty*, Mark Rifkin explores "the ways histories of settler dispossession, exploitation, and attempted genocide and their ongoing effects and current trajectories are embedded in the dynamics of everyday life" (2). Though Rifkin is concerned with written texts, one can certainly ask the same questions of film. In what ways can *Drunktown's Finest* be seen to "theorize dynamics of Indigenous sociality and spatiality that are not recognized as sovereignty within the administrative grid that shapes the meaning of self-determination under settler rule"

(4)? Rifkin sees erotics as "a way of exploring the contours and dynamics of indigeneity," addressing works that "foreground interdependence and vulnerability as positive principles of peoplehood" (Rifkin 35). And as noted above, Rifkin argues that part of the settler-colonists' enterprise has been and continues to be the erasure of Native cultures and people. We can see this idea of erasure as Freeland presents it in the character of Nizhoni.

Another of the film's three protagonists is Nizhoni, the Navajo woman whose non-Indian, adoptive parents have kept her from her birth-family, even hiding from her the letters and cards the grandparents have written and sent over the years. Nizhoni's adoptive parents justify this deceit by mouthing some platitudes about the right time to tell a child about such things. "There were studies," begins her father, Phillip Smiles (Mark Silversten), "that said that adopted children could be traumatized if they were reintroduced to their biological parents" (minute 73). Here Nizhoni cuts him off. Keeping the correspondence from their daughter and keeping even the very existence of her grandparents from her, they effectively attempt to erase her past and her people. This attempt at erasure is, of course, a centuries-long effort by the settler colonizers.

As noted above, the Nizhoni plot line concerns her searching for the family of her birth parents. She undertakes this search, in part, as a form of survival. With the specifics of a young Navajo woman searching the reservation for her biological family, this plot element provides the viewer a glimpse of the on-going effects of settler colonization of Native America generally. In fulfilling her work of volunteer hours for her college scholarship, Nizhoni enters the reservation with a road-kill pick up crew. Because they come across a motorist who has killed a horse and crashed her car, Nizhoni's mother, Phoebe Smiles (Debrianna Mansini), drives out from town to pick up

her daughter. Phoebe's first words are these: "You shouldn't be way out here on the reservation." As the two of them sit in the hermetically sealed car, Nizhoni confesses to searching for her birth family and says that she thought that if she could find them it would give her some sort of closure. When Nizhoni's mother asks her why she is searching for her biological family, the young woman responds honestly: "Because I actually thought it would help. I've had problems sleeping since before I can remember. And you say that it's all related to the car crash that killed my parents. I simply thought that if I met my real family, it would give me—I don't know—closure" (minute 43).

A potential underlying metaphor here is that a young Native woman is attempting to come to terms with a past that has been riddled with the destructive forces of racism, colonization, and the continuing occupation of Native lands by settlers and settler culture. The mother's response characterizes this colonial attitude:

> Nizhoni, I am simply trying to protect you. I knew your family. I knew the world they came from, and—you know what?—if I lived under the conditions they did I probably would have drank [sic] myself to death too. You have an opportunity that most people here will never have: you're going to college. You have to keep looking ahead" (minute 44).

Phoebe's comments are instructive here. Note the use of the past tense, for instance, as if like her parents, anything to do with Nizhoni's past is just that, past, dead and gone. By this logic, the daughter's obligation to herself and certainly to her adoptive parents is that she look forward, and forward in this context means away from her biological family, away from her ancestral roots, away from Native America. The moment is emphasized filmically with the mother's closing of the car window: as the viewer hears the sound of the power window closing, the camera focuses on Nizhoni with a close up of her face. Filmically, too then, the moment suggests that the young

woman is being locked in and closed off from her biological or ancestral roots. The underlying implication is that there is in fact no past to look back to. The mother's imperative is in itself a form of erasure. The very fact of this film by a Native filmmaker, however, disproves Phoebe's narrative, emphatically denies it, by insisting on the Native presence.

Pausing on this scene is important in that it is suggestive of how the filmmaker in one brief scene, located precisely in the center of the film, is portraying the forms of repression and attempt of erasure imposed by the settler culture, embodied by Phoebe Smiles, the non-Indian, upper-middle class, adoptive mother.

Although this scene is not explicitly about gender politics within the film, a telling moment in the context of colonial imbalance is when Nizhoni uses the cliché of heterosexuality in a lie to her mother to return to the reservation. The very day after the crash and her mother's lecture, Nizhoni returns, still in search of the family of her deceased birth parents. She continues her search knowingly against her adoptive mother's wishes, so when the mother calls, Nizhoni offers a lie that she knows her mother will accept unquestioningly: "I'm fine. I'm just… I'm at the mall. There's this really cute guy at Orange Julius" (minute 57). The implication, of course, is that a young girl meeting a cute guy at the mall is completely within the hetero-normative and thus something the mother will accept unquestioningly. The mother, as the viewer knows by this point, has racist and ignorant attitudes toward the Navajos on the reservation; she assumes they are all somehow dangerous and drunks. Nizhoni herself has imbibed some of that racism, telling the woman at the placement office (for her community service) that it is not safe out there:

> Youth Works Agent: You've done all your work in the city. For some reason, you haven't done anything on the reservation. Why?
>
> Nizhoni: Well, it's dangerous.

Youth Works Agent: Who told you that?

Nizhoni: My mom. (minute 12)

The exchange is worth noting in this context because it is a clear demonstration of the settler's racist and unfounded attitude toward the Navajos, and such attitudes can be seen as indicative of others, especially when such attitudes are held by a wealthy, married, heterosexual, white woman, who is an M.D. by profession. From such a position of social and economic power, she embodies these attitudes and passes them on to her adopted Navajo daughter. This is the mother who will later in the film defend her keeping knowledge of her grandparents from Nizhoni by exclaiming, "Do you think I wanted you to hang out in some shack with some drunk alcoholic relatives out on the reservation?" (minute 74)

At the point in the film when Harmon tells Felixia the story of the *nádleeh* and the river, the viewer has already witnessed the struggle for acceptance and can thus appreciate Felixia's situation and the importance of the grandfather's support. Before turning to the implications of some of those struggles, it might be informative to acknowledge Felixia's own gender identity. Felixia is surrounded by a culture that acknowledges essentially only two sexes and consequently only two genders. As Jennifer Nez Denetdale argues in another context, even in Navajoland there are only the two options: "Navajo leaders, who are primarily men, reproduce Navajo nationalist ideology to reinscribe gender roles based on Western concepts even as they claim that they operate under traditional Navajo philosophy" (2006, 9). Felixia identifies as female. She takes the feminine form of the name—Felixia rather than Felix—on the new (fake) driver's license and competes in a "Women of the Navajo" calendar competition. Her good friend Eugene calls her "girl"; and taped to the bedroom wall there are many photos of women models with whom Felixia seems to identify, photos

that she rips down after the disappointment of her exposure as trans at the calendar competition.

Another indication of Felixia's identifying as female is that on the morning of her departure, she comes into the kitchen where Ruth (the grandmother) is making frybread. Felixia takes some dough into her hands and begins preparing it for the frying pan, expertly enough, evidently, for the process meets with Ruth's approval. The viewer sees and acknowledges this approval via filmic convention: there is a cut to Ruth's face, a closeup showing her smile. The moment is significant, given the Navajo association of gender and gender roles. According to Will Roscoe, "the term *nádleehi* was used to refer to both female and male berdaches… male *nádleehi* specialized in the equally prestigious women's activities of farming, herding sheep, gathering food resources, weaving knitting, baskets… (41). And what the film does not show is a moment when Felixia participates in any of the conventionally masculine roles, such as chopping wood—an exercise, whose associations are clearly male gendered. Indeed, the film stresses this association on multiple occasions. "This wood isn't going to chop itself," Harmon says at one point in Felixia's presence.

Although Felixia identifies as female, she characterizes herself on her website as trans: "Sexy Tranny Felixxxia." And several sequences in the film serve to highlight the difficulties Felixia as *nádleeh* has with her own generation in the struggle for acceptance. Felixia's encounter with Sick Boy as noted above is perhaps the most jarring. But other sequences also depict Felixia's difficulties in seeking acceptance. Two former friends or classmates turn against her, for example, based solely on her sexual identity. In a brief early scene she sees an old friend in a casino, and he essentially snubs her by walking out as soon as she tries to start a conversation with him. In another sequence, as she's preparing for the swimsuit competition as part of her calendar audition, another contestant, an old acquaintance from school, shares her

drink which has been spiked with "Virile Grow" tablets. During the photo shoot, Felixia gets a very visible erection and runs off the stage.

Implicit in this instance is the understanding that Felixia would not be welcome or eligible to compete if the fact of her being *nádleeh* were known by the selection committee—even though Felixia can be seen to qualify based on the criteria that seem to matter: female appearance (even in bathing suit competition), knowledge of Navajo language, and overall physical attractiveness. Once exposed, as it were, however, she leaves the stage under the impression that the members of the selection committee for the "Women of the Navajo" calendar would not include a transgender contestant. Felixia is evidently correct in that no one calls her back as she runs off. Also frustrating for Felixia are her encounters with men. As discussed above, Sick Boy rejects her outright. And the men who pay for sex treat her poorly: after she's had sex with one man, for instance, he tries to short her twenty dollars then tells her to be gone by the time he's out of the shower.

According to Wesley Thomas, "Navajo gays and lesbians identify with the Euro-American notion of sexual identity rather than with the Navajo ideology of multiple genders. Because of Western schooling, extensive exposure to Western culture, and the lapsed transmission of Navajo tradition, the traditional role of both male-bodied nadleeh/feminine males and female-bodied nadleeh/masculine females is not widely known by young Navajos who would fit into these categories." (162). Although Felixia does not actually necessarily fit such categories either, Thomas's argument is applicable here in that it concerns a younger generation of Navajos. In other words, if the characters seen to interact with Felixia on a daily basis, those who knew/know this person as Felix, had a fuller understanding of or appreciation for Navajo culture and history, they would very likely have a more tolerant attitude toward their former friend.

When asked about the generational response to Navajo notions of multiple genders, director Sidney Freeland has this to say:

> I can only speak to my own experiences on this. The grandma and grandpa characters represent the more traditional aspects of Navajo culture. And one of those aspects includes the concept of 3rd and 4th genders. The mindset on the reservation tends to be more conservative, but because this is part of the culture, it made perfect sense that they would be accepting of Felixia. (Wissot np)

Even those who are fully accepting of Felixia warn her about the dangers of auditioning for the "Women of the Navajo" calendar. When her grandmother lets slip that she is auditioning, her grandfather Harmon says "Are they okay with you auditioning?" And Felixia responds, "Just says you gotta be between 16 and 25." Harmon then gives an account of his praying by mistake to an airplane he mistook for Venus, the morning star, concluding aphoristically, "What we look for and what we get aren't always the same thing." (minute 10). Felixia's friend Eugene, who has just set her up with a fake ID, also offers a warning about auditioning, saying, "Girl, can you be a little more realistic?"

Felixia: What's that supposed to mean?

Eugene: I'm sorry if I sound a little bitchy…

But he then changes his mind and say, "You know what? Give 'em hell at the audition" (minute 17). During this exchange Eugene removes his sunglasses, and Felixia and the viewer see his black eye. The implication is that he has been physically abused because of his sexual identity. When Felixia asks what happened, he responds "You do not want to know." And it is at this moment that he says "Give 'em hell." According to a brief response to the film, Navajo scholar Jennifer Nez Denetdale acknowledges that "All three characters' life stories give glimpses of the violence that Navajo women

experience, which largely continues to go unaddressed and unacknowledged. Yet, even less understood or acknowledged is the amount of violence that Navajo lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people experience, both off and on the Navajo Nation" (119). The film does address these issues and makes clear that this sort of homophobic violence applies to Eugene as well.

As instances from the plot demonstrate, Felixia is very definitely ostracized from inside and outside her own community. Sick Boy, the young man she knows in the casino, the calendar contestant, all demonstrate the difficulties Felixia faces by venturing outside the pre- and proscribed sexual norms of her community, even her own Navajo community. This bias can perhaps be seen to extend beyond the film itself. That is, one reviewer infers that the money Felixia makes from sex work must be for a sex-change operation: "we see her engage in prostitution—no doubt to pay for her gender reassignment surgery—but we're left to assume this" (McDavid, np). There is nothing in the text of the film, verbally, visually, or otherwise, to suggest that Felixia has a sex reassignment operation in mind. Does the reviewer's inference itself, given that there is no suggestion in the text of the film, suggest a tendency toward heteronormativity?

Jennifer Nez Denetdale argues that "a narrative like *Drunk Town's Finest* [sic] ignores the realities of Navajo people's experiences in border towns like Gallup, thereby making invisible and sustaining injustices, hatred, and discrimination" (2016, 119). One must grant that despite its title and Sick Boy's drinking, the film pays little attention to the issue of border-town alcohol abuse. Nor does the film pay much attention to violent crime including sexual abuse. Its focus is elsewhere. As Freeland relates in an interview with *High Country News*: "I want to tell a story about the reservation, but I don't want it to be tragic. I don't want to have a tragic ending… I didn't want to tell a story where everybody lived happily ever after, because that would

also be disingenuous and would gloss over a lot of the issues that are going on back home. So it was sort of like finding this middle ground—this middle ground that wasn't quite tragic, but wasn't quite happily ever after" (Ahtone np). Of course it is finally up to the viewer to decide how successful the director has been, but, clearly, the film does make visible some of the realities of Navajo people's experiences.

By the end of the film, both Felixia and Nizhoni are to leave the reservation. Nizhoni is returning to Michigan, but not before she has reconnected with her grandparents, the parents of her birth mother and with her cousin Felixia. Felixia too is leaving the reservation. The immediate reason for the departure is to join a man in New York, who identifies himself as Daddy Warbucks and who has sent a plane ticket, as promised: "Come out one week. I'll pay you well. Could be longer if we have chemistry" (minute 53). She has met her cousin and has, in a sense, reconciled with Sick Boy. Felixia's grandfather has shared with her the account of *nádleeh*, explaining the importance of acceptance and balance, and he has made sure she understands her family's acceptance: "I know you're… you're struggling with acceptance. This world can be cold and hard on our people. But you must always remember wherever you go, whatever you choose to do, you will always have a home here, in this place" (minute 81). Interestingly, when Harmon states that the world can be hard on "our people," he does not distinguish between *nádleeh* and Navajos more generally. This fusion, fusion through the use of the first-person plural pronoun *we*, demonstrates not only total and unquestioning acceptance of *nádleeh* but also a repudiation of any culture or group of people (or individuals?) that is unaccepting.

And where do these departures leave the viewer in the context of the issue of transgender, of *nádleeh* people in the Navajo Nation? The answer might be in the suggested interdependence of the three main characters at the points of departure.

The idea of acceptance is certainly at play when Felixia and Nizhoni meet. Nizhoni comes to the reservation on the morning of her departure, and Ruth introduces the cousins. Felixia asks "you mean like cousin cousins or Navajo cousins?" (minute 86). This meeting is the intersection of their two plots and collides both quests: Nizhoni's search for her biological family and Felixia's for acceptance. In meeting Nizhoni, Felixia finds family and acceptance from outside, from off the reservation, as it were, through her cousin. In a sense, this meeting marks the bridging of an important gap between the unquestioning acceptance of Ruth and Harmon, and that of the larger community, represented by Nizhoni. The film neither glosses over the complexities of different Navajos' responses to the idea and fact of transgender people nor suggests the future will be unquestionably smooth. Nizhoni will return to Michigan and have to figure out the place in her life of her birth family. And Felixia will undoubtedly face obstacles in New York, but will know she always has a welcoming home.

Having brought Nizhoni and Felixia together, the film, in its final sequence, can turn to the apparent reconciliation of Angela and Sick Boy. The shot-reverse-shot camera work shows the two of them looking at each other as Sick Boy begins the *kinaalda* ceremony run with his sister Max. After starting to run, he pauses, looks back to Angela, smiles, and then sets out running. Angela watches. Thus, the film shows Sick Boy perhaps on the road to healing. He is the one, after all, who has been totally unaccepting of Felixia, and who even says when he first hears of his sister's going through puberty: "too much information." Because of his lack of acceptance, the film declares that his is the character that must be addressed; this is the character most in need of learning acceptance. At the beginning of this final sequence, Sick Boy has been surprised to see Felixia again, but his concern is not with the fact that Felixia is *nádleeh*. No, his concern is that, as a married man soon to be a father, he was with Felixia at all. This moment of recognition can be seen as filmic shorthand indicating a

form of acceptance on Sick Boy's part. And Felixia's casual response, "we were both drunk. . . . This stays between you and me" demonstrates their interdependence (minute 74). Sick Boy has matured enough to accept Felixia for the person she is and enough to acknowledge his earlier inappropriate response to her, filmically a mere nod of recognition on Sick Boy's part. Analogously, his participation in the *kinaalda* ceremony demonstrates his acceptance of responsibility toward his little sister. He runs with her.

In addition to Angela and Ruth, the viewer can assume that Nizhoni and Felixia also watch the runners, and in this way they also participate in the ritual. Whatever hints concerning the road ahead for these three characters, the final glimpses of each holds promise. That is to say, in a sense, the film ends where Harmon John's story about *nádleeh* ends, with the realization that "both sides needed each other: the men needed the women and the women in turn needed the men, and they both needed the *nádleeh*. To this day we carry this lesson, this balance. (minutes 79-81).

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