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An Intersectional Approach to Contemporary Indigenous Cinema: Decolonizing Representations in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* and *Drunktown's Finest*

Abstract

This article focuses on two recent narrative feature films by Indigenous filmmakers that are conscious of intersectional power dynamics on both the level of narration and production: Rhymes for Young Ghouls, directed by Jeff Barnaby (Mi'gmaq) and released in Canada in 2013, and Drunktown's Finest, directed by Sydney Freeland (Navajo) and released in the United States in 2014. Both films present their stories through the perspectives of female or Two-Spirited lead characters. In consequence, the two movies not only challenge the still prevalent colonial gaze, but, more importantly, also re-center decolonizing perspectives that emerge from and emphasize Indigenous conceptions of gender. In doing so, both films reframe Indigenous women and Two-Spirited persons by illustrating the intersectional dynamics affecting their lives and allowing them to draw strength and develop agency through exposure to Indigenous storytelling and the epistemologies informing it.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur deux longs métrages récents de réalisateurs autochtones qui sont sensibilisés à l'intersectionnalité des dynamiques du pouvoir aussi bien au niveau de la narration que de la production : « Rhymes for Young Ghouls » réalisé par le Micmaque Jeff Barnaby et sorti au Canada en 2013, et « Drunktown's Finest » réalisé par le Navajo Sydney Freeland et sorti aux États-Unis en 2014. Dans les deux films, la narration se déploie, du moins pour des grandes parties, à travers le point de vue des personnages principaux féminins ou bispirituels. Par conséquent, les deux films contestent non seulement le regard colonial toujours courant, mais ils recentrent surtout des perspectives dé-colonisatrices qui émergent de et soulignent des conceptions autochtones du genre. Ainsi, les deux films recadrent les femmes autochtones et les personnes bispirituelles par l'illustration des dynamiques intersectionnelles qui affectent leur vie et qui leur permettent de tirer leur force et de développer leur capacité d'agir (agency) par l'exposition à la narration autochtone et ses épistémologies.

Introduction

For the longest time, cinema has shown Indigeneity through a colonial lens. If Indigenous characters were not omitted entirely from the plots, they were constructed along the lines of certain recurring types: wild and uncivilized savages, mystic creatures, obedient servants, or silly figures for comic relief. The portrayal of Indigenous women usually followed such stereotypical depictions, but they were often 'othered' even further by the racism and sexism of the colonial imagination. Hollywood films and Westerns were at the forefront of such practices. In her study *Killing the Indian Maiden*, M. Elise Marubbio illustrates how female Native characters were often reduced to the trope of a 'Celluloid Maiden,'¹ a figure that is frequently shown as "a young Native American woman who enables, helps, or aligns herself with a white European American colonizer and dies as a result of that choice" (2009, xi). Beyond that, as film scholar Lee Schweninger points out, narrative films from the past century that included First Nations and Native American characters represented them predominantly through male points of view: "The films are male centered, male oriented, male dominated, and inevitably told from a male perspective" (2013, 145). Adding to his observation, Schweninger points to a study by Angela Aleiss that recognizes a significant increase of Native actors in the American film industry during the late 1980s and early 1990s, while it also demonstrates that from 1985 to 2003, the number of Native women among those actors did not exceed one third of that of Native men. On both the levels of diegesis and production, Indigenous women and their perspectives were granted only marginal roles.

Schweninger further elaborates that it was not only narrative cinema by non-Native filmmakers that marginalized female Indigenous characters. Up to the early 2000s, many Native American filmmakers focused predominantly on male characters as well, and, accordingly, showed almost exclusively male perspectives. In many of these movies, as the film scholar elaborates, Indigenous women

are present, but they remain secondary to the film's main action. They mostly facilitate the film's almost exclusive interest in the father-son and grandfather-grandson relationship and the son's coming of age story. (2013, 148)

1 In her study Marubbio also shows how the stereotypical representation of Native women in Hollywood Western has changed in the course of the 20th century. In the century's early decades, she identifies a 'Celluloid Princess' (2009, 7) whose alliance with a white hero symbolizes the acceptance of the sovereignty of the United States, and whose death stands for the inevitable demise of Native culture. Towards the middle of the century, this princess figure is gradually replaced by the 'Sexualized Maiden' (2009, 7), a fetishized *femme fatale* figure, often of mixed blood, whose moral and social depravity stand for the perceived dangers of Native America and thus justify her death. From the 1970s onwards, the 'Celluloid Maiden' appears as a hybrid form of the 'Celluloid Princess' and the 'Sexualized Maiden'.

Schweninger illustrates his point by listing several convincing examples, including Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals*, Sherman Alexie's *The Business of Fancydancing*, and John Hazlett's *In a World Created by a Drunken God*.² Even though these films are important in that they center Indigenous stories, they fall short of representing the perspectives of Native women.

These Indigenous productions seem to follow intersectional logics as they were conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw. In her 1991 article "Mapping the Margins,"³ the critical race theorist already notes that the problem of intersectionality extends to issues of representation. She admits that scholars by then had begun to examine some of the ways in which representation can affect and perpetuate gender hierarchies. In doing so, however, most of the analyses have neglected the ways in which race and gender intersect in the construction and imagination of women of color in popular culture. In order to be able to bring such issues to light, Crenshaw points to the need of an analytic framework cognizant of this problematic:

[A]n analysis of what may be termed "representational intersectionality" would include both the ways in which these images are produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color. (1282–1283)

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- 2 To some degree, Schweninger's argument seems to hold at least some truth even until more recently and beyond a North American context. Among Indigenous films in New Zealand, for instance, Taika Waititi's highly successful feature films *Boy* (2010) and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016) are also restricted to male perspectives and focus on the relationship between father(-figure) and son and the son's coming-of-age. At the same time, it needs to be stressed that Indigenous cinema in Australia has presented strong female perspectives right from its early days: Tracey Moffatt's experimental short films, most notably *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) and *Night Cries – A Rural Tragedy* (1990), "foreground connections between history, race, and gender" (Knabe 2015, 81), deliberately exploring them through female points of view. A few years later, in 1998, Rachel Perkins' widely acclaimed movie *Radiance* brought the story of "three strong but flawed Aboriginal women [who] are portrayed with a complexity that eschews cliché and stereotype" to Australian cinemas (Marsh 2012, 6). There seems to be a tendency in the Indigenous cinemas of settler societies to focus on male characters, but there are exceptions. In Australia this becomes obvious at an earlier point in time; in North America the tipping point appears to be around the turn of the millennium.
 - 3 In this article, Crenshaw expands her conceptualization of the intersection of racism and sexism, which she had first explored in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989). Intersectionality, as she elaborates, aims to raise awareness for the problem that the lives of real people are regularly affected by the interplay of racism and sexism; and yet, feminist and anti-racist practices too often retain an exclusive focus that ignores this intersectionality. Crenshaw notes: "[W]hen the practices expound identity as 'woman' or 'person of color' as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling" (1991, 1242).

While Crenshaw's theories emerged primarily from her observations of the experiences of African American women, they are also applicable to those of other women of color. In the case of Indigenous women, narrative discourses have often followed gendered logics as well: Julia V. Emberley, for instance, points to the colonial heteronormative logic that regards "the indigenous female body [as] coded as sexual object and the indigenous male body [as] reduced to a representation of primitive male aggression" (2007, 218). Shari M. Huhndorf comes to similar conclusions, but highlights the internal power dynamics even more poignantly. She notes that "Native cultural authenticity and political resistance have been gendered male," whereas Native women came to represent either sexual victimization or "colonial complicity" (2010, 183). While popular culture's depiction of Indigenous men frequently shows them as fighting for their own people, the female Native heroines that are best remembered have usually sided with white male colonizers, assisting them in defeating their own people.⁴

The logics of such 'representational intersectionality' are also evident in the films M. Elise Marubbio and Lee Schweninger point to. However, the past decades have witnessed a significant growth of the Indigenous film scene in and beyond North America. As the films have diversified, so have the perspectives that are shown by contemporary Indigenous filmmakers: an increasing amount of these films focus on female protagonists, and film festivals nowadays highlight the rising number of women among Indigenous directors, actors, and producers.⁵ By changing the perspectives, these films also become more aware of the problem of 'representational intersectionality,' showing female protagonists and Two-Spirited characters⁶ in roles

4 In her article "Taming Aboriginal Sexuality," Jean Barman notes that historians working on Aboriginal peoples often almost inevitably fall in the trap of a male bias: "Records almost wholly male in impetus have been used by mostly male scholars to write about Aboriginal men as if they make up the entirety of Aboriginal people. The assumption that men and male perspectives equate with all persons and perspectives is so accepted that it does not even have to be declared" (1997–98, 238). Along similar lines, Shari M. Huhndorf emphasizes that there is a gendered division in the representation and remembrance of Native peoples: "[T]he role of the traitor falls most frequently to Native women, who are remembered, if at all, almost exclusively as collaborators in the invasion. They stand in stark contrast to the chiefs and warriors, gendered male in popular memory but not always in historical fact, who resisted the invaders and became objects of an ambivalent American fascination with so-called savagery" (2010, 281).

5 In 2017, almost three quarters (72%) of films shown at the Toronto-based Indigenous film and media art film festival *ImagineNATIVE* – the largest of its kind – were directed by Indigenous women (imagineNative 2017, n.p.).

6 The term 'Two Spirit' is an umbrella term used to describe non-binary gender identities and the traditional roles associated with them in Native and First Nations communities. As Qwo-Li Driskill (2010, 72) explains, the term emerged in the early 1990s out of contemporary Indigenous communities as an alternative to problematic colonial terms, such as 'berdache' (see also Morgensen 2015, 43–44). While some prefer terms like 'Native queer' or 'Native trans,' many have adopted 'Two Spirit,' which is also meant as a challenge "to the white dominated GLBTQ community's labels and taxonomies" (Driskill 2010, 73). The meaning of the Western concepts is usually restricted to sexual and gender identities, whereas the meaning of the term 'Two Spirit'

that help to renegotiate their public perception. Contemporary Indigenous films often reflect on the characters' multiply marginalized statuses, and, accordingly, raise awareness of the heightened impact of colonial violence, institutional as well as individual discrimination, and other kinds of intersecting power dynamics that have left their mark on the cinematic representation of Indigeneity in the past and the present.

Two recent feature films that successfully work against such 'representational intersectionality' are *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, directed by Jeff Barnaby (Mi'gmaq) and released in Canada in 2013, and *Drunktown's Finest*, directed by Sydney Freeland (Navajo) and released in the United States in 2014. In both films, the narration unfolds – at least for significant parts – through the perspectives of female or Two-Spirited lead characters. In consequence, I argue, they not only challenge the still prevailing colonial gaze, but, more importantly, they also center decolonizing perspectives that emerge from and emphasize Indigenous conceptions of gender. In doing so, both films reframe Indigenous women and Two-Spirited persons by illustrating the intersectional dynamics affecting their lives and by allowing them to draw strength and develop agency through exposure to Indigenous storytelling and the epistemologies informing it.

Rhymes for Young Ghouls

Rhymes for Young Ghouls is set on a fictional Mi'gmaq reserve during the 1970s, called the Red Crow reserve. The film essentially tells a revenge story. It centers on Aila (played by the Mohawk actress Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs), a young Mi'gmaq woman who decides to stand up against the evil Indian agent Popper (played by Mark Antony Krupa) who mercilessly runs the reserve, is responsible for her father's incarceration, and exerts violence and terror on Aila and everyone else in Red Crow.

In a press statement, director Jeff Barnaby explains his decision to write this story with a strong woman as its lead character:

All the cinematic Native heroes that I've encountered in my life up to this point have worn buckskin, have been men, and were more often [than] not, not actually Native. The real heroes I've encountered in my life,

deliberately aims to point to "gendered experiences and identities outside dominant European gender construction" (2010, 73) along with their cultural significance in the respective Indigenous communities. While the experiences of Native queer and Two-Spirited people differ from those of Native women, they, too, are affected by expressions of 'representational intersectionality.' In "Mapping the Margins," Kimberlé Crenshaw points to intersectional dynamics affecting Black gay men, who are targets of homophobic humor emerging from prominent representatives of the Black community. Crenshaw notes that "[c]ritics have linked these homophobic representations of Black gay men to patterns of subordination within the Black community" (1991, 1294, fn. 177).

growing up on reserve, have been women and every inch of them Indian. (Prospector Films 2009, n.p.)

Reflecting upon his own experiences and these role models of his youth, Barnaby explains that his motivation for constructing Aila's character in the way he did is essentially rooted in his awareness of the intersectional dynamics that are at play. He elaborates:

I think about the era these women grew up in, the 60's and 70's, where you were sub-human for being Native, and sub-atomic for being a Native woman, and I marvel their will. And it was out of that will that Aila was born, it was the brutal reserve life that she was born into that necessitated the will to be something other than just another girl, to see all the full contact ugliness of being Indian and turn it into humor, or pride, to turn it into something beautiful and not be ashamed of where she, where we come from. (Prospector Films 2009, n.p.)

Barnaby emphasizes that he, too, recognizes that the Native women of his youth were particularly exposed to intersectional dynamics. The problem of being located in this position, as Kimberlé Crenshaw has repeatedly emphasized, "is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1989, 140), and accordingly requires a will to survive that is particularly pronounced.

Right from the beginning of the film, this will to survive in conditions that are everything but inviting is perhaps the strongest trait in the character of Aila. The story is set into motion seven years prior to the main action, at a time when Aila is eight years old. In the dark prologue of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, Aila recounts the night her mother Anna (played by the Métis/Cree actress Roseanne Supernault) accidentally kills her own son while she tries to back the family car after a night she has spent drinking with Aila's father Joseph (played by the Mi'gmaq actor Glen Gould) and her uncle Burner (played by the Mohawk actor Brendon Oakes). On the day that follows, Aila awakes to the screams of her father, who is about to be arrested by the Indian agent. When Aila goes outside to find out about what is going on, her father's warning not to look cannot stop her from finding her mother hung from the rafter of the house. Following Aila's gaze, the prologue ends with a close-up of the dead mother. Just before the scene turns to black, Aila states in the voice over: "The day I found my mother dead, I aged by a thousand years" (*Rhymes* 2013, 00:07:10).⁷ From the age of eight, as Christopher E. Gittings adequately puts it, Aila has to "confront trauma head on" (2018, 232) – but as one of very few other characters on the re-

7 Christopher E. Gittings (2018, 232) points to an interesting parallel: Aila also introduces the character of Old Man, a friend of her grandfather, as "aged by a thousand years" after he survived and returned from a World War II-battle in Japan. She thus aligns herself with a 'warrior' figure.

serve, she finds ways of coping without getting lost in the rampant drug and alcohol abuse most of the other people in her community seem to have adopted as a way of dealing with their situation.

This, however, is not meant to suggest that Aila is a perfectly innocent character. Quite the contrary is the case. Even though she does not take drugs herself, she is actively involved in the drug economy on the reserve. Not long after her father is sent to prison, as the spectators learn later, she has not only joined her uncle in his business of selling marijuana to members of their community, but she has really taken the operation into her own hands. After her father Joseph returns home, he witnesses in disbelief how his daughter has taken a role he had neither suspected nor hoped for. Surprised and reproachful, he demands to know of his brother Burner how Aila came to participate in this line of business: "Where'd she learn how to do all that!? You're supposed to be taking care of her, Burner, not her taking care of you!" (*Rhymes* 2013, 00:30:20). Burner can only apologetically respond that he was not the one pushing her into this job, but that she has really taken over herself:

Do you even know your girl, man? Huh, Joe!? She's a coupling of Anna, Ceres, and you're a fucking hardhead. She can beat people after the apocalypse. What makes you think any of this was my idea? [...] You've been gone a long time, Joe. That ain't no little girl no more. (*Rhymes* 2013, 00:30:35)

Only a few moments later in the same scene, it becomes obvious just how clearly the roles in their operation are divided. The conversation with Joseph leaves Burner with a guilty conscience, and he walks over to the table where Aila is preparing and selling the drugs. When he asks her to let him take over, Aila only replies: "You can't roll for shit" (*Rhymes* 2013, 00:31:40). Burner, after being shown his place by his adolescent niece, is only allowed to take over when he points out that all of their potential customers are in a drunken and ignorant state anyways. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, it is the young Mi'gmaq woman Aila who is given the role of the strong, warrior-like figure. Her character thus inverts the classical representation of the 'Celluloid Maiden.' But at the same time, her morally questionable behavior – she takes, after all, a leading role in supplying her own community with drugs – defies both classical Western and Indigenous expectations of this figure. Transcending the clichés, Aila instead reflects Jeff Barnaby's vision: To survive on the reserve, she cannot act in ethically flawless ways. Her role as a transgressive young woman forces her to embrace the "ugliness of being Indian" (Prospector Films 2009, n.p.).

Her uncle's comment points to the sources of Aila's will to survive: her mother Anna and the elderly, grandmother-like figure Ceres. Aila's strength is predominantly rooted in the unique bond the film's protagonist maintains with these two women. In the case of her mother Anna, this strong bond even transcends death. Even though the Aboriginal woman has committed suicide early on in the story, she

retains a forceful and seemingly empowering presence in Aila's life. The first time Anna reappears is in the dreams of her daughter. On Halloween, Aila dreams about visiting her mother's grave. As she is standing there, her mother emerges from the earth in the shape of a zombie. When the dead Anna approaches her daughter, Aila steps back only for a brief moment, after which she is no longer afraid to get closer and to listen to her mother's demand: In Mi'gmaq, Anna asks her daughter to take vengeance (*Rhymes* 2013, 00:34:10).

Kaiama L. Glover explains that in Haitian voodoo mythology, where the figure of the zombie finds its origins, such living corpses are seen as "being[s] without essence" (2011, 59):

Not at all the crazed, bloodthirsty monster of Hollywood fame, compelled to hunt down humans and feast on their brains, the zombie in Haiti is a victim – deserving of pity more than fear. Without any recollection of its past or hope for the future, the zombie exists only in the present of its exploitation. It represents the lowest being on the social scale: a thingified non-person reduced to its productive capacity. (2011, 59)

The zombie is the white, enlightened man's 'other,' signifying the social death – the non-humanity – of African slaves and Indigenous peoples (Maddock Dillon 2019, 626). However, as Elizabeth McAlister contends, the zombie is also "an example of a non-western form of thought that diagnoses, theorizes, and responds mimetically to the long history of violently consumptive and dehumanizing capitalism in the Americas from the colonial period until the present" (2012, 468). In consequence, as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon proposes, the zombie is not as silenced as it appears to be: It "speaks to the long histories and current crises of human and inhuman assemblages, to forms of life and capitalist contestation articulated at a biopolitical level" (2019, 628). What is more, it is not necessarily stuck in-between life and death for eternity. Kaiama L. Glover elaborates:

If the zombie ingests even a single grain of salt, it is brought out of this state of lethargy and is immediately transformed into a *bois-nouveau* [new wood], suddenly awake and aware of its situation. As such, while the zombie's subjugation is profound, it is not necessarily definitive. (2011, 59-60)

Pointing to the scene when Aila dreams of being visited by her mother's living corpse, Christopher E. Gittings suggests that it is really the entire Mi'gmaq community on the reserve that is zombified in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. They are transformed "into something unrecognizable through their retreat into alcohol and drugs to repress the evil of trauma caused by residential school" (2018, 236) – a behavior that represses their recollection of the past as well as their hope for the

future. The physically zombified mother that appears to Aila, on the other hand, is shown as “a source of energy” (2018, 236) that has regained her sense of identity and therefore literally calls Aila to act against the terrorism exerted by the colonial regime. To Aila, the apparition of her dead mother is the ‘grain of salt’ that opens her eyes to the need to work against the apathy within her community and reclaim agency.

The connection to her mother remains Aila’s strongest ‘source of energy’ throughout the film. The most prominent signifier for the strong bond between the two Aboriginal women is a sketchbook Aila carries with her at all times.⁸ In one scene, when Aila visits the elderly Ceres, the empowering presence of the mother becomes apparent through the book. As Ceres tells Aila a tale in Mi’gmaq about a blood-thirsty wolf that eats Mi’gmaq children, Aila discovers that her mother’s sketches depict the very same story. At the end of the tale, during which a subjective camera showing the sketches in the book changes from Aila’s point of view into a sequence that transforms Anna’s sketches into a graphic animation, Ceres emphasizes the connection between the young woman and her mother, saying “[b]efore they took me off to school, my mother told [the story] to me. Your mother is telling it to you, too” (*Rhymes* 2013, 00:23:10). Christopher E. Gittings reads the scene “not just [as] an allegory for the residential school system, but for the entire Canadian capitalist industry and economy that is dependent upon consuming First Nations and their territories to live” (2018, 236). Beyond that, and just as importantly, the scene illustrates the significance of transmitting Indigenous stories and the knowledge they contain via the community’s women.

The lasting bond between the women seems to be what gives Aila the strength to be “something other than just another girl” (Prospector Films 2009, n.p.), as director Jeff Barnaby emphasizes in his statement. It is this knowledge, transmitted by the Mi’gmaq women from her family and community, that helps Aila *not* to be as easily victimized by the colonial system and its various ways of exerting epistemological and physical violence, but to gather the strength to subvert it instead. Referring to Indigenous writers, Julia V. Emberley points to the strong pedagogical objective in Indigenous storytelling: “Engaged in a process of retelling, that is, in fact a ‘telling’ of the stories that hold the teachings, Indigenous literatures today are restoring a sense of balance to Indigenous urban and remote communities” (2010, 4). In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, this function of ‘retelling’ is ascribed to three generations of Mi’gmaq women: By hearing the story Ceres has already heard from her own mother, and by discovering the very same one in the sketchbook, Aila is not only exposed to the Indigenous perspectives that are transmitted through the tale, she also understands more clearly what it is she needs to fight for. At the same time, Aila – as

8 Christopher E. Gittings also points to the “ever-present sketchbook” (2018, 234) that he reads as a totem that emphasizes “that even though colonialism has taken Anna away from Aila, the connection cannot be severed” (236).

protagonist and occasional narrator – retells a personalized version of this wolf-allegory herself, translating her own experiences into the story the two women have taught her.

However, Aila's version of the story deviates in some crucial passages from the original. In Anna's and Ceres' version, the wolf first eats all the paralyzed Mi'gmaq children in a state of delusion before he ultimately devours himself:

The wolf was all alone. Sick and alone. He leaves and goes to the forest. As he's walking around, he sees a tree. He begins to hallucinate. Mi'gmaq children are hanging from the tree. The wolf, so hungry, blacks-out. And he shakes the tree real hard. Until the children begin to fall. He sees them as though their heads have become mushroom caps and their bones as stalks. He begins to eat, and eat. Until finally, he's eaten all the children.

[...] Not knowing what to do, he continues to eat. As he sits there, he begins to eat his tail, he gets to his stomach, and begins to eat his stomach. He finishes his stomach, then gets to his heart and eats his heart. He has finished his heart completely, and then has finished eating himself. (*Rhymes* 2013, 00:22:20)

Anna's sketches of the wolf emphasize its connection to industrialized capitalism: he lurks through a dystopian urban environment, has chimneys growing out of its back, and does not shake the Mi'gmaq children down from an actual tree but from a set of power poles. Greedily consuming the Mi'gmaq children, this figure is really a personification of the monstrous qualities of colonialism, which are particularly harmful to Indigenous families.

In Aila's version of the story, Popper is a personified version of the wolf, and the devouring of children symbolizes the assimilationist practices of the residential school he administers. Until the 1980s, residential schools like the fictionalized one on the Red Crow reserve were a grim reality in Canada: They were used as a strategic tool to separate Indigenous children from their parents in order to assimilate them into white Canadian society. The motivations to do so were ultimately economical: "If every Aboriginal person had been 'absorbed into the body politic,' there would be no reserves, no Treaties, and no Aboriginal rights" (Truth & Reconciliation Commission 2015, 3). In its final report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission therefore declares these institutions to be a constitutive element of the country's "cultural genocide" (1) against its Indigenous peoples.⁹ Like the wolf in the story, the schools

9 "Cultural genocide," as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission explains, refers to targeted measures aimed at "the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group" (1). The measures implemented by Canada and directed against its Indigenous peoples included the seizure of and forcible removal from Indigenous lands, the banning of Indigenous languages and spiritual practices, as well as the disruption of families "to prevent

were devouring Indigenous children, aiming to strip them off all ties to their culture, and more often than not exposing them to the physical, psychological, and sexual abuse by the persons running the institutions. In *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, the Indian agent is shown to engage in all of these forms of abuse against the Mi'gmaq children in school and the people on the reserve.

Aila, on the other hand, is not like the paralyzed children from the story. For her, hearing the Mi'gmaq story from Ceres in her own language constitutes a subversive act, as Christopher E. Gittings points out: This "storytelling in a language that [the residential school] St. Dymphna's works to kill, is a testimonial narrative that repairs the matrilineal transmission between Anna and Aila ruptured by the trauma of colonialism" (2018, 236). The story does indeed seem to play a crucial role in empowering the Aboriginal girl. Once Aila is familiar with it, it does not take long until Anna appears in her dreams and asks her daughter to take vengeance (*Rhymes* 2013, 00:34:10). From then on, Aila takes matters into her own hands and mobilizes support for the rebellion against the despotism of the Indian agent Popper, who is ultimately killed in the film's final showdown – in the moment he is about to rape her. In Aila's version of the story, Popper – just like the wolf in Anna's and Ceres' version – also goes down because of his insatiable greed.

Towards its ending, the film once again highlights the significance of the bond between the three women for the transmission of knowledge and the maintenance of a purpose in life. Just before the final showdown, as Aila looks through the sketchbook, Anna appears to her daughter one last time. The 15-year-old Aila observes a scene from her memory, watching her younger self and her mother. As Christopher E. Gittings (2018, 236) points out, the scene shows a loving and caring mother who is neither zombie-like nor intoxicated. Aila watches as the two characters from her past are painting one of her mother's sketches onto a door – the facial features of a stereotypical Indian man wearing a headdress. The older Aila watches her younger self as their mother teaches her how to paint; but she also learns about the meaning of the images she produces: it is a practice that has a subversive, decolonizing significance. The stereotypical Indian is not originally an image from their culture, as Anna has to admit to her daughter. However, it is an image that, when re-appropriated by two Mi'gmaqs, may evoke a fear of losing control in non-Native people. Anna explains to her daughter: "Drawing an Indian on some piece of wood isn't that big of a deal. Two Indians drawing an Indian is" (*Rhymes* 2013, 01:15:35). In this scene, Anna teaches her daughter to reclaim authority over representations of Indigeneity. For the older Aila, re-witnessing this scene seems to trigger an epipha-

the transmission of values and identity from one generation to the next" (1). Residential schools were the key instrument for reaching the last goal. At the core of these inhumane measures were economic interests. The Commission elaborates: "The Canadian government pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources. [...] [It is] estimated that at least 150,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students passed through the system" (3).

ny: She realizes that the bond with her mother has always been a key factor for maintaining a meaningful connection to her own culture – and beyond that, it has now become the source for her strength to continuously subvert colonial powers and discourses.

Rhymes for Young Ghouls strongly emphasizes this mother-daughter relationship, and it ascribes a significant decolonizing power to the female transmission of Indigenous knowledge between Ceres, Anna, and Aila. The ending of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* does not pretend that Aila has been liberated from all predicaments and disadvantages. Her father, despite being innocent of the crime, takes the blame for the killing of Popper and is sent back to prison, so that Aila is once again left without parents. Even though there might be hope, and even though the monstrous antagonist is gone, Aila remains in a situation that is not all that different from the one she was in at the end of the film's prologue. However, by centering the narration on Aila and by highlighting the subversive potential of this all-female bond, the film consciously counters the representational intersectionality that has functioned as a void for celluloid Indigenous women in the past.

Drunktown's Finest

There are several parallels between Jeff Barnaby's *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* and Sydney Freeland's *Drunktown's Finest*: Both films are set on reservations/reserves, both try to point to the absurdity of simplistic and stereotypical portrayals of Native communities as dysfunctional, and both films approach their subjects from points of view that are still only rarely seen in narrative cinema. *Drunktown's Finest* is set on and around the place from which it derives its name: Dry Lake – a fictionalized version of the New Mexican city of Gallup, immediately bordering the Navajo Nation reservation and once infamously labeled 'Drunk Town USA.'¹⁰ The film follows the lives of three quite different Navajo characters whose paths ultimately cross at a traditional initiation ceremony in the film's final scenes. The three protagonists include Luther 'Sick Boy' Maryboy (played by the Navajo/Omaha actor Jeremiah Bit-sui), an impulsive young man who is constantly getting into trouble and, by doing so, jeopardizes his young family; Nizhonie (played by the Navajo actress Morningstar Angeline), a young woman who is raised by white Christian foster parents and eventually comes to the reservation to find her biological family – against the will of her adoptive parents; and Felixia (played by the Two-Spirited Navajo actress

10 In an article for the *Native Peoples Magazine*, Tara Gatewood elaborates on how Gallup, NM, which is also Sydney Freeland's hometown, has gained a nation-wide reputation "as a place mired in alcoholism" (2014, 44). The city was even labeled 'Drunk Town' in a controversial segment of ABC television's current affairs magazine *20/20*. While the community has changed significantly, the notorious name stuck. In Gatewood's article, Freeland explains that she wanted to contribute a more holistic perspective: "I'm not trying to change people's minds about any particular subject. I just want to do an honest portrayal of this community, where there's good stuff and bad stuff" (Freeland qtd. in Gatewood 2014, 44).

Carmen Moore), a promiscuous Two-Spirited woman whose dream it is to become a photo model and to be featured in the 'Navajo Women of the Tribe' calendar.

From a perspective that focuses on representational intersectionality, the character of Felixia is particularly interesting. In several scenes, Felixia's life is affected by her Two-Spiritedness. While her life on the reservation does provide spaces where she can be herself, she is also frequently discriminated against because of her sexual identity. Felixia has multiple affairs with several local men, but attitudes on the reservation require all of them to keep these liaisons secret.¹¹ When she meets one of them in the casino, who just a few scenes earlier paid her for a sexual encounter in his car, he gets visibly uncomfortable and tries to get away from her as quickly as he can (*Drunktown* 2014, 00:19:40). When she seduces Sick Boy – who, at the time, is under the influence of alcohol and marijuana and willing to betray his pregnant girlfriend – he is shocked to find out that Felixia has a penis and causes a scene (*Drunktown* 2014, 00:37:50). Also when she spends the night with a notorious gang member who has previously been shown as acting tough, Felixia is rudely kicked out of the motel room in the morning (*Drunktown* 2014, 00:40:45). The various Navajo men Felixia encounters come from very different backgrounds. They are all quite keen on engaging in sexual relationships with the Two-Spirited woman, but none of them is willing to admit to these affairs publicly. In the already underprivileged space of the reservation, a prevalent transphobic climate pushes Felixia even further to the margins.

The scene that illustrates Felixia's struggles on the reservation best is the casting for the 'Navajo Women of the Tribe' calendar. It is Felixia's greatest dream to have her photo featured in the calendar. However, she is well aware of the fact that her Two-Spiritedness may stand in the way of reaching this goal. Accordingly, she has organized a fake ID card that identifies her as a woman. Initially, during the first round of the casting, things seem to go as planned. While many of the other candidates are quickly dismissed because they are unable to speak Navajo, and are thus deemed unsuitable as representatives of Navajo culture, Felixia – who was raised by her traditional grandparents – impresses the jury with her eloquence in the language and the details she can provide about her Navajo background (*Drunktown* 2014, 00:26:40). Eventually, however, things take a different turn. In the early stages of the casting, Felixia runs into Karah (played by the Dakelh actress Shauna Baker), another

11 As Brian Joseph Gilley elaborates, Christian moral values played a crucial part in undermining and vilifying Native perceptions of Two-Spiritedness/gender diversity on reservations: "By 1883 the Indian agents overseeing Native populations on reservations and the Christian missionaries they supported were using the Code of Religious Offenses, or Religious Crimes Code, to aggressively attack Native sexual and marriage practices. The Code outlawed many of the ceremonial and public gatherings that Native people used to maintain their social and religious organization. The Code also attempted to restrict tribal practices of polygamy and pressure Natives to adopt Euro-American ideals of monogamy and lifelong marriage. Tribal peoples who did not abide by the Code were arrested and punished" (2006, 14). See also FN 13.

contestant she still knows from her high school days – a time when she was not yet Felixia but Felix. Karah is visibly irritated and slightly appalled by Felixia's new identity. Later, in the casting's second round, as the contestants get dressed for a photo shooting, Karah tricks Felixia into drinking her energy drink – into which she has mixed a Viagra-like substance. Shortly afterwards, as Felixia starts to pose for the shooting, she develops an erection that is impossible to miss. Everyone's gaze along with the photographer's camera lens is directed at her loins. Felixia's secret is exposed and she rushes to leave the scene. She does so because she knows that even the jury – who earlier on insisted on casting only 'authentic' representatives of Navajo culture – will now no longer accept her as a Navajo woman.

The tragic irony of the scene, and of most of Felixia's experiences on the reservation up to this point, is that Two-Spirited people have taken key roles in traditional Navajo communities up to and beyond the point of colonization. Will Roscoe's study *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Gender in Native North America* illustrates that people transcending the binary distinction between male and female have always existed in Navajo tradition. Known as *nádleehí*, Two-Spirited people often held highly significant roles in their communities. Roscoe elaborates:

Female *nádleehí* gained prestige in men's pursuits such as hunting and warfare, while male *nádleehí* specialized in the equally prestigious women's activities of farming, herding sheep, gathering food resources, weaving, knitting, basketry, pottery, and leatherwork. Many *nádleehí* combined activities of men and women, along with some traits unique to their status. By engaging in both farming and sheepherding, along with the manufacture of trade goods, they were often among the wealthier members of the tribe. The only activities that male *nádleehí* did not perform were warfare and hunting, which were strictly male, and carding and spinning wool, which were reserved for women. (1998, 41; emphasis in the original)

Non-Indigenous people, educated according to the norms of the European-Christian tradition, regarded such Indigenous gender perceptions for the longest time to be at odds with their own ideas of morality and, accordingly, often saw them as aberrant. As Scott L. Morgensen elaborates, some of the key aspects of the colonization of the Americas were structured around the European/Western binary of male-or-female. Referring to Deborah Miranda's investigation of the "Extermination of the *Joyas*" during the Spanish colonization of California, Morgensen points out that the early colonizers deliberately singled out gender-variant men, classified them as 'sodomites,' and practiced a form of 'gendercide' upon them.¹² These brutal

12 Scott L. Morgensen borrows the term from Deborah Miranda, who explains that Two-Spirited people were specifically targeted in the process of the Spanish colonization of California. The

realities of colonial expansion, as Morgensen suggests, were not only directed at the Two-Spirited individuals who were killed, but really sought to fracture Native communities at their core: "Colonial violence against individuals also sought to violently restructure Indigenous peoples as a whole, so that the shared values that had accepted gender or sexual diversity would disappear" (Morgensen 2015, 43).

Morgensen further argues that the forms of European masculinity (or, for that matter, European conceptions of gender) retained a colonizing impact that eventually led Indigenous communities to accept the moral superiority of European gender systems, while internalizing the view that aspects of their own systems – and particularly the central role of gender diversity – were inferior. Morgensen describes this process of gradually accepting and reproducing European gender norms in Native communities:

[European masculinities existed] on others' territories, while affirming their own morality as well as the immorality of those whom they ruled through intimately colonial relationships. Violence continued, because colonization itself is violence; but it also was elaborated, as modes of policing, reeducating, and assimilation became methods for colonizers to secure an integrity they still perceived to be under threat. Targeting indigeneity as an origin of an "immorality" colonizers knew resided, or originated in, themselves, "colonial masculinity" served to control Indigenous people through the moral education of subordinates, even as this educative activity served to prove that colonial morality was secure. (2015, 45)

In the Navajo community, there is evidence for at least this latter, epistemological colonization of its traditional gender delineations. By the 1930s and 1940s, as Will Roscoe elaborates,

white ridicule and changing Navajo attitudes had created significant pressures on *nádleehí* not to cross-dress. In the absence of this traditional marker of their status, one finds them described simply as "bachelors" or men "not interested" in women. (1998, 43; emphasis in the original)

A recent report on *The Status of Navajo Women and Gender Violence* by the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission points out that such internalized attitudes – despite being limited in understanding of the *nádleehí*'s cultural significance – were gradually institutionalized and imposed upon Indigenous communities as laws and

Spanish colonizers sought to brutally kill gender-variant Natives, whom they called 'joyas,' (Spanish for 'jewels') and regarded as 'sodomites.' Miranda considers this a form of gendercide, as her insights lead her to the conclusion that the Spanish practices were "an act of violence committed against a victim's primary gender identity" (2010, 259).

policies: “[U]ntil recent times, many indigenous peoples, and simultaneously, indigenous nations, do not acknowledge or recognize the presence of multiple genders within their communities” (Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission 2016, 16). As a consequence, this loss of knowledge also worked in favor of the emergence of a climate of homo- and transphobia on Navajo reservations.¹³

Speaking about her own experiences, *Drunktown’s Finest*-director Sydney Freeland confirms both the loss of knowledge about the role of Two-Spirited people in Navajo society and the now prevailing trans- and homophobic climate on reservations. During the promotion of the film, the Two-Spirited woman is repeatedly asked about her motivation for including Felixia among the film’s three protagonists, and whether or not the character is based on her own experiences. In an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*, she can only partially confirm this:

I grew up on the reservation but had no idea about this aspect of Navajo culture. The first time I really heard about it was when I moved to San Francisco. I met a trans woman who, when learning that I was Navajo, was like “Wow, the reservation must be so loving and accepting of the trans people!” I didn’t know what she was talking about at the time, but I was able to research and learn more about this. It ended up that I had to move to San Francisco to learn about my own culture. (Freeland qtd. in Wissot 2014, n.p.)

Unlike Freeland, her character Felixia does not have to leave the reservation to find out about the *nádleehí*’s roots in Navajo culture. Nonetheless, there seems to be some connection between the experiences of the writer/director and those of the character. The opening shot of *Drunktown’s Finest* shows a time-lapsed sunrise over the city of Dry Lake, filmed from an elevation next to the town. In the voice-over, a person that sounds like Felixia wonders: “They say this land isn’t a place to live, it’s a place to leave. Then why do people stay?” (*Drunktown* 2014, 00:00:06). At this point, Felixia’s experience on the reservation is predominantly negative. Despite her traditional and accepting grandparents, she, too, is not familiar with this part of Navajo tradition.

Felixia’s grandfather Harmon (played by Yuchi/Muscogee-Creek actor Richard Ray Whitman), a medicine man who is firmly grounded in Navajo epistemologies, on the other hand, is well aware of both of the general attitudes towards Two-Spirited

13 The report by the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission (2016, 9) points to an unpublished survey among Navajo LGBTQI people who reported a significant number of instances of suicide and violence that resulted from their identities and sexuality. As illustrated above (FN 11), trans- and homophobia on reservations is rooted in the attempts to assimilate Native people from the late 19th century onwards. Back then, Indian agents and missionaries tried to enforce heteronormative gender conceptions that were acceptable to Christian moral values, while they vilified and punished any deviations from that (Gilley 2006, 14).

people on the reservation and their real significance in their culture's tradition. When he learns that Felixia is about to audition for the 'Women of the Tribe' calendar, he does not stop her, but warns her that "what we look for and what we get aren't always the same thing" (*Drunktown* 2014, 00:09:50). After her hopes are crushed in consequence of the false perceptions of 'authentic Navajo culture' held by the jury, Felixia regards the reservation indeed as nothing but "a place to leave." In this place, the intersection of her Navajo identity and her gender identity as Two-Spirited become unbearable for her, and she arranges an escape with a man whose acquaintance she has made on the internet, whom she has never met in person, but who promises to take her along on an extended trip to New York. Close to the film's ending, just as Felixia is about to leave, her grandfather visits her to tell her the traditional Navajo narrative that preserves the knowledge about the role of the *nádleehí*:

Did grandma ever tell you the story about the *nádleehí* and the river? [...] A long time ago, all Navajo lived alongside the great river. The men, the women, and *nádleehí*. One day they began to argue over who is more important than the other. The men said they were, because they had it [sic]. And the women said they were, because they tended the crops. On and on they argued until finally, they decided that maybe they were better off without each other.

The men rafted across the great river, and they took the *nádleehí* with them. And 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 *nádleehí* back to check on things. And the *nádleehí* 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 for them.

It became apparent that both sides needed each other. The men needed the women, and the women in turn needed the men. And they both needed the *nádleehí*. To this day, we carry this lesson, this balance. And I know you, 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 always have a home here. (*Drunktown* 2014, 01:18:45)¹⁴

By telling the story to his granddaughter, Harmon does not only provide Felixia with a sense of purpose and a reason to stay. He also implicitly contextualizes the

14 The Navajo narrative related by Harmon is also mentioned in the report by the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission (2016, 17-18), which identifies the narrative as part of the Navajo creation story.

discriminations she experiences as grounded in colonialism and the epistemic violence that comes along with it.

Showing Felixia's traditional grandparents in such an accepting role does not only emphasize the importance of a decolonial understanding of Navajo traditions, it also seems to be a starting point for Felixia to reconfigure her position within her community: Harmon's story is shown as an impetus for her to move out of a place that seemingly resists to accept her – where she has to be careful to keep her affairs secret and where she has to hide her identity as a Two-Spirited woman during the casting for the calendar – and into a culturally safe and meaningful space. For the revelation of the intersectional dynamics standing in the way of this move, a decolonized understanding of Indigenous gender is essential. Mark Rifkin emphasizes the central role Indigenous stories play to achieve that:

The stories of the oral tradition provide a way of reframing nationhood, queering the matrix of peoplehood by dislocating it from the “values” normalized by the United States, which [...] cover over the past while naturalizing that elision. Such storytelling, therefore, takes part in a process of counterhegemony. (2011, 286)

Harmon's story does not merely open up a different perspective on the tradition of Two-Spiritedness, but emphasizes the *nádleehí's* significance in Navajo history and understandings of social order. For Felixia, this contextualization provides an answer to the question raised in the film's opening shot: People stay because this land is their home, and it provides them with a purpose. However, just like *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, *Drunktown's Finest* does not end on false illusions. In the film's final scene – the initiation ceremony of Sick Boy's sister – Felixia can feel safe and at home because she is surrounded by her extended family. Among them, she will most likely be accepted from now on, even if they held prejudices against her before. At the same time it seems unlikely that her new awareness will immediately trigger a more widespread acceptance of and interest in the role of the *nádleehí* in her community. Accordingly, it remains uncertain whether or not she will manage to stay on the reservation forever. Nonetheless, knowing her story is an important first step, and the film's emphasis on the significance of Two-Spirited people in Native societies provides another important perspective that is not yet seen often enough on cinema screens.

Conclusion

Rhymes for Young Ghouls and *Drunktown's Finest* serve as good examples of the decolonizing perspectives contemporary Indigenous cinema provides. The lead characters of both films are constructed in ways that are conscious of how 'representational intersectionality' has affected the portrayal of Indigenous women and Two-Spirited people in the past, and they transgress such portrayals. Neither Aila

nor Felixia fits the cliché of the sexualized/victimized 'Celluloid Maiden.' Instead, the two characters are the ones to exert the primary agency and thus take a role that was previously all-too-often restricted to (European) male characters in much of Hollywood cinema.

Interestingly, in both films, the agency of these lead characters is grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and its intergenerational transmission through storytelling. Aila's motivation to rebel against the Indian agent and the colonial powers is ultimately triggered by the subversive message of the story she hears from Ceres and reads about in her mother's sketchbook. In *Drunktown's Finest*, Harmon's story helps Felixia not only to accept her own identity, but to recognize how the knowledge about her own culture provides her with a purpose in life. Both films center the significance of decolonizing epistemologies, presenting them as meaningful ways forward.

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