

Pocahontas No More: Indigenous Women Standing Up for Each Other in Twenty-First Century Cinema

Sophie Mayer, Independent Scholar

Abstract: Sydney Freeland's fiction feature *Drunktown's Finest* (2014) represents the return of Indigenous women's feature filmmaking after a hiatus caused by neoconservative politics post-9/11. In the two decades since Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), filmmakers such as Valerie Red-Horse have challenged erasure and appropriation, but without coherent distribution or scholarship. Indigenous film festivals and settler state funding have led to a reestablishment, creating a cohort that includes *Drunktown's Finest*. Repudiating both the figure of Pocahontas, as analysed by Elise M. Marubbio, and the erasure of Indigenous women in the new Western genre described by Susan Faludi, *Drunktown's Finest* relates to both the work of white ally filmmakers of the early 2000s, such as Niki Caro, and to the work of contemporary Indigenous filmmakers working in both features (Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu of *Arnait*) and shorts (Danis Goulet, *Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers*). Foregrounding female agency, the film is framed by a traditional puberty ceremony that—through the presence of Felixia, a transgender/nádleeh woman—is configured as non-essentialist. The ceremony alters the temporality of the film, and inscribes a powerful new figure for Indigenous futures in the form of a young woman, in line with contemporary Indigenous online activism, and with the historical figure of Pocahontas.

A young, brown-skinned, dark-haired woman is framed against a landscape—the land to which she belongs. Her traditional, cream-coloured clothes and jewellery move with the movement of her body against the wind; brilliant washes of colour change with the changing light. She is at one with the world around her, immersed in it and emerging from it to lead her community.



Figure 1: *Pocahontas* (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995). [Walt Disney Pictures]. Screenshot.
 Figure 2: *Drunktown's Finest* (Sydney Freeland, 2014). [Indion Entertainment Group]. Screenshot from trailer.

The closing shots of Navajo filmmaker Sydney Freeland's fiction feature *Drunktown's Finest* (2014), shot on and around the Navajo reservation near Gallup, New Mexico (renamed Dry Lake in the film) are, inescapably and deliberately, a critical re-visioning of perhaps the most famous and persistent image of Indigenous womanhood in

contemporary global cinema, the character of Pocahontas (voiced by Irene Bedard, [Inupial/Cree]) in the eponymous animated film (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995).¹ The sequence shows a teenage Navajo girl on the closing day of her kinaaldá, the ceremony that marks the transition to adulthood, and, as Navajo legal scholar Heidi J. Todacheene notes, a reinscription of the Navajo creation myth that centres on Changing Woman as life- and law-giver (30).² Freeland's film evokes the particularity of the Southwest in the clarity of the sky, the desert colours woven into the shawl and the centrality of corn, while *Pocahontas* is set on the east coast in what became Virginia; nevertheless, they share a preoccupation with women's coming of age as a movement through and with the world. Thus, Freeland's film is pertinent for considering the emergence of an Indigenous-centric feminist fiction-feature cinema, one that works in tandem with digital screen media (where Freeland has directed the new media series *Her Story* [2016]) to challenge colonial representations of Indigenous women as sacrificial victims and/or sexual objects.

As Maria Lyytinen has noted, Pocahontas figured in the nineteenth-century North American colonial imaginary as both sacrificial virgin and as seductress; in travelling shows, "Pocahontas and other princesses of the white male sexual fantasy performed dance numbers in small buckskin dresses and sold snake oil and other 'Indian' products [and later ...] as half-named Indian damsels dancing in early Hollywood musical choruses" (82). Disney's *Pocahontas* draws, in a family-friendly way, on both forms of the stereotype deeply embedded in Hollywood cinema, albeit shaped by the romanticisation popularised by Peggy Lee's additional lyrics for "Fever", which paralleled the teenage Pocahontas with the character of Juliet from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (Richmond 318). The Disney film's central song-and-dance number "Colors of the Wind" won both the Academy Award and Golden Globe for best original song in 1996. It expresses Pocahontas' holistic worldview through inventive animation that becomes more transformative and layered as Captain John Smith becomes more drawn to Pocahontas' world; when he sees the constellations through her eyes, the camera pulls out on a shot of the couple lying on a small, round island, which becomes their reflection in the eye of an eagle. As part of Disney's postfeminist revival in the mid-1990s, Pocahontas is a so-called strong female character who advocates for her culture, but the song is entirely directed to John Smith, and through him, to a non-Native audience.

M. Elise Marubbio identifies the problem of the "Celluloid Maiden figure," a cinematic trope that, as in *Pocahontas*, "depicts a young Native American woman who enables, helps, loves, or aligns herself with a white European American colonizer and dies as a result of that choice" (ix). Marubbio notes that, in Disney's revisionist history, Pocahontas "is left alone after her white lover leaves ... While replacing death with trauma diffuses the racist and colonialist implications associated with the Celluloid Maiden figure, it does not erase them" (224). Yet the historical Pocahontas died in England aged 22, on the eve of her return to Virginia. Researching young audiences' reception of the film, Amy Aidman notes that Pocahontas offers "mixed messages" as her strength of character is punished with Smith's wounding, as well as her exile (4), and that "[i]n general, the girls rejected Disney's representation of Native Americans as stereotypical" (13).

As Elissa Washuta (Cowlitz/Watlala) argued more recently, the stereotyping that Aidman observed in 1999 continues in contemporary mainstream cinema, both reflecting and perpetuating the lived experience of gendered colonial violence against indigenous women. Washuta's blog post, ironically titled "Violence against Indigenous Women: Fun, Sexy, and No Big Deal on the Big Screen," cites the character of Emily (Tinsel Korey [Ojibwe]) who

first appears in *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (Chris Weitz, 2009), a Makah woman whose partner Sam is a werewolf who, in another persistent settler colonial trope, is a “savage” unable to control his behaviour, including a violent assault on Emily. Washuta notes that this is part of a continued “insistence that the image of Pocahontas at the end of a gun barrel is wholesome while, every day, more and more indigenous women die while we are told that this is not a phenomenon, not a problem, nothing more than crime.” Yet Washuta is part of a new generation of online Indigenous North American feminist media activists whose campaigning and critiques offer context for the emergence of the cinema represented by *Drunktown’s Finest*. As Danis Goulet, a Cree/Métis filmmaker and programmer, observes, “[w]ithin Indigenous cinema [now], women are a serious force to be reckoned with ... approximately 37% of the [imagineNATIVE’s] festival submissions had come from women in [2012], and 62% of official selections were made with Indigenous women in a key creative position” (“Welcome”). Extrapolating from Goulet’s figures, the percentage of women represented in Indigenous cinema is almost double that in dominant cinema (when representation at Sundance, Toronto and London in 2014 is estimated at 20%).

Goulet utilised the platform of imagineNATIVE to found the Embargo Collective, the second iteration of which focused on Canadian women filmmakers. Goulet writes that “the group determined a universal restriction based on mutual respect: that each filmmaker would make a new film drawing inspiration from the work and/or process of another filmmaker in the collective,” relating the practice to the “Cree word *neepahistamasowuk* [which] means ‘they stand up for each other’” (“Embargo”). Thus far, the Embargo II films have screened on Air Canada flights as well as at festivals. They follow previous films by the filmmakers, which have been exhibited on the festival circuit. Goulet’s theory of Indigenous women’s cinema is borne out by her own short film, “Wakening” (2013), in which resistance fighter Weesakechak (Sarah Podemski [Salteaux]) searches through a near-future dystopian city for the Cree cannibal spirit Weetigo (Gail Maurice [Métis]) to aid in the fight against an army of occupation. Whereas settler media depicts Weetigo/Wendigo within the vernacular of the horror film, Goulet recognises its insurgent potential as the return of the repressed; that is, of indigeneity. Although the spirit is non-gendered, Maurice’s vocals identify it with the feminist solidarity embodied by Embargo II.

Embargo II filmmaker Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers (Blackfoot/Sami) addressed the Pocahontas problem directly in a prior short film, “A Red Girl’s Reasoning” (2012). Delia (Jessica Matten), the protagonist, is first seen dressed in bike leathers, fighting both a white male mugger and a white male policeman in intercut scenes. She says in voiceover:

I’ve been on this bloodpath for six, long, lonely years. But white boys have been having their way with Indian girls since contact. Forget what Disney tells you: Pocahontas was 12 when she met John Smith. It’s pretty little lies like this that hide the ugly truth.

Tailfeathers’ script aligns the violence of colonial rape with the reinscription of that violence through Disney’s erasure of it. Faye Ginsburg uses the term “screen memories” to describe the work of indigenising media:

invert[ing] the sense in which Freud used this term to describe how people protect themselves from their traumatic past through layers of obfuscating memory. By contrast, indigenous people are using screen media not to mask but to recuperate their own collective stories and histories—some of them traumatic—that have been erased

in the national narratives of dominant culture and are in danger of being forgotten within local worlds as well. (40)

By evoking Pocahontas, *Tailfeathers* provides the non-native viewer with a familiar framework within which to read Delia, even as Delia and the filmmaker together defamiliarise the framework by (physically) dismantling it.

The film is a powerful example of neepahistasowuk: Jessica Matten is not only an actor, but also a Cree community organiser who runs the viral campaign #N8Vgirls, to publicise the same issue as #mmiw (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women), a Canadian hashtag campaign on Twitter to honour the lives of those who have been devalued and discarded by the nation-state as well as by individual (predominantly white male) agents of violence. “A Red Girl’s Reasoning” amplifies the rationale and activism of #N8Vgirls, depicting Delia surviving a confrontation with a violent rapist who calls her a “squaw.” *Tailfeathers* and Matten, like Freeland, are using fiction filmmaking as an intervention: Freeland’s film, which defiantly takes up the pejorative term applied to the city of Gallup by ABC news show *20/20* in the 1980s, was made in the context of growing activism concerned with this violence, and with its systemic nature, which goes completely unrepresented in mainstream cinema.

Indeed, Courtney Hunt’s low-budget debut *Frozen River* (2008) is a rare feature by a white American filmmaker to foreground an agential Indigenous woman. Mohawk smuggler Lila Littlewolf is played by Blackfeet actor Misty Upham in her breakthrough performance, following her first role in *Skins* (Chris Eyre [Cheyenne/Arapaho], 2002), as the film was unexpectedly nominated for two Academy Awards. Yet Upham subsequently struggled to get lead roles, and her death due to a lack of support and consideration from medical and law enforcement personnel demonstrates the gulf between liberal Hollywood’s mild commitment to “representing” diversity, and lack of real commitment to making social change (Young). Hunt’s film is more forceful: it film begins by foregrounding Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo), a working-class single mother, as its protagonist, but the narrative shifts after she meets Lila, who drives migrants through the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne to cross the Canada/US border of the St Lawrence river. Ray aligns herself with Lila, eventually taking the fall when they are caught by US border police, knowing that her white skin privilege will shorten her jail sentence.

Frozen River is also a powerful inversion of the renascent Western, shifting the contested border from south to north, and positioning women as agents in crossing it, rather than victims. In *The Terror Dream*, Susan Faludi offers a powerful speculation about the Western as resurgent narrative in US culture post 9/11. She argues that the militaristic response to the bombings, media narratives such as the rescue of PFC Jessica Lynch and the neoconservative backlash against feminism can all be attributed to the revival of the primal myth of white settler culture, as exemplified by *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956). She does not mention the lack of media coverage given to Lori Piestewa, a Hopi soldier who became the first Native American female US soldier to die in combat, in the attack in which Lynch was initially injured (see Younge).

Marubbio argues similarly that *The New World* (2005), Terrence Malick’s acclaimed revisionist history, as a post-9/11 film, “reaffirms rather than critiques the age-old themes of nation building and manifest destiny” from its title onwards (228). This neocolonialist backlash, which continues with *The Revenant* (Alejandro Iñárritu, 2016), marking a hiatus in

the alternative representation of Indigenous women on-screen, as proffered by three mainstream Pacific Rim films made in 2001–02 by white filmmakers working as allies with Indigenous communities: *Lilo & Stitch* (Dean deBlois and Chris Sanders, 2002), *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002) and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Philip Noyce, 2002). All three films foreground young indigenous women as active and agential, particularly in confrontation with the state and its operatives. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Molly (Everlyn Sampi [Bardi]), Daisy (Tianna Sansbury) and Grace (Laura Monaghan) confront A.O. Neville (Kenneth Branagh), the government’s “chief protector of Aborigines”, both directly and through his operatives; audience foreknowledge that the film is based on a memoir by Doris Pilkington Garimara (Mardu), Molly’s daughter, undermines the film’s use of a conventional thriller structure of threat, ensuring that the three young women are not perceived as victims. As Corinn Columpar notes, through the closing insert in which we see and hear the historical Molly Craig, the film “foreground[s] the voices of their Aboriginal subjects, literally letting them have the last word” (77).

Similarly, in *Lilo & Stitch*—a Disney animation—Hawaiian sisters Lilo (voiced by Daveigh Chase) and her legal guardian Nani (voiced by Tia Carrere, who is of Hawaiian descent) have to confront mainland social worker Cobra Bubbles (voiced by Ving Rhames). Bubbles does not recognise Nani’s methods of raising Lilo as legitimate, nor Lilo’s own agency, capability and determination, castigating them as chaotic. He eventually removes Lilo to state care, a painful echo of the settler state policy of removals that also motivates *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Lilo escapes, and—working with Stitch, a chaotic alien she has adopted—saves the planet. Whereas Nani has the conventional contours of an animated Disney woman, Lilo offers a striking contrast to the studio’s canon of protagonists: she is a contemporary working-class young woman of colour, with a solid, rounded child’s body, generally draped in a palm-leaf patterned muumuu. Taking ethnographic photographs of obese, sunburnt white tourists losing their ice creams, she is also shown as aware of colonialism and its effects, and in control of visual media.





Figure 3: *Lilo & Stitch* (Dean deBlois and Chris Sanders, 2002). [Walt Disney Pictures]. Screenshot.
 Figure 4: *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002). [South Pacific Pictures]. Screenshot..

Yet the film's end credit sequence sees Lilo and Stitch performing contentedly in a tourist luau alongside adult dancers, Lilo having learned the correct steps that she got wrong in the film's opening sequence. Like Pocahontas' exposition to John Smith in "Colors of the Wind," this mandates what Lee Schweninger calls "a sort of benevolent multiculturalism," with a narrative engineered towards comprehension and acceptance by a white audience (149). Lilo is also shown as taming her behaviour towards normative femininity, as she is able to perform alongside the obedient *haole* girls with whom she had fought in the opening scene. Like Pocahontas, Lilo is moved away from independent, daring interactions with the natural world, and her repudiation of settler society, toward social assimilation.

Whale Rider is also framed by a performance of traditional dance centred on the role of Paikea (Keisha Castle-Hughes), who contests her grandfather Poro (Rawiri Paratene [Ngāpuhi]) over his narrow, patriarchal application of Ngati Porou law, demanding legal and spiritual authority through her connection with the titular whales. As Columpar notes, paraphrasing Māori scholar Tracy Johnson, there is a "reductive equation of Māori tradition with patriarchal oppression [which omits...] the pernicious role played by colonialism in the creation of the situation that protagonist Paikea negotiates" (51–52). Like *Pocahontas*, *Whale Rider* draws its cinematic charge from spectacular scenes, including underwater photography, of its protagonist's loving and empowered interactions with the natural world. In particular, Paikea's scene of connection with the beached whale offers a physical, spiritual and relational vision that spoke to a wide audience. Paikea and Lilo are both third-wave protagonists, exemplary female characters who take on traditionally male roles as central, active, individualist protagonists who (initially) contest claims of family and tradition. The framing presence of the traditional dance ceremonies cuts against this assimilationist narrative, recentring community against individualism. Rather than a song-and-dance "number" in a conventional musical, in each case the ceremony does not interrupt but rather simultaneously motivates and replaces the character narrative, operating as a vehicle of cultural transmission, albeit within a formal performance aimed at a mixed indigenous/settler audience.

By contrast, the final shots of *Drunktown's Finest* show Max Maryboy (Magdalena Begay [Navajo], who also acted with Misty Upham in the short film "Without Fire" [Eliza McNitt, 2013]) running towards the sunrise on the fourth day of her kinaaldá, a ceremony shared with extended family rather than performed for a diegetic audience. She shares with Lilo the solid roundedness of a healthy pre-teen body shape, and her cream dress and

embroidered shawl are substantial and not sexualised in the manner of Disney's thigh-length deerskin dress. She is on the reservation, at the home of Harmon John (Richard Ray Whitman [Yuchi/Muscogee Creek]), the local medicine man, and we have glimpsed her there carrying out the corn-grinding ceremony earlier in the film, when her brother and legal guardian Luther, aka SickBoy (Jeremiah Bitsui [Diné]), visited. The protocol of the private ceremony has been observed. In placing ceremony on-screen, *Drunktown's Finest* not only grapples with the legacy of Pocahontas' colours of the wind, but also with the longer legacy of ethnographic filmmaking and its hunger to know (and thus own) ceremony.

Michelle Raheja (Seneca) names this "visual sovereignty," a practice utilised by both the film scholar and the filmmaker essaying a critical intervention through image language. It is:

a reading practice for thinking about the space between resistance and compliance wherein indigenous filmmakers and actors revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic film conventions, at the same time operating within and stretching the boundaries created by these conventions. (1162)

Rather than simply changing visual representation, visual sovereignty "intervenes in larger discussions of Native American sovereignty by locating and advocating for indigenous cultural and political power both within and outside of Western legal jurisprudence" (1162). Both filmmakers and critics/scholars are participating in a larger struggle through their attention to screen media, to (re)establish indigenous agency and authority.

Nyungar anthropologist Marcia Langton, author of the first study of Australian Aboriginal film and television in 1993, noted that the "enormous output of visual art, film, video, music and performing arts currently produced by Aboriginal people ... remains uncommodified and subject to traditional Aboriginal social rules" (9), a negotiation she particularly explores with regard to Arrernte filmmaker Rachel Perkins' first film (as producer), *Jardiwarnpa—A Warlpiri Fire Ceremony* (Ned Lander, 1993) (75–80). Auto-ethnographic documentary has been one of the primary sites for Indigenous filmmakers, but few filmmakers have moved into fiction filmmaking, although the distinctions are not hard and fast as auto-ethnographic documentaries deploy storytelling and performance as key strategies. Perkins is a significant exception, most recently with the very successful film adaptation of stage musical *Bran Nue Dae* (2009), which features veteran theatre performer, television actress, playwright and activist Deborah Mailman (Bidjara/Ngati Porou and Te Arawa).

Arnait Video Productions is another significant exception, and a model of *neepahistamasowuk*, founded in Igloodik to capture Inuit women's histories, practices and stories that were not being recorded by the better-known (all male) Isuma Productions, as Ginsburg notes (45). Like Isuma, which moved from ethnographic video documentary to feature production with the *Caméra d'Or*-winning *Atanarjuat the Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk [Inuit] and Norman Cohn, 2001), Arnait Video Productions used the ethnographic video documentaries they had made as the basis for a feature, *Before Tomorrow* (Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu [Inuit], 2008), depicting an Inuit community at the point of contact. Davinia Thornley notes that "Ivalu's long commitment to, and leading role in, the Arnait collective belies *Before Tomorrow's* ending [in which her character, Niniuq, dies], which allows her to use a 'static' narrative structure as a vehicle for—in a very real sense—keeping alive her community's values and traditions" (39). Their second feature

Uvanga (Cousineau and Ivalu, 2013), like *Whale Rider* and *Drunktown's Finest*, is set in the contemporary world, carrying forward Inuit values and traditions through a focus on a young protagonist negotiating their relationship to the community and their heritage.

Twenty-first century Indigenous feminist cinema emerges both from several decades of production with an emphasis on collaborative practice, at the intersection of Third Cinema, auto-ethnographic filmmaking, and feminist film workshops in Central and Latin America (Meier). While Abenaki documentary-maker Alanis Obomsawin and Australian Aboriginal experimental filmmaker and video artist Tracey Moffatt have had careers that cross the millennial divide, and have been the subjects of critical studies, by Randolph Lewis and Catherine Summerhayes respectively, films by Indigenous women remain underrepresented in studies of Indigenous cinema and in feminist film studies. As Schwenger notes, Cherokee/Sioux filmmaker Valerie Red-Horse's *Naturally Native* (1995) was the first Native American feature film with female leads, and the first general-release fiction feature directed by a female Native American. Schwenger argues that, as such, it "has the potential to open the way for new directions in Indigenous film" that are only just being achieved (145).

Naturally Native was released the same year as *Smoke Signals* (Eyre, 1995), the film that has dominated discussion of Native American feature filmmaking. As Joanna Hearne observes, *Smoke Signals* was significant for

forg[ing] a connection between those images, with their mass audiences, and distinctively Indigenous points of view. This intervention is not just a counter-appropriation; to borrow Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's term, it is also an 'Indigenization' of mass media [that ...] refuses to function as an outsider's guide to Native cultures. (xvi)

Drunktown's Finest is similarly not just a counter-appropriation but an equally powerful indigenisation, and—in contradistinction to *Smoke Signals*—its focus is on indigenising representations of women. Freeland noted the significance of Eyre's work for the development of her own (Freeland). Both filmmakers are alumni of the Sundance Festival's Native American and Indigenous Film Program, which has just created the Merata Mita Fellowship for Indigenous Artists, named after the first and most prolific Māori female filmmaker. Sundance and *Smoke Signals* both infer the significance and necessity for Indigenous films to reach and speak to a mainstream global audience saturated with negative, stereotypical depictions, which represents a disproportionate struggle for female-helmed films.

Sundance provides an intervention into the market similar to the state-funded agencies working in Canada (the National Film Board, which has long supported Obomsawin), Australia and New Zealand, which have offered support to Indigenous filmmakers globally. Unlike many film production organisations, Sundance is located both outside Hollywood and close to the natural world; it is also close to the Skull Valley Goshutes' tribal land. Freeland, who grew up on Navajo lands in Gallup, New Mexico, commented that the programme is run "with our background in mind. When I took part in it, it was on the homelands of the Mescalero Apache Tribe in New Mexico. We had a welcoming ceremony and a prayer, and a closing feast" (Freeland). Thus, the programme is able to nurture filmmaking practice located in an ethic of neepahistasowuk that is borne out by the narrative of *Drunktown's Finest*, particularly in relation to its deployment of ceremony as the culmination and spiritual centre of the film's narrative.

Although the centre of the kinaaldá ceremony, Max is not one of the central characters of the film, which focuses on three intertwined stories that entwine only at the ceremony, whose deadline increasingly guides the film's temporality. The timeline is initially established by her brother Luther's struggle to stay out of police custody over the weekend so that he can enter basic training for the US military; Nizhoni's (MorningStar Angeline [Shoshoni, Nez Perce, Blackfoot, Chippewa Cree and Diné]) last weekend at home with her white adoptive parents before attending missionary college in Michigan, and her desire to find her Navajo birth parents; and Felixia's (Carmen Moore [Diné]) quest for acceptance as *nadleeh* (a Navajo identity that encompasses queer, trans, and non-binary; frequently aligned with the pan-Native term Two-Spirit) within both Navajo and white settler culture.³ The temporal sensitivity of the ceremony for Max takes over from the more conventional Bildungsroman narratives of the three protagonists, bringing all of them to Harmon's land for the closing event of the kinaaldá.

Exemplifying *neepahistasowuk*, Angeline, herself an online activist, commented that:

One of my favorite moments was seeing our makeup artist Kayene Pino put makeup on Magdalena Begay. Magdalena's character was getting ready to do scenes of a Puberty Ceremony and they were both wearing traditional Navajo clothing and jewelry. Kayene always wore her moccasins and a long dress during work. I greatly appreciated her dedication to wearing such things.

Visual sovereignty, embodied sovereignty and land sovereignty are interconnected through *neepahistasowuk* that recognises the collaborative work of all, both characters and crew, and *Drunktown's Finest* allows us to feel that in the way that the temporality and spatiality of Max's ceremony gradually takes precedence in shaping the film's narrative. This is particularly palpable in the temporal and spatial vanishing point of Max's and Felixia's parallel stories, as the kinaaldá becomes a coming-of-age ceremony for both of them as women.

Just before Max runs out of the hogan to meet the dawn, Felixia joins her grandmother Ruth (Toni Olver) in the kitchen to make frybread from corn dough, connected to the corn that Max was seen grinding earlier in honour of Changing Woman's revival by corn pollen (Todacheene 33). This is traditionally a woman's task, and Felixia is confident in her handling of the dough, indicating that she has long been welcome in, and worked in, Ruth's kitchen. This is a quieter, more coded moment than when Harmon tells Felixia a traditional story about the *nadleehí* people who mediated between men and women in an argument that separated the community, also offering key contextual information to the film's audience. He tells the story in the most intimate space: Felixia's bedroom, a space of both subjectivity and sexuality. Lisa Tatonetti, in her discussion of three earlier depictions of indigenous North American Two-Spirit characters, notes they "segregate indigeneity from queer sexuality by relegating queerness entirely to off-reservation spaces" (158). She writes that *The Business of Fancydancing* (Sherman Alexie [Spokane/Coeur d'Alene], 2002), for instance, carries "the rhetorical message: one cannot be queer and Native on the reservation" (172). This is where Felixia, totally present to and through her grandparents, stands out from previous depictions of Two-Spirit characters in Indigenous North American fiction features: she is the embodiment of ethnographer Carolyn Epple's observation of "the simultaneous

distinctness (identity as *nádleehí*) and fluidity (identity as context-dependent) of *nádleehí*'s self-descriptions" (268).

In fact, Max's name—Max Maryboy—contains multiple potential gendered readings (not least bringing together Mary and the boy Jesus). This aligns her with Felixia, who moves, depending on context, between identifiers: she is Felixia, *nádleeh*, to her grandparents; "girl" to her gay friend Eugene (Wambli Eagleman [Lakota Sioux/Navajo]) who provides her with a fake driver's license in her new name that will enable her to audition for the "Women of the Navajo" calendar; and "Sexy Tranny Felixxxia" on the Facebook page she uses to run her successful sex work business. Felixia's participation in the ceremony, despite her intention to leave for New York on a ticket paid for by a Facebook client, holds out the possibilities of gendered distinctness and fluidity to Max as a Navajo way of life, embedding these possibilities (rather than a limited essentialist reading of a puberty ceremony as passage to maternal womanhood) within the *kinaaldá*, literally folding them into the dough. Felixia "stands up" for Max by staying for her ceremony, and representing alternate ways of doing gender; Max "stands up" for Felixia by offering her the *kinaaldá* she could not have when known as Felix. Neepahistamasowuk is the film's narrative arc.

What connects Max and Felixia, other than the site of the ceremony, is not just their shared Navajo identity, but also the specificity with which they bring it to the screen. While Luther and Nizhoni are seeking their identities between the rez and the institutions of white settler culture (in which the military and the university are proffered as parallel routes "out" that the film shows to be compromised), Felixia and Max are both located. Joanne Barker notes that "[g]ender and sexuality are about the ethics and responsibilities of relationship—to land, to non-human beings, interpersonally, within Native/Indigenous governance". Felixia initially performs her Diné identity in the audition for the calendar, in which she speaks the language fluently—unlike other contestants—but is barred from the stage by the cruel actions of another auditionee who refuses to acknowledge her gender. Thus, the recognition she receives from Harmon and Ruth before the ceremony, and back on the land, are critical, shifting the film from the artificial performance of the calendar photoshoot (which takes place in an austere, harshly-lit empty theatre) to the relational, locational ceremony suffused with natural light. Felixia's identification is shifted from a Euro-Western question of identity politics and performativity and centres instead on her relation to her grandparents, their land and their ceremonial practices.

Freeland's careful staging of ceremony in relation to both geographical and screen space also provides a contrast and corrective to the way in which "identity politics" is mobilised to critique indigeneity as patriarchal, as in *Whale Rider*. As Erica Violet Lee notes, "Indigenous women are still assumed to be passive and in need of 'saving' from an archaic culture, and this is not at all the case ... Well-meaning folks who intend to 'save' us from our ceremonies should situate themselves in the history of white Canadian settlers." When Luther comes out to Harmon and Ruth's place, he is hesitant at first to approach the tree under which Max is grinding corn. The camera frames his approach with a long shot, keeping the viewer away from observing the ceremony until Ruth and Luther have spoken, and we know that he is welcome as an observer. There is a cut to a close-up of the grinding-stone, and Max's hands moving the grinder back and forth, which acts to remind us of her embodiment and its agency. The film then cuts back out to the long shot, and a clear distinction between female/ritual space and male/everyday space is visible, divided by the tree. Luther crosses from lower screen right, where Max is grinding in the tree's shadow, to the sunlit upper

screen left, where Harmon is preparing to chop wood for the fire pit that will be needed to bake corn cakes.

Todacheene argues that the “kinaaldá ceremony honors the young woman’s fertility and her body is molded for hózhó and strength” (35). She translates hózhó as balance, beauty and/or strength; with kinship and clanship, it is one of the three governing principles of Navajo common law (37). Hózhó is not located in an individual, like the Euro-Western concept of beauty, but is communitarian, reflecting and affirming Navajo jurisprudence and/as spirituality. Melanie K. Yazzie (Navajo) draws a comparison between hózhó and Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower; she describes it as “ordinary power,” connected to life force, in contrast to the destructive effects of state/hierarchical power (85–7). Thus, the kinaaldá does not just represent an essentialist femininity predicated on biological fertility, but an entry into citizenship, as to be (culturally enabled to be) a mother in a matrilineal society is to be responsible for justice and governance. Max’s kinaaldá reinstates Navajo matrifocal jurisprudence over and against US martial law and policing (as seen in SickBoy’s participation), the US legal system, particularly pertaining to adoption/removal (as seen in Nizhoni’s participation) and Euro-Western heteropatriarchal gender binaries (as seen in Felixia’s participation). This is a great weight for a small body to carry, but through her kinaaldá Max is also (connected to) Changing Woman, as well as supported by her family and clan relations who accompany her on the day. Unlike the solitary Pocahontas, dancing towards John Smith and the heteronormative dyad, and thus out of her community, Max is celebrated as central to her community, and as being at the fulcrum between childhood and adulthood. She teaches the adults, particularly her brother, and they teach her.

It is a reminder that, as Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo/Sioux) describes in her biography of Pocahontas, the Powhatan teenager was a peace leader, a cultural intermediary, a translator, a diplomat and a spy: a young woman whose agency and skilled contribution were recognised by her nation as central to its encounter with the ferocious colonisers. Neither a victim nor a lover, she was rather an activist. Rather than Disney’s Pocahontas, Max can be seen in relation to a contemporary young Indigenous heroine, Shannen Koostachin, the teenage Cree education rights activist whose campaign to bring equal funding to First Nations school around Canada, starting with her home in Attawapiskat First Nation, is celebrated in Obomsawin’s most recent documentary, *Hi-Ho Mistahey* (2013). When showing Koostachin as a public activist, Obomsawin depicts her in full ceremonial garb, dancing—an image that cannot help but resonate with, invert and indigenise Disney’s *Pocahontas*.



Figure 5: *Hi-Ho Mistahey* (Alanis Obomsawin, 2013). National Film Board of Canada. Screenshot.

Figure 6: *Drunktown’s Finest* (Sydney Freeland, 2014). Screenshot.

Separated by thousands of miles and hundreds of diverse Indigenous cultures, Shannen and Max are united by Obomsawin's and Freeland's intervention into representation, which recalls the image imprinted by Disney's global reach and incessant marketing, only to transform it. As activists, dancers, community leaders and teenage girls, Shannen and Max evoke the real Pocahontas, and advocate for the end of our devotion to her two-dimensional image. Just as Max brings Felixia, Nizhoni and Luther into her timeline to stand up for, and with, her at the sunrise ceremony, so these films call us as feminist film theorists to stand up for, and with, them.

Notes

¹ I use Indigenous throughout the paper as a global term that encompasses Native American,

² A note on Indigenous words: these are not italicized herein except where original speakers/writers have italicized them. This is a standard practice in contemporary Indigenous studies. Similarly, I follow the transliterations used by individual speakers/writers rather than attempting to standardize.

³ Diné is the name that the Navajo nation uses for itself; it means "the people."

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Sophie Mayer is the author of *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema* (London: IB Tauris, 2015) and *The Cinema of Sally Potter: A Politics of Love* (London: Wallflower, 2009). With Corinn Columpar, she co-edited *There She Goes: Feminist Filmmaking and Beyond* (Detroit: Wayne State, 2010), and *Lo personal es político: Feminismo y documental* (Pamplona: INAAC, 2011) with Elena Oroz. She is a regular contributor to *Sight & Sound* and *The F-Word*, a co-founder of Raising Films, and a co-curator of queer feminist film in London with Club des Femmes.