Hózhó: Portrayals of Beauty and Brutality in Diné Film and Poetics

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Diné (Navajo) artists excel at depicting their homeland in a variety of ways, sometimes beautiful and sometimes ugly. While consuming the variety of Diné creative works depicting its "ugliness" or "boringness" for the first time, I tried to suppress and ignore the thought that lingered in my head: *why are these Diné creatives showing off the ugliness of their land?* While I somewhat regret my uninspired reactions to much of the scenery filmed and described, there is merit for exploring this research question. In this essay I present the reasons for why Diné creatives sometimes depict the ugliness of their lands by analyzing several reasons, primarily focusing on the balance, or *Hózhó* that the creatives pursue. Within such a framework, I argue that they reinscribe their land's personhood and sovereignty to exist without shame, which then dictates filmmaking and poetic structure. I relay the discussion using key works by Diné filmmakers and poets Blackhorse Lowe, Luci Tapahonso, Jake Skeets, Elizabeth Woody, and Blackhorse Mitchell.

Beginning the conversation with film, Blackhorse Lowe's 2005 film *5th World* promotes the significance of—and the relation between—Diné daily life and land. With numerous lengthy shots of the Southwestern landscape, Lowe showcases the casual beauty of the Diné land. The landscape and sky are visible in nearly all scenes, serving as a backdrop to the characters' growth. However, 'backdrop' does not give the land enough credit, for it also holds influence as a lyrical and narrative element of the film as the plot tracks two Diné young adults' journey through the very lands (Lowe). Characters discover their homelands mostly by hitchhiking and meeting new community members (Lowe). In doing so, Lowe presents a vision of Indigenous youth thriving in the dry, red desert, thus challenging the Vanishing Indian Myth and reinscribing the land's agency. Through the characters' non-stereotypical romance, *5th World* challenges normative misconceptions to offer a progressive look at present-day kinship among Diné. Ultimately, it offers a hopeful glimpse of a dynamic future. To affirm the land's sovereignty, Lowe tactically decides to present long shots and pans of the desert—these are contrasted against scenes and voice-overs of conversations among characters of various ages to populate the land and illustrate the Diné People's intimate relationship with it (Lowe). Non-human does not mean non-deserving of screentime, and so Lowe treats the landscape as a non-human character who, like any other, deserves solo scenes to convey its animacy.

Another way Diné artists actualize land sovereignty is through personification in poetry. In "This Is How They Were Placed For Us," Luci Tapahonso refers to the land with female pronouns and gives it dialogue: about Blanca Peak she writes, "She watches us rise at dawn. / Nidoohjeeh shá'áłchíní, nii leh. / Get up, my children, she says" (Tapahonso 98). Several Diné artists do the same, such as Jake Skeets in "From Under His Cover": he describes the same sunrise as "The sun whispers / in from the eastern door" (Skeets 293). In another instance, Elizabeth Woody writes in "Chinle Summer" that she is the "daughter of two landscapes," which captures her identity split between two communities (Woody 108)[1]. The use of this literary device serves to capture the sacred relationship Diné people have with their mother, Mother Earth. In these examples, the poets grant the Sun and mountains the same personhood as the narrators themselves. The personification communicates power among the Diné people, which thus asserts its agency. When Tapahonso writes the two communicating, she expresses the interrelation of human and non-human beings.

By communicating with each other, the human world can learn from the land's wisdom. In analyzing *5th World*, we see the agential land influence filmmaking techniques, with its authority strong enough to command markedly long shots and takes. This persists as Diné poets likewise follow the land's philosophy in their writing. Again in "This Is How They Were Placed For Us," Tapahonso traces her identity using Diné directional knowledge: she describes the significance of the four sacred mountains over four grouped vignettes, respectively, separated by Roman numerals (Tapahonso 96-99). Anthropologist Anthony K. Webster identifies this as "fourfold repetition," which is an "important device" in Diné poetics (Webster 247). Years later, emerging poet Jake Skeets employs the fourfold repetition in "Let There Be Coal." Skeets, too, writes of the Diné lands, but as a young man and emerging poet he has a complex relationship with his homeland: he has watched them be burdened *and* sustained by the coal industry (Skeets 292). Regardless, Diné directional knowledge is Skeets' mother tongue, and thus when speaking of the land, he follows the four mountains' guidance.

Tapahonso also orders the mountains purposefully, adhering to the directional knowledge's guidelines of East clockwise to North. Webster explains that the traditional ordering is followed in song, chant, and prayer; it "reflects an ideology of proper speech" (Webster 248). Indeed, in vignette IV Tapahonso writes "This is how the world was placed for us… All these were given to us to live by. / These mountains and the land keep us strong. / From them, and because of them, we prosper." (Tapahonso 99). Here she cannot be more explicit in her esteeming explanation that, like all day-to-day practices, Diné land guides her storytelling and poetics.

1 In the same poem, Woody writes, "I am one story" (Woody 108). It is perhaps an essay for another time to analyze the ways in which Woody and other artists turn the tables on this poetic device and depict *themselves* as non-human beings or concepts. This would reinforce the narrative of interconnectedness among all Diné beings and ideas.

This also falls neatly within the highest guiding principle to find or forge harmony in one's life, *Sa'ąh Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón*, which roughly translates to "thinking, planning, living, reflecting" (Diné College). In Diné philosophy, the Earth is the mother who sustains and guides Diné people through the four mountains. Diné people are especially encouraged to live harmoniously with all human and non-human beings on Earth, seeing as she created them all. Through this framework it follows that one exists interconnected among all beings. Tapahonso confirms that she writes poetry to "show the interconnectedness we Diné share and how we relate to each other" (Tapahonso 87). Tapahonso has never confined herself to writing only about people: she has works about the land, her favourite coffee, her history, and her members of kin, among countless other topics. Every human and non-human being in her works is related and lives to work together in harmony.

Although a decolonial theoretical lens easily identifies the resurgence in these pieces' connection with their landscape, they may be differently perceived by contrasting audiences. When watching *5th World,* Non-Indigenous viewers (admittedly, including myself) might find the "endless shots of desert landscapes" (Snider qtd in Wood 46) boring and unappealing, to varying degrees. This is especially the case when non-Diné viewers do not recognize some locations, to which Diné viewers are more likely to bond. But before assessing this reaction, it is useful to define some key terms. Another instance of depicting the boring or unappealing is Blackhorse Mitchell's poem "Beauty of Navajoland." It is crucial to note that for native Diné bizaad speaker Mitchell, "beauty" refers to the Diné bizaad term hózhó, "a state of beauty, of harmony, of balance, of peace" (Werito 27). Tapahonso adds that hózhó "is abstract most of the time," and she often struggles to achieve it (Tapahonso 103). Therefore, instead of being about the aesthetic attractiveness of Navajoland, Mitchell's poem concerns the degree of balance; although, it is more complex than non-Diné speakers can appreciate. Specifically, he stages a satirical twist by evoking the disorder and disharmony that can be seen across the reserve. Mitchell begins the poem with the title, then describes diverse scenes of disarray and conflict: litter, death, and pollution. He ends the piece with a poignant remark that "[the described scene] Is not the beauty of Navajoland" (Mitchell 27). Mitchell thus introduces the conversation of the motivations behind Diné creatives' portrayals of a neutral or displeasing contemporary Navajoland.

"Beauty of Navajoland" can be read as a grievance or a call to action for readers to acknowledge and resolve the need to re-establish hózhó. This is a fitting undertaking for a Diné person, for hózhó is Diné epistemology. It fits within the greater philosophy of Sa'ąh Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón, the intention for the speaker and audience to live "in harmony with the natural world and the universe" (Diné College). Therefore, Mitchell's poem exposes the "ugliness" of Navajoland to signal the need for hózhó. The teaching of Sa'ąh Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón influences this undertaking.

Applying such a definition to the "boringness" of *5th World*, Lowe acts in a manner that complements Mitchell's poem. Hawaiian scholar Houston Wood contextualizes this reaction with Tongan academic Epeli Hau'ofa's account of comparable Indigenous film styles in Oceania. Hau'ofa observes that Indigenous filmmakers and viewers usually expect the plot to be "inscribed on the landscape" (Hau'ofa qtd in Wood 46). If omitted—as a Hollywood film likely would—viewers would lose fundamental elements of the Diné worldview. While Eurocentric film typically prioritizes depictions of material and institutional culture, Indigenous filmmakers and viewers more so value the "preservation and study of [their] landscapes" (Wood 46). Not only does the film reflect Diné cultural reliance and respect for the sacred land, but it plainly presents the journey *with* the land that the couple takes to recover hózhó in their lives. As such, the film is likewise bound by Sa'ąh Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón.

Furthermore, depicting the "brutality" of Navajoland instead of its aesthetic beauty also pursues hózhó because it balances out the beautiful depictions. For good reason, Diné artists love to show off their lands, using the same sacred imagery, colours, and patterns. For example, in "Chinle Summer" Woody is distraught by her ties to two communities, but she still gives credit to the picturesque "red earth completely round. / The sky a deep bowl of turquoise overhead" (Woody 108). Later in the poem, she honours beautiful hózhó when she writes, "Beauty walked South and then North again. / Beauty sparked physical creation" (Woody 108). Woody once again personifies a non-human being and even prescribes movement onto it, for the guidance of hózhó can ebb and flow as Diné people need. In both excerpts, she balances the negative emotions she feels with beautiful imagery. This also reflects the tumultuous relationship Diné people have with their lands, given that they were once forcefully displaced in the *Long Walk* of the *Navajo in 1864*.

Skeets continues this thought in an interview when he observes that treating beauty and brutality as oppositional forces is unwise because the land can be seen as both simultaneously, to varying levels depending on one's perspective. He asks, "How do I find beauty in brutality and brutality in beauty?" (Skeets). Skeets' "entire orientation is based on the land," and so in poetry, he follows Dinétics (Diné aesthetics) which are, too, wholly land-based (Skeets). Recalling my earlier analysis of the land's influence on Diné artists' artwork, I see a connection in motivations, as Skeets' loyalty to his land determines his loyalty to harmonize depictions of beauty and brutality in his work. As a Diné person he is born with a love of his land, but he also watches as it is infected by pollution, resource extraction, and violence. Skeets' poetry is a written reflection on the duality he sees his homeland experience, as well as an attempt to reconcile the oppositional into hózhó. Skeets and other contemporary artists also offer a glimpse of the future of Diné lands, as they make apparent their dedication to restoring its hózhó. This is especially important within Diné epistemology, which emphasizes social responsibility for their land and people.

It would be unjust to neglect another answer to the question of why portray Navajoland "brutality": *why not?* Diné creatives can depict their lands in any fashion they desire, and it would still likely be resurgent. In a review of sovereignty in Indigenous art, Tuscarora academic Jolene Rickard identifies some theories that support this answer. She defines "visual sovereignty" to be an expression of self-determination through Indigenous aesthetics, whose existence destabilizes dominant colonial narratives (Rickard 82). Spotlighting the land within such a framework, critical theorist Karen Ohnesorge sees "artistic sovereignty" in "the decolonization of the landscape genre in [Indigenous] art" (Ohnesorge qtd in Rickard 82-83). In praxis, this scaffolding infers that presenting one's Indigeneity without shame is a practice of self-determination that asserts the artist's personal and national agency in the face of the colonial forces that have, for centuries, worked to suppress. The representations reject stereotypes of all kinds, and thus support the formation of Indigenous viewers' evergreening cultural identity. As such, visual representations—positive or negative—by well-intentioned Indigenous creators are foundational supports of their community's resurgence.

Additionally, the Diné artists are being *honest*, and that pursuit in itself should be appreciated. Honesty is not always easy, especially when one is honest about what pains them. For instance, in "The Canyon Was Serene," Tapahonso expresses her frustration that she has trouble achieving hózhó since leaving the Diné reserve. She admits, "Since it happened, there has been no way to weave / this loneliness and the quiet nights into that calm state called beauty." She even confesses a lingering doubt about the existence of hózhó (Tapahonso 103). It is apt to note that in "The Canyon Was Serene," Tapahonso reflects that she misses her homelands, and after just writing about its natural beauty (both of hózhó and aesthetics), she is comforted once again (Tapahonso 104). Diné land's healing power is so strong that, although away from home and spirituality disoriented, reminiscing about the joys that the land gave her is enough to ease Tapahonso's anxiety. In a large scale, the poem reflects the land's medicine, and especially how the land values honesty, as it is Tapahonso's candidness with her feelings that allowed her to heal her anxieties.

For a greater example of honesty, in "In 1864," Tapahonso preludes her poem with a scene of cultural mourning, in which an electrician ultimately quits his job in Western New Mexico because he feels the location is too haunted by the legacy of the Long Walk of 1864. She writes, "He couldn't stay there any longer. / The place contained the pain and cries of his relatives, / the confused and battered spirits of his own existence" (Tapahonso 93). It is difficult to admit that parts of one's native land are too fraught with harmful energy to even work there. Note that Tapahonso is certainly not warning readers to never work or live in the Western plains. The scene may be a true story her aunt had once recited, but I would even surmise that it is a feeling so personal to Tapahonso that she created a character onto whom she could displace the sentiment. Regardless, in a nation that lives *despite* attempts of forced displacement and assimilation, honesty about one's experiences and feelings will

undoubtedly feature some pain and ugliness.

Analyzing the depictions of Indigenous land in art is a prolific undertaking, and one of great weight in Indigenous aesthetics. For instance, Scholars Jarrett Martineau & Eric Ritskes assert the inherent connection between political imaginings and Indigenous art with the concept *fugitive Indigeneity* which exists within decolonial aesthetics. Martineau and Ritskes define fugitive Indigeneity as spaces and paradigms where decolonial artists dismantle dominant narratives and structures (III). The Diné artists I have reviewed protest settler colonial control over Dinétah (Navajoland) and thus exemplify Martineau and Ritskes' discussion. Indigenous art rarely exists independently from political action because art is used as a tool that sustains Indigenous Peoples' agency to affirm their existence and propel their resurgence against modern settler colonialism. In other words, the endurance of the Indigenous artist and their art subverts the colonial hegemony. The art they produce is confirmation of the survival of Indigenous people despite historical "colonial erasure" (Martineau and Ritskes I). Decolonial aesthetics are a site of fugitive Indigeneity, whereby artists materialize the decolonial resistance in their art. This supports the decolonization process that, Martineau and Ritskes assert, requires collective creation of "new radical subjectivities premised on Indigenous survival and re-emergence" (III).

This essay has argued that depicting the "brutality" of the sacred Diné lands is a worthwhile pursuit because it follows the traditional guidance of a need for hózhó. To prove this, I first assessed the manner that several Diné filmmakers and poets reinscribe sovereignty to their lands, which I then contextualized with the Diné philosophy of Sa'ąh Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón, whereby Diné human and non-human beings intertwine to pursue hózhó. These foundations lead me to prove that negative depictions of Navajoland is justified in its pursuit of hózhó, which thus asserts the artists' and the land's visual sovereignty. This analysis is significant within the larger conversation of Indigenous futurities, given that the land is the source of culture and knowledge for Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, it is sensible to present all the land in all lights to remind readers and viewers to protect the sacred lands.

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