

Beyond Words Spoken; the Nádleeh of the Navajo

Alk`idáá`jini¹, a long time ago - it is said: the men and the women; male and female, had a quarrel. Their dispute brought consequent hardships to the People², including hunger and sexual depravation. Until then, the Nádleeh³ had lived peaceably among the People. They dressed, behaved, and functioned within the group as other women. But when men and women no longer wished to coexist, it begged the question of "Who will the Nádleeh live with?" Since the men, upon separation, were the ones who planned to leave the women and make their own camp, they decided that, although the Nádleeh did the chores of other women, they were biologically men; they would be taken along to the men's camp with them. Not surprisingly the men fared a little better than the women...

Stories like this were often told to me in my youth, they are a part of a larger web of tradition that formulated my upbringing into Navajo culture. Retrieving this story propels my mind into an array of connected experience upon this upbringing. Specifically, I can remember preparing for an eventful night one summer, one by fire of sparks sent to the stars.

An Ndaa⁴ ceremony was taking place over a short drive's distance, and we were moments away from dance. It was at times like this my mother brought out the jewels of such treatful evenings, which she kept most of the year locked away in a special box. Strands of turquoise, finely hand-woven sashes, and moccasins dyed a rich Mahogany⁵ were thus freed for the festivities. As my mother took these gems out of the plastic lidded bin, I looked most longingly at the glowing velvet skirts and blouses in hues of red. She laid them, sprawled about, accordingly on her bed. I neared them, beholding the soft fabric between my fingers.

"Don't touch that!" my mother said, hastening her order towards me. I lifted my hand and turned away sharply, acting as if I did not know what she was talking about. She then shouted at the top of her voice "Breanna! Alicia!" - beckoning my two sisters to come into the room. Turning towards me she asked, "Joshua, can you get your sisters for me?" Of course, I was all too happy to delight my mom. I smiled starringly and took off in a dash to the room adjacent.

Why do they get to wear the skirts? They don't even like them as much as I do! I thought as I summoned them from their trifling preoccupation.

My demeanor as a child was quite compliant; I bathed in the love and approval of my parents. However it was moments like when I was admiring the skirts or leaned towards Barbie dolls, where I felt my heart drop to my feet. I felt the displeasure of shame arise within me, because I knew I could not desire such things as skirts and girl toys. That such desire was not allowed in boys such as myself. That I'd have to suppress and ignore.

After settling for another well made velveteen shirt and *also* beautiful turquoise necklace, all four of us children, adorned in our traditional attire piled into the back of the Blue pickup. We were tossed around fervently once we got onto the dusty, bumpy, dirt roads which occupied the entrance to such ceremonies. Still, I was teeming and fluttering with excitement.

*Together oh, we are traveling
On Horseback ho! we are travelling
On wheels a go! we are travelling
Adorned in Gold of sky hues*

*Anticipating in Silvery fervor
Over dirt roads
Under Starry skies
We make on ways spirited,
To the drum yet in token*

The dance was just as wonderful as was anticipated, the chorus of the men sang long into the night as we made our rounds. The women all in long flowing skirts, and the men with their finest silver and Stetson hats, arms linked as they circuited the open fire. Among such coupling, I often shied away, to such embarrassment, my family often attributed to simply be boy jitters. Inside though I knew, it was not the same kind of discomfort. Nevertheless the elders still laughed and teased me as I awkwardly accepted the girls' requests to dance, for in these Navajo dance, it is Lady's Choice. Still I did not like being coupled in such a way.

...Meanwhile, before the separation of the men and woman, as a young man was returning home with a slain deer obtained from his hunting trip to the mountain, a young maiden was also awaiting the return of her husband. Untriumphantly however, the husband was not in the best mood, he had heard a rumor of his wife that had alleged cheating. Unsuspecting of his foul mood, his wife said in a regretfully joking manner:

"It is a good thing men desire women so, lest there be no meat brought to our homes!" she jested at him. Her remark may have been otherwise received with good humor, if her husband had not been the swirl of jealous thoughts that entered her home that day.

He replied sharply. "You women! You take so much for granted only to throw it away! If it were not for us men, you women would not be able to survive the winter!"

Unaccustomed to such treatment she brazenly responded to his accusation. "You men! You would be too lazy to go hunting if you were not trying to get under our skirts!" she continued, "It is us women who do all the work around here!"

Back and forth they argued only ending upon him leaving in a storm of hurt and anger. His heart was in anguish, he thought indeed the allegations must then be true. After leaving he could speak of nothing. As he was usually a good speechmaker, the ants grew considerably worried upon his befallen silence. They decided he should see their grandmother, maybe she could help...

Perhaps it is not by chance one would turn to a grandmother upon such circumstance. My grandmother is a very sweet woman, akin to much laughter and teasing. She was also at the dance that night, but she was among the rest of them, insisting I go along with the girls and laughing as us young boys took them in arms. She lives with my grandpa, together, right down the street from my own. She is a dutiful cleaner and faithful housewife, though I mean more so that her house is run much to her own accord. Even as she employs a well managed household and husband, she is never beyond reach for a musing with guests. Communication with her can be sometimes a patient endeavor however, English being her second language.

As it pertains to me, she frequently enjoyed relating to me about stories of her grandmother. One time in particular, she relayed to me an interesting bit of her childhood, one that would provide me a step

towards my own acceptance. She told me how her grandmother had told her that the Nádleeh whom we now call *LGBTQ* were a special thing in Navajo culture. She explained how they fit within Navajo society in the old days. A boy that was blessed with being Nádleeh was taught to weave immediately following his profession, being raised as a female thereon. To the People, they embodied a special perspective, one that might escape a strictly male or strictly female perspective, as might be the case for the story of the two sexes and their dispute. Because they transcended the limits of both genders, they usually became leaders among the People. It was upon hearing this that I felt as if someone had shined a light on my soul. I had within my history and legends a place for myself to find solace. The child I had denied so long, was finally allowed to be embraced and loved, hereonward in my own home.

...As the husband was having troubles in his home, he followed the advice of the ant people and left to find the grandmother of the Ants. Old Grandmother Ant Woman offered her counsel to the young man. She was actually a man dressed as a woman, and she was a great leader among her people. She hunted her own meat, sewed her own fields, ground her own corn, and wove her own baskets⁶. Still in a jealous fit, the husband recounted how women were too comfortable in their provisions, how they would surely suffer if it were not for the men. She told the man, "If you believe so, I will instruct you on how to build a raft so that you may cross the great river. Take your men and cross this river. Then you may live apart just as you said." The mythical river was very large and dangerous and anyone who dared cross without such a contraption, as the raft Old Grandmother spoke of, would surely drown. Upon the directive of Old Grandmother, he set forth. Gathering the men, he convinced them of the women's disloyalty. They decided they would take with them the twin Nádleeh and would make their way across the river on the raft just constructed. Many young couples were saddened as they by their departures, but it was the stubbornness that they were subjected which separated them of each other...

I felt torn by this new insight into myself, I still could not embrace it fully, but it was a step. Although my grandmother held such wisdoms she gained from her grandmother, the town in which I grew up in and the new generation that I was raised in was influenced by the Christian and Mormon influences which permeated our reservation. It was just not safe just yet, no longer was it the time my grandmother spoke of. It would be years later that I actually came out as gay to them. My grandmother accepted me fully, but my grandpa, who went to a government boarding school that seeded to destroy the Navajo culture, had a hard time grappling with it. So much has been lost of our culture, and so much that many Navajo youth today are unaware of. Maybe I can bring to light some of these traditions that are still useful today.

I believe it is in every culture we can find valuable lessons. Even in every individual there is value of a different perspective. I only offer mine to demonstrate for the Western world that such a thing as "Gay rights" has been an established tradition in a fully functioning society predating the arrival of Columbus.

In delving into the Nádleeh identity that is found within Navajo culture, It is not my intent to add yet another letter to the word *LGBTQA*, although I certainly would not be opposed. I think it is most important however, to not become attached to such labels. That is not to say that the fight for equality is not justified. The functionality of being able to legally marry, and not be hated by society is most useful. However we cannot mistake an aspect of our identity for being the truth of our self. Examining the role of

the Nádleeh can strengthen our fight for equality because it shows that even outside Western, and for that matter, any school of thought, there are variables that cannot be contained within such an ideology.

The word *Nádleeh* is not mentioned considerably within Navajo texts, because it is not a definitive feature of a person. Old Grandmother Ant Woman does is not referred to as a Nádleeh, she is simply as a woman, a person. Altogether it is not important that she be referred as such woman. Even as the Nádleeh is a sacred thing in Navajo culture, so too is all things such as animals, plants, rocks, earth, and air. Each sacred within their own right, and altogether create harmony in the world. That was what escaped the young couple in the story, they did not value the other, and so Old Grandmother Ant Woman offered them a chance to recognize their need for each other as men and women.

The valuable contrivance we as LGBTQA and Nádleeh can contribute to society lies within our occupancy outside of conventions; such as Gender paradigms and Sexual Orientation paradigms. Our orientation alone forces recognition of these paradigms within society as a function and not a truth. It forces people to see that regardless of their desire to see the world through a certain lens or idea - as the binary gender, there are people and phenomena that occur outside of said constructs that cannot be explained through any model of human thinking. The truth lies outside of these paradigms, outside of any label, outside of any function of society and culture, outside of all language and ideas. To function as a society we must be able to concede our ideas if they prove to be dysfunctional, because ultimately life is not a function, life is life and life unspoken.

In the end, I am not Nádleeh, I am not LGBTQA, I am not anything that can be categorized, uttered, or spoken of. With pink ink I may write, because I like the color, but I am not the pink ink.

So to finish the story, the men and the women realized that neither one could live without the other. They were nothing as they thought they were, Old Grandmother Ant Woman was happy to see them realize the absurdity of dividing themselves into such categories as “men” and “women,” because they were just one people, and the poor Nádleeh twins who had to live with a *bunch of men* for four years returned once again to their same lives of weaving and cleaning, little changed for them throughout the whole ordeal, but still they were happy to the group reunited. Did I mention that Nádleeh in Navajo society were taken up as wives without stigma by men? Now that must have been such a four year hardship.

I do not see myself!

To confess my self in thee

Everywhere I turn people tell me

Here you are

I am a child of Water,

Look I found you!

I am a child of Earth,

Yet with their fingers pointing, I found nothing

My teeth are made from the white shells of her shores,

In my days I looked

My fingers are marked with the spiraling trails of her breath,

I cannot see myself!

Nowhere do I profess

*The Blood that flows through my veins, is the
water that flows in rivers yonder,
I am Sá'áh Nághai Bik'eh Hózhóón⁷,*

*We are her people, his people, all people, no
people*

Notes

1. Ałk'idáá'jini¹, a common Navajo introduction to a story, used similarly as *Once upon a time*.
2. the People² - As Navajo, we do not call ourselves *Navajo*, we call ourselves Diné, which means simply “the People,” so in speaking English, instead of referring to our tribe as *Navajo*, I say instead the People, which is how we see ourselves, as a people.
3. Nádleeh, the word roughly translates into English as “changing” or “transcending.”
4. An Ndaa' is a Navajo 3 day ceremony that is held during the summer, it is one that is held for serious purposes, such as a veteran who returns from war and suffers mentally from the things that his position had him do. A medicine man, the Navajo Scholar/Historian/Priest, prays over him during the day, but at night the seriousness is left aside and much gaiety arises from the dance that is held until midnight.
5. Moccasins are dyed with the roots of the Mahogany tree, turning it a deep red-brown, the color of most Navajo moccasins.
- 6.” *She hunted her own meat, sewed her own fields, ground her own corn, and wove her own baskets*⁶” In Navajo society, the men were usually the ones who hunted, planted corn, and the woman prepared the meals, ground the corn, and wove the baskets and rugs. Old Grandmother did things of both genders, but not all, she was allowed to transcend these lines of gender, facing no criticism or repercussions
7. *Sá'áh Nághai Bik'eh Hózhóón*⁷ This is a phrase that is central to Navajo teaching, it relates both the male *Sá'áh Nághai* and female *Bik'eh Hózhóon* energies into one cohesive phrase that can roughly translate to Old Age and Happiness, though there is a wide range of definitions available that mean deeper than just that which I said. In the Navajo scheme of the universe, it is that which encompasses all beings and all life forms, including rocks, wind, and trees.

Extra Notes:

There are many versions of this story, each telling of the story stresses a different point of the story depending upon which ceremony, song, or teaching it is trying to convey. All stories are accepted by the Navajo people, this version is one that resembles most closely the story told in *Gift of the Gila Monster* a book written containing a collection of many Navajo stories. This is also a very shortened version of the story, depending on who is telling it, this story just one scene from this story can last all night, and this is but one scene of a much larger Navajo legend.

All the poems which are contained in this essay, and the retold story that is written in this essay are written by me.

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