

## **‘My You’re a Great Man’: A Wâkôhtowin Exploration of the Changing Indigenous Masculinity**

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### **Abstract**

When it comes to examining Indigenous boys, men, and masculinities, much of the research remains theoretical in nature, with few scholarly explorations of how diverse, place-specific Indigenous nations engage in processes of recuperating and sustaining the Indigenous values, roles, and responsibilities of boys and men. In this paper, we present research emerging from a five-year “community-first Land centred” project with Ochêkwi-Sîpî (Fisher River Cree Nation), which is located in the territory today known as ‘Canada’. The findings in this paper foreground the stories of eighteen Elders that were gathered through sharing circles and intergenerational interviews. The findings are analyzed using a relational ontology, and more specifically the Cree concept of wâkôhtowin (being related). In so doing, we were able to see how an ethic of relational accountability to self, community, nation, and more-than-human relations was woven through the stories of the Elders, as they envisioned what Cree masculinities could be.

“Each person in our families and nations is a medicine. Differently abled people, trans, queer, and two-spirit people, and those that use substances and, live with addictions, all have gifts to offer.” (Konsmo & Recollet, 2018, p. 242)

## Introduction

Settler scholar Sam McKegney (2021) provocatively asks “what if Indigenous masculinities themselves were conceived as medicines?” (p. xii). What if, in other words, Indigenous masculinities were to be upheld as part of the process of healing and re-building Indigenous nationhood? Such a line of questioning is indeed a dangerous one because colonialism has always been—and continues to be—a gendered process (Barker, 2017; Goeman, 2013; Hokowhitu, 2015; Pyle, 2020). With the historical and ongoing conditions of gendered colonialism in mind, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) is concerned that foregrounding Indigenous masculinities, as McKegney (2021) suggests, might “reinforce the colonial gender binary centering cisgendered straight men (who are already the centre of everything) instead of dismantling heteropatriarchy” (p. 137). This tension between, on the one hand, affirming Indigenous ‘maleness’ and ‘masculinities,’ while recognizing the destructive effects historical and ongoing processes of gendered colonialism have had on Indigenous communities, on the other, has resulted in somewhat of an *impasse* within scholarly examinations of Indigenous masculinities, especially healthy Indigenous masculinities. Within this context, it has been easier to write about unhealthy Indigenous masculinities, where Indigenous men are either characterized as violent victimizers (Innes, 2015; Innes & Anderson, 2015) or themselves as victims of poverty, addiction, or absenteeism (Sinclair & McKegney, 2014). Either way, such constructions reduce Indigenous masculinity to pathology, foreclosing considerations of how Indigenous men either challenge or creatively negotiate settler conditions of possibility to their own purposes (Hokowhitu & McKegney, 2014), much less any thought as to how Indigenous masculinities might themselves be conceived as medicines.

Notwithstanding the risks, Cree-Métis scholar Kim Anderson maintains that engaging healthy Indigenous masculinities is critical work because Indigenous communities are only going to be as healthy as are the men. Thus, Anderson's work is guided by a "vision for healthy families and communities" that sees Indigenous men as having gifts to offer and thus being pivotal to realizing this vision (Anderson & McKegney, 2014, p. 92). However, this is not an uncomplicated vision to actualize because it involves unearthing place-specific values and practices as a pathway to both dismantling heteropatriarchy while at the same time re-thinking and re-building healthy relationships with land and kin in the service of Indigenous nationhood<sup>1</sup> (Anderson et al., 2015). Anishinaabe scholar Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair outlines a three-phase process for conducting this difficult work. The first phase involves interrogating the historical settler colonial regimes of "dispossession, disenfranchisement, and social engineering" that continue to constrain the contemporary conditions of possibility for Indigenous boys and men (Sinclair & McKegney, 2014, p. 232). In the second phase, Sinclair suggests that we seek out nation-specific knowledges about healthy Indigenous masculinities that continue to exist within the community, although often obscured by "invented traditions" of Indigenous masculinity (Hokowhitu, 2015), by engaging Elders and knowledge holders. In the third and final phase, the knowledge gained in the first two phases can, alongside a critical awareness, be implemented in "imaginative ways that might engender a variety of possibilities for non-dominative yet empowered Indigenous masculinities" (Sinclair & McKegney, 2014, p. 232). In this paper, we engage with the first and second phases by sharing the stories of eighteen Elders

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<sup>1</sup> Nationhood, as we use it in this paper, is not the bounded colonial nation-state that divides inside from outside, but rather draws on the notion of kinship or wâkôhtowin -based (being related) practices of peoplehood that are inclusive of diverse human and more-than-human relationships (see Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000; Kolonpenuk, 2020). Here, Cree peoplehood or sovereignty is not governed by the possessive logics of Western capital, but being in relation, which animates Ininiwak [Cree] peoplehood whereby each individual is a synecdochal part of the whole" (Kolonpenuk, 2020, p. 10).

involved in a “community-first, Land-centred” (Styres & Zinga, 2013) research project with Fisher River Cree Nation (*Ochêkwi-Sîpî*).

Before turning to these stories, we discuss what Indigenous and Cree masculinities *could be* when embedded in practices of relational accountability or wâkôhtowin and follow this with an overview of the existing theory and research emerging from Indigenous feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, with a particular focus on the impacts settler colonialism has had on Indigenous gender formations broadly and Indigenous masculinities more specifically. We have elected to organize the paper this way, privileging the aspirational and practical over theoretical and historical accounts of trauma, in an attempt to “unsettle and disrupt...the regime of theory over practice” that characterizes dominant Western-centred approaches to research and scholarship (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p. 9). We are also hopeful that such a move creates space for the emergence of desire-centred research, where strengths, yearnings, and continuities of those involved in the research are foregrounded, as opposed to historical and ongoing traumas (Tuck, 2009). We follow this with an outline of our methods and then turn to three over-arching themes emerging from the project, including: an exploration of *Ininiw* [Cree] masculinities; an examination of how these masculinities are evolving in relation to the changing social, economic, cultural, and land environments within the community; and finally, a brief overview of gender expansiveness within Fisher River Cree Nation. We conclude the paper by turning, once again, to community Elders and knowledge holders who offer a pathway for a Cree-centred futurity for Indigenous masculinity (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

### **Relationally Accountable Roles and Responsibilities of Boys and Men**

According to a relational worldview, which is a common worldview amongst many Indigenous nations, the self is continuously becoming through the diverse human and more-than-

human relationships that one holds and is accountable to. Cherokee author and scholar, Daniel Heath Justice (2008), speaks of this relational worldview in terms of kinship, suggesting that:

kinship isn't a static thing: it's dynamic, ever in motion. It requires attentiveness; kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun, because kinship, in most Indigenous contexts, is something that's done more than something that simply is. (cited in McKegney, 2021, p. 154-5)

Here, the self is in a perpetual state of becoming in relation to, and through participation in, “an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships” (Justice cited in McKegney, 2021, p. 157). The Cree use the word *wâkôhtowin* to describe the kinship laws that guide respectful and “mutually affecting relationships” within the community, where community is understood broadly and is inclusive of human and more-than-human relations. Here, one is only as healthy as are their relationships and thus following the laws of *wâkôhtowin* leads to deeper inter-connectedness within the community, and ultimately to *mino-pimatisiwin*, a Cree term used to refer to the good life. For Ininiw (Cree) people, ‘the good life’ is not a destination, nor is it a static state of being, but is an ongoing journey of healing, learning, and being-in-relation (Hart, 2002). *Mino-pimatisiwin* is rooted in a number of foundational concepts, including *wholeness*, where all aspects of life—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—are incorporated into being in a *balanced* (thoughtful consideration of all aspects of life) and *harmonious* (respectful relations with self and others) manner. When practiced well, *mino-pimatisiwin* leads to growth and healing (Hart, 2002), which is conceptualized more broadly as the practice of continuously striving to learn about and restore the “person, community, and nation to wholeness, connectedness, and balance” (Reginer, 1994, p. 135). Healing holistically from a *mino-pimatisiwin* way recognizes that it is more than about a person, or generation of individuals, but is linked through intergenerational responsibility to previous generations and the generations to come. When applied to Indigenous masculinities, the pathway towards healthy masculinities

means dis-investing from some relations (e.g., settler colonial constructions of individualism and heteropatriarchy) and remembering *wâkôhtowin*, or “how to think relationally, to know relationally, to speak relationally: to be in relation” (Kolopenuk, 2020, p. 67). This remembering is heavily reliant on learning of traditional practices, whether ceremonial, practical, or otherwise.

Crucially, to suggest that the self becomes through continually becoming ever more integrated into the group does not mean that there is no room for agency or individual freedom. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. As one of the authors of this paper has described elsewhere, a relational worldview is guided by “a sense of communitism *and respectful individualism*” (emphasis added, Hart, 2010). Within a relational worldview it is acknowledged that the individual is accountable to the broader needs of community, as opposed to self-interest alone, and as long as one’s self-expression contributes to the greater good, they are accorded considerable freedom as to how their contributions manifest (Hart, 2010). The form an individual’s contributions take are diverse and are not ascribed based on one’s gender identity, but rather represent the unique gifts the individual possesses, and these unique gifts are understood as a strength of Indigenous societies, not a weakness, as they foster “a diversity of highly self-sufficient individuals, families, and communities” (Simpson, 2017, p. 129). Simpson writes that “people were expected to figure out their gifts and their responsibilities through ceremony and reflection and self-actualization, and that process was...the most important governing process on an individual level—more important than the gender you were born into” (2017, p. 4). Simpson later explains that once the individual asserts their identity and the expression of that identity through their gifts, it is then the community’s responsibility to support that identity, carving a role for them within the community, provided that identity does not encroach upon or impede the self-expression of others. Within *wâkôhtowin*-based societies, roles

should be approached as a system of values that inform everyone's, including men's, responsibility to (re)generate, maintain, and strengthen the broader web of intimate relationships with diverse human and non-human actors, inviting relationships across various differences and generations. This is a central point, because we are mindful that "heteropatriarchy is often present even when we attempt to decolonize...attitudes towards gender and sexuality" (Pyle, 2020, p. 110). Indeed, calls to reclaim traditional and authentic Indigenous masculinities have, at times, resulted in fixed colonially defined constructions that have entrenched gender binaries, thus privileging some Indigenous men at the expense of women, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse peoples (see Hokowhitu, 2015; Laing, 2021; Pyle, 2020).

### **Indigenous Feminist, Gender, & Sexuality Studies**

Across Indigenous feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, it is understood that the targeted disruption of nation-specific gender systems was not merely a by-product of settler colonialism, rather it was—and continues to be—at the very core of the Canadian nation-building project (see Morgensen, 2010, 2015). This means that diverse and expansive gender systems were targeted for destruction as a means of disrupting Indigenous ways of being and dispossessing Indigenous lands (Barker, 2017; Smith, 2005). Crucially, this was a relational process, as settler scholar Scott Morgensen (2015) argues, because in order for what he calls "colonial masculinity to achieve dominance it had to be *invented*" (p. 39). This means that "European modes of manhood arrived on Indigenous lands, changed as they participated in colonial violence, and became entrenched as methods of settler rule" (p. 37). In other words, colonial masculinities are "creations of conquest" and there is nothing static nor neutral about them, but rather as settler logics of domination shift, so too do colonial masculinities

(Morgensen, 2015, p. 39). In the Canadian context, settler logics of gendered colonialism have operated through a range of overlapping, albeit diffuse, discursive, and non-discursive technologies. Some of the more prominent examples of these technologies of gendered colonialism include: the imposition of gendered economies such as the fur trade and farming that sought to dismantle family and community as economic units by undermining the contributions of all genders to the well-being of the family and community; the formation of the inherently sexist Indian Act, which sought to govern all aspects of Indigenous life in accordance with settler logics of heteropatriarchy (see Carter, 1990; Cannon, 2019; Lawrence, 2004; Van Kirk, 1980); the Indian residential school system, which was structured around and sought to forcibly impose a colonial sex-gender system on the children within the schools (see Norman et al., 2019), and; the reproduction of colonial simulations of Indigenous masculinity that constrain and fix the lived diversity of Indigenous gender expressions within the narrow confines of the colonial imaginary (see McKegney, 2011). These gendered creations of conquest continue today as pivotal technologies upholding the settler nation-state through power relations that incite Indigenous peoples to disinvest from their knowledge systems and invest in settler colonial relations. Cree scholar Robert Innes (2015) suggests that these settler colonial relations are rooted in White supremacist heteronormative patriarchy that continue to colonize “Indigenous peoples’ bodies, minds, and lands” (p. 53), negatively impacting not only Indigenous boys and men, but girls and women, Elders, and people of diverse genders (see also Tatonetti, 2021). What is particularly pernicious about settler colonial gender logics is that they not only govern existing Indigenous gender formations, but also constrain the imagination, foreclosing the ability of Indigenous peoples to envision alternatives to the heteropatriarchal norm (Innes, 2015). On this point, Kanyen'kehá:ka scholar Marie Laing (2021) explains that the opportunity for Indigenous



communities to “philosophize are constrained by the violence of settler-colonialism and the ways in which Indigenous communities are kept in crisis by the settler state” (p. 135).

This attack on the imagination is precisely why scholars and community-based activists suggest that the task is not just to decolonize or get ‘rid’ of colonial masculinity, but also to draw on Indigenous knowledge systems as a pathway for prying open ways of doing Indigenous masculinity otherwise. That is, re-situating masculinity as medicine, where masculinity “belongs and is in service of kin and community rather than a masculinity that exists solely as personal expression of the self” (Justice cited in McKegney, 2021, p. 160). Here, the sort of masculinity being hailed is “less about anatomy and more about ethics” (McKegney, 2021, p. xvii).

However, shifting the focus from bodies to ethics does not guarantee a masculinity that is relationally accountable to kin and community. Indeed, the affective ‘pull’ of the “false promise patriarchy,” rooted as it is in neoliberal individualism (McKegney, 2021, p. 189), cannot be overestimated (see Hokowhitu, 2012; 2015). In this version of masculinity, men are incited to pursue an entrepreneurial ethics of the self, where the promise of the ‘good life’ is to be found through individual expressions of power and authority in its many forms, including hypermasculine violence, consumption, (hetero)sexual conquest, and the attainment of bodily beauty ideals, to name a few. When positioned alongside the promise of heteropatriarchy, and with few alternative pathways available—even at the level of the imagination, as Innes contends—for Indigenous boys and men to accrue power and authority under oppressive conditions of settler colonialism (see Hokowhitu, 2004), a relational ethic of responsibility to kin and community may comparatively seem somewhat less appealing, if not increasingly difficult to practice (Anderson et al., 2015; Sinclair & McKegney, 2014). Nevertheless, an ethic of relational accountability as recognized within *wākōhtowin* is precisely what Indigenous scholars, activists,

community members, and settler allies are suggesting we pursue in scholarly and community-based work on Indigenous men and masculinities, and below we outline how we approached this task methodologically.

### Methods

Story work has always been an essential tool in Indigenous peoples' reclaiming the power and authority to define themselves, as it has been critical to Indigenous ways of knowing (see Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). In this way, the power of story is not just the purview of recognized 'storytellers,' such as acclaimed writers, poets, and scholars, but has been, and continues to be, part of the everyday fabric of the mutually affecting relationships that are constitutive of Indigenous societies. When it comes to studying Indigenous masculinities, this is an important point because the conversation tends to centre the voices of university-trained and funded story-tellers (for exception, see Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 2015) and, as Niigaan Sinclair cautions, we must include "our brothers and uncles who are not in those places when we have these discussions about what it means to be an Indigenous man" (Sinclair & McKegney, 2014, p. 237).

With this caution in mind, we set out to gather stories of what it means to be an Indigenous man within the place-specific context of Fisher River Cree Nation (*Ochekwi-Sipi*), which is located in Treaty 5 territory, about 230 kilometers north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The project was informed by an Indigenous-centred, community-first research design (see Styres & Zinga, 2013), which means that we took a number of steps to both foreground Indigenous knowledge systems (see Absolon, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Lambert, 2014), and specifically Swampy Cree knowledge (see Hart, 2002, 2009, 2010; Wilson, 2008), while also centering the priorities of the community. These steps included: the formation of a five (sometimes six) person

Community Project Committee (CPC) who oversaw and guided the research process; a research team composed of both Indigenous (M.A. Hart & C. Sinclair) and Settler-ally (M. Norman & L. Petherick) scholars; and, a circular research design that involved ongoing and recursive cycles of knowledge gathering (i.e., sharing circles, intergenerational interviews) and knowledge sharing (i.e., community feasts, an Elder-facilitated Land-based heritage camp, and a community-based book). Elsewhere, we elaborate on our research design (see Norman et al., 2018). After a year of meetings with the CPC, in the fall of 2015 it was decided that knowledge gathering would begin with Elder sharing circles. Between the fall of 2015 and the spring of 2017, thirteen Elders participated (eight men, five women) in four sharing circles, with two Elders participating in more than one circle. Sharing circles were facilitated by recognized knowledge holders from the community with one or more members of the university research team present. After the first three Elder sharing circles, additional sharing circles were hosted with adults, youth, and children. Sharing circles lasted between 1.5 hours and 3.5 hours, depending on the number of participants and what they had to share. Additionally, seven inter-generational interviews were conducted, where a community youth or adult interviewed an Elder (six men, one woman), with two of the Elders participating in both a sharing circle and an interview. Intergenerational interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. A total of 75 people participated in one or more of the research activities associated with the project. The over-arching objective of the project was to access the place-specific values, roles and responsibilities informing what it means to be a Cree man in Fisher River. Those who participated were asked to reflect on and share their life experiences, changes within the community, and the evolving values, roles, and responsibilities of Cree boys and men. Participants were also asked to share their vision for a healthy community and the role boys and men might play in such a community.

As Angie, one of the members of the CPC, shared in an adult sharing circle she facilitated, the lessons carried within a particular story are not necessarily straightforward, which means that the listener is not passive in the story-telling process. Rather, the listener must actively engage in processes of coming to know, and based on their own experiences and situation in life, come to some understanding about the lessons carried in a particular story. As Angie explains of her experiences speaking with Elders, sometimes you think to yourself “just give me an answer!,” but:

...it's not that simple with Indigenous people...It's not that straightforward answer. You'll never get that straightforward answer. It's what you find in...what they're sharing—the answers are there...The Elders can guide you and give that encouragement and advice through stories, [but] you'll have to find what you're looking for [in their stories].

Angie's approach to stories is consistent with an ethic of respectful individualism, where lessons are not prescriptive, but rather interpretative. As such, the listener can bring their own unique gifts to the meaning-making process, thus opening opportunities for a range of interpretations and perspectives that foster, as opposed to foreclose, the diversity that ensures the strength, resilience, and adaptability necessary to sustaining the larger group, and in turn the community. We would offer this ethic of respectful individualism for readers of this article as well. Although we have interpreted the stories shared in relation to the place-specific context of Fisher River, as well as in relation to our own experiences and positionalities, we encourage readers to build their own relationship to the stories in this article. We remind individuals that such work within respectful individualism is always seen in relation to community. Hence, as you build your relationship with the stories, that we are committed to act “respectful” to ourselves *and* the communities involved.

This process of coming to know through respectful individualism and sharing our internal reflections for the benefit of the group, and in turn the community, was followed within our interpretative synthesis process as well. Each of the authors carefully listened to the recordings and read the transcripts of those who shared their stories with us, and then personally reflected on what was shared from our own place in the world. We came together to reveal our interpretations with one another, and synthesized these interpretations to develop a common understanding, which we share below.

### **Ininiw Masculinities**

In the intergenerational interviews, Elders were asked about what ‘masculinity’ means to them. Without exception, the Elders answered this question by contrasting dominant Euro-Western versions of masculinity with their experience of the values, roles, and responsibilities of Cree men and boys. As Sherman shared, “when you say [masculinity] in Cree it has a deeper meaning,” and it is those deeper meanings that we were interested in hearing more about in this project. As opposed to the strong, muscular, neoliberal ideal of Western culture, the Elders spoke about a ‘strong’ man being one who is accountable to all of their human and more-than-human relations. For Dorothy, the English word ‘masculinity’ conjured the notion of a “warrior or strong person,” but she elaborates on her response, suggesting that,

a warrior doesn’t have to be only a person who goes to war. A warrior could be a person who helps you lead a good life. A warrior helps to protect you from danger and also to protect you, and even provide for you, the things you need in life, that’s a warrior.

As we alluded to earlier, Indigenous masculinity is overdetermined by colonial simulations of the hyper-masculine “bloodthirsty warrior” (McKegney, 2011; see also Klopotek, 2001), but Dorothy conjures a Cree articulation of the warrior that goes beyond the Western colonial imaginary. Here, the warrior is not defined by the embodiment of physical strength and violence,

but by their ability to protect and provide a 'good life' for others—that is, to seek *mino-pimatisiwin* with the context of community. As such, the warrior is not an identity, but rather a dynamic and affective enactment of *wâkôhtowin*. A little later in the interview, Dorothy elaborates, this time using the Cree word *napewiwin* to articulate a more holistic understanding of the roles and responsibilities of men, explaining that,

a long time ago when a man became a man, you know, and he goes hunting and brings food back, [...] an Elder will say [said in Cree] “my, you’re a great man,” because you bring us all this food—to the community, to feed us. He’s a great provider and protector, you know, it’s all of those things connected to masculinity.

In an intergenerational interview, Sherman Sinclair offered a similar elaboration on what masculinity meant to him from a Cree perspective:

I know what stands out [about the word ‘masculinity’] is somebody big and strong, but I think it’s a little bit more than that...I think it goes a little deeper than that for me. I think it’s somebody being strong—it doesn’t matter if he’s a big man. I think when one stands strong for his community, for his family and his friends, especially in a time of need, he has heart to help people. That’s how I see it...he’s somebody who’s being strong for somebody else who is not strong.

And finally, Bill T., an Elder who participated in an inter-generational interview, shared that masculinity sometimes involved being tough, as circumstances required, but such toughness was not about elevating oneself at the expense of others, nor was it tied to narrow constructions of hegemonic masculinity (see also Anderson et al., 2015). Rather, masculinity was more about relational accountability than it was about individual status and dominant norms of hypermasculinity.

...the word masculinity, you know, seems like someone who thinks they are superior...But I don’t know if that fits my role or fits anybody’s role in this world, in an Indigenous life...You know guys go [commercial] fishing. You need to have some masculinity to do that. But you’re out there making a living for you and your family...I like to think I’ve provided for my family all these years, you know.

These more holistic narratives of masculinity are similar to those shared with Anderson, Swift and Innes (2015), where the Indigenous men in their study spoke about the role of ‘protection’ as

being part of Indigenous men's responsibility to the larger community. However, Anderson and colleagues (2015) observed that participants seldom described what being a protector might entail, leading them to speculate that their notions of protection might remain rooted in patriarchal relations of domination and masculine status. However, the Elders in our study did describe the values informing the roles and responsibilities of Cree boys and men, including those of sharing with others and supporting and sustaining *mino-pimatisiwin*. You will recall that *mino-pimatisiwin* refers to the commitment to restore the person, community, and nation to wholeness, connectedness, and balance" (Reigner, 1994, p. 135). As such, greatness is not found in individual acts of conquest, bravery, or heroism, although these are sometimes part of the process. Rather, greatness is found in the contributions, whatever form they may take, to creating and protecting the conditions for the good life for both oneself and members of the community.

This sense of responsibility extended beyond human relations, as Russell Sinclair explained in an Elders sharing circle:

It *hurts* when you read stories [about pollution] and see where our lake [i.e., Lake Winnipeg] is going—our water is going—it's being polluted...And yet, you know, we always hear that Native people are the *keepers of the land*—that's what I hear from the Elders—that's our role on this earth, is to look after the land and the resources. [cited in Norman et al., 2020, p. 97]

Indeed, the effects of settler colonialism come in many forms, with climate change and environmental degradation being among the "shape-shifting" (Corntassel, 2012) ways it continues to disrupt Indigenous ways of being (Wildcat, 2017). As we have argued elsewhere, anthropocentric environmental change is enabled by a Western worldview that conceptualizes land as a resource to be harvested in the service of capital accumulation (Norman et al., 2020). Within such a worldview, land is approached as inert matter that does not have value in and of itself, but comes to be valuable as it is *re-sourced* through human intervention into a commodity. This is a radically divergent perspective from a relational worldview, where land—which is

inclusive of earth, air, and water (Styres & Zinga, 2013)—is part of the intimate web of human and more-than-human relations that are constitutive of *wâkôhtowin* -based peoplehood.

Therefore, when Lake Winnipeg—which is the body of water on which Fisher River is located—is polluted through human activity (i.e., farm fertilizers seeping into the rivers that empty into the lake, extractive industries, such as peat mining, and the aggressive development of the watery scapes of the Lake Winnipeg basin), this has a deep affective impact—it is felt in one's very being—put simply, it *hurts*. It hurts because it disrupts the web of affective relationships which is both constitutive of the self and to which one is relationally accountable. In other words, environmental degradation forcibly disrupts the performative responsibility of Cree boys and men to embody their role as “keepers of the land”. Indeed, stories about how change has impacted the roles and responsibilities of boys and men were common, as we explore in the following section.

### **Changing Communities, Changing Masculinities**

The Elders spoke about a number of factors that continued to disrupt and erode the intimate web of relationships that were constitutive of a Cree way of life. These factors included: the introduction of ‘welfare’ as diminishing independence, the intensification of technologies (e.g., television, smart phones) as eroding inter-dependence, environmental degradation as disrupting relations with Land, standardized Euro-Canadian education curricula as troubling intergenerational mentorship relations, and finally, they spoke of the ideal of the nuclear family as disrupting Cree kinship relations. Although the Elders did not necessarily use the language of settler colonialism, we nonetheless see each of these challenges as different strands that, when taken together, comprise the settler colonial assemblage (Barker, 2021) that targets Indigenous relationality for destruction as a means of gaining access to Indigenous lands and fortifying white



settler belonging and entitlement. While these challenges threatened the community more generally, it was acknowledged that they jeopardized the roles and responsibilities of Cree boys and men in specific ways, as they undermined pathways for boys and men to remain relationally accountable to the larger group. At the root of these challenges is the changing economy of Fisher River as it shifted from a primarily land-based economy, where men engaged in practices of hunting, fishing, trapping, lumbering, and farming to one based in wage labour where workers increasingly require post-secondary education or specialized credentials to secure work. As Dorothy Crate explains, the decline in the land-based economy has had a rippling effect throughout the entire community:

...most people do not live off the land too much anymore. They don't go hunting, they don't do fishing too much, they don't do trapping at all. All these changes and we don't live off the land very much anymore. And the families are not really doing too much together anymore [...] Everybody has their own things going on in their own little selves. We don't mingle as much as we used to a long time ago.

Other Elders shared similar sentiments, explaining that living off the land was a very communal way of life, where several families would hunt, trap, fish, gather, and prepare food together and share food with others. However, factors such as environmental degradation and the subsequent decline and contamination of animal populations, the privatization of land, various land development projects, and state-sanctioned hunting and fishing regulations, to name a few, have made it increasingly difficult to sustain a land-based way of life (see also Anderson et al., 2012). These changes have implications for boys and men who, at one time, were able to fulfill meaningful and relevant roles and responsibilities within these land-based contexts, are now increasingly forced to adapt to changing economies, which have given rise to different masculinities (see Cariou et al., 2014).

Indeed, the jobs available within increasingly globalizing conditions of advanced capitalism often pull men away from the local community context to larger urban centres or other distant locations at the same time that they seduce—if not incite—men to take up a neoliberal, corporatist value system, as Simon explains of his experiences working in the financial sector:

...I worked in a bank...and at that time money was everything for me. That was it. I thought I must try and make as much money as I can. But later on in life, I asked myself 'why am I pushing myself to try and make as much money as I can? It's not making me happy...' After a while I kind of went, 'oh, it's not all about money'.

Simon goes on to explain that he and his family had all of the accoutrements of a so-called 'good life' according to the logics of late capitalism, but ultimately the promise of happiness went unfulfilled and he left his job at the bank and has filled the void by focusing on his relationships with family, friends, and community, a decision that he does not regret.

As others have argued, advanced capitalism has sought to erode the structures of place and identity, where individuals are re-imagined as entrepreneurs of the self who are incited to take responsibility for their own success, ultimately transforming themselves into marketable commodities within the global flow of capital (Beck et al., 1994). Here, the assumption is that the individual is able to transcend their 'place' in life, whether that be their place in gender, racial, and class hierarchies or—and more importantly for our paper—the transcendence of geographical place by becoming the dis-embedded, hyper-mobile, (neo)liberated subject of advanced capitalism. However, the romanticization of mobility and placelessness in both dominant discourse and in some critical theories is itself a Western fetish that does not readily translate into place- or land-based societies (Grande, 2015; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Indeed, when identity is always already a relational becoming, the notion of dis-embedding oneself from place is not seen as freedom, but rather as another biopolitical regime of settler colonialism

designed to further fracture Indigenous relationality. This was apparent in how several of the Elders spoke about the decline of land-based economies and the local knowledges they sustained had the effect of disrupting intergenerational mentorship relations. In particular, they noted how the increased emphasis on formal education and the rise of credentialism served to erode local knowledges and intergenerational relations.

I think one of the roles and responsibilities of boys and men today...would be mentorship, but I don't see as much of that today as compared to the past. I find it's a lot different, more technical...Years ago, there were a lot of jobs that you didn't need an education. You had to build that reputation for yourself, you know. A good worker that people can depend on.

Whereas the value of a worker was once defined locally and in relation to their reputation within the community, increasingly value is defined according to a globalized elsewhere through, for example, standardized, formal education.

It's getting more technical today than it was years ago. It seemed simple before, but there are things that I learned, they got so that they were deep-rooted within me and they helped me to be a role model and support others even though I didn't have my full education.

Here, the interdependence that was associated with land-based societies 'a long time ago' is being replaced by standardized and distant formal education, where people, and in this case boys and men specifically, have to leave the community to get the credentials necessary to acquire marketable skills in the new economies of advanced capitalism<sup>2</sup>. This is not to suggest that the Elders necessarily saw formal education as a 'bad' thing. Indeed, most suggested that education was necessary and were thus encouraging of youth pursuing an education. Nonetheless, they did see formal and standardized curricula as presenting unique challenges for local knowledges and the place-specific values, roles, and responsibilities of boys and men. To this point we have

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<sup>2</sup> Similar tensions between local knowledges and the abstract knowledge of standardized formal education, along with the different masculinities associated with each system, have been described in commercial fishing communities on the east coast of Canada (see Corbett, 2010; Norman et al., 2015).

highlighted the stories about Indigenous men and masculinity, but as we elaborate below, masculinity was not fixed to men nor the male body.

### **Gender Expansiveness**

While the participants primarily spoke about the roles and responsibilities that were associated with boys and men, there was nonetheless considerable fluidity within these roles, and the over-arching goal was not reducible to clearly defined and distinct gender roles, but rather the focus was on sustaining the intimate relational network that is constitutive of a Cree way of life. In an adult sharing circle, Lori described how this fluidity played out within her family, where she “took it upon” herself to pass along the hunting knowledge she had learned from her father:

When I had my children, I ended up having two sons and their father was a workaholic. He didn't know about hunting or anything like that. He was raised by his grandmother so he had the baking and you know that sort of thing. So, I took it upon myself to go and take my sons hunting because I enjoyed that with my dad. I ended up getting a 4-wheeler and I would take my sons out and make a tiny picnic for us. Put one little boy in front of me and the other behind and make them hang on tight and we would just go riding. I would take a little .22 [caliber rifle] and put little paper targets on the willows and teach them to shoot.

Lori goes on to describe that she, along with two men in the community, eventually formed a land-based program in the community that brought youth onto the land, teaching them hunting, fishing, trapping, and other land-based knowledges. Throughout the sharing circles and inter-generational interviews, there were other similar stories shared, where women saw a need within the community and worked to address this need quite irrespective of gender. On this point, Lisa Tatonetti (2021) writes that “Indigenous women's labour is not an anomaly, but a common occurrence—women do what needs to be done to support their kin networks and nations, and such work is complementary to the work done by folks of other genders, not contradictory” (p. 111; see also Anderson, 2000). Indeed, accounts of strong women “doing what needs to be done”

were woven throughout the stories shared for this project, although tellingly it was mostly women who made these reflections. Nevertheless, highlighting how Indigenous gender expansiveness continues to live on in the community, quite irrespective of the narratives circulating within dominant culture, is one strategy for queering the colonial sex-gender imperative, as it refuses to render Indigenous roles and responsibilities reducible to a binarized, static gender identity.

### **Change, Continuity, & Indigenous Futurities**

We 'conclude' this paper with the theme of continuity, which came up in many of the participants' stories. Indeed, there were many stories of change (e.g., the decline in land-based lifestyles) and loss (e.g., the loss of the Cree language), which were described as challenges that threatened the ongoing and dynamic relationships integral to communal continuity. However, concerns about change and loss were more often than not embedded within complex and layered narratives of continuity, where simplistic 'either/or' binaries (e.g., present/absent, traditional/contemporary) were challenged, as Angie explains.

A lot of our stories aren't, you know, picture perfect. Like when I was taking Indigenous studies courses in university, I would think 'oh, we're all wonderful people who are all very traditional'. But that's not the reality. I strongly believe, and always have believed, that our community is very strong in tradition. Not necessarily the ceremonial part of the tradition, but the tradition that you share what you have and you give what you know [...]. And sometimes I forget the human part of us—that we're perfectly flawed and to accept that and keep going, you know. Our community is so strong and, in our culture—not the glamorized portrayal of our culture, like where everybody lives in teepees and should all know this and how to do that—it's not like that. It's those teachings, those laws, I guess. You know, having respect for each other, loving each other—and I'm not saying it happens all the time, but it is still there in the community.

Angie's reflection pushes back against a number of problematic colonial constructions, including static and categorical notions of identity, reified representations of culture, and binary thinking that contrasts traditional and contemporary ways of life (see Liang, 2021). Indeed, to reify

culture is to render a culture static, fixed, and stuck in the past, emptying culture of an existential being in the here and now (see Hokowhitu, 2015; Stinson et al., 2014). Such articulations of culture perpetuate notions of 'authentic' or 'genuine' Indigeneity, leading to prescriptive understandings of what it is to be a 'true Indian,' prescriptions that foreclose diverse and dynamic possibilities that we have argued are critical to the strength and resilience of Indigenous communities. Moreover, such authentic Indigenous identities are an impossibility, as Angie explains, because they do not allow for the 'perfectly flawed,' complex, and messy dimensions of being human. When taken together, colonial simulations of culture, identity and time serve settler colonial logics of elimination by refusing to acknowledge the continuity between past, present, and future, and the ways in which change for Indigenous societies is not the death knell of some romanticized and wooden notion of culture, but is in fact itself culture in motion as it adapts and responds to the conditions in which it exists (Friedel, 2011; Liang, 2021).

We close the paper with this quote by Angie because we feel that it reflects a poignant pathway forward. Indeed, Indigenous masculinities as they are practiced in the place-specific context of Fisher River Cree Nation are complex, contradictory, and "perfectly flawed". Given this messiness, one would be remiss to foreground romanticized notions of what masculinities *once were* without at the same time acknowledging *what they are now*, where settler logics of heteropatriarchy have become firmly embedded within the community. However, acknowledging the manifold ways in which heteropatriarchy has come to disrupt the relational accountabilities of Cree boys and men, and the destructive consequences this has for Cree and Indigenous communities, should not be confused with ascribing an all-powerful, determining force to settler colonial gender logics. It is, in other words, critical to remember that Cree values of respectful Individualism, communitism, and relationality—or the laws of *wakohtowin*—

continue on within the community, even if obscured by more dominant colonial forms of masculinity. In this regard, the stories we tell matter (King, 2003; McKegney, 2021) and if we want to push back against colonial simulations of Indigenous masculinity as stuck in the past and thus dying, on the one hand, or as pathologically addicted, absent, or violent, on the other (see Klopotek, 2001; McKegney, 2011), we must remain optimistic—albeit critically so—in foregrounding stories of continuity, flawed and messy as they may be.

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