

By Robert Alexander Innes

March 2016

Indigenous masculinities was not an area of research I had originally planned to pursue. I had focused my research on the ways contemporary Indigenous people put into practice traditional kinship. I had been working on starting some new projects when Kim Anderson contacted me and said that she was looking for an Indigenous male scholar to partner with her in a project on Indigenous masculinities. I was a little hesitant to agree to participate mainly because I had my name on a number of research grants and wasn't sure if I could manage all the work if they were all successful. One of the grants I was a part of was to explore how kinship obligations played out between Indigenous men and their female relatives with HIV/AIDS. In the end however, the draw of working towards addressing issues facing Indigenous men was too great to turn away from. As it turned out, the other grants were not successful, which allowed me an opportunity to focus on this project.

There have been scholars researching and writing about Indigenous masculinities, but with little contact with each other. The recent move to bring together and share information, develop networks, foster research relationships points to an emerging field of study. In 2007 at a conference at the University of Oklahoma saw the first panel on Indigenous masculinities with Vince Diaz, Lloyd Lee, Ty Tengan and Brendan Hokowhitu. These scholars had been writing about Indigenous masculinities for a number of years prior to appearing on the panel. Hokowhitu is probably the leading scholar in the area publishing many articles on Maori masculinities with Tengan, on Native Hawaiian masculinities, and Lee, on Navajo masculinities, publishing the only two monographs to date on the topic. In 2008,

The

Contemporary Pacific

journal published a special issue titled, "Re-membling Oceanic Masculinities," (

[here is the link](#)

) highlighting how much further ahead the Oceanic region was compared to Canada and the

U.S. in exploring Indigenous masculinities studies. In North America, there had been studies undertaken on Indigenous men, but for the most part they were narrowly constructed from a deficiency model, with researchers working in isolation from each other.

In 2012, Kim Anderson and I organized three panels on Indigenous masculinities for the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association one on 'Identities,' one on 'Queer Indigenous masculinities,' and a roundtable for 'dialogue and networking.' The participants were from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the U.S. and were queer, female, cis-gendered, gender non-conforming, males, Indigenous, non-Indigenous, straight, grad students, professors, elders, and community partners, with 8 queer panellists, 5 cis-gendered straight Indigenous men, 1 cis-gendered straight Indigenous woman, and 1 cis-gendered straight white man. The diversity of the participants reflected the degree in which a range of people recognized that the time had come to address issues of Indigenous men and masculinities that impact our communities as a whole. Many of the participants on these panels contributed chapters to our new book on Indigenous men and masculinities ([Indigenous Men and Masculinities : Legacies, Identities, Regeneration](#) University of Manitoba Press, 2015). .

Indigenous masculinities, as we envision it, "seeks to deepen our understanding of the ways in which Indigenous men, and those who assert Indigenous masculine identities, perform their identities, why and how they perform them and the consequences to them and others because of their attachment to those identities" (Innes and Anderson, 2015: 4). It builds on theories and praxis of Indigenous feminist and queer scholars to question the hegemonic nature of the 'masculine' to work towards finding ways that acknowledges the existence, significance, and legitimacy of the multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory gender identities of Indigenous people. Central to Indigenous masculinities is the examination of how the depth of Indigenous male dysfunctional behaviour has been caused by their internalization of the ideal masculine traits and characteristics, based on the white supremacist heteronormative patriarchy, imposed on them through a variety of colonial mechanisms. Indigenous masculinities theorists ask how, and to what degree, have Indigenous men adopted and adapted the western heteronormative notions of maleness that serve to subjugate and erase Indigenous women and queer people in violent and non-violent ways, and leads many to inflict violence on each other, while leading others to become trapped in the carceral cycle, with the results contributing to the maintenance and strengthening of colonial structures that oppress all Indigenous people.

At the same time, Indigenous masculinities scholars look into how Indigenous men are trying to overcome the negative and toxic masculinities that have engulfed them. Indigenous men lead in various categories indicative of the social conditions they have to overcome. For example, in Canada Indigenous men have the lowest rates of life expectancy and education attainment, while their suicide, murder, and incarceration rates are the highest. As more and more Indigenous men become aware of their situations many strive for change by creating pathways for themselves and others to address their issues so they can turn their lives around and become positive contributing members of their families and communities. There are some communities and organizations that have started to institute programs designed specifically for Indigenous men, typically around violence against women. The movement among Indigenous individuals and communities toward creating healthy men coincides with the rise in the number of researchers who want to detail and assess these initiatives to determine the effectiveness of the methods utilized to counteract the toxic masculine behaviours and create spaces for the expression of multiple masculinities, whatever that may mean to individuals.

There is an understanding within Indigenous masculinities that gender is socially constructed to be attached to a particular sex and that those who do not fit that constructed narrative are in some way deviant. Indigenous masculinities scholars accept the idea that this narrative is a fiction, which does not fit the realities of many Indigenous people. At one point we were going to title our book "Indigenous Masculinities." This seemed to account for the potentially various ways a masculine identity can be asserted, no matter what sex a person is born with. However after I conducted a focus group in Winnipeg, with assistance from Albert McLeod, the co-director of Two Spirited People of Manitoba Inc., with two spirit participants who identified as men but not as masculine, we realized that Indigenous masculinities was not quite inclusive enough for those men who identified as feminine, however they defined that to themselves. Therefore we changed the title of the book to Indigenous Men and Masculinities.

Those in this new and emerging field do need to be cognizant of the fact that within mainstream masculinities studies there are two streams. One stream is guided by feminist/queer theory and praxis. The other stream is basically the intellectual arm of the Men's Rights Activist movement. Many working from within this stream take a decidedly anti-feminist stance. This is illustrated by the number of academic articles in their journal that contain discussions about the toxic environment for men created by feminists.

Adam Jones, a non-Indigenous political scientist at the UBC Okanagan, who is a highly regarded comparative genocide studies scholar, illustrates this line of inquiry to gender studies. Jones wrote an op-ed piece for the *National Post* (Here is the link - <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/adam-jones-aboriginal-men-are-murdered-and-missing-far-more-than-aboriginal-women-a-proper-inquiry-would-explore-both>) newspaper and then later appeared on the CBC radio show *Unrese*

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<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/tradition-authenticity-and-the-fight-for-indigenous-identity-1.3281731/are-we-ignoring-missing-and-murdered-indigenous-men-1.3284322>) in which he mentioned that though rates of violence experienced by Indigenous men are much higher than those of Indigenous women, the rates are seldom mentioned in the media. He explained the reason behind this as follows: “The campaign to highlight the victimization and extermination of aboriginal women has become a feminist cause célèbre (including an aboriginal-feminist one), in a way that has suffocated consideration of even more pervasive patterns of violence among and against all aboriginal Canadians, including men and boys” (2015).

His insistence that Indigenous feminists are the reason murders of Indigenous men have not received attention not only highlights his lack of knowledge of the Indigenous context in Canada but also his approach to gender analysis. He does not mention that the relatively recent high profile of the missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada is due to the efforts of the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), who have been working on this issue since at least 2003. NWAC is an organization that lobbies government to address the particular kind of racism and sexism directed towards Indigenous women, including sexualized violence that has lead them to call for the national inquiry. Jones’ insinuation that non-Indigenous women have made MMIW an issue flies in the face of the reality that this has been a movement led by Indigenous women (many who would not consider themselves to be feminists) and the families that have lost loved ones. In his interview on *Unreserved*, he told host Rosanna Deerchild “that it concerns me that Aboriginal feminists have towed this line and advanced this project...it is not clear to me why they would not want to see similar attention paid to their [Indigenous men] particular and perhaps even greater plight.”

Deerchild challenged Jones’ assertion by informing him that it has been the “families and friends of missing and murdered Indigenous women [that] made this an issue after relentless activism, after rallies, after movements, like the Sisters in Spirit...” His response—that we should not set it up so that women advocate for women and men for men—fails to acknowledge that this is not currently the case. There are a number of Indigenous men working as individuals and in organizations to advocate for ending violence against Indigenous women. Paul Lacert started the “moose hide” campaign to raise awareness, and Chris Moyah, a former gang member has gone on walks toward ending violence against Indigenous women. The Kizhaay Anishinaabe Niin—I am a Kind Man program developed by the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres has been taken up in other provinces by organizations keen on developing initiatives where men can show leadership in ending violence against women. In addition, there are many women advocating for men, including Beverly Jacobs and Michele Audette, both prominent leaders and former NWAC presidents, who have said that the national inquiry into MMIW should include examining the violence experienced by Indigenous men (though the current president, Dawn Lavell-Harvard favours an inquiry that focuses on women).

Even though Adams has no research experience with or for Indigenous people and has acknowledged that he had not talked to any Indigenous people before reaching his position, he nonetheless felt compelled and qualified enough to speak to the issue. Whether or not he is a card carrying men's rights activist is difficult to tell for sure, he has stated he considers himself to be a feminist, the fact that he sees Indigenous men disadvantaged by Indigenous feminists does fall in line with MRAs views. The premise of his critique is to place Indigenous feminists in opposition to Indigenous men because he believes that healthier lives for Indigenous men are sabotaged by the Indigenous feminists' agenda. There is no basis for his contention that Indigenous feminists are purposefully ignoring Indigenous men, as if advocating on the behalf of your constituents, as NWAC has done, automatically silences the concerns of others. The reality is that no one in Canada was talking about murdered and missing Indigenous women prior to the work of NWAC. Without this awareness people would not now be talking about the level of violence Indigenous men face.

We don't know if Indigenous masculinities will follow the same pattern as mainstream masculinities studies, but we should be aware that that is a possibility. There have been some criticism, or perhaps suspicion, that Indigenous masculinities as a project will simply reinforce and maintain the white supremacist, heteronormative, patriarchal male power structures that disadvantage and disenfranchise Indigenous women and queer people. At this point, however, these criticisms have not been well articulated but nonetheless, the gist of the criticisms is evident. Therefore Indigenous masculinities scholars need to be continually prepared to be self-reflexive, self-critical and to be clear that Indigenous masculinities should act to challenge and dismantle rather than reify and strengthen the white supremacist heteronormative patriarchy internalized by many Indigenous men, to varying degrees, to the detriment of our communities.

Indigenous lives are complicated by multiple and varied factors and Indigenous masculinities studies scholars, like Indigenous Studies scholars in general, aim to complicate as it is through understanding and clearly articulating the intricacies that inform Indigenous people's lives is when we can start to come to a better understanding on how to regenerate our families and communities in positive ways.