Native Women and the Regeneration of Coeur d'Alene Masculinity in Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals*

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"An Indian man ain't nothing without his hair" remarks Victor to his friend Thomas during their bus ride to Arizona to retrieve Victor's father's ashes. This statement is the only time in *Smoke Signals*—directed by Chris Eyre, screenplay by Sherman Alexie—that a character makes a self-conscious, direct reference to Native masculinity. Though the question of just what constitutes Native masculinity—more precisely, Coeur d'Alene masculinity—is a central undercurrent embedded in this appropriation of the road-trip buddy film genre, this topic has received relatively modest critical attention among scholars. Joanna Hearne points out that *Smoke Signals* (1998) "focus[es]" on masculine identity (84), but for her purposes she does not explore the theme in depth. Brian Klopotek maintains that "through perpetual dialogue with popular white constructions of Indians" (264) *Smoke Signals* deconstructs Native male stereotypes such as the hyper-masculine warrior and the wise medicine man (268). However, scholarly analysis of the film's treatment of *Native* or *Coeur d'Alene* masculinity remains as opaque[1] as it appears to Victor, whose comment about his hair, though *seemingly* revealing his self-awareness about his masculinity, is in fact an example that, according to Alexie, Native men are generally "clueless" about their masculine identities (quoted in Hearne 85). Specifically, scholarship has yet to address how the film portrays the emasculating effects of colonialism on Native men and, in turn, how this emasculation is perpetuated generationally from father to son. Nor does scholarship tackle how it begins to address the *means* by which Native or Coeur d'Alene masculinity might be reconstituted.

Turning to males as models of a healthy Native masculinity poses difficulties for Victor and Thomas. As a child, Victor is a daily witness to his father Arnold's emasculation—he disappears when Victor is a young boy. Thomas's father died in a fire (caused by Arnold) when he was a baby, and though in his memories Thomas idealizes Arnold as a surrogate father and role model, these memories are at best sparse. Like Victor, he has been abandoned by Arnold. Also, Native male elders are conspicuously absent, since the only other male Native elders who appear, very briefly, are the KREZ radio personalities of Lester Falls Apart and Randy Peone. As the film follows Victor's journey to Arizona to reconcile himself with his father by retrieving his ashes, it seems to suggest that Victor's own confusion about his

masculinity begins and ends in a reconciliation with his father. Still, the final scenes problematize this view. Upon returning home, Victor takes a portion of his father's ashes to the Spokane River. While dispersing the ashes from a bridge above the river, he drops to his knees and lets out an emotionally distraught primal scream. The movie ends with Thomas's voiceover of Dick Lourie's haunting poem, "How do we forgive our fathers?" Yet, the fact that the poem remains ambiguous in its point of view—for example, in oxymoronic lines such as "Do we forgive our Fathers for marrying or not marrying our mothers / for divorcing or not divorcing our mothers?"—suggests Victor's continued confusion in his search for a stable masculine identity. Even worse, in its concluding line, "If we forgive our Fathers, what is left?", the poem implies that Victor's forgiveness of his father would lead to an epistemological collapse, as there would no longer be the possibility of a masculine figure against which to measure and affirm Native masculinity in contrast to the emasculating effects of colonialism.

Given the portrayal of Victor's raw anguish over this dilemma, the film seems deeply pessimistic about the possibility of Native masculine redemption for, even if he forgave his father, Victor would remain as unmoored and "clueless" about what it means to be a Coeur d'Alene male as he is at the beginning. Instead, in keeping with Native, or more specifically, Coeur d'Alene epistemology, the film suggests that one possibility by which Coeur d'Alene men can begin to revitalize their masculinity is by structuring their identities in relation to Native women. In fact, women consistently set the terms of what *should* constitute proper masculine behavior and, at times, proactively shape masculinity.

The recent news of screenwriter Sherman Alexie's sexual harassment of women in February 2019 poses a challenge for Alexie-related scholarship, in this case a critique of a film that is hybrid art created by Eyre, Alexie, and the actors. Certainly, readers and teachers of Alexie's work have reacted strongly to the revelations of sexual harassment. Monique Laban, for example, writes, "I don't plan on reading Alexie's work anymore, nor recommending it to friends" to protest his egregious behavior. Professors are removing Alexie's work from their syllabi, which Angela Yin describes as an effort to "strip Alexie of [his] status" as an internationally recognized Native writer. Moreover, she adds that "On a more tangible level, classes wouldn't be financially supporting Alexie, either." The reasons for eliminating Alexie from reading lists and classrooms might easily be applied to how to approach him as a scholar, that is, not to produce scholarship about him at all, including scholarship on *Smoke Signals* since he wrote the screenplay. But I contend that Alexie's actions should not prohibit the study of the film since it is a composite creation between screenwriter, director, and actors, and therefore

cannot be judged through the same lens as a work produced by Alexie alone. As well, it has both historical significance for its impact on mainstream and Native cinema and is an important assertion of political and visual sovereignty (Hearne xxv-xxxi). To argue here that the film affirms the importance of Native women, all the while knowing the hypocrisy exhibited in Alexie's private life, is difficult to square. Yet, we need not, nor should we, reconcile the two. To continue to study the film given the hypocrisy of Alexie's egregious behavior does not redeem him; rather, the film itself raises powerful questions about Native masculinity that contribute to undermining the very distorted Native masculinity exhibited by Alexie's actions, a distortion that is all too often exhibited in the daily lives of Native men.

Native Masculinity, Native Fathers, Native Sons

To claim that *Smoke Signals* is about the regeneration of Coeur d'Alene masculinity raises fundamental theoretical questions about the very notion of Native masculinity itself. What, exactly, is being regenerated? Can one assume, for instance, that Native masculinity—or more properly, masculinities—existed before colonialism given that historically Native peoples, as scholars such as Lisa Tatonetti point out, did not adhere to the "settler defined sex/gender dichotomy" (xix)? And if they did exist, how were they imagined? Who shaped masculine values in any culture? Fathers? Uncles? Mothers? Aunts? All of these? As Brendan Hokowhitu illustrates in his deconstruction of contemporary Māori masculinity, one must ask to what extent have colonial ideologies coopted or distorted Native masculinities?[2] I concur with Sam McKegney's argument "that there are such things as Indigenous masculinities and that discussing—even theorizing—them is not only worthwhile but necessary" (3). Moreover, "Native masculinity" refers to a "[tool] for imagining an empowered, non-dominative Indigenous male [identity]" (3) that *Smoke Signals* suggests has epistemological roots in Native culture, particularly that of the Coeur d'Alene. This is not to say that Coeur d'Alene masculinity emanates from some ahistorical "essence." Rather, Native masculinity is "a [historical] process, not merely a set of norms that one does, or modes not internalized" (Tengan 10). The term "emasculation" in this essay refers to the insidious material and ideological effects that colonialism has had on the ability of Native men (in this case, those of Coeur d'Alene) to be empowered to define indigenous masculinity by their own, non-dominative norms.

Though the film certainly points to the struggles of the father/son dynamic between Victor and Arnold as its dominant theme, to focus solely on Victor's relationship with his father (or any male elder) as *the* means by which to define Native masculinity would risk replicating the assumptions underpinning a patriarchal, colonialist ideology that a priori expects that, ideally,

a young man shapes his manhood primarily through his relationship with his father.[3] To imagine that Native masculinity can be shaped best and exclusively through a father/son dynamic only means that Victor risks being Native in name only, his masculinity a byproduct of ideological colonization. Certainly, the kinship structure of Native cultures—distinct from the Euro-American nuclear family[4]—means that an individual's masculinity is shaped by various relationships within kinship networks, both male and female, specific to a tribe. In Cherokee culture, for instance, the influence of a father on his child's development was subordinate to the influence of the mother's brothers because the children belonged to the mother's clan (Stremlau 55). Given the preoccupation with Native father/son relationships and recent scholarship that points to the important role of fathers and sons in Native cultures, my analysis concentrates on that relationship.

To understand what specifically constituted Coeur d'Alene masculinity or masculinities before the onslaught of colonialism poses its own specific theoretical problems. One cannot know with absolute certainty what it was to experience Coeur d'Alene masculinity through Coeur d'Alene eyes before colonialism, given the historical distance from today. Existing anthropological studies of the Coeur d'Alene draw from colonial archives that, though useful in delineating gender roles, offer little observation about Coeur d'Alene men that, even with the ideological layer of the colonial gaze, might hint at what defined their masculinity. Nonetheless, the film suggests the possibility that Coeur d'Alene men can recover and regenerate traditional values of masculinity in great part through their relationship with Native women. By "traditional," I am not trying to locate some "authentic" or timeless, ahistorical masculinity; rather, the term "traditional" refers to those masculine norms that have historical roots predating the insidious effects of colonial ideologies on Native gender constructions. Simultaneously, "traditional" refers to the "ways that [these norms] are being created *within* a larger framework of [Euro-American] culture, or in *resistance* to it" (Anderson 35).

In specific cultural contexts, Native fathers played an active role in helping young Native men to shape their masculinity before and after the onslaught of colonialism. For example, Charles Alexander Eastman (Santee Dakota) and Luther Standing Bear (Oglala Lakota), both of whom were raised traditionally, overtly shape their masculinity in their writings against idealized fathers who played an active role in their lives. In fact, Eastman and Standing Bear are a testament to how Native men adapted their experiences in Euro-American culture to fit tribally specific Native masculine norms.[5] Also, in his historical novel about pre-contact Coeur d'Alene culture, traditional leader and former tribal chairperson David Matheson portrays the key role of Coeur d'Alene fathers and male role models in developing a son's

manhood.[6] Note that I do not mean to suggest that Native fathers do not *today* play important roles in their son's lives. For example, in Sam McKegney's 2011 interview with Native elder Thomas Kimeksun Thrasher (Inuvialuk), Thrasher remarks, "When I left the residential school [in Canada], I became a man beside my dad. I had to become a man. But in a good way, and with him I could do anything. You know, he was my inspiration" (McKegney 66).

Though the examples of Eastman, Standing Bear, and Thrasher illustrate how Native sons had strong ties with their fathers (in Eastman's case, a close tie with his uncle, another male role model), ties that in the case of Eastman and Standing Bear were maintained figuratively or literally as they went off to boarding schools, colonialism nonetheless had a profound impact on Native father/son relationships. Robyn Johnson theorizes that colonialism emasculated Native men because their traditional roles as warriors and hunters were radically upended as they were cordoned off on reservations. Additionally, men were affected by the fact that their tribes were removed from the traditional lands where their identities were intimately based.[7] The paternalism of colonialism meant that they no longer had "meaningful social ranking" and now "considered themselves diminished and devalued in their families and as the focal points of tribal identities" (346). Boarding schools were particularly destructive, in great part because their goal "was to insert patriarchy into tribal communities and to socialize children to believe in patriarchal gender norms" of Euro-America (Ramirez 28). This objective also meant that male and female students were, as a rule, separated from one another in daily life.[8] Though there is no question that the aim of boarding schools was to erase any trace of Native identity, an objective that had horrific effects on Native boys, what made these institutions particularly destructive was that Native boys, as young as six years of age, might have little or no contact with their fathers (or any Native male elders) once in school.

For some boys, attending boarding school meant they would not see their fathers during the eight-to-nine-month-long school year. For others, the school's distance from home made it logistically or financially impossible for them to see their fathers even during the summer months.[9] The residual effects on Native boys who attended boarding schools and thus had limited contact with Native elders as they grew up was twofold: first, they had been, by default, emasculated through the assault on traditional cultural standards of masculinity; second, they were emasculated by a patronizing dominant culture that generally did not accept Native males as equals according to its standards of masculinity. The demise of boarding schools finally began in the 1970s, but the multigenerational disruption of the transmission of cultural knowledge in traditional settings (fathers to sons) had done its damage. Granted, as Sam McKegney rightly reasons, "Too often conversations about

Indigenous masculinity begin from a position of presumed deficit that unwittingly accepts the perverse 'success' of colonial policies of dispossession while obfuscating the living models of non-dominative and empowered indigenous manhood that persist in families and communities, in teaching and stories, in minds and actions" (5). However, Jessica Ball contends that the legacy of colonialism very much haunts many Native boys today, as many Native fathers have relatively limited cultural knowledge of Native masculinity to pass on to their sons—those who do have a depth of knowledge of it see little point in passing it on. Moreover, their own personal struggles make them poor role models to their male offspring or, in many cases, they feel ineffective because they have been absent fathers.[10]

Victor's father, Arnold, is limited as a role model for Victor. The first time we see Arnold and Victor interact is "Independence Day," when Arnold picks up a young Victor from town in his pick-up truck and takes him home. Arnold turns to Victor and remarks:

> Happy Independence Day, Victor. You feeling independent today? I'm feeling independent. I'm feeling extra magical today, like I could make anything disappear. Poof. Houdini with braids, you know? Wave my hand and poof! The white people are gone, gone back to where they belong. Poof! London, Paris, Moscow. Poof! Poof! Poof! Wave my hand and the reservation is gone. The trading post and the post office, the tribal school and the pine trees, and the drunks and the Catholics, and the drunk Catholics. Poof. And all the little Indian boys named Victor. I'm so good, I can make myself disappear. Poof! And I'm gone.

The irony of "Independence Day," of course, is not lost on Arnold, and his dialogue reflects his emasculation as a powerless Native male in the late twentieth century, living on a reservation that, despite its "sovereignty," is circumscribed by the jurisdiction of a paternal U.S. government and its Indian policies. Arnold's ability to imagine himself as having magical powers to make "white people" and the legacy of colonialism disappear suggests his clear awareness of the possibility of an alternative to the reality that he knows. In other words, the ideologies of colonialism that sought to make Native peoples "disappear" have not foreclosed Arnold's desire to at least conceive of a different future for himself and the Coeur d'Alene. In turn, his sentiments, to some extent, model for Victor the capacity to envision the possibility of self-transformation on the Reservation. However, the implications of the closing line in this passage point to the fact that Arnold is very much limited in his ability to conceive just what that alternative reality might be. Playing on the trope of the vanishing Indian, his desire to make himself disappear attests to his feelings of worthlessness as an Indian man—in es-

sence, his sentiments figuratively fulfill the final genocidal logic of colonialism, which was and arguably still is, to make Native cultures disappear. The scene suggests that in witnessing his father's emasculation as a young child, Victor risks internalizing his father's subjection. By overtly telling Victor that he, too, will be made to disappear, Arnold overtly signals to Victor that he believes he has little to offer Victor as a father.

Victor's internalization of his father's emasculation is underscored late in the movie when Suzy Song retells a story that she heard from Arnold about a pick-up basketball game that pitted Arnold and Victor against two Jesuit priests. In a flashback, we see and hear Arnold's version of the story in which he claims that Victor's heroic last shot led to victory. Arnold remarks, "Maybe Victor was possessed by the spirit of Jim Thorpe, because he had this look in his eye and he was mean. 'Come on, Victor,' I shouted. C'mon Victor! 'We're up against the Son and the Father here, but these two are going to need the Holy Ghost to beat us!'" In his invocation of Jim Thorpe as a role model, Arnold suggests that, in this moment, Victor embodied this icon of male Native identity. In his representation of their match as a duel of Native father/son against "the Son and the Father," Arnold symbolically pits his own relationship with Victor against the paternalism of Christian missionizing, a paternalism that has contributed to his emasculation by displacing him as a father. In effect, the match represents a struggle over the very future of Native masculinity. According to Arnold, "My boy, Victor, he was the man that day. He took that shot and the won the game. It was the Indians versus the Christians that day and for at least one day, the Indians won." Like the "magic" scene alluded to earlier, Arnold's version of this event illustrates his ability to at least momentarily reimagine himself as a father, as well as to assert a vision of Victor as an agent of change against the paternal force of Christianity in his triumphant shot at the end of the match. Yet, though Arnold claims that Victor made the shot and refers to him as "the man" to suggest that Victor came of age in this triumphant moment, Victor responds to the story by telling Suzy, "Well, I missed the shot. I lost the game." When Suzy responds, "You mean your dad lied to me?" he answers, "Yeah, and a lie that made me look good." That Victor remembers this moment as vividly as his father underscores the role the moment played in his own subjection. Not only does he bear witness to his father's emasculation at the hands of the Jesuit priests, but this moment also pointedly registers the fact that a path to a masculinity defined on Native desires is supplanted by the Jesuit "fathers" and "God, the Father" of Christianity.

The fissure in the relationship between Arnold and his son and the implications to Native masculinity is forcefully and tragically represented in the lead-up to, and Arnold's actual abandonment of, his family. In a flashback

to the night of the July 4 party, we see an inebriated Arnold standing with Arlene; he turns to a young Victor and this exchange follows:

> Arnold Joseph: Hey, Victor, who's your favorite Indian, huh? Who's your favorite?
>
> Arlene Joseph: It's your momma, huh? Tell him it's your momma.
>
> Young Victor: Nobody.
>
> Arnold Joseph: What did you say, Victor. Speak up, boy. Who's your favorite Indian?
>
> Young Victor: Nobody.
>
> Arnold Joseph: Nobody, huh? Nobody! Did you say nobody?
>
> Arlene Joseph: He didn't mean it. Come on, tell him, Victor. Tell your daddy you didn't mean it.
>
> Young Victor: Nobody. Nobody. Nobody.

Victor's answer to Arnold implicitly emasculates him (illustrated by Arnold turning away from Victor repeating "Nobody! Nobody! Nobody!") and, at the same time, it reflects Victor's own existential crisis as a confused adolescent boy on the cusp of manhood. Not only is Victor ashamed of his father, but his bleak response to Arnold's question also reveals that he does not have the capacity to even imagine a substitute model of Native masculinity with which to identify. Victor's existential state is underscored in the closing shot of this scene: he stands alone at the party, gloomily staring at his father and mother who are off screen. This flashback speaks to Victor's lack of a positive masculine role model when he was a child and reveals that this memory and its implications structure his identity as a young adult.

Victor's isolation from his father is reinforced two scenes later, when an adult Victor stands before a mirror in a diner bathroom and an image of his lonely childhood-self stares forlornly back at him. As his young self turns and walks away from his reflection in the mirror, we first hear and then see a flashback of young Victor angrily smashing beer bottles in the middle of the night against Arnold's truck. Victor's actions awaken Arlene, who then stares out the upstairs bedroom window at Victor. As a result, she angrily exclaims "no more" to Arnold and, the next morning, as Arlene tries to wrest a beer bottle from Arnold, Victor witnesses Arnold strike Arlene, knocking her to the floor, after which he stares directly at Victor, and then walks out of the room. The next shot is of Arlene chasing Arnold out of the house, telling him "don't you ever come back," followed by an excruciating, heartbreaking plea made by Victor from inside the house, "Don't leave Dad." Victor then runs out of the house after his father as he drives away in the truck. Arnold stops, hops out of the truck to give Victor a brief hug, and Victor murmurs "don't go Dad" before Arnold drives off. Arnold's treatment and abandonment of Victor is the material manifestation of what has transpired: he has

been largely absent in Victor's life as a viable model of Native masculinity, pointedly illustrated by this scene's portrayal of Arnold's alcoholism and his physical abuse of Arlene.[11]

Though his relationship with Victor is limited, Arnold's potential as a masculine role model is evidenced by Thomas's fond memories of Arnold. On their way home from Arizona, Thomas mentions to Victor that "I remember so much about your Dad" and though Victor retorts to Thomas that he did not know his father, Thomas claims "But I *did* know him." Unlike Victor, his memories of Arnold are positive. For example, earlier Thomas had recounted to Victor an experience in which he sat on a bridge spanning the Spokane River waiting to see a salmon and have a vision. Thomas then remarks, "but there ain't any salmon left in that river no more. And then I hear this voice: 'hey what the hell you doin here?' It was your dad yelling at me. And he keeps on yelling: 'I asked you what the hell you're doing here?' So I told him I was waiting for a vision and he just laughed. He said: 'All you're going to get around here is mugged'." Following this dialogue, we witness a powerful face-to-face image of Arnold reaching down to help Thomas up as the latter explains to Victor that Arnold took him to Denny's for a "Grand Slam breakfast." Thomas's desire to have a vision points to the potential revitalization of Coeur d'Alene culture, represented by the salmon. His darkly humorous remark that there are no more salmon in the river seems to negate this possibility, a negation reinforced by Arnold's laughter and claim to Thomas that all he will get is "mugged." Yet, at the same time, Thomas's recounting of his exchange with Arnold, along with the powerfully symbolic image of Arnold reaching down to help him up, counters this negation and clearly points to Arnold's redemptive qualities, in this case his capacity to be a protector of children and practice selfless generosity.

Though Arnold does illustrate potential as a male role model in Thomas's memories of him, Victor's witness to, and internalization of, his father's emasculation has led to his being largely adrift and plagued by his own feelings of inadequacy; in turn, he "mopes" around the reservation and treats his mother poorly, according to Thomas. Victor attempts to compensate for his emasculation by adopting a classic white stereotype of Indian masculinity, the hyper-masculine stoic warrior, which distances him from anything resembling a masculinity defined by Native or Coeur d'Alene cultural norms. The bankruptcy of "playing" a white-imagined Indian is lampooned when, after Victor admonishes Thomas to look "like a warrior" or "people will walk all over you" during the bus ride to Phoenix, two white men take their seats and refuse to give them up to Thomas and Victor. As Thomas humorously remarks, "I guess your warrior look doesn't work every time, Victor." The movie suggests that a potential vehicle that can play a role in his—and

figuratively his father's and all alienated Native males'—emotional morass is right before him and has already been partly successful in helping to shape his masculinity. If he proactively followed this guidance, he could begin the process of regenerating a healthy Native masculinity, that is, the guidance of Native women.

Native Women and the Regeneration of Native Masculinity

In its appropriation of the "road trip" genre, *Smoke Signals* implicitly establishes that it is concerned with questions of male identity given the classic expectations of the genre—a male protagonist in quest of self-discovery (Hayward 49). Simultaneously, it is a "buddy film" that, in its classic form, replaces a heterosexual romantic relationship between buddies who are experiencing a masculine crisis (Cohen and Hark 2). A central tenet of the genre as it is traditionally constructed is that the male heroes can only define masculinity apart from women (Roberts 62). Moreover, "the road movie's linear structure and the metaphorical road's connotations of individualism, aggression, independence, and control, combine the Western's ideal conceptions of the American and the masculine" (61). Given the expectations of the genre, *Smoke Signals* seemingly reinforces the need for Native males to isolate themselves from women in order to realize their masculinities.

In its appropriation of the buddy movie, *Smoke Signals*, however, undermines this trope to underscore that women do not debilitate Native men; rather, women are important to the formation of a viable Native masculinity.[12] In making this argument, I differ from Klopotek, who suggests that the film is "moderately successful at bringing Native women characters into central roles" (270), as well as from John Warren Gilroy, who writes that "while the female characters in *Smoke Signals* no doubt contribute important aspects of the narrative, their role is ultimately subordinated to the simultaneously overarching and underlying theme of the relationship between fathers and sons" (32), a reading maintained by Lee Schweninger (145). To read the role of women as somehow subordinate to this theme would reinforce a Western reading of that expects that Victor's masculinity can only be realized through his relationship with his father. I agree with Angelica Lawson's assessment that Native women characters "are far more complex and significant than an initial analysis indicates" (95-96), and Lawson rightly claims that "the development of the male leads would be impossible but for the influence and prominence of the female characters in the film" (96). As Lawson states, in its adaptation "of the buddy and road trip films," *Smoke Signals* "coincidentally reenacts an important archetype from the canons of Native oratory," namely the hero-twin story in which two brothers search for a lost father to gain self-knowledge. Importantly, in hero-twin stories females play a significant role (98), namely as "advisors, guides, and catalysts for action," con-

tributing "to the characters' self-knowledge and bonding" (99). Building on Lawson's insights, I argue more specifically that women play a crucial role in both demanding and shaping a viable Native or Coeur d'Alene masculinity in the context of film.

That women play an active role in helping to shape Native masculinity reflects the traditional complementary gender roles and values common to many Native cultures. For example, in his analysis of Diné masculinity, Lloyd Lee writes, "Prior to colonization, Diné communities did not distinguish between male and female through a gender power order or power relations between groups of people. Male and female essences are thought to be part of all living entities in the universe" (8). Kim Anderson writes that though gender roles were generally different, "Native men's work was never considered to be more valuable than Native women's work" (60), and the respect accorded women in Native cultures meant women had economic, political, and spiritual power, and they "typically had [interdependent] power, respect and recognition within their families" (79). Similarly, Devon Mihesuah writes:

> Most tribes were egalitarian, that is, Native women did have religious, political, and economic power—not more than men, but at least equal to men's. Women's and men's roles may have been different, but neither was less important than the other. . . . Prior to contact, men and women performed tasks specific to gender. Perhaps men hunted while women farmed, or men performed heavy labor while women cared for the children. Although the duties were different, none was inferior to the others. . . . The influence of Europeans' social beliefs, however, changed the way Natives interpreted the world, themselves, and gender roles. (42)[13]

Penelope Myrtle Kelsey calls attention to how the Dakota writers Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Philip Red Eagle advocate for the need to restore the balanced, nonhierarchical, interrelated principles of *anpetu wi* (the masculine principle) and *hanwi* (the feminine principle) to regenerate a healthy Dakota masculinity.[14] The need to restore the interrelatedness of the masculine and feminine to heal Native men is underscored in Sam McKegney's interview with the Cree playwright, novelist, and musician Tomson Highway, so that Native men can learn that the "health and power for women is, in fact, a pathway to their own health and well-being" (26). A stark example of this healing is evident in Taiaiake Alfred's interview in his *Was*á*se* with the Ditidaht artist Tsaqwuasupp, in which the latter recalls his grandmother's intervention in his life. She took him through healing ceremonies, and he recalls that she told him that "we're going to make you a better man" (169). He then reveals that "my grandmother had told me that being an artist is being the best warrior that you could ever be" (170). Native masculinity's potential

to be healed through a restoration of the connection between the masculine and the feminine is also famously portrayed in Tayo's relationship with Swan Woman and Ts' eh in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*.

According to Robyn Johnson, Northwest tribes like the Coeur d'Alene were primarily patriarchal, and thus "placed a great deal of importance on the empowered creative roles of men" because of their belief in a "supreme male deity" (345). Though women were "significantly respected" and "privileged males' roles, as warriors and hunters, were open to women as well" (345), women were generally "compelled to do 'a great deal of the heavy work'" (345). Men "had more access to power and wealth" and "social mobility" than women, and "had enormous influence on their extended families" (345). Johnson, drawing from dated anthropology,[15] overstates how gender roles operated in Coeur d'Alene culture, roles that, like with other Native tribes, were complementary, with women exerting significant authority in daily tribal life and decision making. Notably, in the domestic sphere, the authority of both parents over children was regarded as equal (Ackerman 96), meaning that mothers were critical to the shaping of Coeur d'Alene masculinity.[16] David Matheson, a traditional leader and former Tribal Chairperson of the Coeur d'Alene tribe, writes in his novel *Red Thunder* that, in the broader scope of daily activities and decision making, "the women of the tribe were the real power of the people. If they did not agree or support what the men were doing, it could not continue" (285). In other words, women were clearly highly influential in shaping Coeur d'Alene masculinity.

Though the film does not explicitly define Native or Coeur d'Alene masculine traits, it implicitly suggests that Native women can play a restorative role in decolonizing Coeur d'Alene masculinity from Euro-American values and, in turn, instill traditional cultural values. That Native women play this role is consistent with scholarship that stresses how Native women are often "keepers of cultures" (Valaskakis, Stout, and Guimond 9). Marlene Castellano writes that "traditional wisdom about the centrality of women to the strength and survival of nations is often quoted in Aboriginal circles," wisdom that contributes to the "renewal of their communities" (203) and reflected by the women. Though Suzy Song is not herself a member of the Coeur d'Alene nation, her interactions with Arnold and Victor illustrate shared values among Native peoples when it comes to gender complementarity and its potential healing effect on masculine gender formation. Arlene and Thomas's grandmother, of course, specifically represent the "keepers" of Coeur d'Alene culture, whose influence can help to revitalize Coeur d'Alene masculinity.

That Eyre and Alexie believe Coeur d'Alene men should look to their women for some guidance in the resuscitation of their masculinity is

made clear from the beginning, after the flashback of the tragic fire that killed Thomas's parents. This flashback reproduces Arnold leaping to catch Thomas after he is thrown from an upstairs window. A brief dialogue occurs between Thomas's grandmother and Arnold:

> Grandma: (to Arnold) You saved my grandson's life.
> Arnold: It was nothing. I didn't even think about it . . . I just . . .
> Grandma: You saved him. You saved Thomas. You did a good thing.
> Arnold: I didn't mean to.

The scene then cuts to an image of Arnold Joseph flanked by his wife Arlene and Thomas's grandmother holding (as infants) Victor and Thomas. What the viewer is unaware of at the time is that Arnold accidently caused the fire by setting off fireworks inside the house in a drunken stupor. His self-deprecating tone in this exchange evidences his shame about his actions despite his heroics. In a sense, Grandma's praise for Arnold illustrates her naïveté about his actions and the reason behind his fumbled response. At the same time, however, her remarks affirm her expectations of an idealized version of masculinity that Arnold *should* follow, one defined by self-sacrifice and the desire to protect community children rather than, as illustrated here in Arnold's response, a masculinity that is defined by an inability to take responsibility for one's actions. The structure of the shot—Arnold flanked by Arlene and Grandma as they hold the children—figuratively reinforces that ideally Coeur d'Alene masculinity should be shaped in part by a complementary relationship with women.

This gender complementarity is again illustrated during a scene in which Arlene, standing in the kitchen, accidently drops a piece of fry bread on the floor. She remarks, "Damn arthritis," leading to a gesture of affection by Victor, who rubs his mother's hands and responds, "Hurting bad today, enit." A cross-cut of Thomas and his grandmother occurs directly after this. The structure of the cross-cut is inverted as an aproned Thomas stands kneading and frying dough as his grandmother looks on. In his domestic garb and actions, Thomas defies stereotypical gender expectations—at least those scripted by the dominant culture—and clearly frames the question of what, exactly, constitutes Native manhood in its juxtaposition with Victor and his mother. The juxtaposition of the scenes does not suggest that one version of masculinity is more desirable than the other; rather, the scenes work to challenge the dominant culture's fixed assumptions about masculinity, a masculinity—or more properly masculinit*ies*—that in Native cultures was, as a rule, more fluid. Though the roles are fluid, the masculine values that Victor and Thomas reflect are the same: both young men illustrate respect and tenderness toward women that Arlene's and Thomas's grandmother engender in their son and grandson, respectively.[17]

The movie implies that Thomas, though not entirely certain about what constitutes Coeur d'Alene masculinity (for example, his willingness to follow Victor's advice to be "stoic" and "mean" "like a warrior") is more secure in his masculinity, in his defiance of any recognizable masculine Indian stereotype in his "nerdy" demeanor. The failure of his new-warrior look to unseat the white men who take their seats on the bus blatantly undermines the stereotype, and Thomas quickly reverts to his more secure, and genuine, "nerdy" persona. His security in this version of himself is a direct result of the fact that he was raised by his grandmother. Her demand that Thomas display a confident self-respect is evidenced when, early in the movie, she questions his desire to join Victor on the trip to Phoenix because he is "mean" to Thomas. Thomas's generosity and compassion toward Victor is shown in his funding and supporting Victor's journey, and in his willingness later to stand up to and challenge him for, at times, making "his mother cry" is a testament to his Grandmother's influence in his upbringing.

Though Victor occasionally harms his mother emotionally, this barely means that she is passive in their relationship. Arlene, in fact, sets expectations of masculine behavior for Arnold and Victor frequently throughout. In the previously discussed scene in which Arnold abandons his family, it is Arlene who demands of Arnold (and herself) "no more" regarding his drinking. It is *her* demand that leads to Arnold's departure and subsequent attempt at reformation, prompting in him an introspection that, as we see in Suzy Song's stories about him to Victor, he engages in after leaving home. Though he never comes to terms with himself enough to return home to his family, the fact that later Victor finds the photo of the family in Arnold's wallet illustrates Arnold's recognition that he has an obligation to his family. Also, his masculinity must be defined by his capacity to be both husband and father, a recognition demanded of him by Arlene. Simultaneously, this scene underscores Arlene's role in saving Victor. Arlene, not Arnold, peers out the window at Victor flinging beer bottles against Arnold's truck, and in her compassion for Victor's pain she intervenes in order to forestall the possibility that Victor's growth into manhood will eventually replicate his father's dysfunctional masculinity. We later learn when Victor is interrogated by the police chief,[18] that he has never had "one drop" of alcohol, attesting to her role in indirectly setting expectations for Victor—through her demand to Arnold that day and in the example of her own sobriety—that Native masculinity cannot be defined by the depredations caused by alcohol, which fosters values antithetical to traditional Native masculinity such as domestic abuse.[19]

Arlene also directly works to help shape Victor's masculinity when he is contemplating whether to allow Thomas to accompany him on the journey to retrieve his father's ashes. It takes Arlene's wisdom to persuade Victor

of the need to include Thomas. As she stands in the kitchen kneading dough for fry bread with Victor looking on, she remarks,

> You know, people always tell me I make the best fry bread in the world. Maybe it's true. But I don't make it by myself, you know? I got the recipe from your grandmother, who got if from her grandmother. And I listen to people when they eat my bread, too. Sometimes, they might say, "Arlene, there's too much flour," or "Arlene, you should knead the dough a little more." I listen to them. And watch that Julia Child all the time.

Seemingly oblivious to her point, Victor responds: "So, do you think I should go with Thomas?", to which Arlene answers, "That's your decision." Victor's inability to grasp the implications of her story (there is no irony in the tone of his remark) attests to his relative isolation and ineptitude as a male. His desire to have her decide his actions for him illustrates his unwillingness to take responsibility for his own actions, echoing his father's ethos following the fire. That Victor eventually decides to include Thomas in his journey at his mother's prompting affirms the value of her message—the rejection of Euro-American masculine individualism in favor of a masculinity shaped by the reciprocal obligations of kinship.[20] At the same time, Arlene's wisdom directly influences Victor's choices as a man.

The impact of Arlene on Victor is most profoundly registered when Suzy Song reveals to Victor that his father started the fire that killed Thomas's parents. After this revelation, they have the following exchange:

> Victor: My dad started that fire?
> Suzy: It was an accident.
> Victor: He killed Thomas's mom and dad.
> Suzy: He saved Thomas.
> Victor: He almost killed all of us.
> Suzy: He saved you.
> Victor: My mom saved me.

Though it is never made clear who saved Victor from the fire,[21] his remark figuratively points to his sudden realization that his mother's fortitude and influence has "saved" him from the depredations common to Rez life—alcoholism, drug use, suicide. He realizes that Arlene, not Arnold, has been the primary guide for his young masculinity to this point; through "unconditional love"—a central trait lauded in Matheson's portrayal of traditional Coeur d'Alene women[22]—she has helped set the expectations that influence his choices and behaviors as a boy and has guided him to his early manhood, an early manhood that can continue to mature if he continues to follow his mother's understated guidance.

The dynamic between Suzy Song and Arnold also attests to the fact

that Native women can play a vital role in regenerating Native masculinity. At one point, Suzy recounts to Victor a story of how she and Arnold attended the "Gathering of Nations Powwow in New Mexico." She explains,

> All sorts of Indians there. Thousands of them, more Indians than I've ever seen in one place. I kept thinking, I wish we'd been this organized when Columbus landed. And your dad and I were sitting up high in the stand. He never liked to get too close to anything, you know? And then the powwow emcee called for a ladies' choice dance. I got to pick my partner, and I picked your dad. "I don't dance," he said. "I ain't got rhythm," he said. But I dragged him all the way down to the floor and we danced. There were mothers and fathers dancing together. There were brothers and sisters. There were some sweethearts. And then there was your dad and me.

Arnold's spatial distance from the central activities of the powwow reflects his psychological isolation from his fellow Natives and Native culture (s), and by extension his distance from Native masculinity. It takes *Suzy's* prompting to motivate Arnold to engage in the powwow, to symbolically reenter the space of Native culture. It is a moment that, as the image of "mothers and fathers," "brothers and sisters," and "sweethearts" dancing together implies, masculinity can at least be partially regenerated by restoring gender complementarity.

In addition, Suzy sets expectations for Arnold when they first meet (recalled in a flashback). She asks him where he is from, and after telling her "Plummer, Idaho," Arnold then shares with her the fact that "I got me an ex-wife and son up there." When Suzy asks, "So what are you doing down here then?", she is of course pointing to his failure as a father, yet the best Arnold can muster is, "I don't know. I guess I'm still trying to figure that out," which here attests to his lack of understanding as to his role and responsibilities as a Native man. But, as her remark that they "kept each other's secrets" illustrates, their relationship deepened. As Victor's embellished story of the Jesuit basketball game suggests, Arnold's relationship with Suzy fosters in him the ability to reimagine his masculinity, notably as a father who cultivated in Victor the confidence and dignity that can triumph over challenges and, as this episode symbolically underscores, assert Native masculinity against the emasculating force of Christianity.

Suzy overtly works to redeem Arnold and, by extension, the potential of Native masculinity in Victor's eyes. When Victor asks Suzy if she loved Arnold, she responds, "Yes. He was like . . . like a father, I guess," to which Victor responds, "A father? He had you fooled, too enit?" Undeterred, Suzy retorts, "He quit drinking, you know" and, when Victor responds that it was in fact his mother who "saved" him, Suzy is quick to add,

> Listen to me, Victor. Your dad talked about that fire every day. He cried about it. He always wished he could change it. He wished he hadn't run away. But you have to remember something, Victor. You dad ran into that burning house looking for you. He did one good thing. He came back for you. . . He didn't mean to die here. He wanted to go home, Victor. He always wanted to go home.

Suzy's sentiments underscore to Victor not only the possibilities of Arnold's masculine redemption, but also Victor's, for this story precipitates her quiet admonishment to Victor that Arnold is "waiting for you, Victor," prompting Victor to enter the trailer where his father died. Like her relationship with Arnold, Suzy sets expectations for Victor, a "catalyst for the resolution that must take place" (Lawson 101), particularly the need for Victor to come to terms with his fractured relationship with his father and to begin the process of redeeming his own masculinity. Once in the trailer, Victor finds his father's wallet, with a family photo inside, and he mourns his father's death by cutting his hair. His hair, as he remarks in the opening of this essay, is symbolic of "Indian" masculinity. Suzy's expectation for Victor is that he will face the memory his father, take on the responsibility of coming to peace with his father and, therefore, begin to proactively imagine a healthy definition of Coeur d'Alene masculinity.

On the journey back to the Rez, Victor begins to demand something of himself, as evidenced by his heroic running for miles to get help for a woman injured in a car accident that occurred while he and Thomas were traveling home with his father's ashes. His act of self-sacrifice cannot come about without Suzy's *expectation* that he will have the courage to confront his father by entering the trailer, an act that concurrently asks him to confront his own masculine definition, one that, up to now, has been defined by a jaded, directionless malaise. His hallucination of his father extending a hand to help him off the pavement after he collapses in exhaustion from his effort to run for help illustrates his desire that his father guide him into a mature manhood. This image mirrors exactly the early image of Arnold reaching down to help Thomas up from the bridge over the Spokane and suggests Victor's recognition (both because of Thomas's story and Suzy's defense of Arnold) that his father did have positive traits. Though this hallucination is countered by the reality that it is a male road worker who helps him to his feet, Victor's ability to *imagine* the redemption of his father (a father whose values reflect an obligation to care for his family, in this case by aiding his son, as well as figuratively affirming Victor's act of self-sacrifice on the behalf of others) illustrates Victor's capacity to *imagine* an ideal that may be restored in his own life, suggesting that this moment can only occur because of Suzy's earlier expectation.

Near the end, when Thomas sentimentalizes Victor's gesture of sharing Arnold's ashes, Victor tells Thomas that he believes tossing the ashes in the river would be "like cleaning out the attic, y'know, like throwing things away, when they have no more use." Though this might appear to be nihilistic at first glance, it points to Victor's realization that trying to redeem his father in his own eyes will only lead to continued frustration, that his masculinity must instead be affirmed by once again looking to his mother. Upon returning home to the Rez, both Victor and Thomas turn to their mother and grandmother, respectively, to help affirm their identities. As Victor drives up to his house, Arlene appears at the door. He walks over to her with Arnold's ashes; he then pauses to look up at her on the porch stairs, hands her the ashes, and continues to look up at her beseechingly. As she raises the ashes over her head, he lowers his head. When she lowers the ashes, he peers up at her for approval. She then reaches out to place her hand on his shoulder to assure him that she is pleased, and immediately they turn and walk into the house with their arms around each other's shoulders. The next scene cuts to Thomas entering his home, where he hugs his grandmother, who looks earnestly at him and asks him, "Tell me what happened, Thomas, tell me what's going to happen." Thomas then closes his eyes, and the scene cuts away to images of the Spokane River and Thomas's voiceover of Lourie's "How do We Forgive Our Fathers." The answer to the poem's closing couplet, "If we forgive our fathers, what is left"—an answer that will continue to contribute to the healthy formation of their masculine identities—is right before Victor and Thomas: Coeur d'Alene women.

Notes

[1] Klopotek remarks that it "offer[s] a vision of what a Native man can be, and what he certainly is not" (270), but that it "cannot define what a real [Native] man is" (270).

[2] See, for instance, Brendan Hokowhitu's genealogy of Māori masculinity, which traces colonial cooptation of Māori men who valorized physicality, particularly through sport, as *the* trait that defines "authentic" Māori masculinity.

[3] As Michael Kimmel writes, "without a father, we are told. . . , young boys will grow up without a secure foundation in their manhood," and "it is a mistake to believe that 'a mother is able to show a male child how to be a man'" (150).

[4] On Native kinship and its radical difference from the nuclear family see the "Introduction" to Mark Rifkin's *When Did Indians Become Straight?* particularly pp. 9-17, in which Rifkin challenges Western interpretations of Native kinship structures as somehow emanating from the nuclear family.

[5] See Bayers on the relationship between Native fathers and sons in

Eastman and Standing Bear.

[6] For example, after saving his father by killing an attacking grizzly, the protagonist gains the approval of his father who, along with his grandfather, tells him that this act has prepared him for a formal ceremony marking his manhood (47).

[7] Johnson, 343.

[8] Adams writes that "when [the boarding school experience] was all over, the onetime youthful specimens of savagism would be thoroughly Christianized, individualized, and republicanized, fit candidates for American citizenship" ("Beyond Bleakness" 36) as proper Victorian men and women.

[9] See Chapter 4, "Homesickness," in Child, 43-54.

[10] Regarding Native fathers in Canada, Jessica Ball remarks that, "Colonial government interventions disrupted Indigenous families and communities and, along with ongoing social inequities, created unique challenges for Indigenous fathers. Removal of children from family care and of families from traditional territories, along with high rates of incarceration of Indigenous men, have produced a fissure in the sociocultural transmission of father roles across generations and created monumental challenges for Indigenous fathers' positive and sustained involvement with their children" (29).

[11] Hearne writes that Arnold's leaving his family shows that "the equation of independence with vanishing intimates that the U.S. discourses of freedom and independence are a false and ultimately destructive model of citizenship for Native men" (86).

[12] In their appropriation of Western cinematic genres, Alexie and Eyre take "possession of feature-film production as a tool for telling Native stories" in a medium that has traditionally "silenced, ignored or obsessively misrepresented Native voices and experiences" (Hearne xvii).

[13] See also Lillian Ackerman's study of Columbia Plateau Natives, *A Necessary Balance*. See also Laura F. Klein and Lillian A. Ackerman's *Women and Power in Native North America.* Anthropologists have long wrestled with the methodical shortcomings of imposing Western gender paradigms upon non-Western cultures. See, for instance, Marilyn Strathern's *Dealing with Inequality*.

[14] See Kelsey's Chapter 5, "A Gendered Future," 93-111.

[15] Johnson especially uses Robert H. Ruby and John A. Brown's 1970 study, *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Sun.*

[16] In making this claim, I draw from the work of Lillian Ackerman and her anthropological study of the tribes of the Colville Reservation. Though the Coeur d'Alene are not part of the Colville Reservation, Ackerman notes that cultures of the Columbia Plateau were highly similar because of "extensive historic and prehistoric intermarriage and trade," and, as part

of her research, she draws upon the Coeur d'Alene anthropology.

[17] In this reading, I differ considerably from Lawson, who argues that in this scene Victor is "unsure about where he stands" and "Arlene, is also unsure about where he stands," and that there is little "balance in this relationship" as Arlene makes the fry bread "while Victor sits" (100). This reading does not account for the clear affection Victor shows towards his mother, which challenges any notion of a hierarchy.

[18] It is also worth noting that, in Alexie's screenplay, his "stage" instructions for the police scene reference the need for Victor to be portrayed as "very proud and warrior like" (130), underscoring that Alexie overtly imagined this scene as linked to Victor's performance of masculinity.

[19.] This scene also clearly reflects Alexie's assertion in the "Scene Notes" to the screenplay that "When Arlene Joseph stands up to Arnold, she is being the kind of powerful Indian woman I've known all my life" (160).

[20] On the centrality of kinship in Native cultures, see Eric Cheyfitz's "The (Post)Colonial Construction of Indian Country" in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States Since 1945*, 1-126.

[21] Schweninger writes, "visually the film certainly does not corroborate her account of Arnold's trying to save Victor" (123).

[22] In his portrayal of the fictional Coeur d'Alene chief Circling Raven, the chief states, "A mother's unconditional love for her child really is the most powerful force on earth" (313).

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