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The Masculine Dilemma:
Entanglement of Violence and Maleness in
The Only Good Indians

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The Masculine Dilemma:
Entanglement of Violence and Maleness in
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Contents

Abstract.....	v
Introduction: I'll Give You Something to Cry About.....	1
Just Another Bar Fight.....	5
We Pay For Our Sins. One Way or Another.....	8
Friends, Fathers, and Father-Figures.....	20
Same Place, New Path.....	27
Conclusion.....	31
Notes.....	32
Works Cited.....	33

Abstract

This thesis examines the four Blackfeet male protagonists within Stephen Graham Jones's *The Only Good Indians* in order to investigate stereotypes often applied to masculinity, specifically Indigenous masculinity. Examining portrayals of characters that demonstrate these stereotypes, this thesis is written to spark conversations about the *why* behind these social expectations, to recognize where stereotypes are rooted, and to build discussion about how to overthrow these conventions. Borrowing from—and entering into conversation with—Indigenous Gender Studies scholars such as Sam McKegney, Daniel Heath Justice, and others, this thesis relies upon real life experiences and realities in order to frame the conversation regarding portrayals of hypermasculine behaviors and internalized expectations. This thesis hopes to create discussions of how and why men act in certain manners, live in certain ways, or even make certain decisions by recognizing ourselves within Jones's portrayals of his protagonists.

The Masculine Dilemma:
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The Only Good Indians

Introduction: I'll Give You Something to Cry About

“Yet what comes to be considered masculine within a given context necessarily falls short of capturing the complex experiences of individual men, even as this constellation of meanings continues to influence how men’s identities are lived and understood.” -Sam McKegney

The concept of masculinity is not a new idea by any stretch, yet what constitutes a masculine identity is still under debate as society has reached 2022. Requirements to reach manhood, what is required of a masculine figure, and what is necessary to retain that masculine identity varies depending on the culture that one finds themselves surrounded by. This variation creates myriad responses to the question “what does it mean to be a man?” However, stereotypical expectations of what a man “should” be are found cross-culturally. As a larger-than-average young male growing up in small town East Texas, I often found myself face to face with the conventions of masculinity within my familial culture, the culture of my hometown, and the culture of the wider social sphere.

I grew up a reader, fascinated by the worlds that I could escape to through the portals of text that I found on library and bookstore shelves. Even though my parents encouraged this, they ensured that I was “well-balanced” by requiring my participation in almost every children’s league sport that was available. It was as though intelligence and imagination were acceptable, but not enough to complete my identity as I aged. When I entered my pre-teen and teenage years, I began to feel the brunt of the social beliefs of my maleness. No longer were the intellectual and imaginative spaces of reading and thinking rewarded or looked upon as completely adequate for

a young man. In my hometown, there were few acceptable pastimes for the young men. Because we lived in the Piney Woods of the area, you could drink, smoke, and sex your way through school, hunt the deer and hogs that called the area their home, or play one of the physical sports the small high school offered—football, basketball, or baseball. If you were a cis-gendered male in this space, you had to participate in one of these options or else be subjected to ridicule, slander, and questionings of your manhood.

Because of my above-average build, it quickly became a reality of my existence in the broader public sphere to be asked about what sport or sports I played, and many comments existed only to critique or extol my potential to be violent in that sphere: “You’re too big to not move that weight,” or “I wouldn’t want to line-up against you on the field.” While I was proud of my physical ability, proud of living up to the expectations of those around me, the physicality of that existence did little to create an emotional maturity necessary to work through life’s challenges without a violence-based solution. Broken bones, bruises, and cuts stemming from the fights or physical outbursts that followed emotional distress were not rare. Yet, this physical expression was not about violence for the sake of violence. Rather, these “solutions” were by-products of the beliefs of what maleness looked like that I had internalized from the cultures around me. As I navigated the challenges I faced, the supposed masculinity of the various spheres resulted in reducing myself to being either strong or weak, masculine or feminine, man or boy, and one could not exist with the other.

It is this very internalization and expectation of a masculine relation to violence that I examine in Stephen Graham Jones’s *The Only Good Indians*. The contemporary publishing of this genre fiction novel (2020) creates an immediacy to the discussion within an academic landscape. More pressing though, is the fact that the novel is presented to the popular consumer

sphere. This public and popular presentation creates a chance to build upon a discussion of masculinities in the moment of engagement with the text and a space where the social construction of masculine assumptions can be discussed in real-time, with real hearts, rather than solely being limited to a discussion within the academy.

Although this paper is centered around the cis-gendered Indigenous male perspectives presented within *The Only Good Indians*, I do not mean to imply that discussions of masculinity are limited to cis-gendered men, nor do I mean to universalize cultural differences. My aim is for this paper to do two things. First—as a white scholar who is not tribally affiliated—my hope is that through this essay’s examination, I am able to speak in a good way that honors the voices of the authors and scholars from whom I will borrow, and with whom I will enter into discussion. In this way, my intent is for this thesis to be a space in which stereotypical constraints of what it means to be a cis-gendered, masculine male in America can be critically examined. I also do not mean to imply in this thesis that masculinity is monolithic—marked by only the stereotypes recognized within this essay—nor do I mean to speak on behalf of others. Rather, I wish to engage in important discussion about what assumptions of maleness create in men’s lives.

Here, it is necessary to also recognize limitations regarding my own cultural knowledge. I cannot, nor do I intend to, speak on behalf of Indigenous men, nor to the exact experience that Indigenous men have in relation to the larger social sphere of masculine conditions. To assume that my understanding of masculine experience is the baseline for all would be ignorant at best and racist at worst. And although I am working with Blackfeet male representations within *The Only Good Indians*, it is important to note that I have not been granted culturally specific knowledge of the masculine role within Blackfeet culture, and therefore will not speak to what is expected or traditional in this community. Rather, I intend the following discussion to be placed

within the space of American Indian Masculinities that scholars such as Daniel Heath Justice, Sam McKegney, and others have created to examine damaging aspects of stereotypical expressions and beliefs of what it means to be a man.

I introduce this essay with a discussion of my own positioning in relation to male-expected violence as a white male not to essentialize the male experience as equal to my own, nor to detract from the experiences of BIPOC males, but instead to express my reasoning for discussing what social constructs affects us as men. Though my belief that these stereotypes aimed at cis-gendered men *are* cross-cultural, to ignore the systemic positioning of the social psyche would be careless. While societal requirements of violence and other tropes of what masculinity looks like *are* levied at all men, settler colonial mindsets of the American social psyche continue to reduce American Indian males to the concept of brute or savage, even though attempts to decolonize this thought process have been and continue to be underway. And though the text engaged within this essay *does* have settler colonial discussions that can and should be had, these discussions are not the primary goal of this essay.¹

In “‘To Fight against Shame through Love’: A Conversation on Life, Literature, and Indigenous Masculinities with Daniel Heath Justice,” Sam McKegney and Daniel Heath Justice discuss, amongst other ideas, the problematic portrayal of the male body regarding the propensity for violent action. Towards the end of this discussion, Justice says,

What strikes me is the male body is seen as capable of and a source only of violence and harm ... We need to see the body— the male body— as being a giver of pleasure, not just a recipient of somebody else’s acts, but a source of pleasure for the self and others...but the models of hypermasculine maleness that we get: if the male body isn’t giving harm,

¹ While a discussion of settler-colonial violence does not make up the primary aim of this essay, this is not to say that moments where the discussion impacts the points of this essay will be ignored.

it's taking pleasure. It's always extractive. It's either penetrative or extractive— or assaultive or extractive. One or the other, there's nothing else. And that is such a catastrophic failure of imagination, as well as a huge ethical breach. To imagine that the male body is only capable of wounding. And it's crippling to the soul to imagine that your only function in life is to hurt people. So literature ought to give us alternatives.

(Justice 78-9)

Justice's point, that the masculine expectations of society claim that the male body is capable only of wounding, being wounded, or being extractive, is both reflected and complicated in the genre novel *The Only Good Indians*. Although presented with representations of men that are indeed capable of both inflicting and receiving violence within this text, it is my contention that the hypermasculine presentations can and should be recognized as intentional tropes working to open a discussion to an awareness of male emotion, pain, and struggle whose outlet for resolution is stymied by the internalized impulse to resort to socially expected violence.

Just Another Bar Fight

"Let me say that again so you can hear me: the men are looking for me. Not who I am but my body. In their language, in their heads, in their blood, courses many versions of the same message that has moved to the edge of our homelands: the only good Indian is a dead Indian." -Michael Wasson

Stephen Graham Jones's *The Only Good Indians* is, primarily, a horror-genre novel. As the supernatural consequences made manifest of a hunt on elder-only hunting grounds stalks the protagonists within the pages, a sense of dread becomes palpable for the reader. However, Jones's presentation of Ricky, Lewis, Cass, and Gabe goes beyond mere reactions to fear. Like

Joseph Boyden² attempts to do in his short story “Painted Tongue,” Jones dives into the masculine stereotypes around these male characters, flips those expectations on their head, and presents an examination that engages who “the real person” behind them is (Boyden 163). Presented in four parts, *The Only Good Indians* offers four distinct scenarios and event sequences that can be examined for their handling of the masculine; the opening bar scene; “The House That Ran Red;” “Sweat Lodge Massacre;” and “It Came From the Rez.”

The shortest section of the novel, but vital to the discussion of stereotypical expectations applied to men— and more specifically Indigenous men— is the opening scene wherein the reader is introduced to Ricky Boss Ribs. At a bar in North Dakota, Ricky finds himself as one of two Native men surrounded by white oil-rig roughnecks. Leaving the bar to relieve himself outside, Ricky walks by the oil-hands lined up at the door and begins to steel himself for the ensuing fight he believes is coming: “Only stupid Indians brush past a bunch of hard-handed white dudes, each of them sure that seat you had in the bar, it should have, by right, been theirs. They’re cool with the Chief among them being the chain monkey, but when it comes down to who has an eyeline on the white woman, well, that’s another thing altogether, isn’t it?” (5-6). Yet, when Ricky turns around, fists ready and waiting, he finds no one in the parking lot behind him but an elk spike. As the elk begins to bang and slam into the trucks in the lot, setting off car alarms and denting metal, Ricky arms himself with a crescent wrench, protection in the face of the animal that outweighs him “by a cool five hundred pounds” (8).

Ricky’s fear gets the best of him. He begins to yell at the spike, swings the wrench, and hits nothing but the trucks around him. At this point, the men that had been waiting to get in the

² While I understand that Joseph Boyden’s identity is the subject of some controversy, his ideas surrounding stereotypical masculinity fits with this essay. Therefore, I posit that his inclusion here is justified as it is not my place as scholar nor individual to question one’s identity.

bar arrive. Ricky looks at them “saw *them* seeing it: this Indian [that] had got hisself mistreated in the bar, didn’t know who drove what, so he was taking it out on every truck” (9). In the expected manner, the group of men from the bar aim to “put him down,” enacting violence as the solution to the problem they believe has arisen (9). And try though he might to get away, the men do catch Ricky, they do beat him outside the bar, and the elk herd across the road watches Ricky die. This scene foreshadows the importance of the elk herd in the lives of the four protagonists. Beyond that, it sets up the discussion of violence as the default problem-solving tool for the hypermasculine and introduces a strong representation of hate-crime reality as well. According to the US Department of Justice “Special Report: Hate Crime Victimization, 2005-2019,” “Persons who are American Indian, Alaska Native, or two or more races had the highest rate of violent hate crime victimizations.”

Though the men who attacked Ricky in the parking lot may not have set out that night in order to play “cowboys and Indians” outside the bar (Jones 7), they viewed Ricky through the settler-colonial perspective ingrained in them through years of absorbing stereotyped representations of Native people, and here in particular, of Native men. In their eyes, Ricky was not a man simply confused and scared of what waited in the dark. Instead, Ricky was found in the midst of their banged-up vehicles with a weapon; which, for the white rig-hands, created the stereotyped image of Native men “as criminal; as violent” and therefore a threat that must be neutralized as Barbara Perry investigates in her book *Silent Victims: Hate Crimes Against Native Americans* (40). Not only is Ricky connected to the property damage the white men see, his very presence in the bar prior to the white men’s entrance interferes with “the presumption of [a] racial hierarchy” that the rig-hands assume should be followed (Perry 106).

We Pay For Our Sins. One Way or Another

“We realize that, at any given moment, we can behave with either violence or compassion, depending on the strength of these seeds within us.” -Thích Nhất Hạnh

Like Ricky, the reader is introduced to Lewis Clarke in “The House That Ran Red” while he is living away from the reservation. Renting with his wife, Peta, Lewis works at the local post office, has a “malamutant” dog, and rides motorcycles with his co-worker friends as a pastime (Jones 15). The most central protagonist, Lewis presents the greatest room for discussion of masculine management of emotion, confusion, and fear. Through Lewis’s memories, we are also made aware of the illegal hunt in which he and the other protagonists partake. My contention is that Lewis, although inflicting violence upon others, specifically intrafamilial and intraracial violence against women, does so in a manner that adds to the horror of the novel. Borrowing from the realities of domestic violence for its impact as well as recognition of horrific realities, Jones also complicates the stereotype that male violence is a reaction to the unknown or uncontrolled by showing Lewis as one who is thoughtful, careful, and capable of vulnerability.

Lewis’s inner turmoil is revealed early. His memory of the cow elk that he killed during the protagonists’ illegal hunt on land restricted for tribal elder use comes to life in the middle of Lewis’s living room:

Once he’s up higher than the fan ... he does what anybody would: looks down through this midair whirlpool, each blade slicing through the same part of the room ... Lying on her side through the blurry clock hands of the fan is a young cow elk. Lewis can tell she’s young just from her body size ... Because she’s dead, too, she wouldn’t care about the

knife in her gums. And Lewis knows for sure she's dead. He knows because, ten years ago, he was the one who made her that way. (Jones 18)

Driven by his guilt, Lewis roughly traces the shape of the cow elk out with masking tape “in order to prove that it couldn't have happened, that she wouldn't have even fit right there,” in what appears to be quite a logical management process, attempting to talk himself away from being overly emotional about the memory flashing to life before his eyes (37). It is not until Shaney, Lewis's Crow co-worker, begins to get involved with him that he begins to fray at the edges. When she wakes him at his home by dribbling a basketball in the drive, Lewis begins their interaction by “bump[ing] the garage door button with the side of his fist, his face pre-hard because that's what you do in what could be a trespassing situation” (44-5). Faced with an unknown intrusion upon his private life, Lewis's first instinct is to affect an air of masculine strength—fists ready and face impassive—because “that's what you do.” Yet, as Shaney is revealed to be the trespasser and no apparent threat, the potential for violence slips away and is replaced by confusion, an assumedly ‘weaker’ position than the original show of strength. The two positions of emotional readiness are unable to hold the same place at the same time.

Shaney's presence defuses Lewis's stereotypically masculine approach to a trespasser. While the argument could be made that the feminine presence can be disarming to the masculine, I posit that Lewis's move away from aggression aligns more with the unknown being made known. The stereotype of the violent aggressor is not needed in this instance, and so it becomes ‘safe’ for Lewis to present a softer version of himself. As the two talk and move into the house, Shaney recognizes the masking tape pattern on the floor and begins to piece it together, “Moving deliberately, Shaney applies the long strips to the carpet, not adding to the elk, but giving it some insides Now it's ... not so much a young cow elk, but a shape the somehow represents a

young elk better than even an actual young elk” (50). Her familiarity with the elk shape on the floor and her willingness to ask Lewis about the *why* behind its existence leads him to bare his memories of the hunt, exposing himself emotionally in a way that even Peta has not seen: “Does the hot girl from work get to know what his wife doesn’t? But she knew how to finish that elk on the floor ... More important, she’s asking” (51). There is both a familiarity with Shaney and a request to be met that allows Lewis to present his vulnerability that was covered until now. This openness subverts the assumption of the masculine man with repressed emotions, and as Daniel Heath Justice notes in “Strong Men Stories: A Roundtable on Indigenous Masculinities,” “the vulnerability, the gentleness, the confusion, the uncertainty ... those are also sources of strength; all of those are also powerful ways of revealing our humanity” (Justice 249).

Lewis’s recollection of the protagonists’ hunt has a dual nature. Although standing in his house with Shaney as he recounts their time in the woods, the past and present mingle. Through the strength of Lewis’s exposure, it is revealed that there is little difference between old events and current. His emotions that he felt during the hunt, the excitement, laughter, dread, and guilt, are all just as real ten years later as they were at that time. Beyond the emotional connections between the years, it is through Lewis’s recollection of the hunt that we are presented with the expectations that have been internalized within his life of what makes him a man. Lewis begins his tale with a description of the other guys on the hunt:

Gabe, at six-two had always been a touch taller ... in John Wayne’s day Lewis and Gabe ... would have been Indians ‘16’ and ‘17’ of forty ... Cass would have been more the sitting-in-front-of-the-lodge type ... [and] Ricky, he’d be Bluto from *Popeye*, just, darker; put him in front of a camera, and all he could hope to play would be the Indian thug off to the side, that nobody trusts to remember even half a line. (Jones 53)

Although Jones uses tropes known to popular society in this text, stereotypes such as these have been applied to American Indian men since settler colonialism began: unnamed threats pursuing the cowboy hero, the savage, the “Indian thug.” Here, Jones is speaking to the potential for internalized colonialism. As Taiaiake Alfred³ states in “Reimagining Warriorhood: A Conversation with Taiaiake Alfred,” “those stereotypes [‘bloodthirsty warrior,’ noble savage’ ‘drunken absentee’] were instrumental to someone else’s [read: white conquest’s] agenda ... if you construct yourself to serve that role, there may be some pride in physicality, and so forth, but there’s no living with it because it’s not meant to be lived with; it’s meant to be killed, every single time” (79). As we have seen with Ricky, and we will see with Lewis, Gabe, and Cass, “to be killed” is coming.

As the memory progresses, so do the occurrences of internalized labels: “‘Shh,’ Cass said, coming down to one knee to read sign like a real Indian. Tracks” (54). The implication here is clear, if you are able to read the tracks left by the prey on a hunt, then you can be called a real Indian, a real man. If not, the label can be removed for failure to fulfill the requirement. The four young men finally come upon the elk herd below their position on the ridge, and Lewis “crawled ahead like a soldier ... knowing that this was how you got to be a good Indian, finally remembered how to jack a round in” (61). Lewis’s internal comparison to a soldier has layered meanings within discussions of masculinity.⁴ As Alfred discusses later in the aforementioned interview with McKegney:

The key defining characteristic of a warrior is someone who is putting his life at risk, right? It’s not so much a set of skills or even traits ... It’s a spiritual sense, a spiritually

³ I recognize that Alfred has been the subject of some controversy regarding abuse and sexual harassment. His inclusion here is not intended to discount, nor discredit allegations that have been made, and is limited solely to this particular discussion of stereotypes and warriorhood vs soldierhood as they pertain to masculinity.

⁴ This is not to say that only those that are masculine can be soldiers.

defined role, as opposed to a more political or social role ...I think it's a universal thing across cultures where there are segments of the population, who ... have been selected and found to be the appropriate person to fulfill that role, serve in that role. (Alfred 84)

Alfred discusses aspects of being in the Marine Corps and how being a part of that military branch can create a spiritual connection to the Corps itself that has little to nothing to do with patriotism. Importantly, Alfred is discussing the fact that the Corps is supposedly set up in direct support of the United States, but the spiritualism within that military community is designed around the sacrifices other Marines have made rather than building a concept of service for the larger community of the country. The concept of warriorhood being spiritual service is clarified through Alfred's distinction between being "warrior soldiers or fighters, and having the warrior spirit in everything that you do as an Indigenous person," and is further explained as someone who is driven to "satisfy that warrior ethic" rather than one who is "living to satisfy the demands of a value system that is constructed out of capitalism..." (Alfred 84-5).

Alfred's discussion of warriorhood, when put in conversation with Lewis's view of himself on the hill above the elk herd, highlights Jones's rhetorical choice of "soldier" instead of "warrior." In recent years, there has been a conflation between the two, and they are often used as synonyms—or even interchangeably—as though they serve the same purpose, and the being that fulfills one role can assume the other easily. However, as Alfred outlines, there is a larger picture that one must be willing to sacrifice themselves for in order to be a warrior, and there is a spiritual connection to that position within society and within oneself. Yet, Lewis seems to have conflated the terms in his own mind. Although a soldier is destined to simply follow orders regardless of their morality or spiritually damning potential, Lewis's internalization of what is stereotypically *expected* of a man is recognizable here in the fact that this fateful hunt is what he

believes proves himself worthy of being who he is. He is attempting to mark off the checklist of stereotypical masculinity without a conscious decision to do so.

Taking aim, Lewis and the others open fire without hesitation, anything in the cross-hairs fair game, and they fell nine elk. Lewis's internal narration in this moment revolves around knowing how to bring down quarry on a hunt, something that Justice discusses with McKegney about his own growing years: "I would go hunting with my dad and I'd lean up against a tree with a novel and read, and he was good with that. You know, I had my rifle; I'd know if there was an elk coming, and being part of the hunt was my responsibility" (Justice 64). Lewis has a similar responsibility here to his friends. Although there were no books brought on this hunt, had Lewis turned away from the hunting path, his responsibilities and his masculinity from his friends' perspectives would have been shirked. But Lewis's hunt is not yet over. As the teens begin to gut and dismember the elk, the cow elk from Lewis's memory is found still alive. The first shot had not killed her, nor the second that Lewis inflicts upon her. The third shot, set against the elk's head, is what finally does her in.

This hunt reflects the discussion between Sam McKegney and Daniel Heath Justice quoted at the beginning of this thesis. Lewis admits that they would not be able to use all of the meat that they killed here: "It was clear this was going to be a haunches-only affair" (Jones 64). Lewis's recognition differentiates this particular hunt from a hunt designed to provide sustenance, as well as clarifies that this hunt generates the infliction of violence and extraction that is expected of masculinity as Justice suggests. It is not until Lewis tells the same story to Peta that the reader learns of the true extractive nature of the hunt. The cow elk that he and the others inflict this violence upon was pregnant with a calf (73). In cleaning the carcass, Lewis

quite literally extracts the unborn calf from the mother and buries it in the nearby snow.⁵ Lewis's soul here becomes "crippled" as the realization of the violence demanded of him in that space comes to bear. Through the few shots after the initial barrage, Lewis is pleading with the cow elk, telling it that if it would die, then he would ensure that all of the meat from her body would be used, a bargaining chip thrown out from the anguish he begins to feel as the ferocious surge wanes away.

His promises here are reminiscent of the way Craig Womack speaks of the hunting trip in D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* in "There Is No Respectful Way to Kill an Animal": "It occurs to him that excitement will not result from gratuitous killing when hunger is not at stake" (14). Lewis's reaction to the cow elk's struggle for survival creates a despair opposite that of the adrenaline rush from his controlling death with his rifle. Just as Womack points out in regard to circumstances in *The Surrounded*, the promises that Lewis is making do little for the animal: "The prayers and ceremonies do something for us, not the deer, at the very least not the same thing for the deer, and there is no way to escape the fundamental inequity of the relationship" (12). Notably, Lewis is not offering cultural prayer or ceremony here, and I do not mean to imply a direct comparison between the promises Lewis makes and those of culturally specific practices. It is the statement Womack makes here, that the promises Lewis is making to the elk do something for *him*, that the promises are a way to justify *his* abrupt infliction of violence on the herd, upon which I am focusing.

⁵ While this burial speaks to the extractive nature of the hunt, it should also be pointed out that the promises Lewis makes do not include the use of the calf's skin in ways that it traditionally could have: "Berry-bags for carrying them were made of small skins from ... unborn calves of large animals such as the elk, or deer, or, most often, of the buffalo" (McClintock 466). This "haunches-only affair" created violence, extraction, and waste all in the same moment. It is also important to note that bags of this kind were not specific to any one tribe or space, nor did they serve the same purpose in every instance of their use.

Lewis's openness with Peta is distinct from the vulnerability he shares with Shaney. As he begins to tell her the same story, he is acutely aware that he is asking Peta to listen to something with which she is uncomfortable, "'You don't like to hear stuff about ... animals'" (72). Yet she encourages him to admit his humanity, something that she knows exists as his wife. In this admission, Lewis confesses that he is crying at the end of the hunt, tears that are acknowledged, but not spoken of, by his friends. Interestingly, he refuses to allow himself to cry in this moment that he shares with his wife because he believes it shows a weakness within him: "He's trying not to cry *here*, he's trying not to be that stupid, that needy" (74). Lewis's belief that his tears equate to stupidity—even in the safe presence of his wife—highlights the stereotyped expectations of men needing to contain their emotions. If we are unable to do so, then we are somehow lesser, weaker, and non-masculine. After he tells Peta the story, he strips naked, peels the elk outline from the floor, and tells himself that it is good, "just, it doesn't feel good" (76). In his most vulnerable state, after having admitted to the violence of his youth, now bared completely both physically and emotionally, Lewis is still scarred, still in pain. Yet this pain does not encompass the strength it took him to be as open about this past as he was.

In *Masculindians: Conversations About Indigenous Manhoods*, Sam McKegney has said that "it's difficult to show vulnerability because we're taught in various ways that to be masculine is to be strong, right? And so, to create scenarios in which vulnerability is actually a sign of strength is a really difficult thing to do" (170). Through the character of Lewis, Jones has presented a moment where the stereotypical aspect of hiding emotion prevents our character from moving forward. Even though it does not *feel* good—as Lewis recognizes standing naked in his living room—it is only after being vulnerable and open with both Shaney and Peta that Lewis begins his plan to remove the Elk Head Woman from his life.

What I find most intriguing in Lewis's vulnerability with Shaney is that she is revealed as the potential embodiment of the Elk Head Woman, the supernatural being that is stalking the group ten years after the hunt for revenge. His original despair and the promises he made to the cow elk are now being recounted to the same in human form, and his openness after an initial position of stereotypical violence or preparation for violence highlights the scarring his soul went through at the time of the hunt. Elk Head Woman's potential incarnation as Shaney shows that the elk, despite not being human, was and is very much aware of the pain it received and the life it lost. This potential embodiment brings forth the concept of *unheimlich*, the uncanny, that can often be found within the psychological horror genre. Since it is never fully clarified whether or not Shaney and Elk Head Woman are truly one and the same, the familiar is contorted, the being is both human and not, and an unease for both Lewis and the reader is created. This unease then guides Lewis's descent into emotional turmoil which brings his capacity for—and willingness to participate in—violence full circle. Lewis's motorcycle, running and in one piece at the beginning of the novel, is slowly taken apart and strewn about the garage, the myriad pieces reflecting Lewis's thoughts—individual pieces to be examined, but not a part of a cohesive whole—as he begins to question when and where Elk Head Woman will appear to take her revenge.

Although afraid, Lewis's first reaction is not that he should be violent. Instead, he is patient, and he is observant. Carefully following the tracks of his interactions, he notices every discrepancy between who Shaney really is and the Shaney that Elk Head Woman pretends to be; “the important part is that, through the revealing blades of the fan, through that flickering that strips away fake faces or whatever, she'd been *herself*” (98). As Lewis becomes increasingly sure that Shaney *is* Elk Head Woman, he concocts a plan to lure her back to the house and he

also begins to rebuild his motorcycle, the pieces coming back together as his thoughts do.

Shaney/Elk Head Woman is successfully lured to the house. Feigning excitement about getting the bike to somewhat running condition, Lewis brings her over to it, revs the engine, and the spokes of the back wheel catch her hair, “crank her head both up and to the side ... her neck breaks, the top of her head scalps off, and her forehead tilts loosely down into the rear wheel”

(115-16). Through this death scene of Shaney/Elk Head Woman, we are exposed to two concepts of the masculine expectation for American Indian men. First is the obvious scalping that is portrayed, lauded by Hollywood as well as settler-colonial fearmongering as the way of all Native warriors even though the act of scalping was itself a settler-colonial import. As Devon A. Mihesuah points out in *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities*, “The practice dates back to ancient Greece. In America, scalping was introduced by the Dutch who offered bounties for the heads of Indian men, women, and children...[but] heads proved too cumbersome, so eventually only the scalps were taken” (50). Although Lewis is not shown as intending to remove the scalp, the inclusion here is intended to be a visceral image for the reader, but also a call to the history of scalping in the U.S.

The other thought process of masculinity is one that Gregory Scofield notes in the same roundtable of “Strong Men Stories” as Daniel Heath Justice,

The roles that we’re assigned and the societal expectations that are put on us growing up, in regard to being male and being masculine, have a lot to do with physical strength and the ability to fight your way through ... There was something very physical about what the expectation was to be male ... There was a lot of violence in my house, so in becoming physically strong, there was a real liberation in knowing that not only could I

protect myself physically, but I could also therefore protect myself emotionally, mentally, and spiritually (Scofield 248-49).

Lewis engages with this prospect of potential violence as liberation, but also subverts the expectation of direct physical violence. Instead, Lewis methodically approaches the issue, examining the variables surrounding the danger, and then uses a tool to create the “accident” that kills Shaney/Elk Head Woman. In this, Lewis steps away from the physical expectation, but wholly steps into the belief that violence of this manner will “liberate” him, and therefore secure him emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. In Lewis’s mind, “payment came due” for those elk and the calf they killed on the hunt, but because of the security of violence here, “he just managed to duck paying it” (117).

But no violence is without consequence. As Lewis returns to the interior of the house, Peta has arrived, and he is covered in blood. The shock from seeing him this way causes her to lose her balance on the ladder she’s working from. She falls, hits her head on the hearth of the fireplace, and dies through no fault of her own. Although seemingly liberated by killing the supernatural danger, Lewis’s actions impact the life of an innocent bystander, too often the case when violence is unleashed upon anyone. As Peta lays there dead, Lewis notes a form pushing at the skin in Peta’s abdomen. Cutting her open as he sliced the cow elk ten years prior, he once more extracts a calf from the womb of a dead mother. It is at this moment, now that Lewis has committed these acts of violence and extractions, that he runs back to the Blackfeet reservation—he is trying to go home. He recognizes that violence has produced no answers to his concerns, and the only place that he will feel safe is that which accepts him as he is.⁶

⁶ Lewis’s interactions with Elk-Head Woman are not limited to the representations of violence presented in this thesis. There are also discussions regarding marriage, cheating, and Deer Woman stories (some that Jones recognizes in his “Acknowledgements” section) that need to be examined for their connections to masculinity in their own right but are not addressed in this particular thesis conversation.

As the novel moves to Lewis's death, Jones once more relies on reality to create the true undercurrent of horror within the text. In a reflection of both their hunt those ten years ago and the hate crime statistics previously discussed, Lewis looks up, "and on ridge above him there's four men sighting down along the tops of their rifles" (128). These are the men that kill Lewis as he attempts to carry the elk calf back to the reservation, but their vagueness is a tool that Jones deftly implements. The men's vagueness creates a multitude of potential killers, whether law enforcement or vigilante. As Kim Wieser discusses in "Healing the "Man of Monstrous Dreams": Indian Masculinities in Silko's *Ceremony*," "American Indian males are those most likely to be killed by law enforcement, according to the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, as Indians comprise only 0.8 percent of the population, but 1.9 percent of police killings" (40). Although published in 2016, the statistics are still horrifically accurate seven years later in 2022. While Lewis's death sparks rumors on the Reservation, it is generally dismissed in the broader social sphere, the murderers are never fully implicated, and the conversation fades to a newspaper-style clipping at the end of the section. This dismissal mirrors that which Barbara Perry discusses through the interviews included in her *Silent Victims* book, "'When white people get killed everybody wants to know who, and to catch 'em, especially if they think it was an Indian'" (qtd. in Perry 94). Even though the clipping admits to the death of Peta and Shaney, their deaths are diminished in the report compared to the focus upon the white men attempting to "help authorities" apprehend Lewis.

Friends, Fathers, and Father-Figures

“One day we’re going to be old men, and we’re going to have young people sitting with us, listening to our stories, and maybe reading our books, and we’ll become a part of their knowing.” -Gregory Scofield

The section following Lewis’s death, “Sweat Lodge Massacre,” brings the reader back to the reservation for the setting, and it is within this section that Gabriel (Gabe) and Cassidy are explored. This section of the novel also introduces Gabe’s daughter, Denorah, who will be examined later in this thesis. “Sweat Lodge Massacre,” as a whole, continues the complications of masculinity that began with Lewis, albeit with multiple character representations within the section. Unlike Lewis’s presentation though, this section leans on the stereotype of violence as reactionary in order to highlight the unavailability of emotional discussion between the main characters in this section, Gabe and Cass.

As Gabe is introduced, we once again find him with a gun in his hands. Unlike the gun he and the others used on that fateful hunt, this one belongs to his father, a “war trophy” from his father’s uncle, and it is unloaded (146). While Gabe and his father speak, there are several important factors of the novel section revealed; a sweat is being thrown in honor of Lewis and his death by the hands of unknown shooters, both Gabe and Cassidy express their mourning emotions by wearing a black bandanna tied to their left arms, and the elder, Neesh, is discussed in his first mention. Both the sweat and the armbands present a discussion of emotions of grief. Neither Gabe nor Cassidy is described as being sad, tearing up, or even having fits of rage from being upset, yet they both have made a conscious effort to outwardly show their emotions to a community that may not even fully remember the person they lost—““Lewis had been gone a long time already”” (148). This emotional display directly confronts the idea that men should

hide their emotions behind a stoic façade as discussed in Kevin R. Kemper’s “‘Geronimo!’ The Ideologies of Colonial and Indigenous Masculinities in Historical and Contemporary Representations about Apache Men,”⁷ “a stereotype about Native American men is that they are sexualized as taciturn and hard, and then falsely seen as not having a full range of emotions” (44). Jones’s presentation of Gabe and Cass’s attempts to make their mourning visual disrupts the sexualization discussed by Kemper and shows that the men *do* have a full range of emotions being experienced in their own way.

Neesh, while primarily a referential character, plays a large part in the connection between Blackfeet tradition (as described in the novel) and the masculinity of the men that we experience the text with. As we see Gabe “borrow” the gun from his father, a memory of Neesh runs through his mind, “Neesh had explained to the ten little Indians in group about counting coup. How that’s what all of them were sort of already doing ... counting coup was running up to the baddest enemy and just tapping them, then getting clear before that enemy could bash you with anything” (149). Neesh presents counting coup to the group in reference to addictive behaviors they had previously exhibited. Gabe recognizes that counting coup is “kind of what he lives by” (149), and the connection between he and Neesh represents an elder generation reaching beyond the Hollywood-peddled “drunk absentee” stereotype applied to Native men and encouraging a recognition of how traditional connection can overcome the settler ideology.⁸

Moving from Gabe to Cassidy, the text brings the reader to the building of the sweat lodge and Cass’s thoughts about the sweat itself. Considering the ceremonial aspect of the sweat, Cass contemplates a sweat with his girlfriend Jo, yet realizes that by adding an attractive woman

⁷ I realize that this article is written about Apache men and that there are different cultural distinctions between tribes. However, the quoted material refers to stereotypes applied to Native American men as a whole. It’s inclusion here is not meant to essentialize in any way.

⁸ In addition to this representation, there is a further discussion of the realities of drug and alcohol use by Native American youth that, while important, is not under discussion within this thesis.

to the mix, the ceremony can come undone; “Cassidy still remembers his own first sweat ... Add a woman into that mix—especially one like Jo ... and it wouldn’t have been ceremonial anymore, it would have been about how, *Look, I’m tough, this heat isn’t anything, I can take it longer than any of these old-timers*” (157-58). His thoughts here clearly insinuate the stereotype of men thinking with their libido rather than their brain, but at the same time, there is an understanding that out of respect to tradition, personal satisfaction should sometimes be set aside. There is a recognition that ceremony is larger than the self which is furthered in his conversation with Jo after he completes the sweat lodge. As she asks him if it is a “Blackfeet wake,” he says that it is just a remembering, but “‘also there’s this kid’ ... needing something traditional to maybe ground him, keep him from burning out on dope and 90 proof” (160). Much like Neesh did for the younger generation at one time, so too will Gabe and Cass now pass on traditional knowledge to the next generation for the same reason, to keep them alive. The male authority figure is one that Joseph Boyden discusses in “Manhood Through Vulnerability: A Conversation with Joseph Boyden.” In this conversation Boyden states that “there’s so often a lack of a male authority figure or a male figure who is benevolent or who is kind or gentle or in any way effeminate” (Boyden 168), yet Neesh, Cass, and Gabe are all in positions of, at least, being a role model where their kindness and gentleness is designed to reach a new generation with a lesson to be learned. Their presence, the presence of kind and gentle men, becomes all the more important when they *are* depicted.

As the two men get together at Cassidy’s place for the sweat, they rib each other and make jokes as most friends tend to do. Past these surface observations though, is a recognition of the depth of regard these men have for one another. It is unclear how often the two meet-up together, yet their first moments in the same space occur as though it is just another day, even

though they are there to honor their dead friend. As “the kid” that Cass described to Jo and his father arrive, Nathan and his father Victor Yellow Tail, the father clarifies for his son that his presence at the sweat that night is not about tradition, “‘It’s not about the sweat ... They were you, twenty years ago ... There used to be four of them” (184-85). While Cass and Gabe think that they are grounding the young man, Victor is instead using them as an example of what not to become in life. As the men strip for preparation to enter the sweat, a similar vulnerability is represented as when Lewis stripped himself earlier in the novel. Although the emotions around the stripping are different, the baring of oneself indicates the concept of being open and unprotected. The idea of being honest, open, and vulnerable is extended by Cass’s instructions to the teen before the sweat begins, “‘this isn’t some toughest-Indian-in-the-world thing ... you’re supposed to get hot, but not hot enough to pass out”’ (192). The machismo⁹ of being the last man standing must be set aside. In the sweat, we learn that Neesh is Nate’s grandfather. This knowledge brings things full circle regarding masculinity and traditions for Gabe and Cass as Neesh was the one that tried to teach them traditional ways of being Blackfeet and being men “when he was trying to pull Gabe and Cass and Ricky and Lewis back, keep them alive” (Jones 304). Now, their role as men is to do the same thing for the grandson of the man who tried to save them.

Elk Head Woman’s appearance for Gabe and Cass is distinctly different from her interactions with Lewis. With Lewis, she manipulated his thoughts, driving him to make logical choices that left out a few things in the end, yet here there are others present that present potential risk for her, namely the armed Victor Yellow Tail. Before she begins to target Cass and Gabe, she kills Cass’s dogs so that they cannot sound a warning and then severely maims Victor

⁹ Although ‘machismo’ is typically used in discussion regarding Tejano and Latino masculinities, the aspect of strong, aggressive representations of masculinity is being engaged here.

so he cannot interrupt her actions. It is the death of the dogs and Cass's finding of Gabe's beer bottle beside the bloody rock used to smash them apart that sets things in motion for our protagonists. Although the dogs were killed before either man left the sweat lodge, Gabe had stepped out in order to get water for the lodge and beer for himself which created a time in which he *could* have drunkenly killed the dogs. The dead dogs and the black thermos that Gabe had brought back are both manipulations of Elk Head Woman, yet the fact that these are abnormal occurrences does not cross Cass's mind. Theories of treachery, similar to stereotypes that Mihesuah dismantles, begin to appear in Cass's mind: "*Good-time Gabe. Dog-killer Gabe. Gabe the bank robber*" (231). There is little distance from these thoughts to the explosive action following them—Cass shattering the windshield of Gabe's truck with the thermos in his anger. Even as Gabe tries to explain what seems to be happening, Cass's emotions have betrayed any logical thought process, exactly as Elk Head Woman wanted. Realizing that words are having no effect, Gabe tries to connect with Cass through physical means, beating his own truck with a wrenched-off side mirror before he then runs and bull-rushes the old beater truck that they once took on a hunting trip, now sitting on cinderblocks where Jo is underneath is trying to find the thermos once stashed there with Cass and Jo's savings (233).

As the truck falls and crushes Jo, another innocent caught in the repercussions of violent action, Cass reaches his breaking point: "Now Cassidy's stalking back from the patrol car. With the Mauser ... and then [Gabe] sees what his friend is doing ... he probably had a stray shell that would fit the old gun" (235). The rapid-fire losses have compounded upon Cass, and the only way that he can make sense of the world now, is to remove his last remaining friend from it the same way they removed nine elk ten years prior. Gabe realizes what has happened, realizes that there can be no repayment, no reparation for the actions that have happened, and begs Cass to

shoot him, “‘do it, man,’ he says. ‘Fucking do it already. I don’t deserve to— *Just do it!* Nobody will even know, nobody will even miss me, man! You’re the only one who would, even’” (236). Gabe’s willingness to sacrifice his life as partial repayment is twofold. On the one hand, he is able to look past the violence and emotions that have clouded both of their minds in order to realize what he has done and how heinous the act of murder is. But, on the other, his understanding of the situation is still limited to a violent solution, another murder that would again scar Cass forever. Hauntingly complicated, but still far too simple are the reactions of violence in this moment.

As Cass aims the gun at his friend, Gabe begins to sing what he calls his death song. Through his anger, Cass yells at Gabe that it is made up, not connected to anything real, and even though he holds the “power” in this moment with the gun, he is still unable to pull the trigger because the two are emotionally connected. During this, both he and Gabe are crying, shattering the stereotypes that men do not cry and that Indigenous men are always stoic, yet Elk Head Woman’s manipulation of the two is not finished. Seeing something appear behind Gabe, Cass reacts with a jerk, shooting a piece of Gabe’s ear off and firing into the being behind him. Completing yet another circle, Gabe refers to the touch of the bullet as “coup,” each man the other’s enemy in the moment, though neither yet dies (237). Both men see the face of Denorah, Gabe’s daughter, in the white-shirted being that appeared behind the kneeling man. The tension between the two being already frayed, a new violence erupts, a Cain and Abel scene minus the jealousy. Gabe kills Cass with the thermos; the very item that helped spark the conflict is what is used to bring one part of it to a close, circles within circles. After Gabe kills his friend, the weight of what has happened is too much. He has lost each of his friends, it appears that he has lost his daughter at the hands of one of them, and in his pain, Gabe decides to kill himself, to “be

another statistic, [to] make it so the pamphlets are right about Indian suicide rates ... He can go—he can go with Cassidy. Maybe even still catch up to him” (241-42). Once more, reality steps into the fictional. According to the National Indian Council on Aging, “The U.S. suicide rate is up 33 percent since 1999, but for American Indian and Alaska Native women and men, the increase is even greater: 139 percent and 71 percent, respectively.” Jones’s use of the real to create the pain of the fictional in this text cannot be overlooked.

Before he can fulfill his desire to become another statistic, the figure that he and Cass believed was Denorah is revealed—Nathan in her place and with a gunshot on his lower left side. But Nate leaves, pushing into the horse pen and away from Gabe, leaving the remaining hunter alone to figure out the events of the night, confusion in every question he asks himself. It is now that Elk Head Woman reveals herself, fully. Gabe connects all of the dots, realizing that she was the one manipulating them and asks, ““It was you who did all this, wasn’t it? Lewis too, right? ... The kid saw you, didn’t he?... P-Po’noka [elk], right?”” and she responds, ““Ponokaotokaanaaki’...Elk Head Woman” (247). Even though Gabe begins to understand the situation, his realization of the manipulation leaves out the notion of the men as responsible for their own actions, both on the hunt and in recent events. Where Lewis recognized his and the others’ guilt for firing into the elk herd with abandon, Gabe still does not understand “that this has been a circle, closing,” begun directly from adolescent actions of violent perpetrations that made them “good Indians,” according to Lewis’s thoughts during that fateful moment (247). Elk Head Woman offers him the gun he had set aside, requiring his death. Upon his refusal, she threatens his daughter.

In order to protect his daughter from the consequences of his own misdeeds, he accepts the gun— “He’s not thinking like a hunter right now. He’s thinking like a father”—and extracts a

promise from the entity that she will not go after his child (248). It is here that the stereotypes of masculinity are set aside. At his most vulnerable, after committing atrocious acts of violence, Gabe's desire to protect Denorah far outweighs his own self-preservation. Even with the gun—therefore the ability to produce violent impact—in his hands, he examines the present threat through love and sacrifice, rather than violence and aggression. While it can be argued that sacrifice for one's child is an expected trait for parents, I believe that Gabe's overcoming of the social structure of *violent* protection speaks to the ability of all men to protect through more than physical means. Offering an alternative to Gregory Scofield's recognition of "societal expectations ... in regard to being male and being masculine" having to do with physical ability (Scofield 249), Jones juxtaposes the physical confrontation between Cass and Gabe with Gabe's sacrifice in such a way that it offers redemption for the violent aspects of the masculinity previously on display.

Same Place, New Path

"...he's sliding his right hand sideways, palm down, left to right like this, the old man says. It's the Indian way of saying a thing is over... It's what he would have told his grandson, if he could have." -Stephen Graham Jones, 304¹⁰

The final section of *The Only Good Indians*, "It Came From the Rez," besides culminating the novel, functions to bring the events of the novel full circle. This section is distinct from the others in that its primary focus is upon Gabe's daughter, Denorah and Elk Head Woman, with minimal interaction with male figures of the novel. While the novel includes this section to bring the original four protagonists' story to a close, it also serves to open a future for

¹⁰ This gesture is also Plains Sign Language for "good." While used in the text to mean "it is over," the gesture is not limited to only this.

the remaining characters that still live. As Elk Head Woman engages Denorah on the backyard basketball court at Cassidy's place and subsequently stalks her with the intent of killing Gabe's "calf" as she did Lewis's unborn child in the womb of Peta, the sins of Denorah's father and his friends creep ever closer to being laid upon her.

As Elk Head Woman steadily follows Denorah, she runs as far and as long as she can. Eventually, when she reaches the end of her ability to flee, she accepts that death has finally come, "You hurt and you hurt, and then you don't. It's soft at the end. Not just the pain, but the world. And at least she'll die with that, she knows: the *world* killing her. Not the Crow. Not Elk Head Woman. Not the thing that got her dad" (299). Before she succumbs to her exhaustion though, she realizes where she is, at the bottom of the same slope where her dad and his friends "blasted all those elk ten years ago" (300). No longer able to run, Denorah is at a point of vulnerability, open to the elements of snow and wind, and the danger of Elk Head Woman's wrath. Yet, just as Denorah's presence in this graveyard of bones acts as a circle coming round for Gabe's story (and by extension Lewis, Cass, and Ricky's as well), Elk Head Woman has also returned to her own moment ten years prior. Elk Head Woman becomes distracted by the hole in the ground where Lewis had buried her calf those years past. As the calf is unearthed and brought back to its mother, Denny Pease, the game warden who caught the group after their elk slaughter and Denorah's "new dad," arrives with rifle in hand. His two warning shots make it clear that he is willing and able to commit the same violence as Gabe and the others had. However, when Denorah stands with Elk Head Woman in the place where her father's sins were committed, she realizes that "it can stop ... it *has* to stop ... she can see her real dad dead in that burned-down sweat lodge ... and she hates that he's dead, she loved him, she *is* him in every

way that counts, but her new dad shooting the elk beside her isn't going to bring him back ... he'll [Gabe] still be there in her reckless smile. Because nobody can kill that" (303).

The idea that nobody can kill the aspects of her father that are within her speak to the capacity for traits, specifically masculine in this case, to be passed from one generation to the next. Just as Neesh attempted to bring the four protagonists back from their antics and moments of counting coup upon various enemies, just as Victor Yellow Tail died trying to bring his son back from the same potential for death, Gabe, for the faults he may have had—drinking, not fully dependable, and indeed violent—also passed on his love that fills Denorah's spirit and gives her something to strive for. The "reckless smile" that reminds her of her father is important because it allows Denorah to recognize that her father *did* care about her, and the things he passed on to her allow her to forge her own path. The recognition of the next generations forging their own way based on what they have learned from their fathers and grandfathers is something that Gregory Scofield discusses with Sam McKegney in "A Liberation Through Claiming: A Conversation with Gregory Scofield." Although in this particular moment of the discussion, Scofield is speaking about his and his friends male experience, I believe that the following notion can be applied to what Denorah has realized as well: "There is solidarity in knowing that we can transcend those places, and that we can do them as strong, healthy, kind, brilliant men. That we can forge ahead, and ... not be limited by what our fathers were limited by and not be limited by what our grandfathers were limited by. And the same thing can be said to be true with the women in our lives" (Scofield 217). Denorah's realization, coupled with Denny's position as a firm but understanding masculine role model, creates a liberation within her that recognizes the potential for greater things, not being weighed down by the entanglements that her father faced.

Denny's points of masculinity are muted as he is not a primary protagonist that we follow. Importantly though, his presence depicts the potential for the same male violence that has occurred throughout the novel. Although he can be seen as "just another hunter" on the hill, he is willing to listen to Denorah's pleas for the ordeal to be over, by extension recognizing that the violence that has been prevalent thus far fixed none of the problem and that a new solution was required, one without violence. In this section the reasoning behind the title becomes clear. Historically, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" was used with the intention of painting Indigenous Americans with a broad brush, that the white settlers were better off if Native peoples no longer existed. Furthered by concepts such as "Kill the Indian, Save the Man" at boarding schools¹¹ established all over the Americas, the stereotypical concept of Native Americans as a whole, but more specifically Native men, as a savage danger, capable of only violence took root. Although the men in *The Only Good Indians* do participate in violent actions, I do not believe that Jones is presenting the men as capable of *only* violence. Each man's emotional response, vulnerability, and yes, their violence all work together to show the sheer humanity of each character, thereby subverting that settler-colonial stereotype. Jones's use of the stereotypical points out the dangers men can face when becoming too entangled in societal expectations of what it means to be a man. The final scenes of a masculinity that is capable of violence but is tempered with thought and reason presents, "not the end of the trail ... [but] the beginning" of one (305).

¹¹ "[Schools were across what is now referred to as] Canada and the United States, with "boarding schools" referring to the experiences of American Indians and "residential schools" referring to the experiences of First Nations people (Wieser, 53).

Conclusion

Although *The Only Good Indians* works with stereotypes typically applied to Native men by settler-colonial mentalities in society, I believe that men of all cultures can connect in some way to the dilemmas of masculinity that the characters face. We continue to see men who are unable to reach a point of vulnerability just as Sam McKegney and Daniel Heath Justice discuss in their roundtable. We continue to see men opt to participate in violence rather than gentleness. The internalization that men are somehow “lesser” if we engage on an emotional level has become so entrenched that to see emotions as a point of strength, as representative of our humanity, is a lesson typically rejected out of hand, yet a lesson we must still learn. As I work through this thesis, I have also been asked to help babysit my six-month-old niece. And as she cries, I am constantly reminded that no amount of physical muscle and no amount of violent reaction can fix the problem for her. Instead, I have to look past the initial reaction that I think of when it comes to protecting my family from harm. I have to look at being vulnerable, gentle, a safe place for *her* to feel secure. And while I am capable of defending her physically, that type of masculinity is not what she *needs*. As McKegney says, “it’s difficult to show vulnerability,” but as she quiets because she is safe, I am reminded that difficulties provide a chance to grow (170). I am reminded that being masculine does not equate to being unfeeling, and I am reminded that we as men are capable of more than the violence expected by society in our lives, especially in our expressions of love.

Notes

- 1) Regarding the sweat lodge and the discussion around it, I believe it is important to reiterate my point from the introduction. I have not been granted cultural knowledge of traditional ways and do not intend for this thesis to assume any form of claim to the contrary. The discussion of the sweat lodge in this work revolves *only* around what is included in *The Only Good Indians* and the way that these inclusions impact a discussion of masculine stereotypes.

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