Strands of Identity and Resilience: Unraveling the Experiences of Indigenous Masculinity in Canada Under British Dominion Through the Microhistory of Hair

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Introduction

This paper will examine the British colonial erasure and ensuing Indigenous reclamation of pre-colonial Indigenous masculinity on Turtle Island through the microhistory of hair. Hair is a valuable focal point for the study of Indigenous masculinity as hair carries spiritual and cultural significance for most Indigenous cultures on Turtle Island. Many First Nations view their hair as an extension of the nervous system as well as an intertwining of the masculine and feminine (Powwow Times Admin, 2019). Historically and contemporarily, hair as a physical symbol of Indigenous masculinity was pointedly attacked under the guise of assimilation to British colonial masculinity. From initial European contact to The Indian Act of 1876 and the federal enforcement of residential schools instituted through the approval of the British monarchy, the hair and scalps of Indigenous males have been and continue to be assaulted in a very material way. Contemporarily, Indigenous males, especially young boys, are ridiculed and even attacked for keeping their hair long or braided in the independent Commonwealth of Canada. Precious to Indigenous masculinity, but scrutinized under the European eye, hair is a lens that allows a view into the wider narrative of the attempted colonial erasure of Indigenous masculinity.

There has been a necessary influx of recent academic attention towards the study of Indigenous feminism including The National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Buller et al, 2019). However, little is written on Indigenous masculinity and the experience of Indigenous males in colonial states. It is not the aim of this paper to suggest that Indigenous males are subject to the same dangers and oppressions as Indigenous females; nor is it to compare the colonial assaults between various gendered Indigenous individuals. Instead, this paper attempts to outline the historical sequence of the attempted colonial genocide of Indigenous masculinity and ensuing Indigenous resistance and reclamation of ‘traditional’

masculinity in the area of Turtle Island known contemporarily as Canada of the Commonwealth of Nations. In a broader scope, the chronological study of Indigenous masculinity to the modern day can aid one in understanding the gendered tactics of the British colonial regime in dispossessing Indigenous communities and their various pre-contact conceptions of gender from Turtle Island. The consequences and resulting violence of these gendered tactics spare no gender.

Indigenous Masculinity and Colonial Masculinity

Prior to European contact, the patriarchal regimes of European colonialists were foreign to Turtle Island (Morgensen, 2015). In contrast, a plethora of Indigenous Nations upheld a majority matrilineal framework of kinship and a matriarchal social structure (Cannon, 2019). Such gendered systems of governance have long been documented to encourage, "social balance and the responsibility and power to act" (Cariou, 2015). British forces immediately recognized and feared this collective strength in gendered Indigenous governance and worked extensively to dispose of it (Cariou, 2015). Under Morgensen's framework of colonization as relational, colonial masculinity was created and imposed on its Indigenous counterpart to dispossess and dominate Indigenous masculinity (Cariou, 2015). Put more succinctly, British colonial masculinity in Turtle Island was structured to oppose and dispose of Indigenous masculinity. The most obvious example of colonial masculinity formed in opposition to its Indigenous counterpart is the Western ideology of masculinity as conquering the wilderness which was utilized in the United States by Theodore Roosevelt in the campaign for westward expansion (Slotkin, 1981). This conception of colonization as a righteous quest for white men to subdue Indigenous lands and communities evolves from the British idea of Manifest Destiny, which is intentionally in complete opposition to the Indigenous masculine ideology of nurturing a relationship with the ecosystem (Slotkin, 1981).

Some environmental historians have drawn attention to the linguistic separation between ‘man’ and the feminized ‘Mother Nature’ in contemporary environmental academics (Scharff, 2003). This separation relies on the patriarchal domination of man over woman and subsequently, man over nature. According to Marx, the fourth step of the transformation to capitalist work is “alienation from nature” (Scharff, 2003). Labour being essential to the capitalist colonization of Turtle Island, the imposition of work separated from the environment for the sake of production and consumption upon the majority male working class of early settlers was a strategy to sever colonial masculinity from the land, creating a colonial conception of masculinity which was intentionally the antithesis to Indigenous masculinity. Colonial masculinity was composed to contradict aspects of Indigenous masculinity such as a reverence for the feminine and the environment to eradicate Indigenous masculinity and sovereignty. One expression of Indigenous masculinity that these imperial intentions concentrated upon was the traditional hairstyles of Indigenous men.

Hair as a Sacred Expression of Indigenous Masculinity

One of the first symbols of Indigeneity on which the British colonial regime focused its attack upon Indigenous male bodies was hair. The documentary *Braves With Braids,* directed by members of the Tsuut'ina Nation, showcases various testaments from Tsuut'ina males and mothers on the significance of long and braided hair for Indigenous males (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). In the award-winning film, Tsuut'ina Elder Deanna Starlight recites, “Long ago, they all had long hair and they were proud of their hair” (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). Throughout thousands of Indigenous Nations across Turtle Island, the expression of masculinity through long hair in braids binds the various Indigenous conceptions of masculinity together. The quote by Starlight is not to be misinterpreted as stating that Indigenous males with braids

have vanished. Instead, the quote expresses the connection that braided hairstyles retain to the wearer's ancestors and Indigenous culture. Despite consistent, calculated attacks on this expression of Indigenous masculinity by the colonial regime, many Indigenous males express their resistance by continuing to wear their hair long and in braids in contemporary Canada.

For the film's Tsuut'ina interviewees, Ellery and Tony Starlight, hair is a source of protection and connection (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). Tony Starlight recalled the medicine pouch of Crowfoot, a revered mid-twentieth century Siksika Chief and the Tsuut'ina top knot as cultural examples of hair as sources of protection for Tsuut'ina males (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). Crowfoot stored his sacred medicine pouch in his hair at the crown of his head so the medicines could be shielded by his hair and protected by its sacredness (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). In addition to providing the wearer with protection, the hair of male Tsuut'ina warriors was seen as something to be protected. The Tsuut'ina top knot was worn at the front of a warrior's head so that it could not be taken from behind by an assailant (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). This sacred symbol of masculinity was intently protected in battle.

For Ellery Starlight, hair serves as a literal connection to his roots. He recalls proudly, "My intention was always to have my hair long enough to touch Mother Earth; and, at one point in my life I did have the hair long enough to do that." (Starlight & Starlight, 2022, 11.55). The practice of Tsuut'ina men growing their hair long physically connects them to the land. Similarly, Bruce Starlight shared that the Tsuut'ina word for hair is the same as the word for the brain (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). For Tsuut'ina men, growing one's hair out is a form of extending the connection to one's mind and thereby decreasing their distance from the land. Deanna Starlight expresses that the act of braiding long hair is a way of holding on to this connection, preventing it from being lost (Starlight & Starlight, 2022).

As a Tsuut'ina mother, Deanna Starlight's explanation of braiding as a practice of protecting one's connections to one's spirit and the land is particularly telling (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). Female family members are often responsible for the braiding of male family member's hair (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). Kelly McGillis describes the act of braiding her son's hair, "when I'm braiding his hair I say each strand has a meaning to it, when you grow up to be a man you're going to wear your hair long and you're going to walk with honesty, faith and forgiveness" (Starlight & Starlight, 2022, 14.58). In addition to the physical significance of braided hair, the action of braiding for Kelly McGillis and her son facilitates the transfer of Tsuut'ina teachings and nurtures her son's cultural pride. Ellery Starlight reiterates this maternal facet of braiding in his experience as a Tsuut'ina male. He expresses that, in his experience, most of the Tsuut'ina Nation members wearing braids are men (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). However, he recounts lovingly that he associates female Tsuut'ina members with the braiding and maintaining of the hair of Tsuut'ina men (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). Through this female participation in the maintenance of the hair of Tsuut'ina men, the anti-patriarchal conception of Indigenous masculinity is reinforced.

The sanctity at which Tsuut'ina men's hair is held and the connection it carries to self, culture, and one's ancestors is essential to Tsuut'ina masculinity. Interestingly, the process of braiding Tsuut'ina men's hair reinforces the Indigenous masculine value of holding the feminine in high esteem. This is unmistakably contradictory to the patriarchal conception of post-colonial Western masculinity which Schraff states in her *Seeing Nature Through Gender,* devalues both the female and the feminized environment or 'Mother Nature' (Scharff, 2003). This contradiction of the masculine Indigenous value of revering the feminine within British colonial conceptions of masculinity in Canada occurred alongside the adoption of the Indigenous value of connecting

the feminine to the environment. This patriarchal blending of colonial and Indigenous conceptions of masculinity in Canadian images of masculinity intentionally devalues the environment for being a feminine entity. This is evidence of the strategic crafting of colonial masculinity to oppose and dominate Indigenous conceptions of gender structures and lands.

The crafting of colonial masculinity was an intentional attempt at eradicating Indigenous masculinity and its relation to the environment and the feminine. Due to the physical and symbolic significance of hair to Indigenous masculinity, historical assaults on the hair of Indigenous males to conform to colonial male hair standards such as residential schools were tactical acts aimed at exterminating Indigenous masculinity.

Mi'kmaq Scalp Bounties as a British Attack on Indigenous Masculinity

The initial British imperial efforts to sever Indigenous communities from their masculinity are first exemplified via Cornwallis' violent scalp bounty on the Mi'kmaq population. The infamous bounty was a ghastly literal attack on the heads and hair of the Mi'kmaq community. His 1749 proclamation reads as follows, "by and with the consent and advice of His Majesty's Council, do promise a reward of ten Guineas for every Indian Micmac taken or killed, to be paid upon producing such Savage taken or his scalp (as in the custom of America) if killed to the Officer Commanding at Halifax, Annapolis Royal, or Minas" (Paul, 2000, 110). Cornwallis enacted and rescinded two scalp bounties during his time in Nova Scotia.

Even more hauntingly, Governor General Lawrence's scalp bounty of 1756 remains in legal books, despite persistent protests from Mi'kmaq elders. Lawrence's bloody proclamation, however, specifically targets Mi'kmaq males. The 1756 proclamation reads as follows, "a Reward of Thirty Pounds for every male Indian Prisoner above the Age of Sixteen Years brought in alive or a Scalp of such Male Indian Twenty-five Pounds" (Roache, 2018). While the Peace

and Friendship treaties superseded the 1756 proclamation, the preservation of the legal terms enticing violence against Mi'kmaq men is an unsettling precedent. It is important to note that Nova Scotian scalp bounties were never solely male-gendered; Mi'kmaq women and children were targeted as well. However, Cornwallis attempted to justify his scalp bounty as a response to a Mi'kmaq military attack, issuing and marketing the bounty as a strategic paralyzing of male Mi'kmaq warriors (Paul, n.d.). This illustration of Indigenous males as dangerous and unpredictable menaces to British-Canadian civilization was the genesis of a careful crafting of conceptions of Indigenous males in the new British white settler state.

Unfortunately, the bounties which were placed on the scalps of the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia are only one example of conscious and violent colonial attacks against the heads and hair of Indigenous males with the intention of disposing of Indigenous masculinity. Being an early example, the scalp bounties of Nova Scotia exemplify the formation and growth of the attempted erasure of Indigenous masculinity in the name of British colonization.

Assaults On Indigenous Masculinity & Hair In Canadian Residential Schools

Perhaps the most infamous examples of colonial violence against the hair of Indigenous males in Canada are those of the federally enforced residential schools. Under the Indian Act of 1876 which received Royal assent from the British Crown, Indigenous children were forcibly torn from their homes, families, and ways of life to attend Christian residential schools. Instituted for the forced assimilation of Indigenous children into the colonial culture, thousands of Indigenous children experienced atrocious abuses in the residential school system for twelve decades with the final residential school closure in 1996 (Miller, 2023). Upon the arrival of a child, the first act the staff of residential schools would take was to cut or shave the child's hair (Alphonse et al., 2022). This ritual of abuse against the hair of students in residential schools was

a violent form of colonial assimilation against the youngest generation. In the testimonial of the experience of residential school survivors, “The Witness Blanket”, survivor, Fred Roland described this forceful assimilation concentrated on hair, “That's what a lot of it was, just trying to break you from your way of being” (Alphonse et al., 2022). This psychological abuse described by Roland was horrifically universal.

The male children of the “stolen generation” who were forced into residential schools were subject to the aggressive cutting of their hair into close-cut hairstyles to impose British colonial expressions of masculinity upon the boys (Blais-Billie, n.d.). This state-sanctioned violence against the hair of Indigenous male children assailed Indigenous masculinity and demanded assimilation to colonial masculinity. Roland recounted his memories of this violence, stating,

> “In our cultural teaching, we understood that the only time you ever cut your hair was if your parent or grandparents passed away. And these stories sort of come around from other friends of ours that did return home from residential schools, and that's the thing they would share with them was, ‘You have to cut your hair because your parents don't want you anymore’ or ‘Your parents are actually dead now, so you have to cut your hair’” (Blais-Billie, n.d.).

The systematic assault on Indigenous masculinity through the cutting of Indigenous children's hair at residential schools intentionally wounded Indigenous boys. The surviving boys were not only left without their hair but also with enormous grief and a patriarchal conception of masculinity inflicted upon them by their colonial abusers (Starlight & Starlight, 2022).

In addition to the forced shearing of the hair of Indigenous children in residential schools, children routinely had their scalps and hair brutally scrubbed with toxic chemicals. One such

appalling instance is shared by Grenfell Mission Residential School survivor, Rosalie Webber in "The Final Truth & Reconciliation Commission Report". In the report, she documented that all students at school were barbarically stripped of their hair and belongings. They were then deloused with kerosene upon admission (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2016). Similar horrors were documented to be policy in the Shubenacadie Residential School in Nova Scotia. Survivor Marilyn Simon-Ingram recalled students suffering from chemical burns after having their hair and bodies violently washed with DDT (Gignac, 2015). The cruel use of toxic chemicals on the hair of Indigenous children is identical to the practice of forcibly shaving hair in that it is yet another example of psychological and physical abuse centred on the heads of the Indigenous to attack masculinity. The effects of these inhumane acts which were focused on the hair of Indigenous boys in particular further affected their communities and families.

In the documentary, *Boys With Braids*, Indigenous National Hockey League player, Ethan Bear directly relates the lack of men in his community who wear braids to the experience of the stolen generation in residential schools (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). The young men who survived the experience of residential schools returned home with immeasurable trauma and intense shame (Alphonse et al., 2022). Many resisted forms of Indigenous masculinity such as braided hair as a result of the horrors inflicted upon the heads of male residential school survivors (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). Upon release from the federally inflicted isolation and abuse of residential schools, children brought this trauma back home with them which was subsequently passed on to other Indigenous males intergenerationally. Operating and perpetrating violence against Indigenous children for 120 years, residential schools facilitated the onslaught of roughly five generations of children who carried their trauma to generations of families and communities.

The government-sanctioned abduction of Indigenous children to residential schools in British Canada was an attempt to further dispossess Indigenous communities while instilling colonial values and dominance over Turtle Island. The brute and uniform cutting of the hair of Indigenous boys into short European hairstyles in residential schools is an example of a mass assault on the hair of unwilling Indigenous males under the guise of assimilation. Residential schools intensified the intentional disposal of Indigenous masculinity by the British colonial regime. They imposed colonial expressions of masculinity upon the stolen generation in the place of prohibited Indigenous masculinity. The microhistory of hair in residential schools is a lens for viewing the intricacies of the attempted assassination of Indigenous masculinity in British Canada.

Contemporary Reclamation and Resistance

While harassment or discrimination against the hair of Indigenous males is no longer legally condoned, it continues to be an unfortunate reality for many Indigenous males today. The most common example of this oppression is the bullying of Indigenous boys in schools for wearing their hair long and in braids. When Rafe Vadnais was in the sixth grade at a non-Indigenous school in Calgary, he had his braid cut behind his back by a fellow student (Croteau, J, 2018). Upon his return from school, his mother was quoted as saying, “I cried like there was a death because I saw the look on his face” (Croteau, J, 2018). This kind of harassment recalls painful memories of forced assimilation for Indigenous boys and their families. The overwhelmingly universal experience of Indigenous boys who wear braids being targeted in this way is a repetition of the historical attacks against Indigenous masculinity.

Despite the continuous oppression of long braided hair as an expression of Indigenous masculinity on contemporary Turtle Island, there are numerous examples of Indigenous men

who resist this oppression and reclaim long and braided Indigenous hairstyles. Peter Morin, for example, resists the colonial oppression of Indigenous male hairstyles through performance art (Griffin, K, 2013). The Tahltan artist described his performance "Witnesses" as a form of resistance to the systematic cutting of children's hair in residential schools by stating, "I made a button blanket covered in human hair. I invited the audience members to step up and come along on a journey with me and confront the difficult political histories we live in as members of what we call Canada. I invited them to cut the blanket off my body while I was wearing it" (Griffin, K, 2013). In addition to such artistic forms of resistance which showcase the effects of colonial assaults on Indigenous males, various grassroots organizations such as "Boys With Braids" encourage young Indigenous men to wear their hair long and facilitate positive Indigenous masculinity (Powwow Times Admin, 2019). Such community-led organizations promoting healthy Indigenous masculinity are not only important for Indigenous males surviving current and past oppressions against Indigenous masculinity and hair but also in healing from the violent imposition of colonial masculinity upon Indigenous males and resulting contemporary stereotypes of Indigenous men.

The attempted colonial destruction of Indigenous masculinity and the forced injection of colonial masculinity into Indigenous communities has resulted in dangerous stereotypes and intergenerational trauma for Indigenous males. A prominent facet of this trauma was the patriarchal views of colonial masculinity which were forcefully injected into young Indigenous males. Viewing colonial masculinity as an intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities assists in invalidating contemporary stereotypes of the Indigenous male as dangerous and brings to light the colonial forces which have constructed this modern stereotype (Cariou, 2015).

In the modern colonial regime, Indigenous men are disproportionately criminalized. In 2011, Adult Correctional Statistics in Canada reported that 20% of all incarcerated Canadians were Indigenous males (Innes, 2015). Even more alarmingly, the RCMP released statistics in 2015 stating that 70% of homicides against Indigenous females were committed by Indigenous offenders, 62% of which were committed by intimate partners (Paris, 2015). These statistics unjustly contribute to negative stereotypes of Indigenous males. The statistical increase in femicide in Indigenous communities is a consequence of the imposition of colonial masculinity which devalues women and facilitates violence against them. It is clear that the involuntary adoption of the Western masculine patriarchal view of dominating women is a key instigator of this male-led violence (Paris, 2015). Interestingly, the equivalent yet under-reported statistic is that non-Indigenous communities with colonial conceptions of masculinity have an even higher rate of homicides committed against women by intimate partners with a rate of 74% (Paris, 2015). This comparison of statistics is evidence that the injection of patriarchal colonial masculinity into Indigenous males in residential schools has resulted in the increased domestic violence committed by Indigenous males against Indigenous women which is used to stereotype Indigenous men negatively.

Modern reclamations of Indigenous masculinity are healing ways for Indigenous males to resist the imposition of colonial masculinity and the oppression of Indigenous expressions of masculinity such as braids. By supporting Indigenous boys in expressing healthy Indigenous masculinity through hair and guiding them through the unfortunate stereotypes and traumas that come with being an Indigenous male, organizations like “Boys with Braids” and “Braves Wear Braids” reclaim Indigenous masculinity and resist assimilation to colonial masculinity.

Conclusion

The repetitive attacks against the hair and heads of Indigenous males are oppressions of Indigenous masculinity which begin with initial European contact. The effects of European contact, residential schools, and modern bullying on the hair of Indigenous males is a smaller symbol of this greater attack on Indigenous communities and their conceptions of masculinity. The increase in Indigenous men wearing Western hairstyles following the cultural trauma of residential schools is evidence of the contemporary effect of these concerted efforts against Indigenous masculinity (Starlight & Starlight, 2022). Alternatively, there is also a growing force of modern male Indigenous artists and community collectives reclaiming Indigenous masculinity and resisting the colonial oppression of the hair of Indigenous males by wearing their hair long and braided.

The intergenerational trauma of the colonization of the Indigenous male and his hair has harmed entire communities. The study of the history of Indigenous masculinity can, in itself, aid the study of Indigenous feminism by dismantling the influence of the patriarchal force of colonial masculinity on Indigenous males. This retelling of the history of the violent colonial domination of Indigenous masculinity and contemporary Indigenous resistance through the microhistory of hair seeks to spotlight the invention of colonial masculinity as a violent ploy to dispossess Indigenous masculinity and colonize Indigenous territories. The concentration of this plot against Indigenous masculinity on hair was and is incredibly harmful, as hair is a physical and spiritual form of the self in most Indigenous cultures (Alphonse et al., 2022).

Throughout the timeline of the colonization of Turtle Island, the hair and scalps of Indigenous males have continued to be assaulted, having colonial masculinity imposed upon them. Hair is a sacred symbol of Indigenous masculinity that has been targeted by the colonial

regime. Thus, the microhistory of Indigenous male hair is a way to view the conception, expression, oppression and reclamation of Indigenous masculinity on Turtle Island.

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