

Response Paper #4 “Research Through Imperial Eyes”

**Masculinity and colonialism**

I intend to explore masculinity within my tutorials and final Graduating Project. The concept of traditional masculinity is often associated with belief in a gender binary and normative gender roles. The North American model of hegemonic masculinity is an idealized manhood prescribing a white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and sexually aggressive man. It is in this definition that we recognize colonial attitudes and lack of intersectionality in Western discourse around masculinity. In dissecting the North American model of hegemonic masculinity, we see belonging to the “white” race as a desirable attribute. Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes:

Race, as a category, was linked to human reason and morality, to science, to colonialism and to the rights of citizenship in ways that produced the racialized discourse and racist practices of modernity (45).

Further, belief in a middle-class aligns with colonial ideas of economics as based on monetary value. In many indigenous communities, trade, reciprocity, and gifting comprise the traditional model of economy – pre-colonialism, there was no concept of monetary exchange. As well, belief in heterosexuality as a sexual orientation relies on the belief of differentiation (often hierarchal) between heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, etc. Classification and or organization of sexual orientation, and of gender, does not exist in many indigenous cultures, or there exist three or more genders and various sexual orientations that are integrated into the greater whole without focus on *othering*. For example, two-spirit individuals are recognized and valued in some indigenous cultures. Tuhiwai Smith notes:

Different historical ideas about men and women were enacted through social institutions such as marriage, family life, the class system and ecclesiastic order. These institutions were underpinned by economic systems, notions of property and wealth, and were increasingly legitimated in the West through Judaeo-Christian beliefs. (46)

Current Western ideas about masculinity and of gender distinctions and gender hierarchies are the result of colonial attitudes and are “deeply encoded in Western language.” (Tuhiwai Smith 46) Tuhiwai Smith notes that “it is impossible to speak without using this language, and... for indigenous peoples, it is impossible to translate or interpret our societies into English... without making gendered distinctions.” (46) The North American model of hegemonic masculinity is inherently colonial and continues to perpetuate colonial ideals. In focusing on discourse around North American hegemonic masculinity, my tutorials and Graduating Project have the potential to perpetuate colonial power and attitudes. Problematic as well is the Western feminism theoretical framework that I intend to apply to my research process. Tuhiwai Smith writes that Western feminism, “conform[s] to some very fundamental Western European world views, value systems and attitudes towards the Other.” (43) In studying men and masculinity from a historical perspective, my research will be skewed by the experiences and observations of white men, “whose interactions with indigenous ‘societies’ or ‘peoples’ were constructed around their own cultural views of gender and sexuality.” (8) The problems associated with studying masculinity and history can be taken further to note that time – the idea that existence occurs through a lineal process – originates from Western concepts of reasoning. Here we recognize that Western history as a universal, chronological, and totalizing concept is constructed around binary patriarchal categories and is, in fact, not universal.

## **Establishing a dialogue**

Recognizing the inherent colonial attitudes in Western notions of masculinity is pertinent to adjusting my research approach and establishing a dialogue. It will be prudent to my research that I undertake a cross-cultural approach to studying masculinities with emphasis on masculinities as a plural, because there are many socially constructed definitions for being a man. Taking this further, in order for my research to transcend cultural barriers and resonate positively with local indigenous, it would be beneficial to incorporate indigenous perspectives on masculinity. Because much indigenous knowledge is oral, I might establish this dialogue by requesting to approach someone from a local indigenous community and conduct a semi-structured qualitative interview. As well, if I proceed with using art-based methods for my research (as stated in my Answer The Question assignment), I should seek to incorporate indigenous peoples and traditional artworks to create a holistic understanding of masculinity from this perspective. In creating a dialogue where indigenous perspectives are held as equally valid and equally necessary to my research process, I will avoid “research through imperial eyes,” and aid in the quest to change who or what counts as legitimate research. Studying masculinity from a cross-cultural perspective that includes First Nations and other indigenous perspectives will allow for my research to try to supersede colonial ideas that are inherent in both my theoretical frameworks and topic of study. Tuhiwai Smith writes:

Research ‘through imperial eyes’ . . . assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold . . . and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings (56).

It is evident then, that in order for my research process and final Graduating Project to establish a dialogue with the worldview of the native local people or other cultures from elsewhere will require acknowledgment of inherent colonial attitudes, incorporation of different perspectives,

and giving attention to the multiplicity and variety of masculinities, especially pertaining to indigenous constructions of masculinity.

### **Significance**

The importance of recognizing and trying to overcome colonial attitudes and ideas in research was exemplified in a presentation by Lauren Paul Yuxweluptun. Yuxweluptun, a Canadian First Nations artist, describes himself as “a ward of the crown, property, prisoner, guest, a non-human being with no human rights.” Here, Yuxweluptun is referring to the oppression he experiences as a First Nations individual under the Canadian government and the Indian Act. In referring to the colonial attitudes embedded in the history of Canada and elsewhere, Yuxweluptun sarcastically remarked that “nothing is found until the white man finds it.” If one engages in research without acknowledging the colonial attitudes present in the research process, one becomes responsible for the perpetuation of oppressive attitudes towards First Nations and other indigenous cultures. Yuxweluptun recommends that “engaging in a dialogue” and expressing mutual “respect and acknowledgement” would resolve tensions between First Nations and the Other (here, the Canadian government).