

More Than Bodies: Diné Masculinities in Anticolonial Spaces and Embodied Discursive Action

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The article presents interviews with two Diné men, where they describe how they enact and model masculine identities in their anticolonial community organising. The discussions centre on being a cis-hetero Diné man, kinship roles and responsibilities, Diné masculinity and femininity, and what it means to create healthy masculinity as an anticolonial practice. The article shows how they imagine, enact, and model their masculinity to contest colonial technologies that disavow Diné men of their body, kin, and land. And through the anticolonial Diné masculinity they live out, they demonstrate what embodied discursive action looks like in their work and communities. Their masculinity offers hope for a future beyond settler domination where Diné men are once again decorated with possibilities, love, care, and health.

Introduction

Ajooba (care) and 'ayóí 'ó'ó'ní (love) are crucial to Diné kinship expressions and for maintaining beauty and balance with body, kin, and land. I truly learned and felt the power of this years ago in the mid-1990s when Nálí Jeffy—*nálí* is the mutual kinship term between grandchildren and paternal grandparents—showed his sincere love and care with a gift. This was not long after my parents separated, and we went from visiting my Nálí Jeffy and Nálí Rose every weekend to seeing them once a year. Our absence in each other's lives had more to do with distance and limited money than the fallout of my parents' failed marriage. One early, wintery January, we scraped together our meagre funds and made a one-day trip to visit our dad and nálís. We arrived unannounced; with no cell phones you did that kind of thing back then. We rang the doorbell to their rented federally-funded Navajo Housing Authority home and waited for someone to shout *woshdę́ę́* as permission to enter. I was the second or third person to enter—the intervening years make

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specifics fuzzy. But I remember Nálí Jeffy sitting in an old brown, corduroy swivel chair when we walked in. Realising who the visitors were, he jumped out of his chair and rushed at us with arms open, saying, “Nálí! Nálí! Nálí!”

Christmas had just passed, so Nálí Jeffy and Nálí Rose must have felt bad they didn’t have gifts for us. Because what they did next was give us things that belonged to them. Earrings and other jewellery for my sisters. Nálí Jeffy went to his room, and when he returned, he was carrying a black, blue, and grey coloured pullover sweater. He said he bought the sweater for himself but he wanted me to have it because it didn’t fit him. I reluctantly accepted the gift because I knew my Nálí Jeffy’s income was limited to his social security, which he earned from working on the railroad. I felt bad for some time after because the winter was cold, and he would have needed that sweater when he herded sheep. After nearly three decades, I still have the sweater in my closet because it reminds me of my Nálí Jeffy’s love and care.

I open with this story because I return to this moment often when thinking about Diné masculine care and love in everyday life, resistance, and radical kinmaking. Nali Jeffy’s gesture informs my feelings on and expressions of love and care with men in my family and the kin I formed in anticolonial organising. When I began grassroots organising with a group of college students in the early 2000s, we started with questions and actions focused on practicing good kinship with one another, the communities and people we serve, and the land (J. J. Clark, 2023). I met Eric Hardy and Brandon Benallie through community organising. This essay’s focal point is two separate conversations with these Diné men that happened in late November 2017. I spoke with Hardy and Benallie to understand how their anticolonial commitments shape the ways they think about and enact healthy masculinities that aim to destroy and move beyond settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. Through my kinship with Hardy and Benallie, I observed how fierce love and care shaped their relationships. As much as care and love are expressed and received as a feeling between loved ones (like in my experience with Nálí Jeffy), they connect us back to our bodies, emotions, communities, and land in radical spaces and kinmaking, operating to counter colonial logics that deprive of the same.

In their anticolonial action and social lives, Hardy and Benallie persistently ask, “What does it mean to be a healthy Diné man?” Prompted by my questions, they discuss how their daily actions seek to end oppressive logics and structures that sustain gendered and racialized violence against Indigenous peoples. Their responses touch upon Diné lifeways, kinship, protection, and action. Their thoughtful remarks on a healthy Diné masculinity lead to more questions: What does it mean to be a Diné man in anticolonial resistance? How do Indigenous men accomplice Indigenous women in ending heteropatriarchy? What does masculine love and care in anticolonial struggle look like? How do Indigenous men recover emotion in

anticolonial struggle and their daily lives? How do Diné men embrace the inherent masculine and feminine qualities that all Diné people are endowed with?

My focus on Diné men in anticolonial spaces extends from my engagement with Lloyd L. Lee's *Diné Masculinities: Conceptualizations and Reflections*. Lee's (2013) study asks, "How are Diné masculinities defined?" and "How has colonization altered Diné masculinities?" (p. 3). He presents masculinities within a Diné cultural context and "documents the impact colonization has had on Diné men" (Lee, 2013, p. 2). Lee's study moves Diné people away from entrenched essentialist ideas of what it means to be a Diné man, showing in interviewee responses that no single definition of Diné masculinity exists. Rather, interviewees define themselves based on their complementary roles with their partners, their role in their families, their education, their occupation, their kindness, and many other things. My article continues this conversation of expanding and diversifying Diné masculinities by looking at the distinct category of men in anticolonial spaces. As such, this is an exploratory look at how some Diné men imagine and enact their masculinity in a Diné cultural and political context.

Hardy and Benallie begin with a theoretical and experiential understanding that colonialism and heteropatriarchy sever Indigenous men from body, kin, and land. Here, I find Sam McKegney's (2013) work in "'pain, pleasure, shame. Shame.': Masculine Embodiment, Kinship, and Indigenous Reterritorialization" useful insofar that he describes "the coerced alienation of Indigenous men from their own bodies by colonial technologies such as residential schooling" (p. 13). For McKegney (2013), the coerced alienation of the Indigenous body is not a happenstance byproduct of dispossession but, instead, it "lay[s] at the very core" (p. 13) of settler nation-state formation. We must look at how Diné men live their daily lives, attending to how the implements of colonization structured and continue to structure relationships with body, kin, and land. The day-to-day performance of masculinity for Indigenous men is a perpetual cycle of reifying hegemonic masculinities while simultaneously making and remaking masculine identities (Tengan, 2008). That is, even as the men I interview question colonial masculinity and persistently labor to make Diné masculinities anew, it always occurs in and alongside hegemonic formations (Denetdale, 2006, 2009). Yet, in their thoughtful responses, Hardy and Benallie articulate how they undertake this difficult and tangled work to imagine and practice masculinity attuned to Diné ideas of balance, complementarity, and wellness.

Like McKegney, I take up Ty P. Kāwika Tengan's (2008) "embodied discursive action" to understand how these Diné men's thoughts and actions are an "active signification, enactment, and production of identities through bodily movements and engagements" (p. 17). McKegney (2013), writing about the young Cree men who comprise the Residential School Walkers,

explains that “these men strive to enact, embody, and model non-dominative yet empowered subjectivities as Cree men” (p. 27). In Hardy’s and Benallie’s responses, I examine how their bodily movements and engagements contest colonial masculinity and technologies. And I put forth that those movements and engagements enact, embody, and model non-dominative yet empowered subjectivities as Diné men. This can be seen, for example, in how they explain what it means to live as a good relative in our families, in resistance, with the land, and while being a guest in other people’s lands. They offer that these must be undergirded by connection, care, safety, and beauty.

Lastly, this essay is about the ways Diné men are racialised and gendered “*only* as bodies” who are then made to disavow “the body through shame” (McKegney, 2013, p. 23). I started to ask critical questions about Diné men, masculinities, emotion, and the body after reading Brendan Hokowhitu’s (2004) brilliant essay “Tackling Māori Masculinity.” Like Hokowhitu’s discussion of tāne men, I became concerned with representations of Diné men as violent, physical, and hypermasculine. Contrary to these discursive processes, I experienced the care, love, and intelligence of Diné men. Despite the colonial manufacturing of Diné men as bodily voids, I know that beautiful expressions of Diné masculine identities exist and represent wonderful possibilities that colonisers disappeared. In the following pages, I present my discussion with two men whose care and love I witnessed in our shared anticolonial struggles. As a beneficiary of their will to love and care as kin and comrades, I can hope for and envision the possibilities of Diné masculinities that have care, love, gentleness, intelligence, and protection at their core.

Story as Theory and Methodology

Eric Hardy (Diné) and Brandon Benallie (Diné/Hopi) are cis-hetero men who have spent most of their adult lives working toward Diné liberation. Eric Hardy was born in 1979 in Tucson, Arizona, and grew up in the Navajo Nation for a few years before his family relocated to Phoenix, Arizona. As an adult living in the Phoenix metropolitan area, Hardy became involved with several community-based, decolonial groups over the years. Brandon Benallie, also born in 1979, was raised in the Navajo Nation. Later, he spent time away from the nation for school and work before he returned to work and live in Window Rock, Arizona, the Navajo Nation capital. Benallie, his partner Radmilla Cody (former Miss Navajo Nation, Grammy-nominated musician, and advocate against domestic violence), and others in the community started the K’é Infoshop, an anarchist and anarcho-communist Diné collective. Since the K’é Infoshop was founded, they have fed unsheltered relatives, hosted drag shows, and led vital community support during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns (Joe, 2023; Nowell, 2020).

Hardy's and Benallie's responses in this essay were obtained through interview-style settings, but I view our conversations as the culmination of nearly two decades worth of observation and discussion about Diné and Indigenous decolonization. I met Hardy and Benallie through Council Advocating an Indigenous Manifesto (CAIM). In *From the Skin: Defending Indigenous Nations Using Theory and Praxis*, I write about CAIM, a decolonial student organization that transformed into a Diné-based resurgence collective. The group was dedicated to "striving for justice and peace, with the hope of restoring righteousness to the people, to the land, and to all our relations" (J. J. Clark, 2023, p. 192). We, along with our many comrades, envisioned and discussed what Diné liberation looks like, and we acted on these ideas through protests, marches, kinship-making, and other actions. My close relationship with and trust in these men is why I reached out to them when questions arose from my gender and sexuality research.

While the interview structure aligns with ethnographic methods, I do not view my method as such. Rather, I see our conversation and this essay as an ongoing community- and kinship-making process that began the moment our Diné people started telling stories about our existence. For Diné, our words had and have the potential to make and unmake worlds. When we recount our emergence or we tell stories about our present conditions, it is always a process of understanding our existence in relation to our past and future. In this way, the stories and knowledge that Hardy and Benallie share are, as Charlotte Coté (2022) writes, a way "to center our voices and positions our bodies as libraries of cultural knowledge passed down from generations of ancestors and kept alive through the telling, sharing, experiencing, and remembering" (p. 6). That is, our stories are and continue to be about how we make sense of our complex and ever-changing world.

In other work, I develop bundling as a practice and theory to explain how Diné people use storytelling to document and make sense of our experiences across time and worlds. When accessing a bundle, "we bring good intention, heart, and mind to the unpacking and unrolling, and we give each item special attention and consideration as we spread out the contents. In assessing the contents of a bundle, sometimes items are removed to be gifted or used for some other purpose. We might add items to replenish the bundle or to accommodate changed or new circumstances" (J. Clark, 2021, p. 156). Storytelling as a method, like bundling, is a process of unpacking and unrolling the many aspects of our existence as Diné people. By positioning the interviewees' voices and bodies as libraries, their experiences and stories allow us to pay attention to and consider how Diné people conceive of and practice masculinities. While Hardy and Benallie only represent two voices of many others working in anticolonial spaces, their stories give insight into the contents of our Diné masculinity bundle. In my analysis, I give special attention to their responses by engaging other Indigenous Studies scholars so as to replenish our bundle, allowing me to account for the changed

circumstance that is colonization. Storytelling, as I use it here, is a process of assessing the contents of masculinity refracted through colonization, deciding what causes harm, and then replenishing the bundle. This process of replenishing demands that Diné people apply the analytics of Critical Indigenous Studies, as I do here.

After completing the interviews, I knew wherever the findings were published that I would present their responses as lengthy quotes. Anything short of what I share below would have decentred their voices and the *bodies as libraries* would be lifeless. And words without life are words that lack the power to mold the world. While most of our conversations were free-flowing, I made sure they responded to the same questions. I conducted the interview with Hardy in person and the interview with Benallie over the phone. In the following sections, I offer a thematic title with a brief introductory paragraph to the questions, followed by their responses, and a short closing analysis.

Kinship Practices and Responsibilities

I began our conversations with broad questions so Hardy and Benallie could establish their understanding of kinship and good relations in a Diné sociopolitical context. In their responses, they emphasized the need to act as good relatives as determined by k'é, the Diné relational system that guides all relationships in the cosmos (for more on k'é, see Austin, 2009; F. Clark, 2009; King et al., 2021; Parsons-Yazzie & Speas, 2007). Accordingly, their ideas and practices of good kinship extend to human persons, land, and other-than-human beings. Their views of kinship provide a framework to chart the effects of colonization (e.g., disavowal of the body) and serve as an accountability system for naming and calling out oppressive acts that disrupt healthy relationships in the community.

What does it mean to be a Diné man?

Eric Hardy (EH): When I think of that, especially in activist work, it is undergirded by conversation[s] of being a good relative....When it comes to care, it's about being a good relative and being that person who can display those good caring characteristics. For me, it's different from what I grew up with. So, part of the conversation is looking at the ways some of our family members were absent. For example, the men in my family were not there because they got lost in alcoholism. I had to find an alternate image of a healthy Diné man. Knowing how colonialism works and finding a space in my family to be that person who is aware of how colonization works and impacts my family....Being a Diné man is about creating spaces for our families so they feel safe, comfortable, and willing to share emotions.

Brandon Benallie (BB): For me, a Diné man is being a good relative to all—not just to women—the mountains, the rivers, and to all relatives above and below the surface. Being a good relative means holding people accountable for behaviors that upset hózhó. And, to me, what can be considered a masculine feature of being Diné is being hashké. And hashké isn't monopolized by any gender. It goes across the entire spectrum of gender because we need our fierceness to affirm hózhó. When someone is upsetting hózhó, when someone is actively being a bad relative then hashké, that masculinity, is there to put that person back in place. And to make them accountable through k'é. What it means to be a good relative—and it doesn't mean to be passive—is not letting someone continue being a bad relative.

Hardy's response offers insight into his thinking on being a good relative, which began with his recognition that such a model was absent from his life. The reason it was absent is because colonial technologies facilitated the condition in which male bodies were emptied and dismembered from their families. He sought this model elsewhere because his family did not have male examples. Turtle clan member of the Mohawk Nation Janice C. Hill Kanonhsyonni (2014), in *Where are the men?*, discusses this absence, saying "I can't teach my son to be a man because there's things that I don't know and never will know and choose not to know because it's not my responsibility" (p. 17). Through his kinship with other men he respects, Hardy formed healthier ideas of how to be a good relative to his family. This includes the responsibility of ensuring his family is "safe, comfortable, and willing to share emotion."

Benallie speaks to the same topic of being a good relative but frames his thinking in the context of hózhó, the Diné philosophy and practice of striving to maintain beauty and balance (see Austin, 2009; Keovorabouth, 2021; Lee, 2004 for more detail). Benallie takes it a step further by adding that it is part of Diné masculine identity to "correct" behaviours that upset hózhó. Without hashké—the quality and philosophy of fierceness and discipline—one would not have the ability and protocol to restore hózhó when imbalance and violence threaten community stability and wellness.

In their responses, Hardy and Benallie consider the changed nature of Diné masculinities and the imposition of colonial masculinity. Part of being a cis-hetero Diné man for them is forming and understanding kinship and undertaking the responsibility to make them meaningful and healthy. Being a good relative means working toward goodness in their relationships, which requires understanding the self and reflecting upon one's actions. One cannot become a good relative without assessing the self and the self in relation to kin and community. Undergoing such critical and reflective processes positions them to act responsibly within their communities.

In the context of k'é, what are your roles and responsibilities?

EH: Part of k'é, for me, is always the underlying idea of being a good relative. Taking care of your relatives through kinship responsibilities, which means being a good person, not being judgmental or making people feel less than or excluded because they are who they are. When I think of k'é, there's also connection to land. It's not just only the land within the Four Sacred Mountains but the land in general, so that, in the context of being here in Phoenix (O'odham territory), part of k'é is understanding the land issues here....I always look at how k'é could work in the Phoenix area that's respectful to the people here and engages with them in a respectful way.

BB: We are all born with unique qualities. We are not a perfect blueprint of the Holy People. We are all born with flaws and strengths, and as Diné we celebrate and encourage those flaws to strengthen our collective self-determination and our way of life. And some of us are more hashké, some of us are more hózhó, and some of us have both of those qualities. My aunties and grandmas in Black Mesa told me my responsibilities through k'é are not just human-to-human or clan relative-to-clan relative. It's my responsibility through k'é to maintain good relations with all, and to also protect and affirm all that it takes to maintain good relations. Being hózhó is living a good way and to protect and defend a way of good living or lifeways. The way I was raised, if I see someone abusing or oppressing someone or brutalizing someone based on their gender [then my responsibility] is to stand up and defend that person if that person isn't able to defend themselves.

For Hardy, acting as a good relative while residing in the Phoenix metropolitan area means that he has to form caring and meaningful relationships with the original peoples. He must be aware of and take part in local struggles. Responsible kinship is an ethic that one carries with them in and beyond Diné territory. The approach is anticolonial in that kinship informs his place as an outsider on other Indigenous peoples' lands. Rather than adding to the throngs of people who only take from the land and the people, he ensures that his kinship responsibilities benefit local Indigenous peoples. Diné masculinities are not only about being a good Diné person to Diné people and homelands but also require that we act responsibly toward other Indigenous peoples by taking up their struggles.

For Benallie, the roles and responsibilities depend on the qualities that individuals are born with. He shares that his understanding of kinship tells us we must encourage and celebrate our differences because those differences make us diverse and beautiful people working under a heightened sense

of care and love. To undertake the responsibility of defending and caring for people of difference is fierce love. This anticolonial practice connects individuals to the body, kin, and land they were forcefully alienated from. Benallie shares sentiments similar to Hardy's about extending the idea of k'é to include those outside our immediate relatives. Good kinship requires that he intervene in situations of oppression that might occur outside his immediate family. This protection can manifest in a number of ways, and it can become physical if the situation requires this intervention.

To practice good kinship as Diné men, we must be aware of our family's well-being and carry our kinship ethics and responsibilities beyond our families and homelands. We have to intervene in oppressive relationships and actions to root out violent, toxic, destructive behaviours in ourselves, our families, and the community. One must make oneself available to the people and other nations if hózhó is to be attained and maintained.

Contesting Hypermasculinity and Embracing the Feminine

Growing up, I often heard from my mom, aunts, and uncles, "Hamá dóó hazhé'é bit'íís bee hazhdit'é." The literal translation is that we are made of our mother's and father's body. The philosophical underpinning of the statement conveys that our parents' hopes, aspirations, and life force adorn our bodies. They dress us with the knowledge and responsibilities of coming from a people who are from somewhere. They gift us personalities and characteristics. And with these many adornments, we each move about the world with the feminine and masculine force of our mother and father, and their mother and father before them. We are never alone because the beautiful array of people who make us are always with and within us (for more on Diné conceptions of feminine and masculine energies, see Keovorabouth, 2021; Lee, 2015). With this Diné philosophical perspective in mind, I asked:

Diné people believe that all animate and inanimate beings are made of feminine and masculine energies. How has this knowledge influenced your ideas of masculinity? If at all.

EH: I'm going to reference bell hooks' *The Will to Change*. I didn't really understand [the feminine] part of myself until I read that book. In the book, she talks about how we learn toxic masculinity....Going to school and the influence of my father and uncles, I had to create this other image of myself that fit their ideas of what a man should be to be accepted among them. I realized reading bell hooks that when I was younger I always needed to be this other person, this other masculine person who was hypermasculine—that was strong, stoic, in power, and in control. In myself, I've always felt like I was aware of my feminine side and masculine side, but I had to make the choice to make the masculine side more prominent

and more in power....And it also depends on how we define feminine. For me, I don't know if this is fair to say, but being more vulnerable and allowing emotion to be expressed and felt. Letting myself feel the happy and sad moments, and allowing myself to feel the hurt and the pains when it comes to family and caring. Once I allowed myself to feel these things, I realized I don't need to be the tough person anymore. But, I can be a flawed masculine Diné man and still help.

BB: For me, to embrace my femininity is not to be ashamed of it. If I'm ashamed of my femme qualities, then I am ashamed of those who exhibit femme qualities. And that's not being hózhó. What I mean by femme qualities is that while they can be labeled as femme because they are typically taken under the roles of a cis-gendered woman it is still subject to a binary system, but it means something different in a Diné context. But femme qualities for Diné people are being compassionate, empathizing, showing emotion, and crying. Talking about my emotions can be considered a femme quality. Saying how I actually feel can be considered a femme quality. But for Diné people, we weren't always ashamed of that. We were direct and open about our feelings, our emotions, our pains, and our thoughts. Unfortunately, those qualities have been gendered as femme qualities and forced into the binary gender system. Now these qualities are considered cis-hetero women qualities.

Hardy and Benallie discuss the dynamic between perceptions of femininity for men, and the active construction of hypermasculine identities that minimise or eliminate the qualities and adornments considered femme. Hardy distinctly recalls having to change his ideas and behaviours to meet the expectations of others. And, while he started out with a diverse idea of masculine identity, he was expected to perform a role that caused him to suppress the more dynamic perspective and personality that he was born with. For him, the disciplining happened at home and school. Historically speaking, school systems were instrumental in eradicating undesirable behaviour, ideas, and bodies in the settler order. School and family institutions can work together to maintain cis-heteronormative orders.

Benallie mentions the shame created around these inherent qualities. He astutely observes that the shame of those qualities within himself forces him to shame femme persons. To feel ashamed of our femme qualities is to be ashamed of others with the same quality. The inward and outward regulation of behaviors and qualities show the regulative operations of shaming. Or, as McKegney (2013) writes of residential schools, the "violent inculcation of shame was the primary tool in this process of social engineering, and the conscription of Indigenous men into a Western regime of misogyny and

related violence against women have been two of its most damaging and protracted effects” (p. 19). The individual becomes both the disciplined and the discipliner through feelings and acts of shame and shaming. But also functioning here is the shame of the self, the self that is femme and that we inherit from our mothers and the lands. To disavow these aspects of our identities is to do the work of colonisation because we sever those aspects of ourselves and those important ties to our kin and land.

In both instances, we can see the attack on the feminine and the socialisation toward masculine identities that disallow emotions, thoughts, and actions perceived as femme. Both Hardy and Benallie show us that the disciplining of femme qualities in men leads to shame toward others, like male relatives who code as femme. The disciplining serves to align Diné men with colonial masculinities and for them to enforce cis-heteropatriarchal norms on relatives and the community. That is, they are disciplined so that they can discipline.

When I think about the disavowal of the body and coerced alienation, I come back to the ways colonial technologies facilitate the disavowal of the femme within all existence and impose a rigid heteropatriarchal masculine image. The idea that men must be proper, strong, resolute, and emotionless is challenged with a return to Diné notions of personhood. Diné personhood asserts that all people are born with qualities gifted to us by our mothers and fathers. Hardy and Benallie discuss how this framework helps them to discover and embrace qualities typically assigned to the feminine. And, in embracing their femme qualities, they had to challenge the patriarchal behaviors and influences in their lives. The Diné conception of masculine and feminine energies allows them to reconcile aspects of their identities that patriarchal rule coercively alienates. Both explore ideas of femininity’s meanings but are cautious about replicating oppressive binary systems in their explanations.

Taking A Step Back and Holding Other Men Accountable

My initial questions about Diné masculinities pushed me to think about the men in my life whom I respected and looked to for guidance and support. Hardy and Benallie came to mind because of our ongoing conversations about liberation, resistance, Dinéness, and responsibilities. As I shared in the opening, I met Hardy and Benallie through community organising and defense of Diné life. In these spaces, I witnessed and felt the power of their care and love. Much like my experiences with Nali Jeffy, I learned that care and love were as much feelings as they are actions. When I asked Hardy and Benallie about their roles in anticolonial work, the topics of protection, support, and care were their main concern. For both, protection is more than being physically present in our families and on the frontlines. They discuss the need for Diné men to step back in resistive spaces so that women take the leadership mantle. Another aspect fostering an environment that is male

dominated was their perspective and experience defending against Diné men who overtake the space or impose a heteropatriarchal dominative presence and approach.

What is the role of Diné men in resistive spaces?

EH: It is still about protecting people, but not in the sense that you are physically powerful and strong enough to protect people. And when it comes to protection, it's not only men that are out there but women too. The different ways that we protect can be more like taking care of each other. Asking everyone how we are doing and getting to a space where people can take care of each other emotionally, spiritually, and physically. And to be able to protect "physically" out on the front lines...Also, as a man in that space, it is to hold other men accountable for their actions and to create spaces for conversations with other men about their toxic behaviors. But, the idea of resistance is also being more comfortable with not having to be at the forefront.

BB: In today's context, it is to recognize that as a cis-hetero male—although I am Indigenous and born in structures of oppression—that just being born as a cis-hetero male offers me privileges that a lot of women and femme people don't have. So to use my privileges as a cis-hetero male, to advocate for women and femme people, to make sure that not only are they understood but they're meaningfully supported and advocated for. And to use my privileges to equal out the roles of leadership, creativity, and intelligence. And to not always take space because I happen to be a male....My role is to support Native women and femme people. And to call out, to confront, and to challenge those who seek to harm them. That includes other Native men.

At the forefront of Hardy's response are ideas of protection, though he carefully discerns that protection does not rely only on physical abilities and strengths. And being "out on the front lines" is not reserved for cis-hetero men. His distinction matters because masculine power and protection in a heteropatriarchal system can and does default to notions of physical strength and ability, where cis-hetero men are perceived as the most effective and viable. Protection, more broadly considered, is about the spiritual, the emotional, and the mental. For Hardy, protection includes "taking care of each other" and asking people how they are doing. Diné men in protective roles, for example, can be about caring for people during marches, runs, and ceremonies. Thinking of oneself as full of possibilities pushes Diné men to exist within the community in more dynamic ways that insist on more than the physical and being physically present. Prioritising family and community

wellness and health demands that Diné masculine presence embody our entire range of human adornments and possibilities, including care and critical dialogue.

Benallie begins by recognising that “being born as a cis-hetero male offers [him] privileges that a lot of women and femme people don’t have.” Although he’s also born into oppression, he holds privileges that come with responsibilities to “confront,” “call out,” and “challenge” those harmful individuals and violent structures. Benallie’s perspective on the relationship between structure, body, and responsibility arises from his knowledge of the cis-heteropatriarchal system’s daily oppressive machinations. In a previous response and other parts of our conversation not shared here, Benallie refers to Diné teachings he received from aunties and grandmas in Black Mesa. He shares that they taught him about the qualities and abilities that Diné men had before colonisers invaded our lands, which were of equal and complementary importance to women and femme people in our society. In my understanding, Benallie’s thinking and actions as a cis-hetero Diné man allow him to recognise the ways colonial technologies facilitate Diné men’s alienation from their responsibilities to body, kin, and land. These qualities and abilities include support, creativity, intelligence, and hashké (i.e., confrontation and challenging).

Hardy and Benallie recognise that, as cis-hetero Diné men, heteropatriarchy grants them some privileges that they must leverage to support and advocate for Diné women and femme individuals. Being a responsible Diné man extends beyond protecting only loved ones. It is also to consciously counteract toxic behaviours that men carry because of the heteropatriarchal regime. They have to persistently speak up and defend the community and relatives against those who dominate and abuse. If one takes their protection responsibilities seriously, then it is incumbent upon them to call out those behaviours detrimental to the community. Their notions of Diné masculinity require that they carry this ethical responsibility throughout their lived experiences. Lee, writing on the role of men in their families, asserts that “some Diné men will need to learn how to be responsible to their family and respectful toward Diné women, and learn how to communicate effectively with their wife, girlfriend, or partner” (Lee, 2015, p. 223). I would add that Hardy and Benallie extend this line of reasoning by showing how all Diné men must learn to be responsible to all femme relatives. Rather than living out their lives only as bodies, they consciously try to reclaim (or adorn) their bodily selves and maintain accountability to femme kin. Hardy and Benallie take on these responsibilities because they know it is not up to women and femme individuals to correct Diné men’s behaviours. These are some of the ways they endeavour to act as a responsible Diné man in anticolonial spaces and within their families.

Looking to Others and Living Out Our Qualities

Diné understandings of gender are ever-changing. Such is the case in our emergence narratives when the genders separated and came back together. Or when Changing Woman, an important figure in Diné emergence narratives responsible for molding Diné people from her body, molded the first people from her body and instructed them on how to live in relation to one another (see Keovorabouth, 2021 for more on Changing Woman in the context of gender and sexuality). This was also true when Europeans arrived in our lands and their “understandings of gender were redeployed in colonial encounters with Indigenous peoples” (Morgensen, 2015, p. 40). Under these colonial conditions, they imposed gender and sexuality to control peoples and usurp lands, and they marked specific bodies and persons as worthy of violence and elimination. In our settler colonial present, Diné people continue to make and remake gender and sexuality so that all our people across these spectrums can live safe and healthy lives. Hardy’s and Benallie’s deconstructing and reconstructing of Diné masculinity occurs within this context.

*How are you deconstructing/reconstructing Diné masculinity?
What are your ideas of a healthy masculinity based on?*

EH: I knew that the masculinity my father and uncles embodied wasn’t healthy. The way they used drinking as a mechanism to heal. The way they harmed the women in my family. Their relationship with women was violent. I knew that was unhealthy masculinity. How I developed/created this alternate image was through other men in my family and, broadly, in my life who weren’t doing those types of behaviors....In fact, it was based on respect for women, respect for the self, and understanding the negative consequences of colonization and how it impacts them. One of the other things that I learned from all of them is that the conversation of being tough and strong wasn’t just physical, but it was spiritual, emotional, and conscious.

BB: Well, here’s the thing: I’m born this way. I can’t possibly understand what it means to be a transnative, Native woman, Native femme person, or gay Navajo man. So what it pulls inside of me is a deep sense of justice, a deep sense of commitment to use the qualities I’m born with and exhibit—that happen to be fierce, that happen to be hashké—to create a healthier unit of family, a healthy family for myself, a healthy me, and healthy community....It is not something that is brand new. It is something that we used to have and can have again....Ultimately, I draw from analyzing myself, my

flaws, and my weaknesses, and then empowering my strengths, empowering what I feel allows me to have a good and healthy life.

For Hardy, formative life experiences help shape his perspective of healthy masculinity. He witnessed the men in his life violently abuse women. Because he knew this was wrong, he sought out men whom he thought represented the type of Indigenous male behaviour he preferred. The early understanding that the male mistreatment of women was wrong is key to the outcomes of his experiences. In his adult life, his connection to key individuals helped to construct a healthier image for his Diné male identity. Again, this points to the necessity of the healthy male image being made available to Indigenous boys and men at all stages of life. Of course, this is not to say that there is a singular healthy image of the Diné man.

Benallie offers some perspective on approaching this in a Diné context. He points to a Diné perspective on personhood in which we are all born with the fierceness to develop a strong masculine identity. That fierceness is how we confront the domination that prevails in our communities and nation. Considered against the dominative images that Hardy experienced as a child, Benallie shows us how the masculine energy and power must be directed at oppressive structures rather than our families and communities. Benallie offers us direction on how to proceed as individuals and as a nation. We should harness our masculine and feminine qualities to protect each other and defend against those who would enslave us. As Benallie states, this should be oriented around a sense of justice for ourselves and our people. The sense of seeking justice as an approach for constructing healthy males and societies gives direction as an orienting goal and helps the individual have a critical and analytical approach to how they live out their lives as men.

Hardy shares that he constructed an alternate masculine image to the unhealthy ones he was raised around. While Hardy modelled other men he perceived as having healthy masculinity, Benallie based his masculine identity on Diné qualities he was born with and a sense of justice and commitment to healthier futures. In my view, both offer an example of making empowered subjectivities rooted in kinship networks and formed out of anticolonial obligations and responsibilities. Consequently, they have developed practices to hold themselves and other men accountable while making themselves available for critical feedback and questioning.

Questioning, Reflecting, and Moving Forward

In Hardy and Benallie's responses, men must hold themselves and other men accountable. Both acknowledge the need for Indigenous men to form a critical awareness about the ways patriarchy and toxic masculinity function in our communities and nation. For Hardy, the path forward is continually unearthing the subtle ways patriarchy is maintained in daily life through

critical reflection. For Benallie, it is asking critical questions and dialoguing about these complex social and political institutions. Their practices and questions outline a process of becoming healthy and envisioning a masculine Diné identity that is loving, supportive, critical, and caring.

What is the path forward for Diné masculinities? What does it look like in the future?

EH: For me, being more aware of how deeply embedded patriarchy is and how toxic masculinity is embedded in our daily activities. Not only in what we do but how we think about things....Especially with what has been happening nationally with the sexual abuse cases coming to light. All these conversations, I think more people are becoming aware of the ways patriarchy and toxic masculinity are present every day and people are knowing about it and people are asking questions....In terms of myself and those people around me, I want to continue to learn about what that looks like for me. Understanding how patriarchy and toxic masculinity continue to play out within myself and on a non-native level. It is also about understanding Diné ideas, which would mean looking at cultural ideas and concepts of masculinity. It is about understanding those things on an academic, cultural, and personal level.

BB: A way forward would be for Diné men—those who self-label as hetero men—to meet and have a meaningful discussion. We need to ask ourselves: Are we living in a healthy way? Are our relatives living in a healthy way? Are the women and femme people in our societies able to live good and healthy lives? Are they able to reach their personal potential? And, if not, what is blocking that? What is preventing them from living good and healthy lives? And how do we play a role in preventing that? How do we claim a role in supporting them?

For Hardy, we must be aware of and examine all our daily habits and ideas to root out the “deeply embedded” oppressive systems. Hardy considers the need for this examination within the #MeToo movement that spread across the United States and beyond in 2017, which brought to bear decades of male abuse and violence across film, literature, and academia. The #MeToo movement exposed the many ways men oppress and violate women through toxic and often violent behaviours, revealing to many the silence and domination that helped maintain the problem (Chandra & Erlingsdóttir, 2021; Vogelstein & Stone, 2021). Hardy views this moment as a time to question and seriously consider the ugly truths movement uncovers. In saying, “I want to continue to learn about what that looks like for me,” Hardy puts forth his obligation to understand and question those structures

that facilitate violence against women and how he, a cis-hetero Diné man, must critically assess his social and political location in these discourses and actions. Hardy's critical reflexivity intertwines with his recovery of Diné knowledge to develop healthy conceptions of masculinity and gender. His reflection, critical questioning, and knowledge recovery are embodied practices that return him and his community to healthier relations with self, kin, and land.

The path forward that Benallie articulates is a necessary and realistic gathering where self-identifying Diné men consider questions about healthy living for all our relatives and the barriers that prevent "living good and healthy lives." His questions underscore the current state of (not) living that urges us to contemplate Diné futures wherein all our relatives (human and beyond) can flourish. While the questions are seemingly straightforward, I imagine different notions of healthy living, roles, and responsibilities would dictate a range of responses from a general Diné male audience. Such was the case in Lee's (2013) study where interviewees held overlapping yet distinct ideas of masculinity. Of course, they were not asked about Diné masculinities that contest colonial technologies. On the other hand, Benallie's questions require that Diné men develop a practice and protocol of critical dialogue. In my mind, Benallie's question about healthy living and the barriers that prevent healthy living requires reckoning with and overcoming settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy.

Hardy's and Benallie's stories chart a masculine identity that is imagined within Diné knowledge and enacted to contest colonial masculinities. Their bodily movements and engagements within their communities and families urge them to act as good relatives to all beings and the land. And even as the colonial and heteropatriarchal machinery produce Indigenous men only as bodies, they labour to co-make masculine identities that remember where we've come from but meet the challenge of destroying oppressive structures. The Diné masculinity they imagine, model, and enact hopes for a future beyond settler domination so that our bodies are once again decorated with possibilities, love, care, and health.

The Possibilities of Love and Care

Rex Lee Jim, poet and former Navajo Nation Vice President and Council Delegate, writes about childhood experiences with his grandfather in an essay where he was asked to reflect on writing. He shares the following memory of his grandfather, who was a medicine person, "I remember standing by my grandfather early in the morning. We stood facing east. His patients stood to his left....It was magical for a child of four to hug his grandfather's right leg and see the world come to life with his grandfather's prayer....Before Western schooling, everything was possible because I knew that if I should so desire, I could create my own world through my prayers, prescribed or personal" (Jim, 2000, pp. 230–231). Jim ends the essay with a poem wherein he meditates

on being a man, crying, and the many ways (Diné) men are disallowed from becoming men, creating distance between self, body, land, and people. Jim says he wrote it after his younger brother “died in a car crash involving alcohol,” adding that “We were to become men together” (Jim, 2000, p. 243). In one instance, Jim shares the many possibilities that his grandfather opened for him, and the other experience emphasises how masculine life and possibility are limited and snuffed out. Jim brings to the fore how masculine interpersonal relationships rooted in love and care create possibilities and are endowed with the words and power to create our world anew, should we desire. The words, actions, and emotions of Diné men have the potential to create a world where we can become men together, whole again with kin, land, and body.

I return to the story of Nálí Jeffy because it informs how I live my life as a Diné man, holding love and care before me. The love and care Nálí Jeffy planted that day is the same love and care that enables me to embrace my family. The memory of my Nálí Jeffy guides me when I advise my nephews and offer teachings about being responsible men. And when I hope and imagine the best for and out of Diné men, it comes from the same place. This is why I call Eric and Brandon my brothers. I remember them in my prayers. I wish for good lives for them and their families. And I hold them in my heart because this is how we are supposed to be. This is how we must be to overcome the settler colonial and heteropatriarchal orders that coercively alienate us from our bodies. True and sincere brotherly kinship is why I share their words, urging and hoping for other Diné men to find and put love and care at the core of their masculine identity. This is the only way I know how we return our hearts and minds to our emptied bodies.

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