



# “This is what I heard at Naicatchewenin”: Disrupting embodied settler colonialism

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## Abstract

In this article, I consider how Anishinaabeg stories are tools that disrupt embodied settler colonialism, which is experienced as historical trauma, grief, ill-health, and substance abuse. I explored the question, “how is settler colonialism manifested upon Anishinaabeg women’s bodies?” with eight Anishinaabeg Elders from Naicatchewenin First Nation. The Elders’ stories reveal that as we heal from the effects of colonialism by making changes from within, connect to our ancestral stories of physical strength, and apply them in our everyday practices of healing, we simultaneously disrupt embodied settler colonialism.

**Keywords:** Anishinaabeg women, ancestral stories, historical trauma, colonisation, physical strength, decolonisation.

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participated in my research study. I am privileged to have been guided by knowledge holders in Naicatchewenin First Nation since 2008. Fostering a deep and meaningful relationship over many years, Naicatchewenin First Nation and I continue to work together on a community research project. Together we are leading an innovative community-driven research project that looks to Anishinaabeg *gikendaasowin* (knowledge) of land, language, and ceremony to better understand Indigenous approaches to health and wellness. This reciprocal partnership, in many ways, flourished because of the sharing circle shared in this paper.

## Introduction

Through conducting research to better understand how Indigenous communities might address the increase of chronic disease from Indigenous perspectives, I gained an awareness of how Indigenous women’s bodies can have dual representations: our bodies can be representative of strength and resilience, or ill health and settler colonial erasure. As Indigenous women seek to resolve our varied but similar experiences with the effects of colonialism, we come to understand how strength and resilience manifest in our lives; Indigenous women gain strength of mind, spirit, and emotional fortitude (Mihesuah, 2003; Young & Nadeau, 2005) as we confront the everyday occurrences that seek to

silence us. From challenging racist discourses in daily encounters, speaking out against injustices as activists, or Indigenous women using physical activity to regenerate from the deficit narrative (McGuire-Adams, 2017), Indigenous women embody determination. Through these contentions, Indigenous women become stronger. Yet, Indigenous women who are strong also pose a direct threat to the maintenance of settler colonialism, which fundamentally requires the erasure of Indigenous people generally (Arvin et al., 2013; Veracini, 2011), and Indigenous women specifically (Anderson, 2011).

Indigenous women are intrinsically connected to the land, as shown through our varied yet similar creation stories and through ceremonial practices, which further inform our connection to our first Mother, the Earth (Anderson, 2000, 2011). As a result of Indigenous women's connection to land, which gives us strength, we are seen as credible threats to ongoing settler entitlement to Indigenous territories and are actively targeted for silence, and even death (Anderson, 2011; Smith, 2005). The nearly 1200 missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada is a testament of the logistics of settler colonialism (Anderson, 2011; University of Alberta: Faculty of Arts, 2014), which is also reflective of how Indigenous women's bodies are casualties of genocide (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). The forced erasure of Indigenous women's bodies through assimilatory and genocidal practices is firmly tethered to a gendered settler colonial erasure (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). My reading of Indigenous feminist theory persuasively informed my awareness of the tensions between Indigenous women's exacerbated experiences with ill health and how the physical strength we may gain can specifically disrupt embodied settler colonialism. I share Bourassa et al.'s (2005) synopsis at length to showcase the depth of the situation:

Aboriginal women have lower life expectancy, elevated morbidity rates, and elevated suicide rates in comparison to non-Aboriginal women (Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, 2004). Aboriginal women living on reserves have significantly higher rates of coronary heart

disease, cancer, cerebrovascular disease and other chronic illnesses than non-Aboriginal Canadian women (Waldaram, Herring, and Young, 2000). A significantly greater percentage of Aboriginal women living off reserve, in all age groups, report fair or poor health compared to non-Aboriginal women; 41 per cent of Aboriginal women aged 55-64 reported fair or poor health, compared to 19 per cent of women in the same age group among the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada). In addition, chronic disease disparities are more pronounced for Aboriginal women than Aboriginal men. For example, diseases such as diabetes are more prevalent among Aboriginal women than either the general population or Aboriginal men. (p.1)

Indigenous women experience higher levels of ill health in nearly every category of examination. Viewing our ill health through the lens of settler colonialism, we see that Indigenous peoples' ill health supports our erasure, and this is especially true for Indigenous women, as we are presumed to eventually succumb to diabetes, heart disease, cancer, etc. Settler colonialism becomes and is an internal embodied experience. I address these complex and intersecting discussions in this article.

The purpose of this article is to share what I learned from Naicatchewenin First Nation's Anishinaabeg Elders' stories of embodied settler colonialism and women's physical strength as I explored the question, "how is settler colonialism manifested upon Anishinaabeg women's bodies?" Early in my research on physical activity and decolonisation, I began thinking about how embodied settler colonialism can be or is disrupted—what would happen if Anishinaabeg women mindfully engaged in revitalising the physical strength of our ancestors in our own bodies? As we wilfully strengthen our bodies, which are intrinsically connected to the land and our ancestors, can we simultaneously challenge settler colonialism through our strong bodies? Further, as we connect to our ancestral stories, can we also disrupt how embodied settler colonialism requires our ultimate erasure (Veracini, 2011)? The Elders' stories show that the effects of settler colonialism are related to the experience of historical trauma, grief, ill health, and substance abuse. Additionally, they shared that Anishinaabeg women were physically strong in the past because strength was an active part of

living on the land and taking care of their families. Their stories emphasised healing as we seek to personally decolonise and, further, that our stories of physical strength are important to challenge embodied settler colonialism. Thus, our stories are tools to prevent our erasure.

This article has three main sections. First, I discuss Indigenous feminist theory to show that settler colonialism requires the erasure of Indigenous women, which has lasting embodied effects on Indigenous peoples' health. I also situate historical trauma, grief, and substance abuse within the literature to provide a deeper understanding of embodied settler colonialism. Second, I explain the sharing circle research method I used to interview the Anishinaabeg Elders. Third, I present the stories from Anishinaabeg Elders, which feature their perceptions regarding trauma, grief, healing embodied settler colonialism and women's physical strength; more specifically, the Elders' shared stories of their mothers' and grandmothers' physical strength that was gained land-based activities. I conclude by asserting the stories of women being strong on the land signals a relational accountability to our ancestors; that is, as we hear our ancestral stories, we simultaneously enact a responsibility to learn from them. By enacting such relational accountability to our ancestors, such as the stories from the Naicatchewenin Elders, we address the internal embodiment of settler colonialism.

### Indigenous Feminist Theory

Indigenous feminist theory offers a space for scholars and communities to critically analyse how settler colonialism affects Indigenous women (Suzack, 2015). To this end, Indigenous feminist theorists have focused on understanding how Indigenous women have an inherent connection to land, and they have also sought to uncover how colonisers enact violence against Indigenous women because of this connection (Anderson, 2011). Anderson (2011) provided an example of how this occurs by linking settlers' sense of entitlement to Indigenous land and, by extension, their sense of entitlement to Indigenous women's bodies. She explained, "the conflation on a symbolic level of Canadian identity with settler access to Native women's bodies places real Native women in a situation of constant danger and vulnerability to sexual and

physical violence" (p. 178), with the ultimate purpose being to enact the "violent erasure of Native women altogether" (p. 179). Similarly, Barman (2010) noted that during colonisation, settlers "depicted Indigenous men in terms of their physicality and Indigenous women in terms of their sexuality" (McGuire-Adams, 2020, p. 36).

Colonisers felt the need to show dominance over Indigenous women through forced sex, which also signified the dominance that was taking place on the land, and is rooted in colonial heteropatriarchal ideologies (Anderson, 2011; Finley, 2011). For instance, Finley (2011) draws the connection between enforcing heterosexual domination over women and the conflation to conquest and settlement of stolen lands, which works in tandem with enforcing an open, penetrable domination of bodies and lands. As Dillion (2015) notes, Indigenous women embody new generations of Indigenous people within them that also connects them to their territories and ancestral memories, which is part of the rationale for settler colonialism requiring harm toward Indigenous women.

Therefore, Indigenous women who are strong and resist embodied settler colonialism pose a direct threat to the maintenance of settler colonialism, which fundamentally requires the erasure of Indigenous people generally (Arvin et al., 2013; Veracini, 2013), and Indigenous women specifically (Anderson, 2011; Dillion, 2015; Finley 2011; Simpson, 2016; University of Alberta: Faculty of Arts, 2014).

While Indigenous feminists theorise that Indigenous women are actively targeted for silence, and even death, because of their connection to land, there are far too many examples of this to show it is happening in reality (Anderson, 2011; Simpson, 2016; University of Alberta: Faculty of Arts, 2014). For instance, the nearly 1200 missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada are associated with the logic of settler colonialism (Anderson, 2011; Simpson, 2016; University of Alberta: Faculty of Arts, 2014); as Audra Simpson emphasised, "Native women will be killed by this country, and its people" (University of Alberta: Faculty of Arts, 2014, 46:04). Quite simply, the violent erasure of Indigenous peoples is highly gendered, disproportionately affecting Indigenous women (University of Alberta: Faculty of Arts, 2014).

Simpson (2016) further emboldens the link between the violent erasure of Indigenous women's bodies and the ongoing dispossession and theft of our territories. She explained that our lives as Indigenous women are anomalies because we are meant to disappear by any means necessary (e.g., state mechanisms, murder, etc.). A distressing example of how violence is tethered to settler colonial erasure occurred in Thunder Bay, Ontario. During the 2013 Idle No More Movement, an Anishinaabekwe was abducted and sexually assaulted as a direct settler colonial response to the Movement (University of Alberta: Faculty of Arts, 2014). The examples of violence against Indigenous women are pervasive, as shown by the CBC News ongoing investigation into missing and murdered Indigenous women (CBC News, n.d.), the National Inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' (2019) final report, as well as the colonial violence enacted against the LGBTQ2IA communities (Hunt, 2016). In response to the murder of Loretta Saunders in 2014, Indigenous feminist Leanne Simpson (2014) argued that violence enacted against Indigenous women is not a matter of individual assaults, but "a symptom of settler colonialism, white supremacy and genocide, . . . [and further gender violence and murdered and missing women] are symptoms of the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from our territories" (para. 26). This wilful erasure also finds presence in statistics; while Indigenous women and girls only make up a small fraction of the overall Canadian population, we are eight times more likely to die of homicide when compared to non-Indigenous women (Dhillon, 2015). Indigenous feminist theorists have clearly illustrated that settler colonialism is violent and murderous (Simpson, 2016), and it is also embodied, as seen, for instance, in the ill health, trauma, grief, and substance abuse many Indigenous peoples experience.

### **Embodied Settler Colonialism**

Settler colonialism is a consistent structure that seeks to erase Indigenous peoples in order to secure Indigenous peoples territories (Veracini, 2011). Settler colonialism differs from colonialism in that settlers intend to take the land as their new home, which works in tandem with asserting settler sovereignty on Indigenous lands

(Wolfe, 2006). As the land is Indigenous peoples' territories inscribed with our stories and practices of wellbeing, settler colonialism causes a violent "disruption of Indigenous relationships to land . . . [that] is reasserted each day of occupation" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). Thus, settler colonialism is not finished; it is an ongoing process that seeks to disempower, erase, and assimilate Indigenous peoples into the colonial institutions and systems (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015).

Prior to colonisation, Indigenous peoples had to be physically strong in order to live a healthy life on the land. The forced removal of our bodies from the land is related to the ill health Indigenous peoples' experience; and, Indigenous women in particular experience ill health in nearly every category of examination (Arriagada, 2016; Bourassa et al., 2005). Previous research on Indigenous women's ill-health is contextualised within a historical and socio-economic context and shows that cultural identity and community-based program initiatives as protective factors to ill health (Halseth, 2013; Wilson, 2004). Indigenous women's ill health, however, cannot be separated from the context of settler colonialism (Browne, Smye, & Varcoe 2005; Browne, McDonald, & Elliott, 2009; McGuire-Adams, 2017). Still, further analysis is necessary to understand how our bodies are affected by embodied settler colonialism, in addition to the ill health we may experience.

Viewing our ill health through the lens of settler colonialism, we can see that Indigenous peoples' ill health supports our erasure, and this is especially true for Indigenous women (Bourassa et al. 2005; McGuire-Adams, 2017). Within a settler colonial lens, there is a presumed assumption that as Indigenous peoples, we will eventually succumb to diabetes, heart disease, cancer, etc. Settler colonial erasure does not only happen by external violence (e.g., genocidal tactics and sexualised violence), but becomes an internalised erasure vis-a-vis ill health. Consequently, when Indigenous women die of ill health or chronic diseases, we are also unknowingly fulfilling the logic of settler colonial erasure. Thus, settler colonialism becomes and is an embodied experience.

Embodied settler colonialism also has profound cumulative and intergenerational effects, which is correspondingly discussed in the literature as historical and intergenerational trauma. Brave Heart (1998, 2003) contextualised the historical trauma, grief, ill health, and substance abuse experienced by many Indigenous peoples as effects of colonialism. For instance, she explained that when people succumb to ill health, alcoholism, and other substance abuse, their deaths amplify the trauma and grief Indigenous peoples are already living with due to ongoing traumatic losses. Kirmayer et al. (2014) agreed and concluded that “the traumatic events endured by communities negatively impact on individual lives in ways that result in future problems for their descendants” (p. 307). Thus, as settler colonialism requires our ultimate erasure to secure our territories, internalised and embodied processes of settler colonialism, such as trauma, grief, substance abuse, and ill health, further contributes to our presumed eventual erasure.

As a result of the enduring force of settler colonialism, Indigenous Elders’ knowledge is imperative to identifying resistance strategies to ill health, and for passing down experiential knowledge of wellness gained from local environments (Alani-Verjee et al., 2017; Tobias & Richmond, 2016). Moreover, Varcoe et al.’s (2010) study concluded that First Nations Elders “represent a culturally-relevant resource for health that is currently underused” (p. 154). There is much to learn from the perspectives of Elders regarding our concepts of health and wellbeing (Richmond, 2015). Scholars have also found that Indigenous practices of healing (e.g., returning to the land and uptake of ceremony), coupled with strategies for resilience, can disrupt the collective, cumulative, and inter/transgenerational impacts of colonialism (Hatala et al., 2016; Hartman & Gone, 2014; Kirmayer et al., 2014).

Remembering and connecting with our Indigenous stories is a recognised way to address and heal from embodied settler colonialism (Anderson, 2011; Brave Heart, 2003; Hatala et al., 2016). For instance, Hatala et al. (2016) explored resilience and wellbeing through interviews with Cree Elders, who explained that stories “helped people find meaning amid distressing historical

and contemporary experiences” (p. 1920). Anderson (2011) has shown that stories can help Indigenous girls and young women establish and maintain healthy boundaries. Elsewhere, Anishinaabeg stories are significant when one engages in healing to disrupt embodied settler colonialism. Minor (2013) clarified that storytelling is a “medicinal practice tied to the strength of the earth and helps Indigenous peoples combat the omnipotent horrors of colonialism, and therefore serves as an anti-colonial and liberatory device” (p. 322). Indigenous scholars further emphasise the role our respective Indigenous stories have in disrupting the hegemony of settler colonialism, as our stories are tools to vision decolonisation (Laduke, 1997; Simpson, 2011; Suzack et al., 2010). I return to the importance of stories later in this paper, but next, I will explain how I went about listening to stories shared with me at Naicatchewenin.

### **Relationships**

Every summer my partner, my son, and I visit our family and territory in Treaty 3 and Robinson Superior Treaty territories. As we live in an urban space, visiting home is regenerative and healing; it is as if we connect to a battery to be re-charged to then go back to the urban setting. We visit with friends and family, connect to our land, and, as an Anishinaabe scholar, I visit with my Elders and ask for their guidance in my research. In early September of 2016, my partner and I visited with the Elders from Naicatchewenin. Naicatchewenin is a small Anishinaabeg community in northwestern Ontario, about an hour’s drive west of Fort Frances, Ontario. Naicatchewenin is known amongst the Anishinaabeg in our territory as a community that has worked to maintain our stories, teachings, and ceremonies, despite the violent attempts at erasure that took place during the residential school era. The residents maintain shaking tent and sweat lodge ceremonies, a Midewewin lodge, host an annual powwow that draws people from all over Canada and the United States, and they use their traditional round house, which is where I met our Elders. Gilbert, one of the Elders, said, “As far back as I can remember, there is always people that come to Naicatchewenin to seek spiritual advice, such as what you are doing.” The Elders then shared

their own stories—stories that I have their permission to share with you.

## Research Method

Following Anishinaabe protocol, the Elders and I met in the Naicatchewenin round house. I offered *semaa* (tobacco), introduced who I was, my clan, my community, and shared my stories to show my truth. This protocol is important as it showed the Elders where I come from and showed my purpose in seeking help. I chose to visit with the Elders in Naicatchewenin as I have a previous connection to the community.

Kovach (2009) and Wilson (2008) emphasized the importance of using sharing circles in Indigenous research. As Kovach (2009) explained, “[Indigenous peoples] don’t have focus groups, we have circles” (p. 152). Wilson (2008) also promotes talking circles as an appropriate method of data collection when engaging in Indigenous research. Thus, I used sharing circles as my research method. Sharing circles involve participants sitting in a circle to engage in a discussion regarding a topic; each person can talk about the subject while the other participants listen respectfully (Wilson, 2008). There were eight Elders who participated in the circle; some chose to share more than others, and some chose to listen, which is common in sharing circles. There were four women and four men who participated, all of whom live in Naicatchewenin. The Elders had the choice to use a pseudonym or to use their name as per the study’s consent form. Although my research focussed on Anishinaabeg women, I interviewed Elders irrespective of their gender identity as they all carry stories that were important for this research. The Elders agreed to be audio recorded for the purposes of producing transcripts. I shared the completed transcripts with a member of the Chief and Council who coordinates communications with the Elders, along with the original recording of the sharing circle to be kept and/or used by the community. I also travelled back to Naicatchewenin First Nation and presented this article to the Elders’ Council, where they approved, accepted, and acknowledged the importance of our work together. Gilbert instructed me to share the Elders’ stories to help with our collective learning as Anishinaabeg now and into the future. He said,

“Share with them: this is what I heard at Naicatchewenin. What you are hearing up to this point in time, this is real.”

To better understand how to create resistance to embodied settler colonialism, I asked the Anishinaabeg Elders from Naicatchewenin how our ancestral stories of women showing physical strength on the land might help with this resistance? The Elders immediately began to share stories of historical trauma, grief, and healing. It was only after this that they began to share stories of Anishinaabeg women’s physical strength on the land. Upon reflection, and in seeking guidance (by offering tobacco to *manitouswag*, spirits), I came to the realisation that to challenge embodied settler colonialism we must seek healing; it is only after we have attended to our personal healing can we absorb and apply our ancestral stories in our lives. In the next section, I present the stories of the Elders. I purposely chose to braid the results and discussion of the sharing circle so as not to compartmentalise the learning that occurred, which resonates with the process of learning in a cyclical way.

### Settler Colonial Grief: “Historical Trauma . . . our Blood Remembers”

The Elders were keenly aware of how settler colonialism is felt, embodied, and carried through grief and historical trauma. Anna shared how she experienced grief resulting from residential school and its impact on her and her community,

I have grief over [not being taught by my grandma] because I lost learning about the plants because I was sent to the residential school. For me, with my culture, I believe in our traditional ways, but also, I’m caught in the middle with the bible and stuff like that cause that is what we were taught... I am still fluent in my language, even though we went to residential school and we were beaten when we spoke our Ojibway language, Anishinaabemowin. And I still speak fluently, but I also, I don’t know how to say this, but I am stuck in that Indian residential school era. I am beaten by English. I want to speak English more than Ojibway. Today my children, they understand a little bit, some are trying to speak, but they would ask me, “why didn’t you teach us to talk Anishinaabemowin?” I felt that I couldn’t even tell them because it was taboo to even speak about it. I know that being a residential school product, I have come a long way...I wasted 34

years of my life; I drank for 17 years and smoked for another 17 years. In 2000, that is where I put everything away, the cigarettes, the pot, the hash. It was back in '85 I put the bottle down, but 34 years I wasted my life. Struggling. Struggling. Looking. Searching....for me also, grief is such a big thing in our communities, families, and individuals...grief hits us all and that is something that we need to heal from. At least get to a better place with [addressing our] grief. It isn't just the old people; it is everybody in the community. Grief hits everyone in the community.

Anna went on to describe historical trauma and its intergenerational effects:

We all carry hurt...my children they have a lot of anger and that anger comes from that hurt and fear...as Anishinaabe people we carry a lot of trauma. It is historical trauma. For me, my dad went to residential school, I went to residential school, me and my brothers. That is two generations and that still flows through to my grandchildren's blood. It is in our blood. Our blood remembers that pain that hurt, that anger. That is why it is still there. It is in our blood. For me, I want that to stop. That is how we heal - when someone stands up and says, "that is it, that is enough. Enough. No more."

Anna experienced grief because she was taken away to residential school. Her experience further shows how settler colonialism forcefully and violently removed a young girl from her loving teacher, her grandmother, disrupting the transmission of knowledge about medicinal plants. Anna grieved the loss of not only her connection from her grandmother but also her connection to the land, both of which had intergenerational effects. Her grief caused her to engage in substance abuse and feel the tension between the indoctrination of Christianity and English and the pull towards her Anishinaabe identity and language. Nicolai and Saus (2013) explained such feelings as historical trauma: "symptoms of historical trauma include somatic, psychological, physical, and spiritual problems relating to the unresolved grief cause[ed] by colonization and presenting as high rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal behavior, substance abuse, disrupted relationships, diagnosable disorders and various other symptoms" (p. 58). Researchers have noted the link between a survivor's attendance at residential schools and the lasting reverberations to not only their own

health and wellbeing but to consecutive generations' (Bombay, 2015; Bombay et al., 2014; Loppie Reading & Wein, 2009). Clearly, our Elders have not been immune to the effects of settler colonialism; often, they were on the front lines in experiencing the trauma, which has had intergenerational reverberations on health.

Gilbert shared that he learned how impactful grief is in our families and linked it to the ill health, such as cancer, Indigenous peoples often experience:

And one of the things I heard in my travels, with grief, when people were talking about grief [was that] if you don't deal with that grief when you are grieving, if you just keep it inside, that cancer is going to break out in your weak areas. And that is what is pushing it - that grief that you are carrying, 'cause that cancer doesn't know how to dissolve that grief, cause it's not visible...That is why a lot of times our people, when they don't deal with their issues, they catch that cancer...That is why grief is so important: when you are grieving you have to grieve properly and not to hold it down...If you don't deal with grief in a proper way, you are going to get sick.

Research has shown a connection between the psychological distress of colonialism and chronic diseases, including cancer, heart disease, and stroke (Fanon, 1963; Reading, 2009). For instance, a 2016 study amongst *Apsáalooke* (Crow) people in the United States found that historical trauma and loss experienced because of colonisation directly "impacted the development and management of chronic illness among Crow people" (Real Bird et al., 2016, p. 206), specifically diabetes and other common chronic diseases. This resonates with why Gilbert recognized the connection between unresolved grief and illness, such as cancer. According to the literature, historically, Indigenous peoples experienced lower cancer incidences and mortality in comparison to non-Indigenous people (Nishri et al., 2015); however, cancer rates are increasing (Reading, 2009), and one study showed that survival rates of cancer are poorer among First Nations people when compared to Ontario's general population (Nishri et al., 2015). Indeed, Brave Heart (1998) explained that for Indigenous peoples, "historical unresolved grief involves the profound, unsettled bereavement that results from generations of devastating

losses” (p. 288), which results in cumulative anguish that affects physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental wellbeing.

### **Healing Embodied Settler Colonialism: “It Starts From Within you”**

While Anna and Gilbert described how they have personally experienced trauma and grief, they also talked about healing. Gilbert shared how he has seen healing take place in the community, which stopped some of the substance abuse, but he noted, “we are not quite there yet. We still have problems...drugs, addictions.” He explained further:

We have come a long way in our own healing. The people that are sitting around here [in the sharing circle] are sober people. Some of us have many years of sobriety, which we didn’t have forty or fifty years ago. And that is the kind of message we want to leave [with] the young lady sitting with us, who is going around collecting [stories about] what would help people to live a better life. That’s what I am hearing, that is what she is searching for, and how do you do it? We all know how you do it; it starts from within you. That is what you have to tell people: it starts from within and then it grows from there.

Anna shared that she engaged in a lot of personal healing work to move through the historical trauma and grief in order to foster forgiveness:

For me, in my own healing journey, I have been to many treatments, many ceremonies, and I am really happy where I am today. I like to think I am in a good place anyways. I have come a long ways with my sobriety...But today, I believe the culture is our healing. There is healing in our culture...you have to forgive and accept what happened to you. It is very important to our young people. I see so many of our young people stuck in addiction. That is part of our historical trauma. Our young people need to understand where we came from.

Gilbert and Anna showed that healing from within is necessary to challenge the internalisation of embodied settler colonialism, which is experienced as historical trauma, grief, ill-health, and substance abuse, is not easy, but it is necessary to foster healing. Gilbert shared that even though he lives a healthy life, he still struggles sometimes:

It is so true too when Elders say life is not easy. It’s true. For me, being sober for many years, I

still have stumbling blocks that I run into. Sometimes these stumbling blocks are so powerful, where I want to give up, to hell with everything. I will just quit doing what I am doing...sometimes I come close thinking the hell with all of this, miyah, enough. Just let go of everything. But, that is what life is all about it, [the] Anishinaabe way of life, and that is what our Elders always talk about: life is not easy.

The historical trauma brought on by settler colonialism is embodied and manifests in substance abuse, unresolved grief, illness, and chronic diseases, which is directly connected to our forced displacement from the land (Loppie-Reading & Wein, 2009; Reading, 2009). Despite the lasting effects of embodied settler colonialism, the Elders showed resiliency and chose to heal through connecting with culture, forgiveness, and gaining sobriety, and this healing starts from within; as embodied settler colonialism becomes internalised, so does our healing. This resonates with what Brave Heart (2003) explained is necessary to resolve our historical trauma and grief, which is the reconnection with ceremonies and traditional culture. She stated that Indigenous peoples should “[foster] a reattachment to traditional Native values” (Brave Heart, 2003, p. 11) and a connection to pre-traumatic past. Similarly, Piyēsiw, a Cree Elder interviewed as part of Hatala et al.’s (2016) study, explained that Indigenous peoples were able to survive colonisation due to “[our] ability to align with ancestral spirits and narratives” (p. 1921). Restoring Indigenous values and remembering the stories of our ancestors are key components of recovering from the trauma brought by settler colonialism. As such, I asked the Elders from Naicatchewenin to share their memories of their Anishinaabekweg ancestors showing strength on the land.

### **Women’s Physical Strength: “It was Just the way of Life”**

The Elders shared that for their mothers and grandmothers, their physical strength came from working on the land through trapping or working in the bush. Delia explained that her mom began cutting pulpwood (i.e., wood felled in the bush to specifically produce paper) in the bush to support the family, as her father died rather young.



Similarly, Luke's mother trapped animals to feed her family. He explained,

My mom [trapped] to feed us. She trapped but not beaver, just muskrat...yeah, she worked in the bush too. I used to go and help her, but I wasn't even that big...She cut jack pine there with a handsaw. They had to pile it up so they could scale it...most of the time I kept my sister and the other little guy. She was strong though. She did anything that those guys did for work in the bush and they'd all load [the wood] up on sleighs before spring, leave them on the lake, she helped those too, to load the sleighs, 8-foot wood.

Anna shared that she used to help her aunt with collecting muskrats:

She used to go out and set traps and she would get me to help her. She would walk that whole river and go check her traps. She would carry a packsack and carry those muskrats home. I used to walk with her. It was quite a walk; it took almost all day to go and check all the traps on the river.

The above quotes show that Delia's and Luke's mothers were physically strong enough to cut and load wood, and for Luke's mother, she specifically maintained a physicality that was on par with the men with whom she worked. Also, Luke and his siblings were brought in the bush with their mom while she worked. This resonates with Anna's experience with her aunt.

Anna also shared that she learned how to paddle from her grandma:

My little grandma was a very powerful woman. She knew plants and this is how she helped people...what I remember, for me that was the happiest time of my life, being around my grandma, playing, learning, and that is how kids learn... and that is where I learned unconditional love. My grandma, to me, she loved everybody. It didn't matter who came to her for help. If it was someone who did something wrong to her, she still helped that person...I remember, I don't know what the plant was, but she would be gone all day to go and pick this plant 'cause it grew way out in the bush, and she would go walk and pick that plant for that person...But she taught me a lot of things...I remember we lived on the other side of a point with my grandma and when we would come to powwows we would paddle around the point. She made me a little paddle so I could help paddle. And this was when I was six or eight. I was eight when I was taken away from

here. But in that time I learned how to paddle, with my own little paddle, and [I felt] so good to know that I could paddle as a little girl.

Gilbert clarified why women trapped or worked in the bush:

They did what they had to do to survive. That is a survival skill, same thing working in the bush – they had to do it...And back then too, when we were living that way, we didn't think "oh, this is tough." When we think back now, we see how hard life was, but at the time when it was happening, we didn't think it was hard. It was just the way of life.

For our ancestors, being physically strong was a part of everyday life. The Elders remembered the physical strength their mothers, grandmothers, and aunties had and that it was an important part of Anishinaabeg being and providing for one's family. Anderson (2010) shared a similar story that highlighted the practice of teaching through *notoknew macivin* (old lady hunting) as described by Cree/Métis Elder Maria Campbell:

Campbell remembers that it was the grandmothers who were the first teachers of hunting and trapping. Children as young as three or four would go out with their grandmothers to set snares because it was the grannies' job to teach children to be thankful, respectful, and gentle with the animals at this time and in this context. Old ladies were deemed to be the most appropriate first teachers of hunting because of their experience and wisdom as life givers. (p. 82)

Grandmothers carried an important teaching role and, further, this Cree knowledge infers that even in their older years, Cree women maintained a level of physical strength and fitness that would necessitate their continued land-based practices, which resonates with the Elders' accounts of their mothers and grandmothers.

Physical strength was an important quality to foster in girls and women when living on the land. Hunting, trapping, collecting medicine etc., are all forms of physical strength on the land and require agile, strong bodies. Treuer (2001) further explained that Anishinaabeg who lived on the land embodied "wajebaadizi, which means to be spry, peppy, and full of life" (p. 204). He gave the example of an Anishinaabekwe Elder who grew up in a traditional Ojibway life, and even into her seventies had a strong body, had her wits about

her, and “rarely complained of any physical condition” (Treuer, 2001, p. 204). Importantly, the Elders’ stories challenge heteropatriarchal beliefs about women’s bodies being inferior and weak, as by today’s standards this type of work is, by and large, considered only “men’s work”. Having strong bodies allowed our ancestors to take care of themselves, their families, and others in their community. The physical strength Anishinaabekweg fostered from being on the land was disrupted by the settler colonial agenda that forcefully removed our bodies from the territory via residential schools, relocation to reserves, etc.

I had the privilege of learning from the Elders when I asked them if they could share their ancestral stories of women being strong on the land. And in typical Anishinaabeg manner (Johnston, 1982), they did not directly answer my question, but led me to where I needed to go, to challenge embodied settler colonialism, Anishinaabeg should attend to our historical trauma, grief, ill health, and substance abuse, and heal from within. I am cognizant that Anishinaabeg experience a broad range of embodied settler colonialism. For instance, there are many people who do not have issues with substance abuse; however, the collective trauma we have experienced and continue to experience because of settler colonialism cannot be overstated. Through their stories, the Elders taught me that addressing embodied settler colonialism is not just a matter of remembering our ancestral stories; rather, we must first address the foundation of our disconnection and then resist embodied settler colonialism through remembering and applying our stories of strength in our lives. Further, when we listen to our ancestral stories, we enact a process of personal decolonisation and resilience; we heal and come to know our bodies as strong by listening and applying the stories of the physical strength of our Anishinaabekweg ancestors in our everyday lives. Thus, what unfolds is a new internal sense of our bodies through our storied Anishinaabeg images of strength rather than an internalised embodied erasure discussed throughout this article as embodied settler colonialism. By taking up a new internal presence, this may disrupt embodied settler colonialism and fosters the revitalisation of other Anishinaabeg and

Indigenous peoples. This lens causes a wilful contention to embodied settler colonialism and is an enactment of Anishinaabeg stories in our lives.

## Conclusion and Future Research

To challenge the deficit-based narrative of Indigenous people’s health, we need a shift in perception occurring in our own minds, so that we may attend to our physical regeneration (McGuire-Adams, 2017, 2020). To this end, I shared Anishinaabeg stories by presenting the results of a sharing circle with Elders, which sought to understand how settler colonialism is manifested in Anishinaabeg women’s bodies. The Elders’ stories shared above demonstrate that the removal of our bodies from the land has had devastating effects such as trauma, grief, ill health, and substance abuse, which are experienced as embodied settler colonialism. Anishinaabeg stories are central to creating an Anishinaabeg future where we embody wellness, strength, and regeneration. Our Anishinaabekweg ancestors exhibited *wajebaadizi*; they were physically strong, capable, self-determined and their bodies were materialised through living on the land and is precisely because of this strength that they were (and are) targeted for gendered settler colonial violence. As this research showed, understanding how settler colonialism becomes embodied is necessary to further its disruption by enhancing our health and wellbeing. The Elders’ stories show us how once we identify embodied settler colonialism, we can address it by attending to our healing, empowering us to reanimate our relationships to ancestors through remembering their stories. Thus, as Anishinaabekweg seek out ancestral stories on our decolonial and healing journeys, we may also learn to apply these stories in our everyday lives. As Johnston (1976) taught his readers 41 years ago, “it was from their ancestors that the Anishinaabeg inherited their understandings of life and being, all that they were and ought to be” (p. 27). Thus, we have a relational accountability to our ancestors; our ancestors survived the violence of settler colonial erasure, but through remembering their stories of strength and applying them in our lives, we renew our relationship to them.

Future research may look to forms of physical activity that are consciously connected with ideals of ancestral strength and/or practised on the land, which may further enact a powerful praxis of resistance to embodied settler colonialism. In addition, as cis-gendered Anishinaabe woman who used this lens from which to hear the Elders' stories, I cannot share how embodied settler colonialism is experienced by our LGBT2QIA community members, and by those who experience disability and societal barriers to accessibility. As such, future research might focus on building understandings of and broadening the framing of embodied settler colonialism, including LGBT2QIA stories of strength and Indigenous disability theorisations of the body. Finally, as I continue to listen, collect, and share our Anishinaabe stories of physical strength, I recommend that you, the reader, also seek out your own stories to support your journey to deconstruct embodied settler colonialism, because, as the Elders said, "it starts from within."

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