

“Men break when things like that happen”

On Indigenous Masculinities in
Katherena Vermette’s *The Break*

Katherena Vermette’s award-winning debut novel, *The Break*, tells the story of the horrific rape of Emily Traverse, a young Métis woman from Winnipeg’s North End. Vermette writes about the North End without moralizing, according to Carl DeGurse, allowing the reader to see all of the people involved with a crime, from the victim to the victimizer to the investigators, with humanity and compassion. *The Break* is “a deeply felt story of a family’s strength and healing” that “puts a human face to issues that are too often misunderstood” by people who are not from the community (Melgaard). The core of the novel is “the ways in which the various women remain resilient to being broken” (Watkins 274). Finally, Âpihtawikosisâniskwêw-Icelandic writer and critic Carleigh Baker notes that

one of the critical responses to [*The Break*] has been to marvel at the strength and resilience of its women. While accurate, this response is problematic in its superficiality. Although there is much media talk of [I]ndigenous resilience as if it is an otherworldly cultural gift, it in fact takes significant daily maintenance. It is precisely this effort that Vermette focuses on—countless moments marked by a blinking back of tears and a hardening of the jaw.

Resilience is the ability to endure hardships and maintain kinship networks. As the young Métis police officer, Tommy, puts it in the novel, “all these women [hold] each other up,” just like his own Métis mother and aunty hold his family up (291). For Métis critic Aubrey Jean Hanson, “[r]esilience is not magical or glamorous: it is the everyday business of enduring together—getting coffees, taking walks, making phone calls, buying sandwiches, sitting together over late nights, cleaning houses, getting blood out of fabric, putting

blankets over the blood that will not come out” (“Holding” 38). The women in the Charles and Traverse families lean on each other during difficult times, like a pack, and the family is associated with wolf imagery. (Alysia Shewchuk’s back cover art on the 2016 trade paperback edition of the text, for example, has a picture of a wolf, and Rain compares her sisters to wolves).

Not all the women in this novel are resilient. Resilience and endurance take a physical, spiritual, and psychological toll on the characters, and the kinship networks in Phoenix’s and Alex’s (who goes by the street name “Bishop” in the novel) family break down. Even within the Charles and Traverse families, Rain struggles with alcohol and substance abuse before she is murdered; her daughter, Stella, becomes isolated from her family while suffering from postpartum depression; Stella’s childhood friend and Phoenix’s mother, Elsie, never recovers from the death of her grand-mère and her rape at a party; and Phoenix is homeless and pregnant when she attacks Emily. While I recognize the resilience of many of the women in this novel, we have to remember that Vermette balances this with stories of Indigenous and Métis women who are pushed to the point of breaking.

The North End is a character in Vermette’s text, in the way that cities like New York, London, or Vancouver become characters in the work of other novelists. Vermette has explained that she writes “primarily about Indigenous women, Métis women, who are inner-city residents, who have all of these things that are familiar to me” (qtd. in Hanson *Resurgence* 180). She adds that “if you don’t understand how I grew up and where I grew up and my place in the world, you don’t understand much about me” (qtd. in Hanson *Resurgence* 176). Plains Cree and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach says that a prologue is important in Indigenous writing because it incorporates “essential information for the reader to make sense of the story to follow” (3). In this way, it is also important to know that my reading of Vermette’s novel is influenced by the fact that I grew up a mixed-race (Black, Métis, and Scottish) orphan in Winnipeg’s North End. While I have never met Vermette, I grew up blocks from where she went to high school, and we both did our undergraduate education at the University of Winnipeg. I went to St. John’s High School and Gordon Bell High School, schools with large Indigenous and Métis communities. I grew up poor and spent time in Child and Family Services custody. I came of age in a community that settler anthropologist Kathleen Buddle calls the Aboriginal “gang capital” of Canada (178). I lost friends and family members to gangs and violence. Growing up in the North End, I watched young men struggle against the pull to become “good men” and the fear that doing so would

make them soft. Like Phoenix Stranger and her family, I lived in the “Lego Land” housing co-op (Vermette 233); like Ziggy and Jake, I went to a high school where my social life was spent negotiating a neutral position between Indigenous gangs (Vermette 59). I know how hard it is to become a “good man” growing up in that environment. What makes a man “good” in the world of this novel is a willingness to exist within the web of relations that allow women and families to endure violence and moments of crisis by supporting each other (Hanson, “Holding” 37). Such men take on rights and responsibilities. “Good men” are the ones that are willing to be part of this web of relations, existing in a space of “mutual and ongoing need, relying on, and taking care of each other” (Hanson, “Holding” 41). I care about the representation of masculinity in Vermette’s novel because she is describing my community, the community I struggled to become a man in, and she is representing those of us who found the strength to resist being soft, while also holding up a mirror to the way that colonialism helps to create generations of “hard men” whose emotional fragility leads to the harm of women and destabilizes families and communities.

Vermette privileges an emergent, non-dominative, inner-city Indigenous masculinity as a way of being a “good man,” and she contrasts it with toxic forms of masculinity that make life difficult for inner-city Indigenous women. As Robert Alexander Innes (*Cowessess First Nations*) and Kim Anderson (*Métis*) argue, the challenges facing Indigenous men are stark. They face racism and gender-based violence like other men of colour in Canada, and they have shorter lifespans, are less likely to graduate from high school, are more likely to be incarcerated, and are murdered at a higher rate than settler Canadians (4). According to Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, one of the most toxic stories told about Indigenous peoples is the story of Indigenous deficiency, a theory that articulates “Indigenous peoples [as being] in a state of constant lack” (2). In the Indigenous deficiency model, Indigenous peoples are presumed to be incapable of caring for “our children or families or selves because of constitutional absences in our character, or biology, or intellect” (Justice 2-3). Settler scholar Sam McKegney argues that conversations about Indigenous masculinities too frequently centre issues of Indigenous men being absent because of gangs, drug and alcohol abuse, or jail, or ask what is wrong with Indigenous men that makes it difficult for them to assimilate to Canadian culture. McKegney notes that these conversation points “unwittingly accept[] the perverse ‘success’ of colonial policies of dispossession while obfuscating the living

models of non-dominative and empowered Indigenous manhood that persist in families and communities, in teachings and stories, in minds and in actions” (5). Peter, the boyfriend of Paulina, models what McKegney calls a “non-dominative” way of being male (5). Non-dominative masculinity is about men whose masculinity is influenced by Indigenous teachings and stories. It celebrates men who can experience “growth, loss, love, power, and responsibility” (McKegney 5-6). Such men have an emotional flexibility and range that enables them to deal with tragedy in positive ways. Non-dominative men willingly take up the responsibility of helping the men and women in their kinship networks.

Bishop and Phoenix, in contrast, embody toxic masculinity. According to settler psychologist Terry A. Kupers, “toxic masculinity involves the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men,” such that “toxic masculinity is the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (714, 724). It is this lack of emotional range that causes people to break when bad things happen to them and the people they love. After all, Phoenix’s rape of Emily happens because she snaps: she is scared, homeless, and has been rejected by her uncle and her former lover. She does not have a working kinship network to help her deal with the heartbreak of being rejected by a man she loves, Clayton, and she deals with her toxic emotions through sexualized violence.

Vermette combats stories of Indigenous male deficiency by demonstrating the high social, emotional, and political costs women pay when Indigenous men try to embody settler masculinities based on domination and control, while also showing that “good men” like Peter and Tommy can lift up themselves and Indigenous women by embodying non-dominative ways of being male. Peter is comfortable showing love and, with others, knowing that he is loved in return. Peter’s attitude towards love is reminiscent of that of Rain, who says, “Whatever else I was, I loved you and you knew it. Your Kookoo knew it too. And you all loved me back. Whatever else you think or know, that is the most important thing about me. That I loved and was loved” (82). The toxic masculinity embodied by Bishop and Phoenix is fragile because they see expressing love and affection as a sign of weakness. Phoenix, in particular, is an example of what anthropologists describe as a “manly-hearted woman,” a term for Indigenous women “who inhabit third gender roles by taking on the behaviours and occupations of men,” as Lisa Tatonetti describes it (134). However, where manly-hearted

women frequently take up masculine positions that help the community and their kinship networks, Phoenix does not have a stable kinship network or a positive outlet for her masculine energy. Phoenix internalizes toxic masculinity as a way of protecting herself from the slings and arrows of her community; she is particularly violent and dismissive towards women and men whom she perceives as weaker than she is. There is no necessary connection between biological maleness and toxic masculinity. In this case, Phoenix takes up toxic masculinity as a way of protecting herself, but her toxic, masculine actions end up harming her friends, her family, and Emily.

Toxic Masculinities in *The Break*

When reflecting on the murder of Lorraine Rain, Kookum, the matriarch of the family, acknowledges that she is happy that her abusive husband, Charlie, was not alive to deal with the aftermath of the crime because “Men break when things like that happen” (335). Kookum’s point is not that all men break when they experience tragedy, but that her experience of men, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, is that they are fragile and have difficulty dealing with tragedy. When Kookum sees Emily, she is reminded of her broken husband, saying, “Another monster was here. A monster hurt Emily. I don’t know who it was. To me, it looks like my Charlie, or that stupid man who hurt my girl. I know it’s not them, but another monster in another person. There’s always another one” (329). Kookum does not think that these men are inherently monsters. When she reflects on Lorraine’s murder, she calls him “a stupid man made dangerous because he had never been taught right” (326). Toxic men do not inherently lack awareness, compassion, and empathy in this paradigm; they become toxic because they have not been taught how to be a non-dominative man, and this can cause them to lash out. Phoenix, in particular, lashes out with physical and emotional terrorism when she is emotionally overwhelmed.

When Tommy attempts to discuss Emily’s sexual assault case with his fiancée, Hannah, she is uninterested in the potential complexities of the case because she “wants life to be simple and has no desire to understand” (223). For Hannah, the men Tommy is talking about are gangsters, and she says they are “like, sadistic and don’t give a crap. They’re not going to, like, feel sorry for some girl. It doesn’t happen like on TV. They’re killers and rapists and drug dealers” (222). She sees these young men not as someone’s sons or fathers, but as “just thugs and criminals,” and she warns Tommy that he is being naive because “you can’t *reason* with them” (222, emphasis

original). For Hannah, all of these men are unreasonable monsters, closer to animals than people, and the only thing to be done with them is to lock them up before they hurt people. Hannah's view of the North End is largely shared by Christie, a racist cop who sees the crime in the community as "just nates beating on nates. Same old" (72). *Nates* is a derogatory reference to Indigenous people in Canada. Hannah and Christie have a single story about Indigenous gang members, and that story shapes their perception. According to Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a single story is founded through repetition and power: "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become" ("Danger"). This is why, for Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew, it is so important to re-story Indigenous masculinity so that we can see the complexity of the lives of men (8-10). *The Break* re-stories toxic men, allowing the reader to see the complexity of their lives and even to have empathy for them, without denying that what they have done is violent and monstrous.

The issue is not that Indigenous youth in Winnipeg's North End are more prone to toxic masculinity than other impoverished ethnic communities; the issue is that urban Indigenous gangs are prevalent in Winnipeg's North End, and they are incubators of toxic masculinity. Inner-city gangs encourage systems of domination. The men within these gangs are taught to be "hard men" who have minimal freedom to express tender emotions. As Nahanni Fontaine observes, there is a tendency to discuss these gangs as an "Aboriginal phenomenon," as if there is something inherent to Indigenous culture that helps to create them (Fontaine 114). Indigenous gangs are a "result of the settler colonial context and experience in contemporary Canada" (Fontaine 114). According to Elizabeth Comack et al., "The prevalence of Aboriginal street gangs in Winnipeg's inner city constitutes a form of resistance to colonialism, albeit one that has had negative consequences" (16-17). One issue is that Indigenous urban street gangs in Winnipeg "[i]ntentionally inflic[t] pain on and terroriz[e] the weakest and most alienated inhabitants of their own neighbourhoods," which becomes "the gang's recognized means for objectifying the individuated pain and childhood traumas of its members" (Buddle 181). The ideology of masculine "hardness" that the gangs encourage spreads to young men who are and are not gang affiliated. In this novel, the ideology of masculine hardness spreads not only to young men, but also to a young woman, Phoenix, who sees being hard as a way of avoiding physical and emotional harm while she undergoes social and economic hardships.

Phoenix is a “hard” woman who embodies many of the most toxic qualities of masculinity as a survival strategy. She is, as Lou says, “a pretty messed-up kid” (346). The key word here is kid. Phoenix will be tried as an adult, but she is a teenager who has been failed by her family, the Child and Family Services system, and the youth correctional system. Her uncle appears uninterested in helping her. She was abused and never really had a childhood. When she uses a beer bottle to rape Emily, Phoenix is a pregnant, homeless orphan with serious body issues that were likely caused by a lifetime of physical and sexual abuse. Phoenix becomes a monster in the text by mirroring the toxic masculinity of her uncle. For example, when she is asked in the Detention Centre to “[t]hink of someone you admire” during “one of their hand-holding bullshit therapy things” she thinks of Bishop (26). Her desire for Bishop to love and respect her is heartbreaking because there is no way that he could give either to her. As a way of proving to her uncle that she is tough and independent, she walks from the Centre to St. Vital mall, and then from St. Vital all the way to Selkirk in the middle of February with just a toque she stole from the dollar store (28). According to Google Maps, that walk is about two hours and thirty-one minutes in ideal conditions, and I can assure you that it would take much longer to make that walk in the snow in February. She knows that she should have “collect-called her uncle to come get her,” but she sees this reasonable request as a sign of weakness, and above all Phoenix does not want to be seen as weak (28). What she wants to do is

just show up at his house like magic, like she’d pulled it off with class. She wanted him to be impressed, to clasp her hand and pull her close like any other of his hard-assed friends, like his equal. She wanted him to come out of his room and be surprised, happy surprised, to see her. (28)

Bishop is not “happy surprised” to see her. The first thing he says to her is, “You can’t stay here, fuck. Your worker was already calling around freaking the fuck out” (29). Indeed, when they are done talking, Bishop does not hug her or tell her that he loves her, but “[h]e gets up like he’s dismissing her” (30). For Bishop, Phoenix is a problem to be solved, and she cannot stay with him because he has “too much shit going on” and he “[c]an’t have any extra heat right now” (30). What Phoenix needs is a safe harbour, somewhere she can feel loved and respected while she figures out what is next. Bishop cannot be that harbour for her because he knows that the cops and social workers are looking for her, and his house is a drug den that hosts gang parties.

Phoenix is a young offender, a child who does not seem to know or care who her biological father is, and has been failed by her biological mother, her uncle, and the Child and Family Services system (and she is hardly the first Indigenous youth to be failed by that system in Winnipeg). Phoenix is a victim of childhood physical abuse. While “pathetic” girls who have psychological issues disgust Phoenix, she is dealing with her own unresolved psychological trauma (26). Phoenix was abused as a child by her sister’s father, and she was abducted from her home where she lived with her mother and sister after she showed up to school with bruises. According to Phoenix, it is her fault that the family was broken up:

They had only one Christmas in the Lego Land house. The girls were taken before the snow melted. That was Phoenix’s fault too. She had worn her mom’s baggy sweater to school, and the sleeves were too big and came down off her arms. She shouldn’t have done that. She knew there were bruises there. Big long finger bruises. Not that she gave a fuck about Sparrow’s fucking dad. He could fucking go to hell, but she knew everyone would blame her mama. (234)

She does not blame Sparrow’s father for giving her the bruises, and she deflects. She clearly “give[s] a fuck about Sparrow’s fucking dad,” or she would not be discussing him with such obvious anger and disgust.

As part of her backstory, Phoenix’s sense of safety and control was stripped from her by an experience of institutionalization at a “safe house” hotel while in the custody of Manitoba Child and Family Services. While she was still a child, Phoenix was put in a hotel with older girls, and she tells us that

[s]he cried that first night. She’d never do that now but she was just a little kid. She tried to hide it and just cried into her blanket. One of the older girls caught her and laughed and said, “Don’t be a fucking baby. It don’t make no difference if you cry or not. No one’s fucking coming to get you.” Phoenix stopped crying after that. (235)

When Phoenix is sent to a psychiatric centre as a young woman, she refuses to speak in the group when asked. She stares at the facilitator, Grace, until Grace “knew enough to move on” (31). By the time we see Phoenix in the Remand centre, she has been emotionally hardened and institutionalized. After just nine days, Phoenix sees the women and guards in Remand as weaker beings that she can physically and psychologically dominate. She says,

All these fucking uniforms are fucking weak bitches trying to push their weight around, trying things like keeping her cuffed up when she doesn’t need to be, and waiting for her to beg for stuff. Fuck that. Adult Women’s is just like youth lock-up, full of useless bitches who would rather claw your eyes out than throw a good punch. (312-13).

When she sees her mother, she says “Elsie looking skinnier than ever and blubbering into a tissue. Fucking weak-assed Elsie” (313). She sees the display of emotion as Elsie performing “[w]hat she thinks a good mother should look like” (315). At the end of their discussion, Phoenix puts on a hard face and “walks like nothing can get to her, like she doesn’t give a fuck at all” (324). The point is that this is literally not true. She cannot show that the conversation with her mother hurt her, or that she is horrified by the idea of being tried as an adult as a “sexual offender” (318-19), something her mother says “like it is the worst thing ever, and Phoenix flinches because it is” (319). Even then, Phoenix’s strung-out mother still offers to talk to her lawyer, to help find character witnesses who might “say nice things about you” (323). Phoenix finds such attempts “*Pathetic*” and sees her mother as “a small, skinny, useless woman” (322, emphasis original).

Rather than rejecting the gang life that has left her emotionally fragmented, Phoenix plans on raising her son in custody so that he will embrace the kind of hard, unemotional masculinity she values in her uncle and that she attempts to perform herself. Phoenix is happy that she will have a boy because “[h]e’ll be strong,” and for Phoenix, nothing is better than being seen as strong (322). Phoenix reveals that “[s]he’s going to name [her unborn son] Sparrow [after her sister] because she wants him to be just like her little Sparrow. Only strong. Healthy. Hard. Like a boy is supposed to be” (322). The larger point of the narrative is that this is not how a boy, or a girl, is supposed to be, but this may be how colonialism has made some people feel like boys need to be. This idea that inner-city men should be hard is a harmful legacy of colonialism. Colonialism imposed patriarchy on many First Nations communities and left many First Nations men with lingering trauma, anger, and addictions issues. Phoenix’s understanding of how to raise a boy reminds me of what Adichie calls a “hard man.” According to Adichie, “We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage” (*Feminists* 26). “Hard men” seem strong, but they are emotionally fragile. Women and “weaker men” constantly have to worry about offending these men, for fear that they might have an emotional or physical outburst.

“Good Men” in *The Break*

If characters who embody toxic masculinity hurt others as a way of protecting themselves, “good men” are willing to love and support women without breaking when they are confronted with tragedy. For Vermette, what makes

a “good man” is a willingness to take up the rights and responsibilities of manhood without having to harm others. In this way, she is rejecting toxic masculinity as a colonial masculinity. As settler scholar Scott L. Morgensen argues, colonial masculinities “arose to violently control and replace distinctive gender systems among Indigenous peoples” (38). Haudenosaunee theorist Bob Antone argues that the internalization of colonial masculinity made communities “oppressive, violent, addicted, environments,” and this ideology influenced the path of Indigenous men (22). He says that “the role of men as protectors and providers for their clan families was dismantled by the invading colonial masculinity” (27). In such a system, Antone says that men struggle to find their place and, in this struggle, many men struggle with issues of anger and addiction: “[t]he ongoing anger that one experiences is the single most powerful disruption in families today. Male anger is destroying Indigenous families and societies. Most men hide their anger and at times use it against their families. As men, we need to face this reality and come to terms with what it is” (28). Vermette’s novel is about the consequences of masculine anger, and the physical, emotional, and spiritual stress male violence places on women’s kinship networks. This anger is not inherent to Indigenous men, and men will have to learn how to deal with this anger in productive ways for a resurgence of non-dominative Indigenous masculinities to happen.

This masculine anger has the potential to destroy families; as Lou observes, in one of the defining lines of Vermette’s novel, the sisters and their families “have all been broken in one way or another” (175). Anderson claims that narratives of strength and resilience may not be serving actual Indigenous women well. “My worry,” notes Anderson, “is that what we celebrate as our responsibility is really a question of overwork for Native women” (88). Being strong and resilient comes at an enormous emotional cost. Toxic men force the women and children of the novel to pay this cost over and over again; “good men,” like Peter, help to lessen the amount of emotional care work Indigenous women need to do. Vermette, in other words, does not just critique how toxic masculinity makes life harder for these strong and resilient women; she also shows us what a difference it makes for inner-city Métis women to have the support of ethical and non-dominative men in their lives.

Peter is an Indigenous man with a job, emotional intelligence, and moral character. His goodness is recognized and frequently commented on by the women in the text as they grow to trust him. As Cheryl states, Peter is “a

good man with a good job” (53). According to Paul, Peter is a large, gentle man with a crooked smile who smells good (187); his voice is “deep,” but he seems “gentle and shy” (187). Peter is emotionally intelligent. He understands that Paul’s trust issues are not about him; according to Paul, “when Pete finally told her he loved her, he cried” (191); Peter tells Paul that he “will never hurt [her]” and that he will “always be here for [her and Emily], no matter what” (192). It is one thing to say that you will always be there for a single woman and her child; what makes a decent man a “good man” is their firmness of purpose. Peter was given a choice between doing what was right or what was easy. He did not have to call Paul and tell her that her daughter was bleeding, but he did; he did not have to drive her to the hospital, but he did; he did not have to stay in the room while racist police officers were attempting to profile him, but he did. Peter looked like a suspect in the rape. He was alone with Emily in the apartment that he had just moved into with Emily and her mother the night Emily was raped. Many men would have been concerned with ensuring that they looked innocent, but Peter shows moral character by driving Emily to the hospital while she is bleeding “down there” (92). Peter stays with Paul even when she wonders if he might have been the one to hurt Emily. Even when he is under a cloud of suspicion, Peter never raises his voice or shows any demonstrable anger. He just stays with Paul and Emily, making phone calls to their families and gathering food and coffee that nobody will eat. Peter seems like the kind of man that Paul and Emily can trust “almost completely” (192). Peter, thus, can be read as a fictive embodiment of what McKegney calls a “non-dominative” way of being male that supports Indigenous women and girls.

Peter does not dominate and manipulate others. For example, Lou tells us that Peter “has always come off as a shy guy, quiet and burly-like, his hands never quite clean” (224). Yet, this shy guy lights up when Paul walks in wearing sweatpants and an old tee shirt (275). According to Lou, when her sister walked in the room,

Pete looked up at her like she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. His face literally lit up. I remember thinking, ‘Oh, that’s what they mean by that phrase.’ He was so bright. I nearly cried. Not even for my sister, though I did feel happy for her, but I mostly felt shamefully, completely, sorry, for myself. (275)

Peter’s reaction shows that he is emotionally open to loving and being loved by Paul, and that he is willing to be seen as loving her (82). Too many men have been raised to hide their emotions for fear that there is something effeminate about expressing love for another. Consider, for example, the way that Bishop

is emotionally closed off with Phoenix, or the way that Christy cannot give Tommy a compliment without saying something racist or debasing at the same time. Peter, in contrast, is comfortable with others knowing that he is in love. Peter, then, is a reminder that Indigenous men should not be thought of in terms of an inherent lack or predisposition to toxic masculinity. He is a reminder that there is something beautiful about Indigenous men who love and are comfortable with others seeing that they love.

When Peter gets to the Emergency ward with Emily, he performs emotional labour for Paul while she deals with the shock of it all. He “puts his arms around Paul and steps back a few feet to give the nurses room. Paul [doesn’t] notice her body shaking until his big arms hold her close to him, until they close firmly around her and try to keep her still” (93-94). Peter knows that Paul needs to be held in this situation, and the way he holds her allows her to process what her body is doing. There is something beautiful, masculine, and loving about holding a grieving mother so that she can feel safe enough to process her feelings. Peter, moreover, offers to call Paul’s mother Cheryl and her sister Lou after Paul says that they should be called. This may also seem like a small thing, but it means that Paul does not have to go through traumatic phone conversations while she is numb and processing her feelings. Before Peter even moves his truck, a truck that is likely illegally parked and covered with blood, he asks Paul: “Is there anyone I can get to sit with you?” (95). Perhaps, just as importantly, when she “waves him away,” Peter doesn’t argue with her or act hurt by her small rejection, but “nods understandingly” (95). Peter appreciates that this is not about him and that his job in this situation is to support Paul in any way that he can so that she can support Emily.

Over the course of the novel, Peter endures the inevitable accusations about Emily from her family and from doctors at the hospital. When the doctor tells Paul that he has to “report this” because “[i]n matters like this, as violent as this looks, we have to report, as you know,” he looks right at Peter, “who can only sit there” (97). The doctor is not necessarily making an accusation against Peter, but he is acknowledging with his glance that Peter is a suspect in the horrific and violent rape of a child. Peter could protest or lash out, or he could walk away in disgust, but he stays. He even stays when Paul and the other women of the family begin to wonder if he is responsible. Even Paul has “a random thought but it lingers a little too long. This isn’t the first time Paul has wondered if she really knows him and what he could be capable of, if she can even imagine” (100). Peter is the kind of man who

knows that his job is to “stand[] quietly behind [Paul], holding her up” (98). “Good men” hold women up in times of crisis, allowing them to bend just a bit by leaning on them so that they don’t break under the pressure of it all. Being a “good man” who supports Indigenous women means focusing on the pain of the mother and the child in this situation.

Peter endures this situation in a way that makes me think that Lou is right to believe that Peter is not going to run away once everything settles down (287). When Paul is talking to Lou, she says, “I think Pete’s going to leave” and that, in the same situation, she might leave him, because the whole thing is “a bit much” and a man “can leave even if nothing’s going on, and now so much is going on” (287). As Paul says, she “needs him” and “Em needs me” (287). The question is if she can rely on him. Lou goes as far as to argue that Peter is “[n]ot that kind of person” (297). She tells her sister: “You don’t want to rely on him. But you can. It’s hard but you can. He’s a good man” (287). It is difficult to express how much is being said here. In a community that can be defined by unreliable, unavailable, and volatile men, Peter is the kind of man you can trust, and the kind of man other Indigenous men can aspire to be. He is not a perfect man, but perfect men do not exist. Peter is the kind of man who can become family. For Lou, Peter can be trusted in the way that their mother and their Kookom can be trusted, because “maybe Peter’s your family now too” (288). For Vermette, family is not made by blood or marriage. Family is forged through trust and responsibilities. A family member is someone you can love and trust, and who is willing to love and trust you in return. The women of the novel trust each other, and Paul’s relationship with Peter shows Indigenous men what it will cost them to be worthy of the love and trust of such amazing women.

That Vermette makes Pete such an admirable character only serves to amplify how troubling Christie’s racist treatment of him is. Pete is racially profiled by Christie, a racist police officer who works in Winnipeg’s North End. When Christie discovers that the crime was an assault, he assumes that it was Native gang members attacking each other, and when he finds out that one of the assailants had a long black braid, he assumes that Emily was raped by a Native man. Christie calls Pete “shifty as fuck” (120), although the only evidence he seems to have for this is that Pete is understandably morose during the interview; when discussing Pete with his young and impressionable partner, Tommy, Christie calls Pete “the big fucking Nate fucker sulking and staring at [Paul] in the corner” (120). Sulking alone is not evidence of criminality that should make someone a suspect.

The racist behaviour of the police in this novel may have an autobiographical element for Vermette. She lost her brother, Donovan Wayne Attley, in 1991 and in her Governor General's Literary Award-winning poetry collection *North End Love Songs*, she is deeply critical of the way that the police handled the case. In her poem "Indians," the speaker vocalizes the attitude of the police to her brother's disappearance, saying,

indians go missing
they tell the family
indians go missing
everyday
blue suits shrug
no sense looking
they said
he'll turn up when
he gets bored
or broke (90)

In this case, there was no reason to believe that Attley was on a bender or that he ran away, and the police officers in Vermette's poem rely on their prejudices about Indigenous men to get out of doing their job, not unlike what Christie tries to do in the novel. (In this way, it is significant that Tommy, a young Métis officer in *The Break*, insists on properly investigating what happened to Emily). Many police officers in Winnipeg have long acted as though brown lives simply do not matter. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the Winnipeg Police Department reacting as callously and inhumanely as in Vermette's poem to the disappearance of a white teenager from Tuxedo.

Conclusion: Towards Balance

In a culture that is fixated on Indigenous men as lacking or toxic, we need to see examples of "good men." Seeing Pete is a reminder that men can help women deal with trauma without being violent and causing more trauma. It is a reminder that, often, the strongest thing a man can do when facing trauma is just sitting with the women who are enduring that trauma together and supporting the kinship web in whatever way they can. Being strong is about driving people to the hospital, getting coffee, and holding people you love when they are scared. It is not about taking revenge against those who have wronged you and your family and creating more trauma. If Pete is a good news story about what Indigenous men can be, Phoenix is a cautionary story about what Indigenous young people might become if toxic masculinity becomes normative. As Hanson notes, Phoenix lacks

“a kin web of unquestioningly supportive women” (“ *Holding* ” 37). I would also note that Phoenix seems to be without any male role models or third-gender role models who could show her how to become a strong and ethical member of her community. Without this kinship network, Phoenix becomes hard as a means of self-preservation, but it is this very hardness that allows her to break when something bad happens to her. Phoenix is a toxic young woman “whose intergenerational struggle with sexual violence, poverty, and disconnection from family have led her to become solitary and hard” (Hanson, “ *Holding* ” 37). How do we encourage more young people to become like Pete and less like Phoenix and Bishop?

An answer, for Vermette, is robust kinship networks with a return to tradition and the land. Jake and Sundancer are also at-risk youth. Both of them start to emotionally withdraw in response to the violence that their sisters experienced. Jake and Sundancer are gang-affiliated, existing on the periphery of gang life like many Indigenous young men and women in the North End. For example, when Ziggy asks her brother what gang he is in, he tells her that it is “complicated” (217). Sundancer has a black bandana and a black hoodie (220), and he spends time on Selkirk Avenue, an area well known for gang activity. Jake also has a “black hoodie” (280). Rita is so concerned when Sundancer abruptly leaves the house that she calls his father and Moshoom and asked them to “[j]ust, like, go around and look for him” (219). When Dan finds Jake and Sundancer at a convenience store, he takes them out for coffee so that they can discuss “Man Stuff” (281). Jake and Sundancer are struggling with their feelings and emotions, and they are tempted by violence and a desire for revenge.

Vermette ends the novel on the reserve with the extended kinship network coming in for a sweat, with Dan and Moshoom spending time with Jake and Sundancer, teaching them “man things” as Cheryl calls them, “old lessons that only a Moshoom could teach properly” (340). It is in learning these old lessons that young Indigenous men can learn how to deal with their anger and toxic emotions in healthier ways. Men break when they are isolated from their kinship networks and the teachings that could help them deal with their negative feelings in more productive ways. To help men deal with this fragility, they need to be embedded within kinship networks of supportive men and women. Non-dominative masculinity is something men have to learn through mentorship and traditional stories. Frequently, it is something men learn when they are away from the temptations of the city. Men within those kinship networks, moreover, need to pass on teachings

that help men learn how to be supportive of others while rejecting toxic behaviours. After a few weeks in the bush with Dan and Moshoom, the boys look “peaceful, their smiles wide” and Jake “runs up and gives his mom a big bear hug” (241). The boys gain confidence and self-esteem spending time with men learning how to be men, and Cheryl notes that Jake even “looks taller somehow” (341).

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