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## Joyful Embodiment: Felt Theory and Indigenous Trans Perspectives in the Work of Max Wolf Valerio

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As I enter my new life, I realize with awakening joy that the ground underneath me has shifted, and finally I am free—to dream and love and to become.

—Max Wolf Valerio, “The Enemy Is Me”

In this epigraph, Blackfoot/Latinx writer Max Wolf Valerio speaks a story of possibility, a story of becoming. Throughout Valerio’s body of work, the knowledge of what it means to become who you are, become who you have always been, is marked as a particular type of joy that is held in the body. Numerous Indigenous writers and filmmakers share literary and documentary evidence of somatic exchange serving as possibility, as transformative conduit: they show how Indigenous people create and extend survivance practices through bodily encounter—in singing, in drumming, in praying, in fishing, in fasting, in walking, in writing, in dreaming, in dancing, in making films, in making art, in making out, in making love, and in the felt theory that arises from those embodied avenues of intellectual exchange. These artists return, again and again, how Indigenous knowledges are archived in the body.

Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million offers a particularly fruitful articulation of these exchanges when she argues for affect theory as an important paradigm for engaging Indigenous politics and literatures. In *Therapeutic Nations*, she explains: “I find it immensely important to put an analysis of affect and emotion, a felt theory, back

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into our quest to understand both classic colonialism and our present in neoliberal governance" (30). Importantly, Million connects felt theory to Indigenous people's creative output. She maintains "imagination, that effort to see the future in the present," like activism and "good social analysis," has "the ability to incite, as in arouse, as in *feel*, to make relations" (31). Here, then, the affective interactions that generate felt theory are active *processes* rather than singular disconnected entities or one-time activities, and they are, as well, tied to relationality. Cherokee theorist Daniel Heath Justice explains that to claim and form kinship—or "to make relations" in Million's terms—is integral to Indigenous literatures, which encompass particular "ways of thinking about Indigenous belonging, identities and relationships" (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* 27). These felt knowledges and affective relations, as I argue elsewhere, present a useful framework for Indigenous narrative, offering a grammar for the ways in which bodily knowledges are experienced and shared among Indigenous people and within Indigenous cosmologies.<sup>1</sup> And, while affective knowledges exist widely across Indigenous texts and contexts, I turn in this special issue to how, when used to read Valerio's essay and autobiography, felt theory reveals embodied ruptures and cultural dislocation/disavowal, or what Million terms "colonialism as a *felt*, affective relationship" (*Therapeutic Nations* 46). At the same time, this essay highlights the ways, in Valerio's stories, felt knowledges offer a map of becoming and a lived route to survivance, healing, and joy.

One of the earliest trans Indigenous people writing in English, Max Wolf Valerio, across all of his texts, represents his experiences of—and others' reactions to—his sex and gender presentations as relational, highly affective processes. Valerio's published works range from pre-transition meditations on Indigenous butch identity in the landmark 1981 collection *This Bridge Called My Back* to two books of experimental poetry—*Animal Magnetism* (1984) and *The Criminal* (2019)—to discussions of his post-

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transition experiences in documentaries like Monika Treut's short *Max* (1991)—which was incorporated into Treut's full-length *Female Misbehavior* (1992)—Bestor Cram and Candice Schermerhorn's *You Don't Know Dick: Courageous Hearts of Transsexual Men* (1996), Treut's *Gendernauts: A Journey Through Shifting Identities* (1999), and, more recently, Chase Joynt's *Framing Agnes* (2019).<sup>2</sup> Valerio's best-known work is undoubtedly his Lambda-nominated memoir, *The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Social Transformation from Female to Male* (2006), which Reid Lodge situates as part of a small group of early twenty-first century trans autobiographies that "offer radical alternatives to medical discourses of trans identity that denied trans agency and self-interpretation" ("Trans Sites of Self Exploration").<sup>3</sup> The first book by a trans Indigenous person, *The Testosterone Files*, as I'll show, chronicles the affective resonance of Valerio's movement to and through transition as a felt experience of both colonialism and joy.

While Valerio has since had other publications, films, and artistic projects, of particular interest to readers of this special issue would be "Exile: Vision Quest at the Edge of Identity," a piece that directly engages intersections of Indigeneity and trans experiences in relation to his return to the Kainai Nation Reserve in 2008 after a 22-year absence.<sup>4</sup> An excerpt of "Exile" was published in the 2010 "International Queer Indigenous Voices" special issue of *Yellow Medicine River*, a publication that was one of a cluster that marked the contemporary rise of scholarly work in Two-Spirit and Queer Indigenous studies (2SQI) in the first decade of the twenty-first century and the beginning of the second. Notably, Valerio published in landmark texts that serve as bookmarks for queer Indigenous literatures and theories—*This Bridge* marking the era in which some of the first overtly queer Indigenous literature was published, and "International Queer Indigenous Voices" marking the twenty-first century rise of Queer Indigenous studies and proliferation of 2SQI artistic production.<sup>5</sup> Yet, surprisingly,

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Valerio's work has received sparse critical attention: a handful of essays consider his poetry, essay, or autobiography and, among, these, his place as an Indigenous author often goes unrecognized. With this in mind, I want to acknowledge the import of Valerio's work—*The Testosterone Files* particularly—to 2SQI studies in terms of both his publication history and his engagement with what we can now term felt theory. Valerio directly engages the felt experience of colonialism by highlighting how, despite their subversion of cisgender gender regimes, trans masculinities can be interpolated into settler understandings of sex and gender by both Native and non-Native people.

### **Embodied Knowledge in "My Mother's Voice, the Way I Sweat"**

Valerio's writing and film work spans a time of radical change in expressions of queer of color and trans identifications in literature, film, memoir, and the public sphere. Valerio came out as a lesbian in 1975 at the age of eighteen and began reading poetry in the lesbian feminist scene in the mid-1970s at the University of Colorado. He explains in an interview with Trans studies scholar/poet Trace Peterson, "there was a lesbian caucus and women's liberation coalition, and so that's how I first connected" (qtd. in Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet," 532) He then moved to San Francisco where he studied at the Naropa Institute with Allen Ginsberg. It was in the vibrant arts community of San Francisco that he met Gloria Anzaldúa.

Valerio began publishing in the 1980s, during a crucial period of political and literary visibility for queer folks of color. Anzaldúa, a major figure in that movement, invited him to contribute to *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981). This first collection of literature by woman of color, which Anzaldúa co-edited with Cherríe Moraga, included five openly queer Indigenous writers. Valerio's essay in *This Bridge*, "My Mother's Voice, the Way I Sweat," is a precursor of his later autobiographical work: in both his memoir and his pre- and post-transition essays, he bluntly speaks his mind, challenges

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romanticized images of queer and/or Indigenous cultures, and consistently pushes against tacitly accepted gender expectations, both cis and non-cis, both settler and Indigenous.<sup>6</sup> In a period where many queer Indigenous artists were writing about the importance of reclaiming the place of queer peoples within their nations, and at times sometimes romanticizing Indigeneity in the process, Valerio instead poses a strongly worded *critique* about how gender circulates on his reserve.

More specifically, Valerio offers a lesbian feminist perspective that overtly challenges the gender expectations of his Kainai community, writing as someone who grew up returning to the reserve with his family yearly, inheriting his mother's ties to land, family, and community: ties that he marks as particularly affective. Valerio explains that his mother's first language was Blackfoot and that his great-grandfather was a holy man named Makwyiapi, or Wolf Old Man ("'It's In My Blood, My Face'" 42-43). Specifically, he narrates lines of kinship and speaks to the relevance Indigenous tradition had to him as he came of age. He describes the overwhelming experience of his first sweat at sixteen as "so miraculous . . . it was as though God appeared before me and walked about and danced" (43). As a young activist, Valerio joined the American Indian Movement and visited Wounded Knee during the 1968 siege. He explains, "There was a time . . . when I was so angry so proud I wanted so much to reclaim my *language* the symbols and sacred gestures the land" ("'It's In My Blood, My Face'" 41, italics/spacing in original). The doubtful "but now?" that follows this statement signals his troubled response to the normative behavioral expectations he encountered during a several-month stay on his reserve in southern Alberta in his early twenties.

Valerio bluntly frames this 1977 trip as a moment of troubling realization: "I went back to the reserve for two months traditional cultures are conservative and this one is patriarchal" ("'It's In My Blood, My Face'" 41). Discussing how gender expectations

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can be used to constrain, Valerio problematizes interpretations of tradition, using the Sundance as a point of entry. He recounts a discussion with his mother in which she noted the holy woman had been chosen to open the ceremony because "she has only been with her husband and never any other man and it makes her a virgin of sorts" (41). Of this, Valerio asks, "What does it mean that it's a holy woman that sets up the Okan [Sun Dance]? and why does it make her holy that only one man has touched her?" (41). He questions whether the woman is holy because of her fealty to her husband—"because she has been a good little piece of property to that one man"—or because of women's power in Kainai culture—"a hearkening back to earlier matriarchal times (41)? By citing two potentially contradictory readings, Valerio alludes to the fact that gendered hierarchies—as opposed to gender complementarity—can arise in certain spaces deemed "traditional." Moreover, Valerio's questions suggest that heteropatriarchal norms can be instantiated and regulated under the guise of tradition, a fact highlighted by contemporary scholars in 2SQI studies. Two-Spirit Métis/Anishinaabe scholar Kai Pyle notes that "While it is admirable that people are concerned with addressing gendered colonization, we must take care to question where tropes [about Indigenous gender roles] come from and what purposes they serve" ("Reclaiming Traditional Gender Roles" 111). In addition, Driftpile Cree poet/theorist Billy-Ray Belcourt comments that tradition:

is a sort of affective glue that sticks some objects together, sticks us to bodies and to ideas we often do not know—conversion points that make something or someone traditional through proximity or performance. Here, a politics of tradition refers to the ways tradition produces and deproduces some corporeal forms, how some bodies pass below and beyond the aegis of the senses and, in this, sidestep theory's ocular reach and thus disturb the traditional itself. ("A Poltergeist Manifesto" 29)

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When experiencing the reserve as a butch lesbian, Valerio locates the queer body as a disruption of the sort Belcourt describes—a fact evident in his description of standing outside gender expectations. This fissure aligns, as well, with what Justice terms a relational “rupture, a word that invariably refers to violence to bodies: human, geological, political” (*Why Indigenous Literature Matter* 186). Ruptures sever relationship and deny kinship, a fracture mirrored in Valerio’s discussion of the silence he felt compelled to keep about his queerness. He comments, “I am gay. Perhaps in the old days, in some way or other, I could have fit in there. But today, my lesbianism has become a barrier between myself and my people. . . . It is hard to be around other people talking about their lives and not be able to talk about your own in the same way. It causes a false and painful separateness” (“‘It’s In My Blood, My Face’” 39). At this moment in Valerio’s life, “tradition” serves as a boundary rather than a teaching, and the gender expectations of his nation a potential barrier to his full inclusion in his Blackfoot community. As such, Valerio refuses a vision of Indigeneity in which being queer, trans, and/or what many people ten-plus-years later would term Two Spirit, allows for a seamless integration of gendered, sexual, and/or Indigenous identifications at a particularly early moment in Indigenous literary history. This contrasts distinctly with work from writers like Maurice Kenny (Mohawk) who, along with other queer Indigenous poets and fiction writers of the period, was trying to recoup a queer Indigenous history and reclaim that space in the present.<sup>7</sup>

With this in mind, we can look toward how the text overtly wrestles with the ways the author’s perception of settler gender norms impact the felt experience of queer Indigeneity. Valerio depicts gender disparities and cis/het normativity as factors that potentially splinter his identification with Blackfoot culture: “that is why I sometimes don’t want to think about being Indian why I sometimes could really care less these days it’s sad” (“‘It’s In My Blood, My Face’” 41). As Pyle asserts, the point

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is not whether or not something is "traditional," but whether gender practices are harmful in the present. Pyle explain, "Regardless of the fact that these may have been part of Indigenous gender roles in the past . . . they are contiguous with heteropatriarchy to the extent that they may be complicit in its perpetuation" ("Reclaiming Traditional Gender Roles" 115). Faced with just such damaging heteropatriarchal narratives, Valerio describes his pre-transition queerness, not as joy, but as "one of the barriers between myself and the reserve" ("It's In My Blood, My Face" 44). This forthright conversation gestures to the complexities of queer Indigenous experiences and markedly undercuts the idealized visions of Indigeneity that were (and sometimes still are) being cited in white queer culture as a way to authorize dominant iterations of queerness.<sup>8</sup> While this is not a comfortable stance, Valerio bears witness to a common experience of the period and, as such, uses his platform in *This Bridge* to narrate what Million calls "the social violence that was and is colonialism's heart" (*Therapeutic Nations* 59).

Notably, while Valerio's earliest autobiographical piece interrogates normative cis het gender expectations, in the same essay he depicts Indigeneity as inherently relational, a felt and even precognitive recognition of being. This affective knowledge is situated in the body. Valerio explains, "I cannot forget and I don't want to. It's in my blood, my face my mother's voice it's in my voice. My speech rhythms my dreams and memories it's the shape of my legs and though I am light skinned it is my features. . ." ("It's In My Blood, My Face" 41). Further, Valerio joins such corporeal realities to his felt experience of his grandfather's home and its surrounds. Celebrating the reserve as a site of embodied pleasure, he recalls "standing on the porch and smelling morning blue sky rolling hills . . . there seemed to be balance then before I knew the meaning of the word" (41-42). The physical, psychic, and emotional experience of landscape is expressed as a deeply held delight. Thus, while he critiques

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potential heteropatriarchal aspects of his culture, Valerio describes his experience of Indigeneity as felt knowledge, archived in the body and tied to specific experiences of place.

The writing and film projects Valerio creates and participates in for the next thirty years suggest the seemingly irrefutable embodied knowledge of Indigenous relationship to self, family, and land described in “‘It’s In My Blood, My Face’” can be short circuited by cis-normative gender demands that, in their respond to trans Indigeneity, create a narrative rupture—what Justice termed a “violence.” In non-Native contexts, Valerio describes how certain feminists and queer folks read his masculinity as necessarily white; in Indigenous contexts, he describes a trans masculinity written out of Indigenous relationality. In both cases, as we’ll see, different types of transphobia hinder Valerio’s ability “to make relations” (Million 31) when others question his felt knowledge of what it means to be a Blackfoot/Latinx transman.

### **The Weight of Masculinity, or, “‘Now That You’re a White Man’”**

In the 2002 follow-up to *This Bridge Called My Back*, Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating’s *This Bridge We Call Home*, Valerio, now Max Wolf Valerio, discusses his transition and returns to autobiography. In his contribution to the collection, “‘Now That You’re a White Man’: Changing Sex in a Postmodern World—Being, Becoming, and Borders,” Valerio considers how perceptions of masculinity shape the way his gender behaviors and Indigenous identity become legible to others. Though the piece deals in binaries at times, implying, for example, that medical transition is a more authentic version of trans identity than others, it simultaneously presents a valuable window into the potential concerns and confrontations experienced by some Indigenous trans folx.

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Valerio describes how the intersections of trans Indigeneity can become a tightrope. His title alludes to this experience in its suggestion that his Blackfoot heritage is, according to his interlocutor, erased by his maleness. He writes: "How did I get . . . to where I am today? An ostensibly 'straight' man who is often asked (usually by lesbian or feminist-identified women who met me for the first time), **'Now that you're a white man, and have all that male privilege—how does it feel?'**" (240, bold in original). While previously Valerio suggested his Blackfoot ancestry was written on the body, perceptions of masculinity appear to disrupt that embodied narrative. Valerio's bolding of the question itself speaks to the sharp impact these words hold for an Indigenous person. Like a slap, they imply his movement into the space of masculinity and, concurrently, heterosexuality, carries with it the weight of whiteness. As such, his male embodiment becomes intelligible only through the all-encompassing lens of settler privilege.

Along with depicting a jarring experience of racialized erasure in "'Now That You're a White Man,'" Valerio also discusses his transition. He begins by citing a key passage from "'It's In My Blood, My Face'" in which he related a childhood story of dreaming to be a boy. Using those memories as a touchstone, Valerio describes early moments of longing: "*I yearn for my body to have the texture, smell, and look of a man's body. To possess a physicality I don't comprehend, but at that moment, I instinctively know this physical self is male*" ("Now That You're a White Man" 242, italics in original). Though this passage ruminates on the physical body, it is *affective meaning*—what Million terms felt knowledge—that serves as the central concern. Thinking about Valerio's previous claims, while Indigeneity was read *on* his body, the felt knowledge of gender is *archived in* the body—depicted here as a lived, pre-cognitive understanding. Valerio returns to this idea in *The Testosterone Files*, commenting, "Knowledge is rooted in the body, without cognition, yet articulate. Not

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only expressed *on the body* as in self-expression or self control, but emanating *from the body* itself. An effortless and driven knowing . . ." (Valerio 143). Across his writing, Valerio depicts the assumptions he encounters—whether in his pre-transition years as a young lesbian feminist or in his later life as a transsexual person—as tying masculinity and men to a negatively inflected sense of transgression and, more specifically, to damaging settler understandings of male identities.<sup>9</sup> In this configuration, masculinity, indexing both whiteness and privilege, stands in direct opposition to lesbianism. For example, in his community of lesbian feminists, "maleness became 'bad,' the 'other,' the 'oppressor'" ("*Now That You're a White Man*" 242). Trans Two-Spirit writer Daniel Brittany Chávez describes a similar experience, saying, "Within this feminist framework, my masculine physical presentation is made to represent patriarchy, violence, machismo, 'wanting to be a man,' succumbing to the enemy, and much more" ("*Transmasculine Insurgency*" 59). In light of such perceptions, Valerio attributes a heavy weight to his decision to transition: "To take this leap, to become part of a class of people I had once believed were in some sense the 'enemy' was an enormous risk—like stepping into the path of an oncoming tornado" ("*Now That You're a White Man*" 242). And that fear was not without merit given that, in the largely white world Valerio describes, he repeatedly encounters the imposed weight of a hegemonic masculinity that relies on settler paradigms.

In both "*Now That You're a White Man*" and *The Testosterone Files*, published four years later, Valerio critiques feminist and genderqueer folks precisely because of the frequency of his encounters with transphobic attitudes that flatten all masculinities into a monolithic norm. Feminists, ciswomen, and even other non-trans gender-nonconforming people are not exempt from holding such ideologies; instead, he argues, queer-identified folks often "have strong expectations about what my behavior and attitudes should be" ("*Now That You're a White Man*" 244). One such example

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arises in questions from a class that viewed Monica Treut's 1992 short film *Max* in which, at one point, Valerio boxes the camera. The students' questions, as Valerio perceives them, critique his performance of masculinity *precisely because* it meets normative measures of masculinity: his masculinity is not "sensitive" enough, not feminist enough, *not queer enough*. While Valerio sees the boxing scene as a moment of masculine energy and embodied joy, the students imply that it involves the enactment of a hegemonic masculinity. Valerio humorously quips, "I know everyone would be much happier if I was knitting" ("Now That You're a White Man" 245). That comment works together with Valerio's later observation that "Before, these gender role expressions were charming and rebellious; now they might seem 'sexist' or 'macho.' In other words, if I'd boxed the camera while I was still Anita, most of the class would have been delighted" (245). These contrasting examples read the same action as, on one hand, resistance, on another, complicity. Thus, just as when he addressed the racialized dynamics in questions about his trans masculinity, Valerio again suggests a settler binary is instantiated. In this equation, butch performance threatens cis-het masculinity; trans masculinity conforms to it. Among the reactions Valerio describes, there's little differentiation between attitudes toward cis and non-cis masculinities. Whether trans or not, masculinity is threat rather than protection, individual mandate rather than reciprocal responsibility. Such readings elide understandings of Indigenous masculinity, which have, in many cases, centered issues of communal responsibility and protection.<sup>10</sup>

For Valerio, relational spaces therefore become fraught, a circuit in which his gender performance and sex are frequently disavowed. He narrates his experience at a San Francisco lesbian bar, Francine's, which he visited regularly pre-transition. After his physical shifts manifest and he enters Francine's as a man Valerio comments, "These women will abide my presence, but they will no longer welcome me" (*The*

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*Testosterone Files* 150). He greets this slow-blooming realization with equanimity; it is, he suggests, a sign he has passed over into maleness. Concomitantly, he sees long-time acquaintances like “Spike, a strapping butch punk dyke” abruptly turn heel and walk away upon discovering that Valerio’s not only trans but “a straight man” (*The Testosterone Files* 166). This clear rejection places Valerio outside the queer community to which he’d long belonged and erases trans realities beneath a perceived position of heteronormativity. To consider just the two examples offered here—the previously referenced responses from the students to whom Valerio spoke and his experience at Francine’s—we can see how these oppositional approaches to trans masculinity cause him to defend a male identification that has been hard won, gained at significant financial and personal cost. And, painfully, in both examples, feminist and queer folks translate trans masculinity as hegemonic, thereby foreclosing relationship, foreclosing kinship. Driving gender into the realm of settler desires, such readings of masculinity enact hegemonic masculinity’s power to segregate, to isolate. Afforded the authority to erase and contain, the specter of white, cishet masculinity fragments relationship—wielding influence even in its absence.

What does it mean, then, that settler masculinity looms so large in these encounters? Or perhaps we can use C. Riley Snorton’s question from *Black on Both Sides*, “what does it mean to have a body that has been made into a grammar for whole worlds of meaning?” (11). This question is especially fitting given that in each of the described interactions, Valerio’s interlocutors are acutely aware that he is non-cis man; thus, it is his trans masculinity, particularly, that is put to question and found lacking. In many ways, Valerio describes a zero-sum equation in which *all* masculinities are perceived as toxic, a charge folks in Indigenous masculinities studies have been working against in their examination of and calls for responsive, culturally informed, and accountable masculinities. What does it mean to write every masculinity as toxic?

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Scott Morgensen argues that such erasures are inherently tied to settler ideologies. In an analysis that addresses the presence of Indigenous resurgence in trans contexts, he comments that "the imperial power of universal gender discourses . . . become geopolitically settler-colonial when they naturalize Western thought on indigenous lands as evidence of their own universality" ("Conditions of Critique" 198). Such readings of trans masculinity place a normative whiteness at the center of understanding leaving no space for the trans Indigenous.

Furthermore, among the feminists Valerio describes there concomitantly seems to be a negative reaction to the sheer joy he finds in masculinity—an embodied joy his audience, as he depicts them, would prefer to be a more palatable shame. His reaction to those attitudes is worth quoting at length as it both addresses such negative responses and also provides a window into how Valerio's representation of his felt experience can evoke discomfort. He comments:

I understand the enormous suspicion and seething resentment beneath these questions [about privilege]. Rigid sex role expectations have hurt women and damaged men. We all want to reinvent our lives free from gender stereotypes' binding constraints. However, real life always intervenes in utopian landscapes. The truth hurts. I wasn't knitting, and I would rather be boxing the camera. My sex drive did go up when I took testosterone, as did my energy level. I experienced great changes in my emotional volatility, my sense of smell, even an alteration in my visual sense. The stereotyped differences between the sexes that I've resisted my entire life do make more sense to me now. ("Now That You're a White Man'" 245)

The Valerio who in *This Bridge* in 1981 condemned gender binaries, in 2002 describes finding himself at home in such structures post transition. He further decries expectations that because he is trans, he must necessarily be genderqueer or gay-

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identified or “above or beyond expressing traditional male sex roles” (“Now That You’re a White Man” 245). There’s no doubt that Valerio rejects the socially constructed view of masculinity he held as a lesbian feminist. Further, though Valerio still professes feminism (with some reservations), he often portrays feminists, and especially lesbian feminists, as shrill attackers, killjoys who disavow his lived experience of his male body and psyche.<sup>11</sup> Lesbians and genderqueer folks routinely take the brunt of the criticism in his work since Valerio feels condemned by lesbian feminists who perceive him as a gender “traitor.” Valerio’s experiences highlight the pressing weight of settler masculinity as the felt experience of colonialism while also challenging any sense that non-cis masculinities must always transgress, that non-cis masculinities are always already queer. To use Valerio’s words, “I’m so straight in such an absolutely twisted—paradoxical and trickster-like way—that *I am way too far gone*. So are other transsexual men . . . We soar in an arena defying easy interpolation or assimilation by a nontranssexual-originated ‘queer’ label” (“Now That You’re a White Man” 252). In these ways, Valerio offers a stark window into divisions between and among those in the queer and/or feminist communities that become visible precisely because of varying interpretations of masculinity.

Concomitantly, just as we saw in “It’s in My Blood, My Face,” Valerio’s later work also troubles the seams of racialized and gendered expectations and highlights moments of rupture. In fact, as trans journalist and author Jacob Anderson-Minshall comments in his review of *The Testosterone Files*, Valerio is not afraid to look at “the dark sides of masculinity” (“Changing Sex, Changing Mind”). For example, in Valerio’s detailed observations about his experience of psychological, physical, and, eventually medical transformation from a butch lesbian woman, to a transgender person, to a transsexual man, he argues for a hormonally driven gender/sex binary. He presents masculinity as a biological shift in which buoyant energy, a high sex drive, and defined

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masculine behaviors are bound to testosterone and male-identified bodies. Valerio comments, "Let me emphasize, I have nothing against anyone exploring any identity. Although I don't actually believe gender is 'fluid'" ("Now That I'm a White Man" 244). Further, Valerio critiques noted queer theorists like Jack Halberstam and Leslie Feinberg, who, in his estimation, get the experience of transition, masculinity, and trans realities wrong in their work. As a whole, Valerio's autobiographical writing and his responses bring up a weighty question—do non-cis masculinities necessarily subvert what settler scholar Sam McKegney terms the "socially engineered hypermasculinity" (*Masculindians* 4) of Indigenous men simply because they are not cishet structures?<sup>12</sup>

### **Embodiment, Joy, and Affective Anger in *The Testosterone Files***

In the first decade of the 2000s, a period in which trans narratives became more visible, Valerio served as a significant voice for trans experiences. Yet, mirroring the gap he described in "Now That You're A White Man," his own writing and film appearances during this period often leave little room for intersectional concerns. A paradigmatic example of this absence is his brief appearance in Tyler Erlendson's 2011 documentary *Straight White Male*. In it, Valerio's comments about transition and masculinity include no mention of his tribal affiliation or Latinx heritage, which, if discussed, ended up on the cutting room floor. Consequently, given the topic and documentary title, there is an inherent assumption that he and the rest of those interviewed in the film, refer to trans experiences in the context of white masculinity. Such erasure is all too common. Morgensen notes in his discussion of trans scholarship that "a plethora of published and online commentary on trans and feminism still makes no mention of race or nation as conditions of their debates" ("Conditions of Critique" 193-194). Likewise, *The Testosterone Files* takes the experience of transition as its central concern and the few scholars who address the text follow that lead.

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One of a handful of scenes in which *The Testosterone Files* engages Indigeneity is in relation to Valerio's chosen name. He describes mulling over possibilities, talking with friends, and trying ideas out until he lands on "Maximilian Wolf Valerio." Valerio first cites his own familial connection to a Maximiliano, his great-uncle on his father's side who he recalls with fondness. He then continues:

A middle name came effortlessly. Wolf. On the American Indian side of my family, many of the names of my male Blackfoot ancestors contained some variation of "wolf": Big Wolf, Wolf Old Man. Big Wolf was my great-great-grandfather, a well-known warrior and the owner of a sacred medicine-pipe bundle. Wolf Old Man was my great-great-grandfather. One of the last traditional medicine men on the reserve, he'd been a weather dancer in the *Okan*, or sun dance and a well-known healer. He could hold live coals in his mouth without getting burned. I would honor these ancestors and the Blackfoot side of my family by taking Wolf as my second name. (*The Testosterone Files* 126-127)

With this description, Valerio ties masculinity to both familial history and Kanai iterations of spirituality, thereby linking transformation to a sense of the sacred. Yet while this story hinges on the familial, in accordance with his mother's wishes, as I'll discuss in this essay's final section, Valerio does not return home during this period. The sort of felt knowledge of Indigeneity and land narrated in *This Bridge* is therefore markedly absent from the memoir.

Yet while what we might call a sort of an intersectional fragmentation recurs in Valerio's texts and film, there is more to his narrative than tragedy. In fact, in many ways Valerio's descriptions offer an ode to masculinity. He writes:

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When I dance, the energy is phenomenal. Power surges through my body. I feel like I can jump through the ceiling! This energy is vigorous—it feels organic, not speedy, as though rooted inside my muscles and bones.

When I go out running, I feel as though an invisible hand is pushing me.

The joy of it! (*The Testosterone Files* 154)

Such productive aspects of masculine performance align with the sort of recognitions proponents of Indigenous masculinities studies forward in which masculinity has (and must have) constructive possibility. For example, Kanaka 'Ōiwi scholar Ty P. Kāwika Tengan's work in *Native Men Remade* describes the strong connections Kanaka Maoli men make through sharing "joyful experiences of brotherhood, fellowship and camaraderie" (188). In a world that aligns Indigenous masculinities with violence and loss as a rationale for colonialism, the act of naming and reclaiming such spaces is essential.<sup>13</sup> Valerio's descriptions of his body and his affective experience of testosterone—his ongoing transformations—are daily processes in which masculinity becomes a cause for deeply felt celebration. "Taking testosterone," he notes with exhilaration, "is like having rock and roll injected into my body" (*The Testosterone Files* 154). His physical changes are met with wonder and a heady exuberance as Valerio becomes the man he knew himself to be.

Valerio's joy in this transition often arises in relation to the chemical awakening he experiences as seismic shift. He jokes about getting acne and undergoing a second adolescence. He describes "feelings of liberation and exuberance" (173) and a visceral elation as his body thickens in places, becomes thinner in others, and his muscles become more defined. Even "peeing becomes more visual, more complex—possibly more fun" (186). The body becomes his object of study, and, in the process, an avenue of delight. This deeply embodied pleasure is something long denied Indigenous men, who are taught by the media and hegemonic cultural expectations that, depending on

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the context, their bodies are dangerous and/or disposable. Through such dominant cultural narratives Indigenous men are primed to feel shame about rather than joy in their bodies. Shame is, in fact, a long-standing affective colonial technology, what Million in her discussion of felt theory calls a “debilitating force” (*Therapeutic Nations* 56). Considering the affective power of shame and masculinity, specifically, Sam McKegney explains:

“Shame” manifests as a tool of erasure cutting [boys] off from the pleasures of the body, enacting a symbolic amputation—or one might even say a symbolic beheading—that denies integrated, embodied experience through the coercive imposition of a form of Cartesian dualism. The mind is forced to treat the body as that which is other than self, creating conditions in which . . . the body can become a weapon. (“Pain, Pleasure, Shame. Shame” 14)

In light of such troubled and troubling histories, Justice argues, “We need to see the body—the male body—as being a giver of pleasure, not just a recipient of somebody else’s acts, but a source of pleasure for the self and others” (“Fighting Shame through Love,” *Masculindians*, 144). It is here, then, that Valerio stakes a much-needed intervention into conversations about masculinity—*The Testosterone Files* shows readers, again and again, what it looks like to love a masculine body becoming. And to claim love for a trans Indigenous male body, in particular, is a valuable lesson indeed in a world where trans bodies are attacked and legislated against daily and where, statistically, Indigenous trans folks are especially at risk.

### **Coming Home: “Exile: Vision Quest at the Edge of Identity”**

In this final section, I return to this essay’s opening, where I argued that, along with detailing the roadblocks he encountered as a trans man, Valerio described his felt knowledge of his identity as a map of becoming, an atlas that charts a route to

survivance, healing, and, joy, ultimately showing that non-cis genders can, at times, serve as medicine.<sup>14</sup> To consider this possibility, I turn briefly to "Exile: Vision Quest at the End of Identity," in which Valerio shares a new chapter of his life, combining poetry, fiction, and memoir to reflect on what it means to return, as a trans man, to Indigenous community.

Valerio performed "Exile" in a number of venues including the 2009 Queer Arts Festival, where he collaborated with Timothy O'Neill, who created a soundscape background of ambient music that includes "sounds of nature and samples of traditional Blackfoot music" ("Performance Description"). In the published excerpt, readers encounter a multi-genre piece in which voice, tone, and genre shift rapidly. The excerpt begins with a poem, which is followed by an italicized monologue narrated by the Blackfoot trickster, Napi or Old Man, as told through Valerio, and concludes with a narrative in which Valerio first describes Napi's travels and then segues to a personal reverie on his own homecoming, when he returns to the Kainai Reserve for the first time since 1986.

The opening poem in "Exile" outlines a journey, in which a human or other-than-human being is "traveling on / . . . midnight roads" (93). When the light dawns, Valerio invokes Blackfoot cosmology with "Natosi / Sun, who was creator . . . and Napi—the trickster" (93). The piece is imagistic, beautiful, and includes classic Indigenous iconography—drums, dances, and more. Yet moments later, the next section (marked by a line separation and switch to italics) pulls the rug from under readers' feet. Enter our narrator, Napi, who, "talking to you through this guy Max here" (94), mocks both the opening and the assumed reader expectations that go along with it:

*So is that Indian enuf for ya? Is that Native American eco-shaman spiritual enuf?  
Am I a real Indian? Am I a TV Western Indian circling the wagons? Listening with*

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*my ear on the ground for enemy? Or am I a militant—transgressive Native American fighting against neocolonialism and litter? Or maybe I'm just me, a guy who happens to be a mixed-blood Blackfoot Indian and, incidentally, as you know, also a transsexual man. (93, italics in original)*

"Exile" highlights the specific collisions that occur in the intersections of Valerio's life as a trans Blackfoot/Latinx man. And while Valerio describes how non-Native onlookers erased his Indigeneity in "Now That You're A White Man," here he vehemently rebuffs not only that settler masculinity, but also hegemonic expectations of Indigeneity more broadly: he challenges correlations between his Blackfoot identity and shallow ecological discourse and a confrontational Red Power masculinity. Thus, in his classic forthright fashion, Valerio takes what he thinks his audience expects of him and smacks it out of contention.

With this deployment of a trickster narrator, Valerio joins a host of other 2SQI writers who have used such figures to engage gender play and queerness. Like Beth Brant's and Deborah Miranda's coyotes, Valerio's Napi, too, subverts gender expectations—in this case joining "the Pride Parade" in "a shimmering gown and high heels" (95). As trickster stories trade in sexual puns, gender reversals, and humor across many Indigenous nations, Valerio, like Brant and Miranda, riffs off classic Indigenous storytelling traditions. Further, Valerio's trickster narrator offers a buffer of sorts as they recount Valerio's very real exile from home in the third person:

*Max's mother, Agatha, she's from the Blood reserve and she forbade him to ever return after he transitioned to become a transsexual shaman. . . . Now, Max reminded his mother one day on a long-distance phone call, in the old days, people who lived as the sex opposite to their birth were inspired to do so by dreams, and these people were often honored and respected. Max waited through a long silence on the other end of the phone. Finally, Agatha spoke*

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*with a chill in her voice, saying, "That was a long time ago."* (94, italics in original)

While the story is painful, Valerio's trickster uses humor to defuse the weight of relational rupture by suggesting Max's identity as a trans man comes with "*newly acquired shamanic trans power*" (93). Though tongue-in-cheek, this statement situates trans identity in a space of productivity that flies in the face of Agatha's damning reaction as Napi turns trans positionality into spiritual power. At the same time, the piece addresses transphobia in *Indigenous* contexts head-on. To this point in Valerio's essays and memoir, settler masculinity was the product of onlookers and editors, the outcome of non-Native desires and expectations. By contrast, "Exile" speaks directly to the ruptures created when settler ideologies infiltrate Native communities as seen when, invoking a settler temporality, Valerio's mother assigns the expansiveness of Indigenous gender traditions to the dust bin of history.

If some non-Native folks read Valerio as holding a seemingly unavoidable white male privilege after his transition, thereby construing masculinity as an a priori marker of whiteness, here the character of Valerio's mother sees trans masculinity as incommensurable with ties to home and to the affective relationships with family, land, and nation the Blackfoot community represents.<sup>15</sup> To be trans, in this logic, is to give up ceremony, to give up the embodied experience of the reserve, to lose access to a path of return. In other words, to be trans, in such an estimation, is to be forced into a space outside Indigeneity. Cree poet Arielle Twist similarly writes about the painful experience in which some family members deny and dead name her in "What It's Like to Be a Native Trans Woman on Thanksgiving," saying, "funny how colonization touches all things, from the beauty of my being to the way family can no longer see it" (2013). Cree-Métis-Saulteaux writer/theorist/curator Jas Morgan situates such experiences as a site of recurring contradiction, saying, "After all these years, I still

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don't know how to talk about homophobia and transphobia on the rez. I'm not supposed to say the truth and give in to settler desire to consume my trauma. . . . I don't know how to deal with the tension between respecting my Elders and not accepting homophobic behavior" (*Nîtisânak* 50.) Valerio's story likewise highlights the intersections of settler ideologies and iterations of transphobia, which he experiences from both non-Native and Native communities presenting one side of the affective coin, or what Million, as we've seen, terms a "felt experience of colonialism."

At its heart, though, "Exile" is not a meditation on rupture, but a story of return. And just as Valerio writes his physical transformation and masculinity as a space of pleasure, so too does he imbue this sometimes-painful narrative with embodied delight. His homecoming involves his relatives, who, he explains, greeted him with "joy" and "appeared to be very accepting of me as I am now, a man" (97). And, together with that familial welcome, Valerio meditates again, some thirty years after *This Bridge*, on the affective meaning of the reserve, crafting his embodied tie to his family and the land as a relationship that has "the ability to incite, as in arouse, as *in feel*, to make relations" (Million 31). Homecoming, as an affective process, involves place as well as people. To that end, Valerio offers a detailed description of his journey back—seeing "the land . . . still wild with spirits," where his grandfather's house, corral, and barn are "deeply familiar." They are, he explains, "one of my oldest memories of belonging and family and magic . . . the container of so much more emotion . . . than any other place in my life" ("Exile" 96-97). Despite Valerio's long absence, "the North End of the Blood Reserve is the closest place to a remembered and cherished home and place of origin" (97). Ultimately, in writing "Exile," Valerio denies the cultural, physical, and psychic separation of settler dispossession and the legacy of gendercide that accompanies it.<sup>16</sup> If felt knowledge is also theory, here Valerio posits an

understanding that refutes transphobia and cultural amnesia, heals past ruptures, and forges new iterations of kinship.

I close by thinking more broadly of Valerio's place in 2SQI literatures. From his first published essays to his most recent, Valerio confronts the relational fractures experienced by many queer Indigenous people. Moreover, his essays and autobiography make visible the violence of settler masculinity, highlighting the ways it can be wielded like a weapon, even between and among queer folx. Valerio suggests that when such damaging masculinities are read as the standard for all masculinities, trans, Indigenous, and trans Indigenous experiences are elided. Further, Valerio's insistence that masculinity equals joy rather than shame is a claim with powerful implications in Indigenous contexts. Collectively, Max Wolf Valerio's work, while sometimes challenging, has much to contribute to Indigenous, queer of color, and trans studies by forwarding joyful embodiment as trans Indigenous possibility.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Building on Dian Million's work, I use "felt theory" and "felt knowledge" interchangeably here. In her chapter "Felt Theory," Million speaks of and with Indigenous women, noting, "we seek to present our histories as affective, *felt*, intuited as well as thought" (*Therapeutic Nations* 57). In this analysis, Million explains that though often not recognized as such in academia, embodied, or felt knowledges, are theory. For more, see Tatonetti, *Written by the Body*.

<sup>2</sup> This list represents only a selection of the documentaries in which Valerio has been a commentator/interviewee.

<sup>3</sup> <https://lambdaliterary.org/2006/04/lambda-literary-awards-2006-2/>

<sup>4</sup> Valerio was born in 1957 in Heidelberg, Germany into a military family. His Latinx father, Steve Valerio, is descended from Sephardic Jews and from generations of farmers and shepherders of Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico, while his mother, Margo, is from the Blood or Kainai Nation Reserve in what is currently Alberta, Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Mohawk author Maurice Kenny published in queer zines in the 1970s; outside Kenny's work, early queer Indigenous literature was first published in the mid to late 1980s. See Tatonetti, *The Queerness of Native American Literature* for more.

<sup>6</sup> The frank writing in Valerio's personal essays and memoir differs radically from his fascinating, but often opaque experimental poetry. See Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet," for a reading of Valerio's first chapbook, *Animal Magnetism*.

<sup>7</sup> I'm thinking here of pieces like Kenny's well-known poem "Winkte," which was first published in the 1970s and claimed a "special" place for queer indigenous people. I want to be clear, as well, that I'm not holding one of these approaches above another. Instead, I'm highlighting how unique Valerio's work is in its frankness at this particular moment in queer Indigenous literary history.

<sup>8</sup> See Scott Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us*.

<sup>9</sup> In the essays "Now that I'm a White Man" and "Why I'm Not Transgender," Valerio vehemently disavows the term "transgender" as a potential erasure. In the latter piece, Valerio explains that transgender "desexes and defangs the term 'transsexual.'" He further comments, "transgender is now used to describe everyone . . . people who might actually have very little in common with me. While I'm not against these people expressing their gender, I do have a real fear: The word transgender has the potential to entirely erase who I am" (Valerio, "Why I'm Not Transgender").

<sup>10</sup> See Innes and Anderson's *Indigenous Men and Masculinities*, Ty P. Kāwika Tengan's *Native Men Remade*, and Sam McKegney's *Masculindians and Carrying the Burden of Peace*.

<sup>11</sup> There are many examples of this rhetoric in *The Testosterone Files*, as well as scenes in which women are objectified or female sexuality is cast as dangerous. At the same time, Valerio makes comments that imply he recognizes the dangers of toxic masculinity. In an online interview, for instance, he states: "Because testosterone drives masculinity, in a sense, does not excuse sexism. There is never an excuse for bad behavior. Certainly, I came to empathize with men's experiences, and understand more where they were coming from, however, bad behavior is not excused. People misunderstand this I think, and are afraid that if men are primed biologically in a different way from women, that bad male behavior is excusable. Bad male behavior, like any bad behavior, is never excusable" (Valerio, "Five Questions With Max Wolf Valerio").

<sup>12</sup> I think here of Jas Morgan's comments: "A toxic trans bro is still a toxic bro. . . . Like with any other form of toxic masculinity, there's a difference between the consciousness-raised, tender trans masculinities, and trans masculinities that reinforce dangerous colonial scripts. . ." (*Nītisānak* 30).

<sup>13</sup> Tengan's comment to McKegney resonates here: "I think all those stereotypes were instrumental to someone else's agenda. For the violence of conquest you needed a violent opponent, so you created this image of the Native as a violent warrior" ("Reimagining Warriorhood," *Masculindians*, 79)

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<sup>14</sup> Here, I riff on Two-Spirit Oji-Cree writer/theorist Joshua Whitehead's words, in which he considers the transformative power, of non-cis genders as "medicine" (*Jonny Appleseed*, 80; Whitehead, "Why I'm Withdrawing from My Lambda Literary Award Nomination").

<sup>15</sup> In Monika Treut's short film *Max*, Valerio briefly discusses coming out as trans to his mother, who had noticed his voice changing after he began taking testosterone. To this point in the documentary Valerio has laughed often, reveling in his discussion of the physical shifts of transition--energy, high sex drive, facial hair. In this conversation, Valerio joked about his mother noticing his voice changing: "I didn't know what to say. Finally, I told her, you know, that yes, there *is* something different about my voice, you're right." In response, an off-camera Treut asks: "And she wasn't shocked?" Valerio noticeably sobers, saying, "She was totally in shock." Following Valerio's subsequent pause, Treut queries: "Did you tell her the whole thing, right away, on the phone?" To which Valerio responds: "Well, let me tell you, it was one of the most difficult things I've ever done. And I would have preferred to have never had to do it. But one has to do it."

<sup>16</sup> I refer here to Deborah A Miranda's theory of gendercide as detailed in "Extermination of the *Joyas*."

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