

Book Review: *Masculindians, Conversations on Indigenous Manhood*. Edited by Sam McKegney. 2014. University of Manitoba Press: Winnepeg

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Masculindians, Conversations on Indigenous Manhood has travelled with me over the last few months—I guess together we would have flown, driven and walked over 25,000km. Travelling across the continent, here in Australia, often leaves you with lots of thinking space, and it was perplexing to reflect on our angles on manhood here, as Aboriginal men. As in other parts of the world, the continuing violence of invasion (stolen lands, murders, forced relocations, stolen generations, etc.) impacts on our way of life and those localised nuances of what it is to be a man.

My own life journey led to all sorts of identity questions and led to a lifelong quest for that deeper knowing of manhood. This quest is often simultaneously romanticized and stigmatized both as a warriors' journey or an antiquated ceremonial coming of age. These days my research, collaboration and community work centres around strategic communication and the use of filmmaking, participatory video and media. We are trying to tactically respond to our Elders deep concerns about maintaining language, culture and ceremony, and protecting lands, waters and sacred sites. We face the second gold rush, the gas rush and fracking, and other mining activities threaten what is left of the pristine Gulf country now. Our young men (and women) now face this life threat amidst a heavily regulated oppressive Northern Territory government regime where interventionist laws target Aboriginal people and seek to strip them of their lands and force the closure of homelands. There is no doubt that exploring masculinity is a fundamental part of this ongoing struggle and the pressures of inheriting family, community and ceremonial responsibilities. The strength and wisdom that resides within our ancient ways is still being handed down, while our young men rock sneakers, jam hip hop and reggae and face all of the social media hype that most other youth do. McKegney's challenge to complete a compilation about masculinity highlights how important this conversation is for all us.

I am still unsure of the title of this book; it troubles me for some reason, but I am not from the region and do not understand the context exactly. The image on the cover captured my attention and I kind of cringed every time it emerged from my bag. The Hunkpapa Lakota artist, Dana Claxton, created this confronting image of a young warrior, painted up, wearing a suit; he stares at us with a red Mustang idling behind him in a white, sterile studio. The title 'Daddy Got a New Ride' sparked conflicting thoughts for me. How do our young warriors navigate through worlds today and what challenges are faced within such consumer-driven newness paradigms? That sense of loss of agency or personal power was what really got to me with this image. Delving into the image I discovered that it was drawn from a single channel, six-hour video installation exploring the mundane aspects of aesthetic practice and I get it. More importantly, the image reasserts our orientation and challenges the typical stereotypes of the 'modern native'. What makes McKegney's an important, contemplative text is the very fact that it speaks to us from within that complex and alluring neo-colonial space.

This interview-driven compilation about Indigenous manhood is open and blunt at times and, with 23 contributors (men and women), it is diverse in scope, although predominantly focused within a North American context. Contributors included fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, scholars and self-confessed nerds, performance artists and deep thinkers, scribes and poets, health workers and activist warriors of today. Of note is the diversity, not only the contributors, but of places in which the interviews occurred. We all know how important 'the place' is for interactions 'on country'; it often influences relationship-building, as well as the mood and the depth of knowledge sharing.

Funnily enough, McKegney has it all in these interviews, which were close to three years in the making and took place in parks, hotels, university offices, highways and bars. There is a humble fluidity in this approach. I find the structure enriching and responsive. This is reflected in three broad themes: Wisdom, Knowledge and Imagination. Wisdom thematically presents culture, history and world views. Knowledge centres on the theorization of gender. Imagination completes the compilation with an emphasis on artistic interventions within an Indigenous masculinity discourse.

Wisdom. Now that is not a light theme, but often a concept that is once again attached to archetypal renditions of the noble chief or righteous warrior staring out into the 'known universe'. McKegney's conversation with Tomson Highway really sparked a few things for me. Highway is a Cree 'playwright, novelist and pianist/songwriter'. He was interviewed in McKegney's office at the Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Firstly, it was clever to see Highway's use of interactivity and 'visual explaining' (via tablet sketches) it helped me to see monotheism, polytheism and pantheism as being more than just three categories. Highway speaks of encounters with mythologies as power superstructures for language and, of course, there are huge resonances with our ways of communicating reality here in Australia.

Despite gender, we are also woven together; as he puts it, "*there's room on the living circle, the animate circle, there's room for the male and female, as well as all of these other shades of gender*". And, when we look to provenance, it's not all serious. When we eat cereal (which I admit I am real muesli bloke, even out bush. The Elders love it when I rock up with our favourite style) "*we pay homage to the goddess of grain*". There is place for everyone, you might be a Weetbix guy, a big breakfast brother or a coffee fiend, but for Highway the sacred seems far more pertinent. For Highway "*arts, it's a medicine*" and it's the pantheism, the circle that will ensure the survival of the planet, not just the phallus.

Knowledge. You would think that this theme would be a no brainer, but the conversation with Warren Cariou (Metis) and Alison Calder came out of the blue for me. Calder plugs Cariou early on, after he frames his family storytelling tradition as being predominantly male. Calder goes on "*But the bullshitting is really a male thing in your family*". [Laughter]. Cariou speaks of the complexities inherent in any discussion about identity. He also raises a common reality: many families are raised by strong, single grandmothers, mothers and sisters. Like many of us, Cariou grew up with a grandmother as the matriarch and whose word was almost law. This conversation reinforced the importance of relationships in any discussion about knowledge.

Imagination. Put simply, imagination frees us from sadness. It illuminates the 'darkness'. We all know that there is loads of darkness in our communities; those things that are often unspoken, the impacts of intergenerational oppression and grief, that stuff of the deficit model. That heart-wrenching stuff, the stuff that calls for solutions, that calls for imagination. Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair invites this theme into his conversation with deep, enduring honesty. For him, this involved sharing his grandfather's journey to becoming a protector. For Sinclair, "*you can learn everything you need to know about being a man by building, making and nurturing ishkode, a fire. Ishkode is our grandfather*". He is able to speak to us because, in some way or form, we are all on this journey.

McKegney is bold in his approach to a complex and controversial topic—boldly reflected in the cover/title. He has certainly taken up the challenge of honouring the complexities of the topic, heeding Brendan Hokowhitu's warning that "*the thing to keep in our minds is the risk of pathologizing Indigenous masculinity*" (Hokowhitu 2014,108). Hokowhitu (a Maori professor from Aotearoa, New Zealand based at the University of Alberta, Canada) offers this warning while acknowledging the ability for literature to reveal imaginings and alternative counter-models to the colonial agenda of social engineering.

We are reclaiming our experience of manhood today and are no longer passive observers of this colonial project/projection. This diverse collection of conversations around Indigenous masculinity

shares some powerful wisdom, it stays grounded, and gives us an insight into the deep complexities of manhood. *Masculindians* is an important and much needed contribution to the field and should be read in the spirit in which it seems to have been made, with openness, humour and patience.

References

Hokuwhitu, Brendan. 2014. "Embodied Masculinity and Sport." In *Masculindians, Conversations about Indigenous Manhood*, by Sam McKegney, 98-108. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.