Making it Like a Man

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As a social scientist, I have taught and published mostly within gender and women’s studies venues, although my current appointment is as Chair of the Counselor Education Department within a Faculty of Education. I offer this disclosure in order to clarify that I am reviewing this text primarily through psychological and sociological lenses rather than from cultural or literary studies perspectives. This also explains why earlier this term I was at a regular meeting of students and faculty engaged in educational counseling fieldwork. As attendees were arriving and taking their seats, I was sorting through the items retrieved from my departmental mailbox. The simple brown envelope was unremarkable in this context; thus when I extracted Ramsay’s book from it I shared the surprise of one of my female colleagues, who let out an involuntary gasp upon sight of one of two cover photographs. It is of a naked man of approximately thirty to forty years of age reclining on a flowered tapestry or carpet and holding a vacuum cleaner laid strategically to cover his genitals, the handle of which is held much as if a shotgun were there instead. Embarrassed, I hastened the book back into its package and explained to her that I had been asked to review it and hadn’t seen it until then (I learned later from the front matter that this cover photograph is derived from an art installation entitled, “On Technologies of Man’s Sensuality”).

One cannot overstate the importance of context, and in this case the aforementioned cover photograph was an intrusion that reminded me of the common critique of men’s taking of both physical and metaphorical space. It is arguably both remarkable and appropriate that even the cover of such a text would be confrontational, conjuring up amusement, shame, hesitation, and boldness before one even begins to read its contents. For me this was a notable experience because as a man I often think about this topic conceptually rather than experiencing it viscerally. For this reason, I already appreciated Ramsay’s book for having the promise of teaching me something consequential before I opened it. Having now read it, my assumption proved to be correct. This text is an elegant and interesting collection of illustrations, cases, and analyses of mundane and dramatic locations—particularly but not exclusively literary ones—associated with Canadian and masculine habitus.

I hesitate to belabour the cover, but there is a second photograph (below the first) of the back of an older or elderly Caucasian man in a
dark suit, hands clasped behind him, his attention away from the camera. Whereas the first man (of approximately thirty to forty years of age, of possible Mediterranean ethnicity, medium height, and sturdy build) is looking directly at the camera with an intent if not menacing expression, the second is either disinterested, rude, lost in thought, British, or all four. It occurs to me, particularly after reading the book, that perhaps it is the combination of these two images within the same space that makes it Canadian. It is also illustrative of a major theme in masculinities studies and in this book: the male gaze, understood instrumentally in terms of aspiration, assertion, predation, desire, imagination, and so forth, and/or experienced by others such as through colonization, imperialism, infringement, objectification, and intimidation, among other forms. This range of real and metaphorical gazing is explored throughout the text in some very intriguing ways.

For instance, in the chapter entitled, “‘Keepin’ It Real’? Masculinity, Indigeneity, and Media Representations of Gangsta Rap in Regina,” Marsh examines thorny intersections between masculinity, race, poverty, urbanity, youth, and other aspects of hip hop culture, particularly from and about the perspectives of First Nations member and rap musician Robin Favel (aka Burden). The documentary examples (for example, news clippings, interview narrative) of Favel’s gang-positive and gang-identified viewpoints included within the chapter serve to interrogate ways in which he, his contemporaries, and the subjects of his songs on the one hand and the police and the state on the other might be seen concomitantly as provocateur or victim of violent (and racist) masculinities depending on one’s perspective and context. As a reader, I had a vivid sense of frenetic and at times overwhelming activity and production of masculinity. Yet, in this and the other chapters the authors conduct their analyses methodically and accessibly. This is a strength of the text overall and something I particularly appreciated as one who does not have a background in the literature examined.

This book is part of Wilfred Laurier University Press’s Cultural Studies Series, and the publisher includes a brief definition of the discipline as “the multi- and inter-disciplinary study of culture, defined anthropologically as a ‘way of life,’ performatively as symbolic practice, and ideologically as the collective product of varied media and cultural industries” (front matter). While there are many books about masculinities, their origins and performances, and several Canadian ones (including my own), Ramsay demonstrates quite adeptly that there are infinite locations and angles from which to approach these subjects. As a social scientist, I particularly
appreciated the way in which an explicitly interdisciplinary field such as cultural studies might engage these subjects in contrast to how one of its constituent disciplines might do so individually.

Readers are encouraged to begin with Ramsay’s introduction, in which she carefully explains her objectives and the approaches taken in developing the book and provides a very thoughtful and thorough socio-historical account of the study of masculinities in the Western world generally and in the Canadian context particularly. Ramsay indicates “the individual authors in *Making it Like a Man* have come together to advance ideas about the practice of masculinities through a specifically Canadian geographical imagination, interrogating how our local/regional/national/transnational symbols and practices are gendered ‘masculine’” (xx).

There are five sections of between two and four chapters each (fifteen in total and well-suited to course adoption). The first section, “Identity, Agency, and Manliness in the Colonial and the National” contains an especially fascinating chapter by Jarett Henderson in which historical analysis of early (1870 to 1901) immigration handbooks articulated an emergent Canadian masculine hegemony and physicality rooted in British imperialism.

I have written elsewhere about the difficulty of pursuing a coherent or conclusive definition of masculinity (Canadian or otherwise), in one instance employing an analogy to determining the existence of space aliens, Bigfoot, or the Loch Ness Monster. We make casts of footprints, produce grainy photographs, recall direct encounters, point to symbols, and curate collections of evidentiary artifacts, but we have not yet and might never prove anything other than the existence of a collective and contested debate. Having worked and lived in both Canada and the United States, I was especially impressed with the time, effort, and humility enacted to excavate Canadian lenses on the subject matter in Ramsay’s book. This was assuredly not an easy task. Like many cultural products, “Canadian” is an amalgam of ideologies embedded with power hierarchies and hegemonic expressions. Ramsay and the contributing authors have provided wonderful fodder for us as we contend with this mess together, and I greatly appreciate the opportunity to review this fine collection and the learning derived from doing so.

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