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## Masculindians: Conversations About Indigenous Manhood by Sam McKegney

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***Masculindians: Conversations about Indigenous Manhood*** by **SAM MCKEGNEY**  
Uof Manitoba P, 2014 \$29.95

Reviewed by **P. KELLY MITTON**

We in the field of Indigenous masculinity studies have to become like magicians; we have to think about where Indigenous men have come from, where we are going, and the way we continue to face assaults on our identities, our sexualities, our bodies.

– Niigaawewidam James Sinclair

*Masculindians: Conversations about Indigenous Manhood* is a volume of 22 intimate conversations between Sam McKegney and a set of influential “Indigenous artists, critics, activists, and elders.” The series of compelling interviews are organized into three sections of interconnected themes: Wisdom, Knowledge, and Imagination. The interviews reflect a combination of creative and critical reflections blending memoir and story. Perhaps because a large body of scholarship, up until now, has focused on vital issues surrounding gender equity, Indigenous womanhood, and violence against women, little academic attention has been paid in earnest to Indigenous masculinity. As a result, McKegney’s project arose from his observation that there was an urgent need to discuss the under-examined sites of Indigenous manhood altered by colonial institutions and technologies. The interview format creates a meeting place of compelling ideas about masculinity theorized through the Indigenous intellectual traditions of the contributors.

A reoccurring theme throughout the interviews is how colonization ruptured the

traditional and sacred practices of men in Indigenous societies and negatively altered their relationships with women, gender, family, governance, community, and land. As Taiaiake Alfred points out in “Reimagining Warriorhood,” the intent of the colonial project was to “impose cultural practices and to impose worldviews that come from Europe on Indigenous peoples. . . . [P]atriarchy and the subjugation of women were at the forefront of that culture.” What all of the contributors make clear is that Western worldviews have caused men’s traditional relationships to be out of balance.

In “Remembering the Sacredness of Men,” Kim Anderson touches on the issue of women’s subjugation as a result of imposed patriarchy. She tells us it is the work of women that has been pivotal in creating social justice and improving children’s lives. Yet she emphasizes that women’s liberation from patriarchal oppression and violence cannot be achieved independently from men. Anderson importantly asks, what would decolonization look like for Indigenous manhood; and she wonders: “Where do men fit in this? What are their roles? How do we honour them?” Anderson’s work thinks about the possibilities of creating new sites for men to reclaim their sacred place in balance with women and children, but outside of patriarchy.

Many contributors in this collection believe that in order for Indigenous men to decolonize their masculinities they must reclaim their traditional masculine roles. In “Manhood through Vulnerability,” Joseph Boyden notes that many men today “have lost what their grandfathers had, which was hunting skills and fishing skills and the ability to feed your family and to play a very active and important and strong role of

quiet leadership in your family.” Similarly, in “Where are the Men?” Janice C. Hill Kanonhsyonni discusses how Mohawk men have been impacted by colonization because the “Indian Act” severed their traditional roles of governance: locally, regionally, and internationally. But despite the ruptures in certain traditional practices, Lee Maracle importantly points to how Stó:lo culture has not been elided by colonization. She states, “Just because you take away the means of making sense of a culture doesn’t mean that the culture changes.” And Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair discusses the power of “ceremony” in culture to resist imposed colonial worldviews. He describes how the Anishinaabe mark the rite of passage of young men as they move into adulthood. During the ritual, they are educated

about community, their bodies, and the hard work it takes to have healthy relationships with everyone and everything around them. When they return to community, they often come back changed, grown up a little, and interested in enacting the senses of connection they learned while out on the land: They are initiated into manhood.

Each of the contributors in *Masculindians* makes it clear that capitalistic colonial economies, technologies, and institutions have distanced men from their traditional work and roles. However, their stories also tell us how men and women have the power to transcend colonial impositions through reclaiming their traditional ways of knowing.

Provocatively, Brendan Hokowhitu counters the idea of a traditional masculinity as an ideal to return to. In

“Embodied Masculinity and Sport,” he challenges the notion men must reclaim a “pre-modern” identity in order to dismantle patriarchy. Hokowhitu reminds us Indigenous masculinities, like cultures, evolve. He believes that “Indigenous communities have to decide what cultural formations are holding us back, and what are still relevant in terms of fighting neo-colonialism.” Hokowhitu’s view that a decolonized masculine identity need not be predicated upon traditional masculine roles certainly offers alternate ways for men and women to think about what achieving a decolonized Indigenous manhood could look like.

In “After and Towards,” Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair recommends to McKegney that for future conversations he should speak with men at the “grassroots” and young men who have experienced “abuse and poverty, policy and law, and how they have overcome these forces” in order to include their theories of masculinity. My own suggestion for McKegney’s book is that it may have benefitted by providing positive examples of the young men and teenagers who are making enormous differences within their communities and do model healthy Indigenous masculinities, which is necessary if we are considering some of the conversations that discuss gangs and youth violence and suicide. As Hokowhitu reminds us, when we think about masculinity we must “look for complexity . . . as opposed to the simplistic answers. The thing to keep in our minds is the risk of pathologizing Indigenous masculinity.” It is significant, though, that *Masculindians* is not a book about tragic masculinities. Rather, the contributors share compelling stories of beautiful and healthy masculinities disrupted by colonization. Their stories

speak of resilience and resistance and resurgence. What we glean from these interviews is that dysfunctional masculinities arise from patriarchy and other neo-colonial forces.

The strengths of *Masculindians: Conversations about Indigenous Manhood* are found in the numerous ways in which the contributors offer ideas for positive models of masculinity as alternatives through which to decolonize patriarchal masculinities. While all the examples are important, a few stand out for me. Lee Maracle talks about resisting colonial ideologies through having “a *communitas* sensibility.” She asserts, “We’ve gone back to who we always are and who we always will be.” And Niigaanwewiidam James Sinclair shows us masculinity, in part, is about an ethics of fatherhood. Tomson Highway tells us that masculinity is about embracing “femininity” and “pantheism.” For Neal McLeod, accepting “responsibility for your life” is vital. And for Joseph Boyden, “part of being a man is admitting that you’re vulnerable.” Throughout the

interviews, McKegney asks the contributors about the power of art and if it can play a key role in decolonizing masculinity. In response, Richard Van Camp sees the enormous healing potential in literature and art. He believes “there is great medicine in writing.” Whereas Louise Bernice Halfe explains, “art doesn’t heal you. It’s your own action and process and insight and willingness that heals you.” All of the ideas offered in *Masculindians* show that this book promises to have groundbreaking potential for revolutionizing the ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can think about “dismantling patriarchy” in order to embrace healthy masculinities and create healthy communities.

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