Doing and Undoing Masculinity

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In June, 1958, the Second Narrows Bridge in Vancouver collapsed during construction. Eighteen people died. One of the many wounded was 22-year-old ironworker George Schmidt, who fell, along with mounds of mangled steel, into the Burrard Inlet. A Vancouver newspaper told his story with eloquent simplicity: "He took off his belt and made a tourniquet around his thigh. Then he lit a cigarette. He smoked it and waited and finally two men came along and lifted him out of the mangled steel into a rowboat. 'Thanks fellas' is all that he said."

For historian Christopher Dummitt, the Second Narrows Bridge collapse is an iconic event in post World War Two history, and men like George Schmidt are similarly central actors. Bridges are made of concrete, steel, technological know-how and brute strength. The failure of such a sophisticated combination provoked what Dummit, in his perceptive study, *The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada*, calls a "moment of modernist crisis." But narrative proved itself even more powerful than steel and concrete. By turning the bridge collapse into a celebration of the rugged masculinity of men such as Schmidt, the relentless optimism of the postwar era marched on, and masculinity inserted itself at the head of the parade.

Dummit's *The Manly Modern*, Paul Jackson's *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military During World War Two*, and Sherene Razack's *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping and the New Imperialism*, are all works which take the ubiquity of men – particularly in locations such as the battle field, the construction site, and the sporting event – and ask us to consider their presence as a product of history rather than merely a fact of life. It has been some years since historian Joan Scott famously asked us to consider gender as both "the social organization of sexual difference" and "a primary means of signifying relationships of power." These insights – hugely important two decades ago – are almost taken for granted in and out of the seminar room these days. Indeed, when he taunted the Democrats as "economic girlie men" at the Republican Convention in 2004, no less an authority on masculinity than Arnold Schwarzenegger was at once performing the schoolyard bully *and* illustrating the complex connections between gender and political discourse.

Of course men have been hiding in plain sight in our history books for centuries. All of these books indicate that, with a little bit of probing by sensitive historians, the men we thought we knew (and about whom some of us, inspired instead by the history of women, had begun saying 'enough already') become unusually interesting. Paul Jackson tells the remarkable story of the presence of gay men, and queer sensibilities, in the Canadian Armed Forces during World War Two. The book is based on a prodigious amount of pioneering research in Canadian military records (begun as a dissertation project I had the pleasure of co-supervising at Queen's). Jackson relies, in equal measure, on the archives of homophobic persecution, such as courts martial and psychiatric assessments of homosexuals, and on extensive discussions with veterans, gay and straight, themselves. His extensive skills as an oral historian are evident in the book and especially in the National Film Board documentary based on this work, *Open Secrets*. Nothing melts even the stoniest anti-gay heart faster than interviews with octogenarian gay male couples (believe me; I've used this film in huge intro classes), particularly when they so sweetly recount their dramatic tales of heroism and persecution.

As usual, the oral history record enriches and confounds the official narrative; the men Jackson found were keen to tell their stories of sexual adventures in foreign climates, making the Canadian Forces seem occasionally like one big Pride Day party. It's a complicated story. The Forces sponsored transvestite entertainers, and used the remarkably homoerotic artwork of painters like Grant Macdonald in its self-presentation. At the same moment, enormous psychic and material damage was inflicted on those gay men unfortunate enough to be caught: some were incarcerated in prisons or psychiatric institutions, others tossed out of the military without pension or benefits. Try searching for the history of the gay or lesbian soldier in Canada's beautiful new War Museum. Last time I checked, their splendid, well-stocked bookstore didn't even carry this book.

Christopher Dummitt uses several case studies from post World War Two Vancouver (including his strongest, the bridge collapse) to argue for a rethinking of some basic, taken-for-granted concepts in modern Canadian history. The relentless, optimistic modernism of the era, he suggests, is unintelligible without an understanding of the dynamics of gender. It's not that gender hierarchies were a recent invention. Rather, according to Dummitt, in the post World War Two era, "beliefs in the differences between men and women not only persisted, but also

expressed themselves in new ways. The ideology of manly modernism acted as one of the main ways through which some Vancouverites re-inscribed men's privilege in the basic social language of postwar life." Dummitt evokes the iconic voice of authority in Canadian radio journalism, Lorne Greene: "steady, calm, authoritative, and male." Fifty years later, he notes, such voices seem funny; we adopt deep, sonorous tones only to mock them. What was it, Dummitt asks, about the postwar era that made masculinity authority so certain and believable?

Sherene Razack's Dark *Threats and White Knights* offers another layer to this question: what made the voice of *white* masculine authority so believable? Razack's study of modern Canadian peacekeeping, specifically the combined stories of Romeo Dallaire and Rwanda, as well as what became known as "the Somalia Affair" is one of the most significant books by a Canadian academic in years. The book is, as she explains, a "story about race and the masculinities that make the nation white." At once a study of the military, gender, race and the nation, Razack asks us to consider how our deep investment — not to mention pleasure — in the moral high ground has created a narrative of national identity which has the power to make other stories, such as the torture and murder of Somali children by Canadian soldiers, disappear.

"A Canadian," she writes, "knows herself or himself as someone who comes from the nicest place on earth, as someone from a peacekeeping nation, and as a modest, self-deprecating individual who is able to gently teach Third World Others about civility." She argues her counter proposal — that peacekeeping constitutes instead a colour line, with civilized white nations standing on one side and uncivilized Third World nations standing on the other — with clarity and precision. Seldom have Canadians been asked, so persuasively, to rearrange their thinking about their place in the world.

Let us never underestimate the power of our beloved national narrative of niceness. Consider this example: last summer I found myself on a train from New York heading back to Canada. Reading another of journalist Jane Mayer's insightful and chilling *New Yorker* articles about the U.S. government's use of torture — this time the C.I.A.'s secret interrogation program in so-called "black sites" around the world — I permitted myself a moment of nationalist pleasure. No matter that I love to visit New York, I give thanks that this train is heading north, that I will shortly cross a border, that I live in another, quietly superior, country. I know better than this, but my reaction to the horrors of this tale of U.S. government-sponsored torture took the form of a visceral sense of relief that I am being propelled towards Canada. I pay for this visit to the moral high ground the next morning, when I wake up to a *Globe and Mail* headline that tells me Canadian authorities knew full well that the Americans wanted the Syrians to "have their way with" Maher Arar. This jaunty, sexualized language, and my own recent indulgence in the myth of Canadian niceness, combine to produce another physical sensation, which I feel in my stomach, the opposite of relief. Serves me right.

So why are we so willing to believe in the voice of masculine expertise, even as the bridge collapses? Why is the lure of Canadian innocence and anti-conquest still so strong? All of these books insist that gender, our deeply held beliefs about women and men, which we carry from the familial to the imperial realm, must form part of the answer to the question of how hegemonies are created and sustained. Yet like any other discourse, gender is incomplete, and can come undone. Here I return to Paul Jackson's extensive use of oral histories with gay soldiers, all of them marvellous testimonials to life under the radar. "I was like a kid visiting a Laura Secord store," is how one gay veteran described his first visit to war-time London, as he reminisced about his evenings of sexual adventure with soldiers from all the Allied countries; multiple partners, multiple evenings. If this isn't a complete undoing of his era's discourses of manliness and militarism, nothing is.

I wish Sherene Razack had extended her considerable analytical reach to include oral testimony, my sole complaint about her book. She takes familiar refuge in the postmodern refrain — she is less interested in the experiences of individuals than the way their stories are assembled as public. But surely individuals are present at, (and even contribute to), the creation of their own narratives. Had she interviewed Canadian soldiers, for example, she might have met someone like I did recently, who noticed me reading Melanie McAllister's *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, an excellent synthesis of cultural studies and foreign policy I wish Canadian foreign relations scholars might attend to. I explained, to his question, that it was a book about how we get from Charleton Heston's Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, to tanks in the desert in Iraq (drawing on the book's cover images). "Well sure, Hollywood is just a propaganda factory for U.S. foreign policy," the young, uniformed soldier replied, happily blowing several of my stereotypes to tiny bits. It's in these spaces, between the doing and the undoing of gender, that these books reside. There's potential for many more.

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