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Masculinities and Other Hopeless Causes at an All-Boys Catholic School

Kevin J. Burke

New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2011

171 pages, \$34.95 (paperback), \$129.95 (hardcover)

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In Kevin J. Burke's *Masculinities and Other Hopeless Causes at an All-Boys Catholic School*, masculinity is closely examined in a single-gendered, religious environment. As a work in critical autoethnography, Burke uses a postmodern, feminist framework to analyze discursive data related to the construction of masculinity with a focus on individual agency and environmental influence (i.e., St. Monica high school). The main issue under examination is the way young men navigate and co-construct emerging manhood and the role of single-gendered schooling in normalizing traditional masculinity. Readers wanting to learn about the construction of positive and compassionate masculinity will want to look elsewhere. Nonetheless, in the book Burke accomplishes what he set out to do—to explicate the mechanisms that give rise to traditional masculinity within Catholic education.

Burke lays the groundwork for his analysis in chapters 1 to 3 with clarity and brevity. By immersing himself in St. Monica and in the school lives of several boys, Burke is able to interrogate masculinity in a reflexive process. Methodologically, *Masculinities and Other Hopeless Causes* is based on a constructionist paradigm. However, Burke emphasizes that unlike other constructionists, he believes there is more “play in the power and resistance present” (p. 96) among boys that helps shape masculinity. In other words, Burke advocates for a less static masculinity. Apropos to his view, Burke uses on-the-spot discussions (flash interviews) to highlight the rapid construction of masculinity as it occurs around him, much of it aggressively playful in type. In chapter 4 Burke brings into focus “fagging”—behavior among the boys concerned with tagging each other as “fags” and finding creative ways for “getting the fag off of oneself and onto another” (p. 73). As readers will come to see, “fagging” at St. Monica often times took the form of verbal slights

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aimed at another's sex/sexuality, highlighting the quick and sharp linguistic facility that was essential to masculinity among the boys at the school.

In chapter 5, Burke expands on how masculinity in a single-gendered context develops in the absence of female students, namely the assumption among boys of (innate) gender differences. For Burke, the absence of girls ultimately teaches the boys that “women are just fundamentally different beings” (p. 98), so different that straightforward discussions of sex were rare at the school, much of it characterized instead by the frequent use of euphemisms. Burke insightfully notes: at St. Monica, “the boys... worked within the frame through discursive traditions, pushing at the edges of acceptability, manufacturing and repacking difference that has already been sold to them through the very separatist structure of the school” (p. 95). Burke explains that the discourse of manhood at St. Monica essentially helps elevate perceived differences in gender, and also stifles authentic expressions of emotions, discussed in chapter 6. There, Burke takes a critical look at the popular retreat known as Kairos. Readers will learn how that institutionalized tradition underwrites a masculine ideology characterized by compartmentalized and inauthentic expression of affect. Burke states: “what they [the boys] miss most... after their time in leaving Kairos... is the open community where it is finally safe to be vulnerable, to be effeminate in the sense of being emotionally available, and to ‘find’ oneself” (p. 133).

By the end of *Masculinities and Other Hopeless Causes*, Burke shows how the boys at St. Monica take an active role in constructing manhood—a manhood predicated largely on misogyny and anti-gay sentiments. Burke contributes to the literature on men and masculinity a critical portrait of the agents (e.g., “fagging”) involved in the construction of manhood. More importantly, Burke manages to bring to light the role of Catholic schooling in shaping gendered schemas. Factors like Kairos are conceptualized as constricting masculinity, making it, like masculinity itself, a hopeless cause. But it is single-gendered education that emerges as the most troubling context. Girls at St. Monica, as Burke plainly notes, “...would only bring complication to a simple environment where guys can just be guys” (p. 107). He states:

The fundamental split in gender relations sold and constantly reinforced by the notion and practice of single-sex education has served to grid troubling... assumptions of physical and emotional differences between boys and girls, men and women, such that separation is seen as... natural and even necessary. (p. 94)

Manhood construction in the absence of female peers is understood to be problematic, emotionally and otherwise since

it is not a stretch... to imagine how these forms of affection can/do become extended to the kind of discourse of physical, emotional, and mental (most often, gendered) violence that relies on an 'I hit you because I love you' line of reasoning/abuse to justify itself. (p. 148)

Burke's findings and conclusions align with the extant literature on traditional forms of masculinity. Here, in fact, is where Burke remains closely tethered to leading constructionists. While *Masculinities and Other Hopeless Causes* sheds light on the individual agency displayed by boys when doing masculinity, it does little to advance a multidimensional view of manhood above and beyond the dominant, hegemonic type (unfortunate given Burke's observations of emerging loyalty and brotherhood among the boys). Nonetheless, *Masculinities and Other Hopeless Causes* gives readers a fuller understanding of the mechanisms that help shape traditional masculinity in an all-boys Catholic context. The author's findings highlight the dynamic nature of dominant masculinity and the potential for religious schooling to influence that dynamic. Burke does not explicitly offer solutions in his book, however bringing significant reform to the practice of single-gendered schooling is likely at the top of his list. In this way, Burke's work is courageous and will usefully serve readers seeking to critically reflect on Catholic education and its gendered traditions.

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