Conceptualizing an Ethology of Masculinities: Do We Know What Masculinities Can Do?

Terrance H. McDonald

Abstract
Rather than a definition or redefinition of masculinity, or masculinities, this article asks what can masculinities do? To explore this question, I map the possibilities that Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of immanence offer masculinities theory. Through a theoretical encounter with Deleuze, Guattari, Spinoza, and Gatens, I seek to open up an alternative conceptualization of masculinities that moves away from morality—transcendent judgments of good or bad—and toward an ethics that privileges our capacities for affecting and being affected. While masculinities studies and gender theory has proposed related notions concerning gender fluidity and resisting gender binaries, this article proposes an alternative through Deleuze’s and Gatens’ readings of Spinoza’s *Ethics* that radically challenges the mind–body split that informs traditional lineages of Western philosophy. What is at stake for this essay is the ability to conceive of masculinities as creative force with no allegiance to the male body other than its capacity to affect or be affected.

Keywords
philosophies of immanence, masculinities, Deleuze, Guattari, Spinoza, Gatens, ethology

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1 Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Terrance H. McDonald, Brock University, 1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1.
Email: terrance.mcdonald@brock.ca
Introduction

Deleuze and Guattari (2012) state, “There is no becoming-man because man is the molar entity par excellence” (p. 322). This could be the end of a Deleuzian masculinities theory because, for Deleuze and Guattari, “man” is construed in terms of a strict and oppressive identity (the molar entity they identify) rather than masculinities conceptualized as a creative experiencing and experimenting with subjectivities (what a Deleuzian would identify as molecular or even a line of flight). Man is majoritarian and “implies a state of domination” (Deleuze and Guattari 2012, 321), which is directly connected to centuries of patriarchy, where white men sought to exclude and retain power in society. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari propose that we need to experiment with a becoming that is minoritarian, which is not to become or identify with a minority (what they would call a reterritorialization) but rather to take our identities apart by continuously exploring subjectivities beyond the confines of the rigid boundaries imposed on our identity as men, as human, and beyond (what they would call a deterritorialization). Their statement that “there is no becoming-man” can be read as signaling the impossibility of applying Deleuze and Guattari’s experimental thinking to masculinities studies. However, this essay aims to pick up this challenge and move toward a Deleuzian theory of masculinities that is informed by philosophies of immanence and Spinoza’s Ethics. I argue that it is a misunderstanding to reach the conclusion that a gender theory inspired by Deleuze and Guattari is impossible. In fact, there is a cluster of feminist theory that actively engages with Deleuze.¹ I will argue that Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophies of immanence, including feminist adaptations of this theoretical framework (e.g., Braudotti, Grosz, Colebrook) and related Spinozist feminists (e.g., Gatens, Lloyd), allow gender studies to further an understanding of masculinities as ex post facto culturally, socially, and historically constructed as a priori male. Therefore, Deleuze and Guattari state that “there is no becoming-man” because we construct men not through an immanent experiencing of becoming but through a transcendent ideal that is produced through a retroactive judgment of what constitutes a man. Thus, we can also account for the shifting definitions of what a man embodies through a Deleuzian/Spinozist theoretical lens that recognizes that these definitions are always written after the fact. Therefore, my essay seeks to open up an alternative conceptualization of masculinities through Deleuze and Spinoza that moves away from morality, transcendent judgments of good or bad, and toward a Deleuzian/Spinozist ethics that privileges our capacities for affecting and being affected. What is at stake for this essay is the ability to conceive of masculinities as creative force with no allegiance to the male body other than its capacity to affect or be affected by it.

My essay explores the ways that philosophies of immanence can open up paths that break through the transcendent ideals of masculinity. While the work of Deleuze

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and Guattari is increasingly relevant for various theoretical fields, philosophies of immanence are not always understood as an alternative philosophical lineage. From Spinoza to Nietzsche to Bergson, Deleuze’s philosophical project maps a break from Western traditions based on the dialectic or the negative. There is hardly the adequate space here to outline this project—it would be an essay in itself—but it is important to grasp Deleuze’s philosophy as attempting a radical rethinking of philosophy that avoids dualisms and binaries. For Deleuze and Guattari (1994), “The plane of immanence is not a concept that is or can be thought but rather the image of thought, the image thought gives itself of what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one’s bearings in thought” (p. 37). There is a radical undoing of the privileging of the mind over the body—the tradition of Western philosophy—that Deleuze and Guattari develop from Spinoza as a way of challenging this Western philosophical tradition. As a result of this undoing, they do not uphold an outside meaning or a preexisting hierarchical explanation of things and their value, which is a transcendent meaning or significance. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari encourage experimentation and exploration, which can create new concepts and new modes of being that are immanent and therefore meaning or significance in any moment is unique to every moment or event. They do not see the possibility of completeness, such as an ideal model one can become or set of laws that can always say what is right, rather they envision that the plane of immanence is always forming new concepts and bodies that are always embracing new becomings. Transcendent ideals of masculinity are any preconceived models of what masculinity should be, which is rejected by philosophies of immanence that reveal we can have no set model for what masculinities should be or who should embody them—I will develop this more throughout the essay.

My main argument here is that instead of working toward transcendent ideals of masculinity that continually defer and deny embodiment, I propose that we consider masculinities as creative force, which resists definition by its capacity to affect and be affected. I state that these transcendent ideals of masculinity continually defer and deny embodiment precisely because any model given to us from the illusion of a transcendent outside meaning or ideal can never be achieved. As we are ever changing and shifting, it is impossible to ever remain stable enough to achieve an ideal. Therefore, by reconsidering masculinities as creative force, which is to say as acts that affect and are affected by other bodies, then we can embrace the dynamic uncertainty of becoming rather than attempting to restrict someone to a rigid form. Spinoza (1996) states in the Ethics that “By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections” (p. 70). If we understand affect as increasing or diminishing the body’s power of acting as well as the ideas of these affections, this allows us to grasp how transcendent ideals of masculinity can restrain because our inability to completely embody them frustrate and upset us. As a result, our power of acting is diminished and restrained, as we have fewer possibilities for acting if we are restricted to a closed set of appropriate and
available options. This also allows us to grasp how it is not simply another human body that can increase or diminish our power of acting but also discourses about bodies, our own ideas about our bodies, and any interactions with beings or things and the ideas that arise from these interactions.

This approach opens up an alternative theoretical conception of masculinities that breaks with much of the psychoanalytic theory informing masculinities studies. Therefore, instead of using an ideal, a model, or a solution, this thinking would collapse masculinity, as transcendent, into a plane of immanence, where masculinity would no longer be a concept, but masculinities would be always what they have yet to become and already other than what they are because they are always in flux. In “Immanence: A Life,” Deleuze (2005) states that “Immanence is not related to Some Thing as a unity superior to all things or to a Subject as an act that brings about a synthesis of things: it is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence” (p. 27). By thinking within the tradition of Spinozist monism, an inspiration for Deleuze’s plane of immanence, I reject dialectical oppositions that structure masculinities and I refuse all forms of a transcendent that would uphold an ideal masculinity.

Transcendent Ideals in Popular Cinema

We can witness the problematic outcomes produced by transcendent ideals of masculinity in two American films from the turn of the millennium: Fight Club (1999) and Psycho (2000). These films follow male protagonists desperately trying to embody ideals promoted by a consumer culture. Each protagonist, in Fight Club Jack the narrator (Edward Norton) and in American Psycho Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale), undergo a psychological struggle in their attempt to force their being into ideal models that defer and deny embodiment. For Jack in Fight Club, this initially involves the pursuit of a complete wardrobe and a luxury apartment with all the comforts of modern living. For Patrick Bateman in Psycho, this involves a rigorous morning workout and skin care routine, the possession of a number of luxury material goods, and status symbols that he wishes will arouse the jealousy of his friends and peers. Both of these men, Jack and Patrick, turn to extremely violent behavior to counter the frustrations they experience due to their inability to embody transcendent ideals. What is problematic about the actions of these two protagonists is not their frustration and, at least in Fight Club, the rejection of transcendent ideals promoted by consumerism but their turn to patriarchal ideals of male combat and the objectification of women in an attempt to gain a sense of power following their inability to embody transcendent ideals of consumerist masculinity. It is precisely the characters’ embracing of one transcendent ideal after another that demonstrates that it is the pursuit of an ideal that structures masculine subjectivities. However, an immanent ethics has the capacity to open up this transcendent structure through the exploration of what masculinities can do as opposed to what masculinities should be according to any ideal whatsoever.
Through Deleuze, Guattari, and Spinoza, I recognize that in *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden’s (Jack’s alter ego) call to reject consumerism sounds like a potential path toward resistance, but it becomes critical to recall the social phenomenon that sprouted from the film—many young men creating their own fight clubs and trying to dress/act like Brad Pitt’s character. Besides the intertextuality between *Fight Club* and Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (2004) in terms of taking back “traditional” hunter–gatherer masculinity, Tyler Durden advances this dialectical opposition to consumerism in consumerist terms. Initially, you begin by burning your IKEA furniture and starting a fight club in a basement, and then the next step is buying a pair of leather pants at a trendy boutique and buying a gym membership to sculpt the perfect abdominal muscles—or worse, your name is Robert Paulson. By constructing an ideal, even if it is an ideal framed as a counter ideal to commodified or hegemonic masculinity, such a movement becomes reinscribed back into the coordinates of consumption. Initially, you are wearing old clothes and listening to unpopular music, and then the next step is shopping at the hippest thrift stores and purchasing a fixed gear bike. Deleuze (1995) recognizes that “marketing is now the instrument of social control and produces the arrogant breed who are our masters” (p. 181). In this new society of control, it becomes difficult, and perhaps impossible, to use one’s identity as a site of resistance or challenge because all radical models eventually become overcoded with marketing and products to suit a lifestyle.

The one advantage we have in this society of control is that we are free to move, however, adopting a radical identity as solely a site of resistance is no longer a protest against the system as in the institutional society that precedes the society of control because forms of resistance are themselves commodified. The potential way out is continuous fluctuation or, to put it another way, the embracing of an ongoing negotiation that has no goal to completely negotiate. It is not a bad idea to leave behind your office job and embrace some homosocial bonding: it is an experiment. However, to assume this practice could become a solution in itself is problematic. Then you get rules to Fight Club. You get a set of products tailored to this lifestyle. You get a new identity to replace the old one that was previously shed. When I state that we should embrace that we do not know what masculinities can do, I am not talking about *the* Patrick Bateman, from the film *American Psycho*, waiting to emerge with the perfect business card and a reservation at the elitist restaurant Dorsia. I am not talking about giving yourself lye burns and sculpting the perfect abdominal muscles, as in *Fight Club*. I am not talking about achieving high scores, being all that you can be, realizing one’s true potential, or even winning. Why? Because, instead of working toward transcendent ideals of masculinity that continually defer and deny embodiment, this thinking proposes that we consider masculinities as creative force, which resists definition by its capacity to act and continuously become other than it is.

Philosophies of immanence are crucial to the development of an ethology of masculinities because an immanentist methodology moves toward what masculinities can do as opposed to what masculinity has been or should be. I use
philosophies of immanence to reconceptualize masculinities as infinite possibilities that escape transcendent or universal hierarchies as opposed to a structuring or restructuring of masculinity. This is, in some ways, an alternative to current projects within masculinities studies that look for ways to understand current issues facing men and then examine ways that men can change, understand their experiences as men, and, perhaps, embrace a masculinity that is less violent (Kimmel 2013; Reeser 2010; Edwards 2006; Buchbinder 2013). As Kimmel (2013) states, “The era of unquestioned and unchallenged male entitlement is over” (pp. xi–xii). Kimmel argues that American men need either to change, which involves accepting a world of increasing equality and relinquishing expectations of power and privilege, or to use Kimmel’s (2013) words, “be dragged kicking and screaming into that future” (p. xii). This is a restructuring of masculinity par excellence which determines that certain characteristics of a masculinity be negated and new characteristics be adopted in order to produce a “better” masculinity. While this appears to be a positive step, and no one can deny the genuine attempt that Kimmel makes to rethink masculinity and masculinities, he is still appealing to morals. I argue there is a more generative way to conceptualize masculinities through Spinoza’s Ethics.

From Morality to Ethics

What is the difference between morals and ethics? While the two terms are sometimes considered synonyms for one another, for Spinoza and Deleuze, the two are radically different. Deleuze reads Spinoza’s Ethics as distinguishing between a transcendent system of morals and an immanent ethics. In Spinoza: Practical Philosophy, Deleuze (1988) states: “Ethics, which is to say, a typology of immanent modes of existence, replaces Morality, which always refers existence to transcendent values. Morality is the judgment of God, the system of Judgment. But ethics overthrows the system of judgment. The opposition of values (Good-Evil) is supplemented by the qualitative difference of modes of existence (good-bad)” (p. 23). The basis for such a shift comes from the recognition that we cannot rely on value systems that impose an a priori distinction forced upon any and all being and action. We cannot rely on morality that determines what is “good” or “bad” in advance because it excludes the difference of each unique moment or event. Traditionally, such a system of morality hailed from religion, but it is also present in many other institutions that establish laws that are assumed to have come from some higher, transcendent order. There is no concern for the specifics of the relations of external and internal forces nor for any particular lived moment or moment to come, but a universal law applied to judge beings and their actions. This shift to ethics determines how modes of existence increase my capacity to persevere or harm my capacity to perseveres. Affect is an important concept for understanding the move from morality to ethics. In the Ethics, Spinoza (1996) states, “By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections” (p. 70).
Thus, if a particular body or bodies have an affect that increases this capacity, then it is generative, but if the affect limits or constrains my body’s ability to persist, then it is toxic. Furthermore, not only can affections arise from our interactions with other bodies but also ideas—for example, discourses or belief systems—that inform these interactions.

Moira Gatens (1996), a Spinozist feminist, helps to clarify this distinction for us: “The ‘good-bad’ morality operating in these cases locates the value—goodness or badness—in the object or class rather than in the relation between the object or the class and the person undergoing the affect” (p. 129). This consideration is important because, for Spinoza, all things strive to prolong their existence as long as possible, which involves the preservation of one’s body by affecting and being affected by other bodies. Furthermore, a body is not restricted to merely human or nonhuman animal bodies, but any bodies that have the capacity to affect or be affected by other bodies. In fact, Spinoza considers the human body to consist of and be supported by a number of bodies. As Spinoza (1996) states, “The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated” (p. 44). What becomes important is not what these individual bodies are, rather it is the relations that any number of bodies enter into in order to increase their power that prolongs existence. Therefore, it is less important how I value an object or a class than the relation I have with other bodies and forces that allow my body to preserve its existence. In Spinoza’s Ethics, it is impossible to consider something to be good or bad because this distinction does not tell me what it can do—its capacities to affect me and be affected by me as well as my relations with it. What we strive for then are communities that generate creative force that give me the greatest and sustained experience of joy. As a result, I will want to avoid bodies that create toxic environments that limit my capacity to act and attempt to destroy my body.

Spinoza’s conception of mind and body is radically different from that of Descartes and other philosophers who privilege the mind over the body and see them as separate. This radical difference occurs through Spinoza’s monism—his view that everything is of one substance—that leads him to understand mind and body as intimately connected, and he does not favor one over the other. As Gatens (1996) points out, “For Spinoza the body is not part of passive nature ruled over by an active mind but rather the body is the ground of human action. The mind is constituted by the affirmation of the actual existence of the body, and reason is active and embodied precisely because it is the affirmation of a particular bodily existence” (p. 57). This conceptualization of mind and body confronts us with a greater focus on the relations between mind and body as well as our relations with others. Our body responds to certain interactions with other bodies that affect us and thus is always changing. For Gatens (1996), “The Spinozist account of the body is of a productive and creative body which cannot be definitely ‘known’ since it is not identical with itself across time. The body does not have a ‘truth’ or a ‘true’ nature since it is a process and its meaning and capacities will vary according to its context” (p. 57). Therefore, to impose a transcendent morality that is determined
for all bodies fails to account for the particular contexts and relations that have yet to occur. We can never know precisely what our body or another body is because it is in constant fluctuation, as it enters into various relations with other bodies in diverse contexts.

To give a simplistic example, I could impose a rule that the heater in my apartment will never be used after April 30 because my landlord states so. However, the following May is unseasonably cold. There was no way to predict this cold spell when the law was made, but it dictates that I cannot use the heater. My cats are also cold and they make a lot of fuss and noise. While I want to read a book, the situation I find myself in impacts my ability to do so because my fingers are too cold and I have two noisy cats. So I decide to turn on the heater, which warms my apartment making my cats content and allows my fingers to hold my book so that I can read. While this may seem like a trivial example, it serves to demonstrate how context and my relations with other bodies are important. It would not benefit me in that situation to merely claim that my cats are bad for making noise because this fails to take into account our relations. I could have chosen to put the cats outside, temporarily relieving the sadness I was experiencing from their fussing, but I would still be cold. Also, I would later miss the company they provide, and this sadness would greatly affect my capacities for sometime. Of course, there are much more radical, serious, and complex instances to consider. This example, however, demonstrates the inherent inability of a transcendent law to account for what has yet to happen and how the relations I have with other bodies cannot be explained by value judgments. An immanent ethics then would place no law on when one would be permitted to use a heater but would instead consider how this use would impact one’s mode of existence.

Context becomes crucial for an ethics because, as Gatens (1996) states, “historical and sociopolitical conditions can, and do, affect the range of capacities and powers that women and men are able to express. A person’s capacity to affect and to be affected is not determined solely by the body she or he is but also by everything which makes up the context in which that body is acted upon and acts” (p. 131). This demonstrates the impact other bodies can have on our capacities to act and be acted upon. What makes up that context is especially important once we consider that bodies also include discourses and other nonmaterial bodies. Not only then are we affected by and do we affect other physical bodies but also this thinking takes into account our relations with media, language, communication, and other nonmaterial or nonphysical bodies. Therefore, it becomes important to undo or breakdown particular conditions that constrain generative force and we should strive for contexts that allow the greatest number of bodies the capacities to affect and be affected to increase power—power being the ability to sustain existence and allow it to flourish. Predetermining a model for what any particular body should and could do undermines the ability to enter into relations and modes of existence that are most generative. As Gatens has explored, Spinoza’s *Ethics* as well as Deleuzian readings of Spinoza can be particularly generative for gender theory. In what follows I will
explore some preliminarily possibilities for using this thinking to inform an alternative conceptualization of masculinities.

**Masculinities Studies and Immanence**

Philosophies of immanence and the work of masculinities studies theorists—such as Brod, Kimmel, and Connell—share similar views that aim to decentralize men’s experiences as universal. What I posit is a reframing of the theoretical foundations of sociological masculinities theory through philosophies of immanence that emphasize becoming as a creative experiencing to open up new directions in masculinities studies. The key concepts for a masculinities studies theory grounded in philosophies of immanence would not be all that radical. For example, philosophies of immanence could conceptualize masculinity as a hegemonic or transcendent ideal of how men should behave that is imposed by any set of historical, political, or sociocultural conditions. Masculinity then could be taken to be an oppressive or limiting affect on men that attempts to constrain them to an ideal set of codes or behaviors. Conversely, masculinities could be understood as distinct from masculinity—as masculinities studies has worked to establish. We could understand masculinities as Gatens (1996) defines gender from a Spinozist perspective: “the affective powers and affects of such a body” (p. 149). This would not prevent men or women from expressing the affective powers and affects of a particular body, as any particular body could organize itself for masculine or feminine expressions. It does, however, denote certain historical, political, or sociocultural contexts that assume some expressions to be traditionally associated with men or women. Therefore, as Gatens (1996) points out, “The very same behaviours (whether masculine or feminine) could have quite different personal and social significances when acted out by the male subject on the one hand and the female subject on the other” (p. 9). By acknowledging and exploring these relations and the affective powers of gender expressed by different bodies, we can map new ways for unpacking and undoing the limitations that are imposed on our bodies by certain contexts that constrain our generative force.

Despite the recent increase of the codes (actions, behaviors, and appearances) that a strict and oppressive (or hegemonic) masculinity regulates, concepts like Kimmel’s (2013) “aggrieved entitlement” from *Angry White Men* suggest that a patriarchal framework continues to structure expectations for social, cultural, economic, and political institutions. I contend that even if we accept Kimmel’s (2013) view that patriarchy is eroding, masculinity remains a valued set of codes for individuals (regardless of one’s sex) to follow, as it privileges an ideal and permeates all aspects of our lives. Even if we feel as though we are subverting dominant ideals of masculinity through our use of codes that were previously not designated as masculine—we choose to be a stay-at-home dad or we reject the military and grow our hair long to signify our pacifism—masculinity remains as an oppressive form that determines our resistance once we designate it as a transcendent ideal. Instead of looking for a
way to convince men to accept equality, as Kimmel (2013) argues that we should (p. 12), I outline that the classification of any set of male behaviors as preferential among masculinities causes the recreation of a strict and oppressive identity or the molar entity *par excellence*, in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, that implies a state of domination and is majoritarian. Therefore, “there is no becoming-man” because man is considered to be a restrictive category, based on transcendent values, that represses creative experience through the construction of an ideal set of codes labeled masculinity.

Masculinities studies and gender theory produces many approaches that aim to restructure masculinity or theories that seek to understand how new forms of masculinity are emerging—but these theories still champion an ideal even if it differs from a patriarchal one. The work of masculinities studies theorist David Buchbinder (2013) represents this continued championing of an ideal when he states, “we should understand that the dominant form of masculinity was authorized by a patriarchal order that itself resulted as a response to historical and social circumstances. Accordingly, therefore, as historical and social circumstances change, it is likely that new forms of the masculine will come into being, although no doubt slowly and tentatively, and in competition with residual and dominant forms” (p. 177). What this approach overlooks is the fact that a new form of the masculine is still a predetermined set of constraints that dictate what a man should be. Even if the ideal is a sensitive masculinity—and we can without a doubt generally view this “new man” as more favorable in terms of morals than a violent masculinity—it still places limits and constraints on what men should be as well as failing to take into account the difference of these expressions within various relations and contexts. Of course, Buchbinder (2013) makes an important point that we should not overlook the historical and sociopolitical conditions that determine our capacities in any context. However, to simply seek a set of ideals for men that are good through a transcendent morality continues to oppress our generative capacities. The aim of a masculinities theory informed by the ethics of Spinoza and Deleuze is not to say what affective powers and affects are good or bad for particular bodies, rather it asks if these affective powers and affects are generative. We can critique all violent masculinities, but, in some contexts, it is great to have a firefighter smash a car window to save a life. While this affective power should not be limited to a particular sex—female bodies could organize for such affective power—it is more generative to explore modes of existence in specific contexts.

For example, Todd Reeser (2010), a masculinities studies theorist, discusses “positive models of masculinity” and “masculinity operating in a nonhegemonic way” as “moments in which men break or attempt to break their own hold over power and ways in which purely critical views of masculinity can be supplemented by more positive ones” (p. 8). This reinforcing of models and supplementing a negative masculinity with more positive aspects remains a theory and practice committed to transcendent ideals. What goes unquestioned are the constraints and limits a dominant masculinity puts on male bodies as well as the effects this has on
our communities as a whole. Whether these restructured or residual masculinities are competing with an everpresent dominant masculinity or whether the notion of dominant masculinity is completely dissolved and replaced by restructured or residual masculinities, there is still a transcendent ideal prescribing how male bodies should be. By simply replacing a set of expectations with another, we continuously frustrate the potentialities of bodies and fail to qualitatively differentiate modes of existence. This leads us away from understanding the relations between particular bodies and the effect of particular contexts on those relations, which is necessary for creative and affective environments that are generative for sustaining life. Conversely, by only implementing transcendent ideals and morality, we allow toxic environments to persist and we are merely responding after the fact by dispelling violators for being bad. This does not take into account the context or the responsibility of a community to foster conditions that are generative.

**Toward an Ethology of Masculinities**

While Whitehead (2002), Reeser (2010), Evers (2014), and even Connell’s canonical *Masculinities* (2005) speculate about the radical possibilities of Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical framework for masculinities studies, we have yet to see an affirmation of such a project. Of course, given the magnitude of Deleuze’s output—both his independent works and the coauthored works with Guattari—there is a multiplicity of directions such a theoretical framework could take. Throughout this essay, I have considered a shift from morals to ethics in order to overcome the insistence in masculinities studies theory on transcendent ideals. This shift allows us to open the potentialities of what masculinities can make and create—as creative force for experiencing and expanding our capacities rather than limiting and restricting what masculinity should be and can be. What I propose now is a move toward an ethology of masculinities that seeks to map the relations between masculinities, the affective powers and affects of a masculine body, and other bodies. This does not limit a consideration of masculine bodies to that of men; rather, it recognizes that masculinities are “a particular extensive ‘organization’ of the material powers and capacities of a body” that are understood as masculine in terms of historical, political, and sociocultural contexts (Gatens 1996, 149). By making this distinction, we are able to view masculinities as having no allegiance to men other than through historical, political, and sociocultural contexts. However, we also gain the ability to consider how, within certain contexts, masculinities can have different affective powers and affects for a man than they do for a woman as well as for other bodies viewed as masculine—perhaps extending this thinking to the nonhuman realm as well.

This move can have radical implications for exploring the pervasiveness of discourses and the historical, political, and sociocultural contexts for the relationality of bodies. Moira Gatens’s work and Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza are particularly generative for an alternative masculinities studies theory conceptualized as an
ethology. Deleuze (1988) states, "studies ... which define bodies, animals, or humans by the affects they are capable of, founded what is today called ethology. The approach is no less valid for us, for human beings, than for animals, because no one knows ahead of time the affects one is capable of; it is a long affair of experimentation, requiring a lasting prudence, a Spinozan wisdom that implies the construction of a plane of immanence or consistency" (p. 125). I would extend this consideration of bodies to nonmaterial or nonphysical bodies as well. Therefore, we can reject the use of transcendent ideals of masculinity as well as we can have the capacity to map how these discourses affect and are affected by other bodies. By pursuing an understanding of masculinities as the affective powers and affects of a masculine body, we come to explore the relations masculinities have with the world beyond simply the male body. A system of transcendent morals can judge specific men or masculinities to be good or bad, but this tells us nothing of how they are affected by and affect other bodies and other materiality. Furthermore, such a system always seeks to impose a better masculinity to replace the transcendent ideal that was judged to be bad. For example, in Fight Club, Tyler Durden does not lead Jack to consider experimentation with creative force to increase his generative capacity. Rather, Tyler instructs Jack to abandon his consumerist masculinity, based in the transcendent ideals of the perfect apartment and wardrobe, for a violent masculinity, based in the transcendent ideals of a primal nature and anarchy. Both versions of masculinity, the consumerist and the violent, had strict rules and guidelines established by transcendent ideals that predetermined how bodies should be and could be.

The point to be made is that as long as there are predetermined expectations grounded in transcendent ideals for what a body should be, then our creative force will be limited and constrained. I posit that if masculinities are to escape classification by the strict and oppressive category posited by man and enter into a series of constant becomings, then we should risk the hypothesis that masculinities are already all they can ever become. In other words, no matter what we decide that masculinities or femininities are, masculinities cannot be classified as exclusively male a posteriori. This knowledge is apparent because, through experience, we come to understand that nothing deemed masculine is exclusive to men as all bodies can extensively organize their material powers and capacities as masculine. However, what we have yet to sufficiently map is the relations masculinities have with other bodies. Such a map would not be a tracing of which particular masculinities are to be strived for and which are to be eliminated. Instead, this map would investigate how or when masculinities diminish or strengthen the power of other bodies. An ethology could map when masculinities can compound with other bodies to increase power or when masculinities might risk decomposing other bodies. Foremost, an ethology of masculinities moves us away from considerations of what masculinity or masculinities should be and toward an exploration of what masculinities can do, which acknowledges the restraining force that attempts to uphold a definition of masculinity for men to aspire toward but continually resists it through difference. This move ceases the illusion that masculinity is a set of transcendent values or codes that men
should aspire to embody. By ceasing this illusion, an immanent ethics thrusts masculinities back into a consideration of its relations with the world. Refusing to separate masculinities from these relations, we are forced to embrace our responsibility and, as a result, strive to affect and be affected generatively in order to increase our capacity, as well as our environment’s and our community’s capacities, for sustaining life.

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Notes
1. For an overview of this cluster, see Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (2000).
2. Philosophies of immanence stem from the philosophical lineage informed by Spinoza, and while there are many interpretations of Spinoza, I am reading Spinoza through Deleuze and Spinozist feminists such as Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd. However, no matter the reading of Spinoza, his philosophy is considered to be a radical alternative. As Christopher Norris (2011) observes, “What unites these otherwise disparate approaches [to Spinoza] is their willingness—albeit very often within certain clearly marked limits—to accept the possibility of thinking at odds with those dominant conceptions that have shaped the self-image of reputable philosophic discourse” (p. 6).
3. Psychoanalytic theory, which works up through the traditional philosophical lineage of Descartes and his mind–body dualism that Spinoza radically opposes, informs explicitly and implicitly a lot of the theoretical foundations of masculinities, for example, Connell’s (2005) Masculinities draws heavily on Freudian and Lacanian theory. Also, Connell’s (1994) essay “Psychoanalysis on Masculinity” outlines how “Psychoanalysis offers to modern thought on masculinity a uniquely rich method of investigation” (p. 33). Furthermore, even if the references of psychoanalytic theory are minimal, such as in Tim Edwards’s (2006) Cultures of Masculinity or Stephen M. Whitehead’s (2002) Men and Masculinities, there is still an implicit foundation of psychoanalytic theory that informs a focus on the unconscious, the phallus, the oedipal complex, and other concepts of psychoanalysis.
4. Rosi Braidotti (2013) maps Spinoza’s monism much more clearly and concisely than I could hope to:
Let me spell out some of these rather dense ideas. A ‘monistic universe’ refers to Spinoza’s central concept that matter, the world and humans are not dualistic entities structured according to principles of internal or external opposition. The obvious target of criticism here is Descartes’ famous mind-body distinction, but for Spinoza the concept goes even further: matter is one, driven by the desire for self-expression and ontologically free. The absence of any reference to negativity and to violent dialectical oppositions causes intense criticism of Spinoza on the part of Hegel and the Marxist-Hegelians. Because this approach rejects all forms of transcendentalism, it is also known as ‘radical immanence’. Monism results in relocating difference outside the dialectical scheme, as a complex process of differing which is framed by both internal and external forces and is based on the centrality of the relation to multiple others. (p. 56)

5. I am building here off the film and gender scholarship of Philippa Gates (2006) and Barry Keith Grant (2011). They each define masculinities as continuously changing and shifting. Gates calls this fluctuation and Grant refers to it as ongoing negotiations. Both of them reject the notion that a crisis of masculinity is possible based on the fact that masculinity can never occupy a stable definition. However, the work of Gates and Grant is also explicitly and/or implicitly informed by psychoanalysis and dialectics and by extension the traditional Western philosophical lineage informed by Descartes. Therefore, though we share similar views of masculinities in constant flux, my thinking works to map this conceptualization through monism, which seeks difference outside the tradition that structures a mind–body dualism.

6. I would thoroughly recommend Moira Gatens’s (1996) Imaginary Bodies for a more intensive discussion of these issues and in particular her discussion of Spinoza’s problematic view of women’s rights (pp. 134–35). My intention is not to gloss over these issues that have been carefully unpacked by other scholars but rather to provide a significant enough overview of a Spinozist ethics to inform an ethology of masculinities.

7. In addition, Genevieve Lloyd and Rosi Braidotti are two other philosophers who connect Spinoza and feminist theory. Lloyd, with Gatens, explores the ways in which Spinoza’s philosophy can be a tool for conceptualizing core feminist issues (1999). Braidotti thinks through Spinoza and Deleuze throughout her philosophy, but in particular see Braidotti (2002).

8. Beyond the scope of this journal article, there is potential for future works that put an ethology of masculinities into dialogue with the established discourses of masculinities studies and feminist theory. In particular, I am thankful for an anonymous reviewer’s suggestion to consider the work of Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack in addition to inclusive masculinity theory. Furthermore, another anonymous reviewer raises important counter points for future consideration, including encounters between philosophies of immanence and the gender theory of Judith Butler—especially the canonical text Gender Trouble as well as her book Undoing Gender. Informed by Hegelian and Foucauldian philosophy, Butler’s theory conceptualizes gender fluidity through traditional and contemporary Western philosophy, which requires a substantial comparison to the alternative
philosophical lineage of immanence that would require a thorough engagement exceeding the space of this journal article but certainly worth pursuing. Finally, it is important to put an ethology of masculinities into dialogue with theories of class, race/ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation, and I am thinking specifically here of bell hooks’s work and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s initial conception of intersectionality and its theoretical development.

9. Those interested can find R. W. Connell’s brief reference to the theory of Deleuze and Guattari in Masculinities, second edition (2005, 20). These references are very limited in scope, but it demonstrates that masculinities studies scholars—including Connell, Reeser, and Whitehead—have acknowledged Deleuze and Guattari. However, there has yet to be a thorough engagement with their theoretical concepts beyond some limited discussions of Deleuze and Guattari’s basic ideas.

References

Author Biography

Terrance H. McDonald is a SSHRC-funded PhD candidate (ABD) in interdisciplinary humanities at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. His dissertation, entitled “Mediated Masculinities: The Expression and Alteration of Masculinity in Hollywood Genre Films, 1990–2010,” incorporates his research interests in cinema studies, digital technologies, masculinities, and posthumanism. He has published journal articles in Masculinities: A Journal of Identity and Culture as well as NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies. Also, he is a cofounder of the Posthumanism Research Institute at Brock University.