A DECLARATION OF CARING:
TOWARDS ECOLOGICAL MASCULINISM

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This thesis is presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University

2013
DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY:

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

_____________________________________________________________

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DEDICATION:

To Mum for celebrating my successes,

To Dad for being my friend,

To Leslie for showing me another world,

To Dottie for reminding me to cackle at myself,

… and to the many other-than-human Others that are our companions on this life-perfect orb floating through space and time.
This dissertation argues that the social and environmental problems we face are primarily the result of patriarchal or ‘malestream’ norms. These norms are constructed on hypermasculinist ways of being, thinking and doing that inhibit the growth and development of sustainable principles and practices. Responding to this assertion and following in the footsteps of deep ecology, social ecology and ecological feminism, the study brings masculinities concerns to the heart of the human/Nature relationship while also bringing concerns for society and the environment to the ways we think about men in the modern West. Further, it argues that if we are to achieve a truly sustainable future, then we must encourage men to reawaken their innate care. The dissertation declares that all men are born good and possess an infinite capacity to care and be caring. It is however recognised that these innate capacities for men to care and be caring are suppressed by ‘men’s oppression’ and that this oppression can prevent men from expressing their fullest humaness to the detriment of all Others and themselves. The dissertation recommends that men develop emotional competencies along with their intellect and intuition in order to authentically nurture the relational space between Others and themselves. Building on feminist care theory, a theoretical framework termed ecological masculinism is introduced, which facilitates modern Western men to care for and be caring towards society, Nature and the self—concurrently. The dissertation constructs a theoretical framework for ecological masculinism that is accompanied by a plurality of ecomasculine praxes. This ecologised masculinities theory and praxes instigates a new conversation in environmental philosophy that facilitates the rise of ‘ecomen’ who serve important roles in forging a deep green future for all of life on Earth.
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The following dissertation has been more than a decade in the making. I enrolled at Murdoch University in 2001 for what I thought would be a momentary sojourn in reading and writing, only to find that the following project fused with my very being. In this time, I approached what I thought was the completion of this project on many occasions. As is common with doctoral dissertations, I now realise that there is no exact finish line to cross. Rather, completion is an exercise in letting-go, after ruminating on the concepts that have consumed my life for so long. I can now look back with the benefit of hindsight knowing that my many attempts to declare myself ‘complete’ have in fact been persistent reminders that I have started a conversation that I hope others will share with me. I have grown and am still growing through some older ways of being, thinking and doing. Through this process, I have arrived at fresher and more effective ways of connecting with my fellow human beings, the Earth and myself. However, the journey has been no solitary venture. Rather, the pages that follow are the product of my relational exchanges with lovers, family members, friends and colleagues, who have each reminded me in their own unique ways that I am a simple conduit through which this work and our collective wisdom has flowed. As a consequence, I have a number of acknowledgements that I would like to make.

A Declaration of Caring wriggled out of my psyche as a result of my quest for a different kind of masculinity to the one I had been trained to be, think and do. The project is the product of many trials and tribulations that accompanied my pursuit of caring for and caring about others, the Earth that sustains us, and myself. Over the years, I have had countless conversations about this work. I have also taken time away from the project to put food in my belly, to fight for love, to teach, to pursue grand adventures in distant climes, and to retreat into myself to heal. Such has been the journey of my
thirties, a time of great self-care accompanied by deep sorrows. The events of my life during this time have been pivotal in helping me test the thinking that this dissertation represents. While it was not obvious to me until recently, I have been my own case study, making this no ordinary academic canter. I have deliberately permitted the ebbs and flows of my personal life to inform the work that follows. I extend my heartfelt thanks to those people who have prodded me to share my thinking about men and the Earth. I have attempted to do so in the pages that follow with humility and honesty about my thoughts and my reality. I accept that this is simply one view. A few others have played key roles in the formulation of this work. I’d like to specifically acknowledge them here as well.

To the agile dragonfly whose skip across a silvery lake goes unnoticed, to the pungent garlic chive whose oral burst is forgotten, to the zestful child whose squeal of delight is frowned upon by serious grown-ups, I offer each of you my first and foremost thanks for the reminder that you are what really matters in life, and are the raw reason for the work that follows.

To my mother, what words can a son say beyond ‘thank you for having me’? None of this would have been possible had you not carried, birthed and cared for me with the depth of love that you have. Your quiet prayer for my life to flourish has provided a constant tide of hope for my own future and that of the Earth, despite my own vagaries. Might the completion of this project be a cause for celebration for us both, I thank you for being with me every step of the way. You can now jump for joy!

To Dad, that we have become dear friends gives me great cause to celebrate a different future for men than the ones we were both born into. Beyond the countless words of encouragement and the many dollars that you and mum have dedicated to supporting me, I am warmed in knowing that we not only love each other, but like each other as well. I am glad I came home. This work is as much about you and me as it is about all men.
To my uncle Leslie, whose shoebox New York City apartment was my refuge those many years ago, this project is largely about seeking an alternative manhood that you showed me was possible and I have since become. Your many gifts, your contemplative spirit, your sense of adventure and your faith in the joys of life have been more than a rope. The rite of passage of entering my adulthood in your care was a revolution of body, mind and spirit that I will carry with me all the days of my life.

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I thank Professor Peter Newman (Former Director of the Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy or ISTP and Current Director of the Curtin University Sustainability Policy Institute or CUSP) for swinging the doors of the ISTP open to my musings. His ‘can-do’ attitude was what it took to start the process of crafting my lofty ideals into a Ph.D. that could pass the test of time.

To those I interviewed in preparing this project, while your voices did not make the final cut, our conversations in those formative early days of the research were rich and sowed the seeds of a diverse field of thinking and writing.

I have had the fortune of being accompanied by four dissertation supervisors over the years. Each of them deserves special mention here.

Dr. Patsy Hallen is widely loved and now retired from her post as Senior Lecturer at Murdoch University. To Patsy, you have taken time to listen and carry me forth when I thought I might break, smiled widely at the smallest of my revelations, blessed me with your trademark ‘pungent breathe of a curious whale’, held faith in the vision that I had embarked on a worthy
project, and reminded me that I could best complete this dissertation by stilling my mind sufficiently enough to summarise my thinking in the single sentence that came as a direct result of your sound counsel: *All men are born good and have an infinite capacity to care and be caring.* Distilled further, I now commonly respond to the question ‘what do you do?’ with a simple and provocative retort – ‘I study blokes’. You helped me see that my professional journey mirrored my struggle to grow into the man I have become. Extending yourself to my project in retirement has been humbling. In return, I commit to paying forward your love and care for me as both your student and Earth-fellow. To your patience and consistency in ‘being there’, your courage to set boundaries and speak your truth with an open heart, your firm but kind hand, and your trademark philosophical brilliance, I bow my head in gratitude.

Senior Lecturer Dr. Michael Booth took a keen interest in my project throughout Patsy’s watch, and stepped in enthusiastically when she retired. Sadly, Michael died shortly thereafter. As a dedicated feminist sociologist and walking encyclopaedia, he showed me the importance of broadening my search for an alternative future for men and the Earth. His soft-spoken and considered wisdom was not only humbling but also exemplified one version of the alternative masculinity that this work is dedicated to heralding. To your spirit and memory I offer a warm smile.

To Associate Professor Brad Pettitt has who been the quintessential pragmatist and exemplar of efficiency, productivity and drive, I offer my heartfelt appreciations for quickly assuming the role of ‘stoker’ upon Michael’s untimely death. With the explicit intent of getting my ‘boiler room’ cranking, your enduring optimism, administrative savvy, and capacity to join dots across a morass of complexities, have been invaluable. You became not only an effective aide, but believed in me, advocated for my flourishing in more ways than I will ever possibly know, and helped me set limits time and again in my march towards completion. Through our many exchanges around this project and our mutual passion for community, I have gained a trusted friend. I honour your ability to hold out big visions for
yourself and a sustainable world, which you have graciously shared with me.

Dr. Wendy Sarkissian joined my supervisory team in the project’s final quarter with the support of Brad. Wendy was a predecessor of mine at the ISTP, having been supervised by Patsy for her doctorate, but had graduated and moved to greener pastures long before my time. While we had not met, I knew of her from the corridor archival banter that unfolds when you hang around a university long enough. We were flung together for my final canter home by providence, which is worth recounting here.

Brad was about to become Mayor of the City of Fremantle, I was grooming the community in support of his campaign, and had decided to attend a CUSP seminar to speak local politics. On the day and unbeknownst to me, Wendy was the distinguished guest invited to share her thoughts with the audience about her new book: *Kitchen Table Sustainability*. In her presentation, she championed the cause for community and heart. Her vision beyond the collective struggle to create a flourishing future for all life on Earth filled me with hope. From her enthusiasm I could see that sustainability is a matter of taking time to know Others and the self. In a flash, I made the connection between the mythical Sarkissian of the ISTP’s corridor and this bold Canadian-Australian standing before me. The rest is history. In very short order, Wendy became my completion supervisor and tenacious writing coach. Her dedication included a gracious writing retreat at her woodsy home while I rewrote the final draft. During that time she fed me, encouraged me, and was directive and warm at the same time.

Wendy, your huge and generous heart, attention to detail, courage to say the hard to say, thoroughness, encouragement and capacity to swiftly and agilely juggle the needs of my project with your many other commitments have been nothing short of monumental. In the closing stages of this project I have discovered not only a mentor and astute guide, but also a visionary, colleague and friend whose zest for life has been instrumental in the triumph of this work. I honour the bandicoots, the white gums, the wallabies, the
curlews, the creeks, and Ovid’s Tristia for bringing us together. I can now step forth from this project largely because of your tireless efforts that have been nothing short of locomotive. For bringing to the kitchen table of sustainability your tenacity and affection, I say to you: ‘Namaste’.

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Through the combined efforts of these various people, I have had the rare privilege of receiving the sensual embodiment, academic rigor, conceptual cohesion and spiritual shepherding that made this project—eventually—possible. A Declaration of Caring has emerged as an exercise in my walking my talk as I have sought ways to express the care and caring that I believe dwells within all men, beginning with me.

This project is a deep reflection on the state of men, society and the Earth. Beyond the many valued contributions of my support team members, I note that any shortcomings that emerge in the following pages are entirely my own and will provide me with lesson after lesson in humility.
Prologue: Foundations for a Journey

King Lear: O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light: yet you see how this world goes.

Gloucester: I see it feelingly.

(Shakespeare 2003: 4.5.140-145)

This dissertation is about men, society and the Earth. It is the product of a journey that begins and ends with me.

I was born and raised in the suburbs of Perth by parents of Maltese, Italian and Lebanese heritage. In the early fifties, both sides of my family emigrated from Alexandria, Egypt when my parents were children, to escape the ravages of the post-war years. As was the custom at that time in Australia, many ethnic groups stuck together and raised their families, as best they could, within the familiar traditions of the ‘old country’. Perth was a small city in those days, and the ethnic folks of southern European heritage typically knew each other. So it was of no great surprise that my parents’ paths crossed. They married young, and set about the task of making their own family.

As part of the first-generation of our family to be born in Australia, I felt out of place: not fully Maltese, Italian, Lebanese or, for that matter, Australian. As I grew, this left me feeling confused about how I should behave as an Aussie bloke. I noticed that many men of similar heritage to me also struggled to fit in. Australian males generally seemed confident, jovial and keen on sports. But they also seemed quite emotionally shut down, except for being quick to anger and laugh raucously at the expense of others. I have few memories of receiving heartfelt care from an adult Australian male; caring seemed to be women’s business. My strongest recollection about the men in my early life was that they were loud, foreboding and unavailable.
These observations left me longing to be closer with my dad and yet scared of the prospect at the same time. I could tell he loved me, but he also seemed hard to reach and I couldn’t understand why. Dad was a family loyalist—by this I mean that from an early age, he had tirelessly dedicated himself to protecting and providing for his mum and younger brother (my grandfather struggled through the transition to the new country, and had moved on to South Africa as my dad came of age, leaving my grandmother, my dad and my uncle to fend for themselves). Within a few years, dad’s sense of family duty expanded to include his young bride and children—as we each came along. He was a hard worker with little time for ‘fluff’. He worked long hours at several jobs, which meant I seldom saw him and when I did, our exchanges were often brief. That’s not uncommon for father-son relationships in the collision between Baby-Boomers and GenXers. The expectations placed on Australian men—like most Western men—pressure them to prioritise doing what needs to be done in order to make ends meet. This left little emotional energy for the active fathering of rambunctious children.

Dad did things in the best way he knew. But the distance between us affected me powerfully. I could tell that something was missing in our relationship, but as a youngster, I had no idea what that ‘missing something’ was. It was not until many years later, while reflecting on the lives of men in Western society as a masculinities scholar, that I gained a clearer perspective on this. My father had grown up as a young migrant in a system that had trained him to be a protector and provider for his family and little else; he was conditioned to demonstrate how much he cared for his family through acts of service to us and our wider circle of family and friends, through his assumed role of being ‘the papa’, through his ability to ‘bring home the bacon’, and get up and do it all again the next day, and the next. I admire that tenacity in him greatly, and came to realise that my father was difficult to reach at least in part because he was working so hard—he was literally exhausted by the demands of being the primary ‘bread winner’ for those he loved the most. This situation seemed to be draining for him and
was, I think, a prime source of my unrest in our relationship. It was with these early memories burned into my being that I became curious about and dedicated to exploring the emotional cost of the social morays we have imposed on men and the ways that these messages affect the people these men love the most.

At first, I rejected the ways of being, thinking and doing my manhood that seemed to impact so severely on my dad and the other men that I recalled from my youth. I was 20, my science degree was in hand, I had a little money in my pocket from my first job out of university, and that was enough for me to turn my back on Australia, and set off overseas to find myself. Thinking I would escape the uneasiness of my earlier years, I went to live with my uncle—my dad’s brother—who, like me, had rejected Australian culture in his early twenties, and found his way to a teaching job in New York City. During my time in New York, I had many experiences that were far from ‘normal’ back home in Perth. My uncle and his community of friends were softer, kinder, attentive, effeminate, available, and even ‘motherly’ towards me. This softness stood in stark contrast to the emotional unavailability of the men I had known while growing up in Perth. The juxtaposition between these two very different examples of masculinity prompted me to seek an alternative path for my own manhood, and marked the beginning of a pilgrimage across three continents and through ten communities, searching for renditions of masculinity that were freed from the constraints of my upbringing.

Moving away from the sanctuary of my year with my uncle in New York, and for much of the remaining years of my twenties, I created a home for myself in rural Pennsylvania with a group of five adults and four children. There, I lived an organic life in a rambling two-hundred-year old farmhouse. Not long before arriving, I had started seeing a young woman who was born and raised in Los Angeles, and was living the life of a dedicated social and environmental activist. I joined her and her friends in an earnest quest to right the world’s wrongs. Our semi-rural home backed onto a state forest reserve. We grew our own vegetables, chopped our own wood, frolicked
naked in the creek that ran through the backyard, wandered timelessly through the woods nearby, shared boisterous communal meals, raised each other’s children, pitched in shoulder-to-shoulder to do chores, and collectivised our finances. During that time, we also actively engaged in our local township as a team of community organisers. We dedicated our days to ending environmental destruction, the mistreatment of young people and the oppression of people of colour. These experiences taught me that sustaining Nature and sustaining the self were different sides of the same coin. Those years were an experiment in intentional living that I found deeply rewarding, and they provided me with an acute alternative view to mainstream life. However, as is the nature of such idealised times in our lives, our stint in communal living eventually came to an end.

By my late twenties, I had become despondent about my effectiveness as an activist in our local community. My contributions appeared to be insignificant in the wake of a capitalist military-industrial complex bent on global domination by any means necessary; wars started, hate groups came to town, young people were beaten in their homes and in the streets, despite my greatest efforts to prevent such things from happening. Around the same time, our dear friends and housemates felt the need to consolidate their family unit, and moved across the country to start a new life as a traditional nuclear family. The single father who also shared the house with us moved closer to the mother of his children to better manage a shared custody arrangement. And naturally, the children of these two families went with them, leaving my partner and I (who were childless) with each other. The communal living that had been the glue that held she and I together evaporated. And freed from the distractions of our lively home, our core relationship issues, which we both had been avoiding, rapidly surfaced. Shortly after our communal home split up, my partner at the time and I separated.

I didn’t know it then, but in the quiet way of cherished moments gone by, these years of alternative living defined my thinking as a community leader, as an academic, and as a man. My thirtieth birthday marked a major
transformation in my life. The sudden ending of our communal home and my relationship with my partner at the time left me wondering if it was truly possible for people to care for each other over the long-term and beyond the lure of self-interest. My experiences during these formative years left me with a sense that the organic world we once had, had been lost. But, I earnestly believed, as I still do, that such a gentle life, filled with love, care and kindness for all others (human and other-than-human Others or simply all Others\(^1\)) as well as the self, was in fact recoverable. With this in mind, and a clear slate before me, I set about the task of exploring the root causes of what I refer to in this dissertation as a ‘malestream’ approach to life, which I believe characterises Western societies.\(^2\) I came to the conclusion that reawakening an organic, simpler and more community-oriented life required a willingness to tackle the broader problems of the world around us. It was around the same time that our intentional community and my partnership dissolved that I received news from Perth of my dad’s illness. His doctor speculated that he might be on the verge of a stroke at the culmination of his arduous working life. They whisked him off to hospital for tests. The condition was indeed stress-related, but could be addressed with behavioural changes and medication. Dad took early retirement and adopted some radical life-style changes in order to recover his health, including having more time and an increased desire to engage with his prodigal son. He let me know that he wanted me to come home.

With my course set, I enrolled in a graduate programme back in Perth and headed home. I rationalised this to be the best way for me to bring about transformation from within the very systems I had spent my early adulthood attempting to avoid. But I also knew on some deeper level that I needed to go home to reinvent my relationship with my dad. In the years that followed, my relationship with my father warmed considerably as we both stepped towards each other again and again, even in the face of momentary differences of opinion. To my delight, my father’s health is the better for his retirement; he has become a dedicated leader in local politics, championing social and environmental causes. And through our many exchanges, he has become one of my dearest and most trusted friends.
From this important transition, my curiosity about men’s lives grew in scope and scale. I wondered how every man’s story was like mine. I began to notice men’s general reticence to give up privilege, power and control in their families and communities. I found this reticence was connected with my long-held concerns for the wellbeing of the Earth. I came to see that the world we have created was rife with oppressions that consistently promoted men’s interests ahead of women, children, and non-human Nature. I also realised that despite the accoutrements of malestream society, men’s emotional lives are considerably impoverished, our levels of isolation unparalleled, our hearts broken far more easily than we are taught to expect, our access to our emotions atrophied, our risk of heart disease, cancer, accidents, drug and alcohol abuse, and rates of successful suicide unprecedented. Even though men are socio-politically advantaged by sexist societies, I came to see that the traditional renditions of modern Western masculine identities were in fact internally bankrupt. This realisation alerted me to what I suspect was a prime reason that men impose the kinds of oppressions upon Others and themselves that we so commonly do.

Following a ‘hunch’, I set about the task of finding ways to enable men to access the levels of emotional trust and safety with each other, their communities and the Earth that I had experienced in my twenties. I dedicated myself to a journey of discovering what it means to be a man who—in Gloucester’s words—‘lives life feelingly’. The seeds were sown for the dissertation that follows.

1 Karen Warren’s contribution to the discourse on ‘otherised’ Others is a critical analysis of what she refers to as a ‘logic of domination’, defined as ‘a logical structure of argumentation that “justifies” domination and subordination … assumes that superiority justifies subordination … and is offered as a moral stamp for keeping Downs [as-in oppressed Others] down’ (Warren 1987: 6, Warren 2000: 24, 47). The phrase ‘human and other-than-human Others’ is derived from Warren’s discussion on a ‘logic of domination’ which provides select men within patriarchal social arrangements with an injunction to marginalise, background and inferiorise any one (human or non-human) who does not fit within the parameters of select and advantages norms that I define and refer to throughout the dissertation as ‘malestream’ norms. Warren noted that injustice, inequity, and the
benefits and burdens of oppressive socially constructed mind-sets (or conceptual frameworks) are the by-products of patriarchy (Warren 1987: 6, Warren 1994: 180). Consequently, otherising results in the inferiorisation of all women, all non-humans, and those men who fail to fit within the parameters of traditional masculine privilege—specifically gay men, queers, bisexuals, transgendered men and also includes, in some instances, the ‘otherising’ of men who have physical disabilities, men of colour, poor men, or men who choose to participate in tasks that cut against the patriarchal grain, such as activism, childcare, nursing, etc. I refer to and the will henceforth abbreviate all these otherised groups and individuals as ‘Others’ or ‘all Others’.

Warren deconstructed the mechanisms of oppression within male-dominated society, and sought remedies to this hubris through an ideological alternative to the masculine domination of women and Nature. Her particular rendition of an ‘ecological’ feminism might be thought of as transformative, aspiring to specific and measurable outcomes that challenge superiorised men, while positing liberation for women and nature. Warren’s ecological feminism constructed an ethical platform that was ‘care-sensitive’ in the context of a liberated society, and remains necessarily feminist and ecological. When taken to its logical conclusion, such an ecological feminism has applications to the gender/Nature relationship, challenging the caring virtues of mothering, nursing, and friendship that are traditionally subscribed to women (Warren 1994: 97, 113). Warren’s ‘care-sensitive’ ethics were achieved through a tripartite process of moral reasoning:

1. The injunction to care about oneself and others, concurrently
2. The universal application of cooperative and ‘care-based’ ethics

This progression guided both women and men towards caring actions. Ironically, traditionally feminised ethics are ‘often lost or underplayed in mainstream [malestream] ethics (Warren 1994:108). However, such ethics readily fail to be noticed in the morass of the malestream. Warren’s ecological feminism is devoted to ‘theory-rebuilding’, which omits these existing male-biases in stepping towards moral reasoning, motivations, and practices of cooperation and care for the self in connection with others (Warren 1994 98, 11, 113).

The term ‘malestream’ is attributed to Mary O’Brien’s (1981: 62) writings on women’s reproductive rights. I define this term and the meaning I attach to it in Chapter 1. Loosely, it is used synonymously with ‘patriarchy’. However, ‘malestream’ refers specifically to those socially sanctioned norms that are supportive of patriarchal domination and pave the way for modern Western men and masculine identities to conform to patriarchal thoughts, words and actions such that men and traditional renditions of masculinity flourish best within the social structures created. These norms are typically accompanied by an internalised sense of superiority in some men over other men, women and Nature.