

“A Curse on Those Who Need Heroes”? Genealogical Appropriation and the Historical Horizons of Gay Liberation, 1969-1975

Scott de Groot, *Queen's University*

From 1973 to 1974, Jim Steakley published a meticulously researched series of articles on the history of “The Gay Movement in Germany” in *The Body Politic*, a Toronto-based gay liberation periodical. A graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Steakley examined the emergence of homosexual activism in Central Europe from the 1860s, the horrific fate of gay men condemned to concentration camps by the Third Reich, and the slow re-emergence of homosexual activism in West Germany following the Second World War.¹ Methodologically, Steakley framed his research in contradistinction to “quasi-historical surveys” that claimed famous figures of Western civilization from Socrates to Wilde in order to “vindicate homosexuality.”² With reference to Bertolt Brecht’s theorization of epic theatre, which spurned identification with individual characters and sought to enhance socio-political consciousness, Steakley declared that “Brecht knew better: a curse on those who need heroes!”³ While overloaded by graduate school obligations, Steakley serialized his research because he believed that communicating the strategies and tactics; victories and defeats, of past formations of homosexual activism had present political value. As a leading English language gay liberation periodical, *The Body Politic* provided an ideal forum for Steakley to disseminate his findings transnationally. From Vancouver to London, from Boston to Sydney, Steakley’s series generated a flurry of excited commentary. Many readers were amazed to discover that homosexuality had a political history extending back to the nineteenth century, and wondered what further revelations lay buried beneath the embarrassed silences and homophobic omissions of academic histories.

To be sure, Steakley was hardly alone in attacking this approach to history, which from the mid-1970s was increasingly denounced by gay activists attempting to bring the history of sexuality into a transformative conversation with Marxist theory and the new social history. Albeit for very different reasons, a pioneering wave of gender and sexuality scholars were also highly critical of searches for heroic ancestors in the 1980s and early 1990s. Employing poststructuralist and social constructionist frameworks, Joan Wallach Scott, Denise Riley, David Halperin, and Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey variously characterised heroic pantheons stretching back to antiquity as naïve, simplistic, theoretically absurd, or a passing phase on the road to greater intellectual maturity.⁴ David Halperin was particularly pointed on this front. In his classic methodological elaboration of social constructionism, *One Hundred Years of*

Homosexuality, Halperin paid a backhanded compliment to “essentialist” histories that investigated homosexuality as a category transcending time and space: at least they were “less rudimentary” than histories focusing on gay heroes from Socrates to Stein.⁵ Yet, decades have passed since a foundational cohort of academic gender and sexuality scholars felt the need to aggressively historicize categories such as homosexuality. And the time has come for more sympathetic accounts of gay liberation’s projects of historical knowledge-making, which have been too easily dismissed on the basis of theoretical frameworks that were either unavailable or irrelevant to early gay liberationists themselves.⁶

Drawing on transnationally circulating, English language gay liberation periodicals between 1969 and 1975, this article focuses on a form of historical knowledge-making that I will call *genealogical appropriation*. Appropriation often carries connotations of theft and violence, but here the term’s more neutral meaning of possession-taking is paired with the term genealogy (in the conventional, non-Foucauldian sense) to denote the elaboration of descent-lines belonging to a political subject. Establishing these descent-lines entailed an engagement with history that made no attempt to mitigate contemporary bias or foreground alterity. Rather, the objective was to unearth heroic figures in whom gay liberationists could see themselves — both as they were and in the future sense of what they hoped to become. Thus, genealogical appropriation entailed ethical self-fashioning by way of analogy and identification with exemplary individuals drawn from across the historical record. In addition to homosexuality as such, criteria for claiming such ancestors often included biographical content evincing rebelliousness in the face of prevailing social norms, and commitments to diverse struggles for social justice. To paraphrase the philosopher Charles Taylor, gay liberation’s heroes modelled not only what it was right to do, but also what it was good to be.⁷ In addition to elaborations of politico-ethical subjectivity, genealogical appropriation was also bound up with projects of historical knowledge-making in ways that extended beyond the study of individuals. Indeed, gay liberationists posited that their heroic ancestors had to be excavated from beneath a veil of academic and popular historical scholarship that concealed, denied, and trivialized homosexuality. And thus genealogical appropriation entailed critical reinterpretations of received histories, biographies, lives and oeuvres. Simply put, genealogical appropriation was bound up with gay liberation’s projects of critical, historical knowledge-making. What began as biographical research projects opened up topics and generated questions worthy of further study, whether in the domain of intellectual history via Edward Carpenter, socio-legal history via Oscar Wilde, or literary history via Emily Dickinson.

Ultimately, this article argues that contrary to received wisdom, at best it is only partially correct to suggest that early gay liberationists “did not have a sense of the past” or were stubbornly disinterested in “learning from past resistance and community formation” as some scholars have suggested.⁸ It may be

true that many activists were too busy with pickets, protests, and organizational commitments to care much about historical questions. And it is clear that some gay liberationists were too preoccupied by ongoing conflicts with an older generation of homophile activists to appreciate the important gains of homophilism. Yet from the very emergence of gay liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, numerous gay liberationists laboured to situate themselves within a historicity of struggle, and devoted considerable time to writing about their forbearers. Far from being published in obscurity, such writing appeared in major gay liberation periodicals such as Toronto's *The Body Politic*, New York's *Come Out!*, San Francisco's *Gay Sunshine*, Boston's *Fag Rag* and *Gay Community News*, Detroit's *Gay Liberator*, London's *Come Together* and *Gay News*, Vancouver's *Gay Tide*, Sydney's *Gay Liberation Press*, and Auckland's *The Gay Liberator*. Collectively constituting a transnational communicative network, these activist periodicals shared far-flung readerships and contributor pools, and reprinted one another's articles. Simply put, their pages provided a dialogical space in which gay liberation's projects of historical knowledge-making inhered. And particularly in the early years of gay liberation, such knowledge-making projects often entailed research into the lives and times of gay heroes from Sappho to Marlowe to Wilde.

Before proceeding empirically, an important clarification is in order: what does the term 'hero' mean, and how might this figure be conceptualised? The answer is by no means straightforward. Even a cursory survey of the hero's long career in Western thought unearths a bewildering variety of conceptualizations ranging from Plato's paragon of civic virtue to Hegel's expression of a world-spirit, from Jung's archetype of the collective unconscious to Nietzsche's overman beyond good and evil. Moreover, in a number of English language treatises and studies devoted exclusively to the hero, this protean figure has been variously constructed as an anthropological universal, mythological motif, engine of world-historical change, literary protagonist, psychological archetype, mechanism of social control, and personification of collective identity.⁹ In an Apollonian tone, heroes are often supposed to perform great feats, inspire and fill with wonder, personify virtue, and strengthen the social order by their good example. But in a Dionysian vein, heroes are also said to stand outside social conventions, flout the law, persist in subaltern counter-memory, and rest in blood-soaked caskets and unmarked graves. In other words, contradictions abound, and the hero is best understood as a malleable figure with considerable value within diverse intellectual and political projects. Heroes are remarkably elastic; they can be stretched, manipulated, and reinterpreted to fit an extraordinarily wide range of aims and programs.

But while the figure of the hero is to some extent a floating signifier, there is a considerable body of scholarly literature that explores how heroes buttress collective identities by personifying common values and conjuring a shared past. Scholars working across the social sciences and humanities have long noted that political parties, ethnic communities, social movements, and nation-states all develop stories about heroes in ways that promote socio-cultural integration. Indeed, heroes often serve both as *dramatis personae* of collective origins, while providing a means of narrativising and parabolising group conceptions of the good. A great deal of scholarship has also explored how heroic figures often feature prominently in projects of public memory and commemoration undertaken by governmental and grassroots organisations alike.¹⁰ But rather than focusing on heroes in the context of pneumatic or commemorative practices, this article is more concerned with a lesser-studied phenomenon, namely the way that heroes are often vital to the critical, historical knowledge-making practices of social movements. As the socio-legal scholar Mariana Valverde notes, critical knowledges (historical or otherwise) identify primary agents of error and mystification such as racism, sexism or homophobia, and seek to unveil a more accurate picture of a reality that the distorting agents kept hidden.¹¹ And in the context of the critical, historical knowledge-making projects undertaken by social movements, heroic figures are pivotal in the following way. Heroes often operate as vehicles for activists to critique historical misrepresentations and omissions of the broader social movement subject that they personify within hegemonic narratives, received historiographies, and official curriculums. But far from fulfilling only a negative function, the lives of heroic figures frequently open windows onto larger historical contexts about which academic scholarship is limited, and their biographies raise questions that inspire further activist research.

Turning to concrete examples, heroes have featured prominently in the resistance strategies and political mobilizations of subordinate, disempowered, and oppressed groups for many centuries. For instance, the great feats of famous women drawn from the historical record have long been touted in support of efforts to undermine the supposed naturalness of restricting women to narrow spheres of activity. Pioneering first wave feminists across Europe and North America often claimed heroic ancestors such as Zenobia, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, Maria Theresa, Lady Jane Grey, Caroline Herschel, and Anna Ella Carroll to argue that men held no monopoly on characteristics such as strength, independence, courage, assertiveness, intelligence, leadership, and militancy. Far from constitutionally passive, weak, private, and domestic, such “women worthies” signaled that women in general were capable of excelling in every field of human endeavour.¹² Similarly, African peoples and the Black diaspora of the Atlantic world have long deployed heroic ancestors to assert their cultural and scientific achievements, capacity for self-governance, and even membership in humanity in the face of racist and dehumanizing colonial

discourses. Egyptian pharaohs, antique Church Fathers, scholars of Timbuktu, statesmen of Ghana, and rebel slave leaders have all been marshalled to resist colonialism, political marginalization, and socio-legal exclusion.¹³

Particularly during what historians refer to as the long 1960s, however, feminists and Black activists increasingly claimed and deployed ancestral heroes in ways that supported systematic projects of critical, historical knowledge-making.¹⁴ For example, women’s liberationists such as Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and Germaine Greer were not particularly interested in the aptitudes and achievements of women who had contributed to “Western civilization” as such. Rather, they sought genealogical connections with women whose affective lives spurned patriarchal expectations and gender conformity, and who were politically connected to labour movements and abolitionism. Simply put, women’s liberationists crafted ancestral ties to Elizabeth Stanton, Harriet Stanton Blatch, Susan B. Anthony, the Pankhursts, and other radical women who rejected feminine conventions, jumped on soap boxes, shattered windows, and mobilized for suffrage, factory workers, and people of colour. Moreover, women’s liberationists frequently deployed these heroic foremothers to dramatise widespread ignorance regarding women’s history, and to criticise patriarchal systems of education and the male-dominated discipline of history. For instance, in the *Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone wrote that,

A hundred years of brilliant personalities and important events have ... been erased from American history ... Most people today know nothing of ... the lives of women of the stature of Margaret Fuller, Fanny Wrights, the Grimke sisters, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Stanton Blatch, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Alice Paul. And yet we know about Louisa May Alcott, Clara Barton, and Florence Nightingale, just as we know about, rather than Nat Turner, the triumph of Ralph Bunche, or George Washington Carver and the peanut. The omission of vital characters from standard versions of American history in favour of such goody-good models cannot be tossed off. Just as it would be dangerous to inspire still-oppressed black children with admiration for the Nat Turners of their history, so it is with the [women’s rights movement]: the suspicious blanks in our history books concerning feminism ... is no accident.¹⁵

Likewise, in the influential anthology *Voices from Women’s Liberation*, Leslie B. Tanner explained that “a minimal amount of research soon showed me how deliberately women had been left out of our history books.”¹⁶ And thus she decided to unearth and reproduce the writings and speeches of Sojourner Truth,

Lucretia Mott, Angela Grimke Weld and other “strong, courageous, brilliant” foremothers for the benefit of a current generation of activists. Even women’s liberationists who were above all focused on generating social historical knowledge found that the lives and struggles of individual forbearers offered insights into the general conditions facing women in earlier epochs, especially where “ordinary” accounts were scarce. As contributions to early texts of women’s history such as *Clio’s Consciousness Raised* and *Hidden from History* make clear, the biographies of famous foremothers contained insights into everything from available educational and professional opportunities, to expected social roles and domestic responsibilities, to tactics and strategies of resistance.¹⁷

In the context of black power, activists likewise deployed heroic ancestors to critique the distortions and biases of received historiographies and curriculums, as well as generate new historical knowledge. For example, Stokely Carmichael argued that instead of the laudatory tales regarding white oppressors that populated history textbooks, African peoples on all sides of the Atlantic needed access to knowledge of inspiring Black ancestors such as Cetswayo kaMpande, Moshoeshoe, and Lobengula Khumalo who militantly resisted colonisation by force of arms, and demonstrated that colonialism was always a bitterly contested phenomenon.¹⁸ In a similar vein, Malcolm X asserted that to help restore a sense of pride and dignity after centuries of misrepresentations of Africans as indolent, barbarous, and vanquished, Black people needed to know that “your grandfather was Nat Turner; your grandfather was Toussaint L’Ouverture; your grandfather was Hannibal. Your grandfather was some of the greatest Black people who walked on this earth.”¹⁹ In the informal study groups and eventually Black studies programs that began to emerge at universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the biographies of Black heroes often provided windows onto distant epochs and broader historical processes. For example, speaking to an audience of students and activists in late 1960s Montreal, C.L.R. James filtered rigorous historical analyses of the slave trade and resistance to slavery through the figure of Toussaint L’Ouverture, who enjoined his interlocutors to proudly claim as a great ancestor.²⁰ Similarly, Walter Rodney stated at the 1968 Congress of Black Writers in Montreal that as a politically-minded historian, he was compelled to retrieve inspiring Black heroes and the achievements of African societies both as a “catharsis towards action” and as an impetus towards further research.²¹

To be sure, gay liberation’s projects of genealogical appropriation and historical knowledge-making proceeded in a fashion that was broadly similar to the projects of black power and women’s liberation. But there were also unique and singular elements. Black power’s heroes were retrieved from Africa as an ancestral homeland and the black diasporic communities of the Atlantic world. Women’s

liberation's heroes were drawn primarily from the annals of first-wave feminism within North America and Western Europe. However, the scope of gay liberation's heroic genealogies was fixed in neither time nor space, and spanned not only all of recorded history, but a huge number of regions, nation-states and cultures. The only discernible boundary roughly formed around the edges of what might be called Western history, and even this was neither an absolute nor theoretically based delineation, nor the result of wilful exclusion. Rather, the emphasis on Western history in gay liberation's genealogical projects was a function of the education, familiarity, and location of activists – although Scott Bravmann is quite right to suggest that longstanding queer identification with figures derived from a heritage stretching back to Greco-Roman antiquity is bound up with an unacknowledged, racialized coding of queer identities as white.²² Another important difference was that while feminists and black power intellectuals claimed no small number of ancestral heroes, in purely quantitative terms their genealogies paled in comparison to those of gay liberationists, who from their very first publications proceeded to draw up lengthy, almost frenzied ancestral lists.

For example, *Come Together* listed well over one hundred names unbroken by punctuation or any explanation except for the rhetorical question, “what have all these people in common”? Greco-Roman antiquity was well represented by Plato, Socrates, and Sappho. Medieval and early modern history furnished Richard II, Leonardo da Vinci, Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare. Modern history bequeathed Walt Whitman, Tchaikovsky, Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, Andre Gide, and Gertrude Stein. More contemporary figures included Allen Ginsburg, Gore Vidal, James Baldwin, Christopher Isherwood, Jean Genet, William Burroughs, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Andy Warhol, and Elton John.²³ To be sure, *Come Together's* list evinced a hodgepodge of influences, from speculation and gossip to a familiarity with books claiming to document the homosexuality of many towering figures of Western civilization in a scholarly fashion.²⁴ But whatever the empirical veracity of individual entries, the broader function of *Come Together's* list was to stabilise the meaning of diverse same-sex practices and desires under the banner of a historically enduring gay subject. And it was only one of the many lists compiled by gay liberationists across the Anglo-American world. For instance, the Gay Alliance for Equality of Vancouver marshalled many of the same characters to argue that gay people had always excelled in their respective fields despite persecution.²⁵ Proposing a longstanding link between artistic excellence and homosexuality, the *Fag Rag* collective claimed that hardly a generation or country had failed to produce a great “faggot poet,” pointing to a lineage that included Pindar, Cavafy, Horace, Sadi, Rimbaud, Catullus, Whitman, Verlaine, Crane, Kleist, Lorca, Virgil, and others.²⁶ In the influential early gay liberation anthology *Out of the Closets*, Karla Jay expressed considerable faith in the power of list-

ing, asserting that “our voices are our most powerful weapon, for when we stand up and scream: ‘We are Socrates, Sappho, Oscar Wilde, and Gertrude Stein,’ we will destroy the heterosexual myths about us and their domination over us.”²⁷

However, gay liberationists were never content with listing alone, and they published numerous biographical features to furnish their heroic ancestors with narrative flesh and blood. For example, *Gay Tide* profiled lifelong partners Charles de Sousy Ricketts and Charles Hazelwood Hannon as “outstanding artists and graphic designers,” who deserved a place in the “chronicle of gay struggle” for continuing to support Wilde following his 1895 gross indecency conviction, and for bravely protesting the censorship of Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness*.²⁸ In *Gay News*, Peter Forster profiled Lord Byron not only as the greatest poet of his age, but as a bisexual libertine and martyred combatant in the Greek War of Independence.²⁹ Dismayed by the preponderance of attention bestowed on the male literati of the Bloomsbury Group, in *GLP* Paul Foss emphasised Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, and Dora Carrington as important lesbian and bisexual contributors to a “post-Victorian reaction” to established gender norms in the United Kingdom.³⁰ Writing in *Gay Liberator*, the “Bookish Butterfly” profiled Gertrude Stein’s iconoclastic, lesbian domesticity with Alice B. Toklas; nineteenth century realist painter Rosa Bonheur’s successful battle with French police to publicly cross-dress; and the public intellectual Paul Goodman’s brave disclosure of his sexuality “long before gay liberation began its defiant attack on homophobic sexist America.”³¹

Despite a preponderance of modern heroes, gay liberationists also penned biographical features on ancestors gleaned from the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and antiquity. For instance, *Come Out!* crafted a portrait of the Elizabethan dramatist and poet Christopher Marlowe as “a convinced homosexual” whose oeuvre overflowed with homoerotic themes and “sensuous gay imagery.”³² Writing in *Gay Community News*, Sam Edwards highlighted Michelangelo as a great Renaissance artist whose masterpieces had too often been “whitewashed” by scholars and biographers.³³ In *Gay News*, Rictor Norton profiled the philosopher and scientist Sir Francis Bacon as a “gay genius,” and King James I of England as a monarch with great fondness for “sweet bedchamber boys.”³⁴ Also in *Gay News*, Joseph Winter depicted the Roman Emperor Varius Avitus Bassianus enjoying sexual relations with athletes and soldiers, and deserving none of the moral condemnation bestowed by historians.³⁵ By far the most temporally audacious of these biographical profiles was penned by Winston Leyland in *Gay Sunshine*, which stretched back over 3000 years to claim the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten as a gay ancestor. In Leyland’s rendering, following the death or banishment of his wife Queen Nefertiti, Akhenaten chose a young male prince as co-Pharaoh; not only did monuments depict of the two men seated naked in a sensual embrace, but ancient hieroglyphs apparently referred to them as beloveds.³⁶

On the surface, it might appear that there was nothing terribly new about gay liberation's genealogical projects, as few strategies of resistance to the criminalization, pathologization, and disqualification of queer acts and identities are older than claiming illustrious kinships. For many centuries, famous individuals from Western history and culture have been variously claimed as fellow sodomites, sapphists, uranians, inverters, homosexuals, gays, and lesbians to combat diverse forms of religious, legal, medical and social persecution.³⁷ Diaries and memoirs provide rich sources on this front, and have shown that isolated individuals were occasionally able to cobble together affirmative understandings of sexual and gender difference by identifying with illustrious historical figures.³⁸ Judicial and medical records have also furnished examples of ordinary people who drew on identifications with Socrates, Michelangelo, Whitman, and Wilde in order to resist discipline and normalization as patients within prisons and hospitals.³⁹ While such lineages relied on a level of education that was generally limited to the middle and upper classes prior to the mid twentieth century, they also crossed class lines and circulated throughout working-class communities by word of mouth.⁴⁰ Homosexual political formations prior to gay liberation likewise deployed illustrious ancestries. From the late nineteenth century, German activists drew upon the cultural capital of famous queers in pamphlets demanding the repeal of Paragraph 175 and the decriminalisation of homosexuality.⁴¹ Following the Second World War homophile activists engaged in similar practices, and as John D'Emilio notes, published “biographical portraits of literary figures such as Radclyffe Hall and Walt Whitman” in order to “legitimate homosexuality as a significant and pervasive component of human experience.”⁴²

Thus gay liberationist's projects of genealogical appropriation had deep roots. But they were also characterised by new elements. In contrast to homophile identifications with famous ancestors to assert themselves as legal subjects deserving protection within postwar human rights regimes, gay liberation's genealogical claims were more often deployed to support assertions of the revolutionary potential of the movement's political subject.⁴³ In brief, this political subject was conceptualised in two main ways: as an eternal percentage of the human population with reference to a particular reading of Alfred Kinsey, and as a polymorphous but repressed potential residing in everyone with reference to the philosophy of Herbert Marcuse.⁴⁴ To employ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terminology, such conceptualizations often appeared in early gay liberation periodicals in an “unrationalized coexistence,” and for many activists they suggested essentially the same strategic situation: the movement's constituency was largely unconscious but demographically massive and waiting to be awakened. Yet there was troublingly little evidence for this critical mass. Despite initial enthusiasm that gay people would stand beside women, students, people of colour, workers, and Third World populations as a revolutionary demographic, closet doors were proving reluctant to burst open. Despite the movement's vociferous conscious-

ness raising programs and recruitment campaigns, most gay liberation political organisations remained small, and outside cruising grounds and constellations of urban commercial space gay people were all too often nowhere in sight. Hence for activists to claim gay ancestors from a massive range of historical eras, societies, cultures, and nation-states provided reassuring evidence of the 'everywhere-ness' of gay liberation's subject, whether conceptualised as a fixed population group or an overarching human potential. Also novel was the extent to which gay liberation's projects of genealogical appropriation fuelled militant critiques of systems of education and academic scholarship. Indeed, activists systematically attacked the widespread extent to which gay people were ignorant of their ancestors as the result of distortions, mystifications, and omissions within received historiography and school lesson plans. For example, the Gay Alliance Toward Equality of Vancouver raged against history courses that failed to mention the homosexuality of figures such as Plato, Marlowe, Byron, Whitman, and Proust, and encouraged gay students to zap their teachers, and loudly proclaim these individuals as gay ancestors.⁴⁵ In *Out of the Closets*, Karla Jay similarly condemned the erasure of homosexuality within academic literary criticism and historiography, pointing to the absence of homosexual interpretations of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, the omission of Sappho's lesbian lyrics from classics texts, and efforts to conceal the sexual nature of the relationship between Rimbaud and Verlaine.⁴⁶

Another unique element of gay liberation's projects of genealogical appropriation was a strong tendency to claim and identify with historical figures on the basis of their non-conformity and contentious politics rather than primarily with reference to outstanding contributions to civilization in general. Thus, while gay liberationists cast their genealogical nets as widely as possible when asserting the temporal universality and revolutionary mass of their political subject via practices of listing, in composing detailed biographical features they were especially drawn to historical figures who could be interpreted as imparting a rebellious ethic and a commitment to social justice. Simply put, not all of the movement's heroes were created equal. And at the pinnacle of gay liberation's pantheon stood Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, Oscar Wilde, and Roger Casement, who were the objects of a considerable amount of activist research and writing. In combination, several factors explain their significance. Whitman, Carpenter, Wilde and Casement could all be interpreted as fiercely resisting diverse forms of oppression, whether in the form of bigoted laws, literary censorship, colonial exploitation, or social norms. And with varying degrees of interpretative finesse, their lives and oeuvres could also be understood as complying with a key value of gay liberation, namely sexual openness and a refusal of the secrecy and abjection of the closet. Moreover, Whitman, Carpenter, Wilde and Casement were variously linked to political causes such as socialism, abolitionism, first-wave feminism, and anti-imperialism, thus suggesting historical

linkages with the antecedents of social movements with which gay liberationists sought alliances in the present.

For example, in a feature originally appearing in *Workers' Power* and reprinted by *Gay Liberator*, James Coleman argued that Walt Whitman's (1819-1892) poetry had been flattened “into a celebration of America as it existed in his lifetime,” and stripped of both its homosexual and political content by historians and literary critics alike.⁴⁷ According to Coleman, the true Whitman was an ardent democrat who expressed great enthusiasm for the European revolutions of his day, enjoined Northerners to oppose the institution of slavery, criticized the exploitation of working-women, and attacked the injustices of unemployment as a newspaper editor. This true Whitman was also a sexual non-conformist who celebrated the human body in enduringly beautiful poetic verse, such as “For the one I most love lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night, In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me, And his arm lay tightly around my breast ...” and “Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have crossed and rested ... Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.”⁴⁸ Ultimately, Coleman recommended that activists return to the poet's original, unexpurgated writings, where they would find a vision of democracy rooted in homoerotic brotherhood, which remained relevant to the present struggle for gay liberation. Therein, gay liberationists would find treatments of homosexual love free from guilt, and a century old “vision of international brotherhood” that remained enduringly relevant.⁴⁹ In a *Gay News* feature, Rictor Norton likewise sought to rescue Whitman from what he saw as the distortions of received histories and biographies. For all its “half-veilings and words unsaid,” Norton discovered in Whitman's poetry not only powerful expressions of homosexual desire, but an inspiring vision of political equality and homoerotic brotherhood “without which I would lose my own faith in the inevitable success of gay liberation.” While admitting the impossibility of knowing anything about Whitman's sex-life with certainty, Norton suggested on the basis of considerable biographical research that Whitman likely had an enduring homosexual relationship with a bus conductor named Peter Dolye, and reproduced a nineteenth century photograph of the two men intimately gazing upon one another.⁵⁰ The London based periodical *Come Together* not only published excerpts from *Leaves of Grass* and encouraged activists to obtain a copy of the book, but declared Whitman to be “100 years ago a rebel in his unabashed love.” Like so many early gay liberation periodicals, *Come Together* regarded the poet as an inspirational, gay liberationist forbearer whose work had survived repeated censorship attempts and “all the narrow hysteria of people too enclosed to allow their feelings out.”⁵¹

Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) was also an object of numerous gay liberation features and commentaries. Graeme Woolston penned one of the most sophisticated of these features in a London Gay Liberation Front pamphlet

titled “Love’s Coming of Age,” which was reprinted by *The Body Politic*. In considerable detail, Woolaston recounted Edward Carpenter’s education at Cambridge, ordination as an Anglican deacon, departure from the Church, and growing realisation of his homosexuality – a realisation aided by Carpenter’s encounter with the homoerotic cultural legacy of Greco-Roman antiquity while traveling in Italy. Discovering and ultimately embracing Walt Whitman’s homoerotic conceptualization of democracy and celebration of labour in harmony with nature, Carpenter eventually relocated to the northern English countryside in the 1880s, where he pursued market gardening, adopted vegetarianism, became increasingly socialist, and openly cohabited with his male lover George Merrill. Turning to Carpenter’s oeuvre, Woolaston was by no means uncritical. And in examining texts such as *Love’s Coming of Age*, *The Intermediate Sex*, and *Homogenic Love* Woolaston bemoaned Carpenter’s adoption of Continental sexual concepts such as *Uranianism*, which constructed homosexuals as female souls trapped in male bodies, and thus constituted “a peculiar and unacceptable theory of what homosexuality is.” Nevertheless, Woolaston praised Carpenter’s eloquent reproach of British law for attempting “to regulate the private and voluntary relations of adult persons to each other,” his trenchant attacks on contemporary notions of homosexuality as an evolutionary degeneration, and his powerful assertion of the inherent naturalness of same sex eroticism. Thus, Woolaston positioned Carpenter as a radical forerunner of the current struggle for gay liberation, and asserted that he deserved “to be read much more widely than at present.”⁵² *The Body Politic* agreed, and appended to their reprint of Woolaston’s pamphlet was a note specifying which of Carpenter’s texts were available at Toronto’s Glad Day Books.⁵³ In a *Gay Community News* feature emphasizing Carpenter’s links to Fabian socialism and first wave feminism, Mikhail Itkin similarly enjoined activists to read texts such as *Love’s Coming of Age*, so they might be inspired by “the courage of the prophets and pioneers who came out a century ago.”⁵⁴

If the radical credentials of Carpenter effortlessly leapt forth from his biography, the same could not be said of Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), who activists had to dig out from the purely aesthetic, dandyish realm of popular perception, and work a bit harder to radicalise. This was certainly the intention of Don Milligan, who penned a feature on Wilde in *Gay Marxist*, which was reprinted by *Gay Liberator*. Quoting from the *Sonnet to Liberty*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and above all *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, Milligan reconstructed Wilde’s vision of socialism as fundamentally anti-Stalinist and opposed to centralised state control, which Wilde feared would result in a nightmarish regime of industrial barracks, forced labour, and police powers. Asserting that Wilde’s fears were prescient in light of contemporary developments in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba where homosexuals were being brutally persecuted. Ultimately, Milligan regarded Wilde’s vision of anarchist-socialism as entailing enhanced leisure time, the pop-

ular development of creative energies, the destruction of bourgeois morality, and the establishment of new social structures beyond the nuclear family. In other words, Wilde was “concerned with liberation, not making the trains run on time.” And for all his reactionary shortcomings as a nineteenth century bourgeois gentleman, Wilde articulated a vision for a just society that gay liberationists needed to take seriously and claim as their own – a vision that according to Milligan provided an antidote “for those of us whose self-oppression as gay people has, until recently, been interwoven with acceptance of ‘The Revolution’ as a butch male jamboree ...”⁵⁵ To be sure, another aspect of Wilde’s biography that gay liberationists worked to uncover was his trial, conviction, and imprisonment for gross indecency in 1895. For example, in *Gay Sunshine* Winston Leyland held that Wilde was not simply a victim of legal oppression, but a courageous homosexual who eloquently and forcefully defended the “love that dare not speak its name” before a packed courtroom at the Old Bailey, and obstinately maintained his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas even from the bowels of a British prison. Noting that the two men exchanged hundreds of love letters both before and after Wilde’s conviction, *Gay Sunshine* printed excerpts from five of these, as well as Douglas’ poem of mourning for Wilde’s death.⁵⁶

The Irish revolutionary Roger Casement (1864-1916) was also of considerable importance to early gay liberation, in part because his biography suggested a historical connection between homosexuality and the politics of anti-imperialism. For example, in a *Gay Sunshine* feature Mike Silverstein recounted Casement’s exposés of colonial atrocities in the Belgium Congo and the Peruvian Amazon; embrace of the Irish independence struggle; attempt to obtain weapons from Germany during the First World War; and subsequent execution by the British state for treason. While attacking the conservative historians and biographers who claimed Casement’s so-called “black diaries” recording his homosexual liaisons in the colonial theatre were depraved forgeries, Silverstein reserved his strongest venom for liberal scholars who, while acknowledging Casement’s homosexuality, argued it was irrelevant to assessing his biography. On the contrary, Casement’s diaries revealed that “It was his sexuality that led him to encounter ‘natives’ as sex partners and people, and his compassion required that he then attempt to end their oppression.” Here Silverstein regarded Casement’s political trajectory as analogous to Jean Genet, whose love of Black and Arab men ostensibly led to strong identifications with the Algerian Revolution and Third World struggles. Moreover, Silverstein posited that Casement’s execution was a direct result of his homosexuality. Indeed, Silverstein held that without the circulation of Casement’s “black diaries” by British colonialists, his sentence would probably have been commuted due to Casement’s internationally influential humanitarian supporters, who abruptly withered away in the face of the diaries’ “perverted” revelations.⁵⁷ In the final analysis, Silverstein insisted that Casement’s homosexuality was a prism through which

both his ardent anti-imperialism and death sentence needed to be viewed. Writing in *Gay Tide*, Stan Perskey agreed, and likewise criticized blithe biographical treatment of Casement's homosexual encounters as simply part of a "sporting life." However, on an intellectual level, Perskey sought to situate Casement's legacy even more deeply within the politics of anti-imperialism by suggesting that Casement's reports on conditions at rubber plantations in the Congo and Peru exercised a great influence. English economist John Hobson's 1902 text *Imperialism*, which explored how imperial expansion was not so much a function of nationalism, but a phenomenon driven by capitalism's constant need to acquire new markets, new opportunities for investment, and greater profits. Given the extent to which Vladimir Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* drew on Hobson's work, Perskey extrapolated that as Casement's corpse hung at the gallows, Lenin "was putting the finishing touches to *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Already a revolution was in the making that the astute, homosexual, [Irishman] had, not quite unwittingly, contributed to by his impassioned investigations."⁵⁸

To be sure, not all of early gay liberation's heroes could be linked to radical politics, and activists also claimed numerous ancestors primarily in the context of building what might be called a liberated gay literary history. This project was extremely ambitious and contained two main elements. First, gay liberationists set out to identify authors whose lives and oeuvres directly addressed issues with resonance to contemporary gay life. And thus they published extensively on Constantine Cavafy, Mikhail Kuzmin, Hart Crane, E.M. Forster, Paul Verlaine, Edwin Emmanuel Bradford, and others who wrote on easily identifiable modern gay themes, such as tensions between private identities and public acts, social opprobrium, and urban underworlds.⁵⁹ Second and simultaneously, however, activists proposed that the entire breadth of the Western literary tradition teemed with subterranean homosexual content, which for centuries had been suppressed — both overtly by religious and state censorship, and more insidiously by academics through practices of omission, mistranslation, misinterpretation, and expurgation. According to this line of thought, even the most celebrated texts routinely found on university syllabi contained hidden homosexual currents awaiting exposure. A central strategy here entailed establishing a hermeneutic circularity between texts and biographies, biographies and texts.⁶⁰ Simply put, this version of the hermeneutic circle sought to reinterpret texts in light of their author's purported homosexuality, while simultaneously reinterpreting an author's biography in light of homosexual or homoerotic literary content. Put another way, after discovering biographical details that could be read as indicating an author's homosexuality, activists deployed these details to aid in the reinterpretation of the author's writings. But equally and conversely, when encountering content within a text that could be interpreted as homosexual or homoerotic, gay liberationists often ripped the content outside of the text, and

used it to aid in the biographical reinterpretation of an author.⁶¹ For example, in a feature on Emily Dickinson published by *The Furies* and reprinted in *Gay Liberator*, Jennifer Woodul complained that available scholarship on the famed poet's life contained countless, “disgusting examples of heterosexual arrogance.” While standard accounts were filled with “pages and pages of biographical detail relating to practically every man Dickinson ever saw,” Woodul raged that “the five to fifteen candidates suggested as Emily's [secret male] lover never received a fraction of the love filled letters that went to Susan Gilbert, Kate Scott Turner ... and several other female friends.” Uniting biographical and textual interpretation, Woodul insisted that Dickinson's passionate relationships with women were necessary in order to properly understand her poetry, and conversely that her poetry offered biographical insights into those very relationships. For instance, after Kate Scott Turner ceased her romantic correspondence and personal visits with Dickinson and married a male suitor in 1861, Dickinson's poetry became preoccupied with dark themes of madness and death, and often depicting a woman forsaking her, as in the stanza: “Her sweet weight on my heart at night / Had scarcely deigned to lie, / When, stirring for belief's delight, / My bride had slipped away.” Even more revealing was a poem referencing Kate Scott Turner directly: “Why, Katie, treason has a voice, / But mine dispels in tears.” Yet Woodul believed that overall, Dickinson's poetry was not so much bitter towards individuals as it was angered by sexist society, as evinced by the stanza “Tis the Majority / In this, as All, prevail – / Assent – and you are sane — / Demur – and you're straightway dangerous / and handled with a Chain.” And thus Dickinson's protracted reclusion could be understood as a “protest against a society whose heterosexual imperialism ruined her life” – the same heterosexual imperialism responsible for the endless academic misinterpretations of her biography and oeuvre.⁶²

In *Gay Community News*, Tom Myles applied a similar hermeneutic maneuver in a feature on Christopher Marlowe that focused on *Edward II*, an “incredible play about England's homosexual King that I'll bet you never read in high school or college.” Published in 1594, the play depicted Edward's passionate love affair with Piers Gaveston, which was an anathema to the English nobility, who compelled King Edward's abdication and then brutally murdered their former monarch. Here *Edward II* was a great, if underappreciated, Renaissance drama, for in addition to considerable formal achievements, it occupied a pivotal place in the development of historical drama as a genre. As one of the first English plays to emphasize actual historical events, *Edward II* drew extensively from *Holinsbed's Chronicles*, an early modern compendium of British history. And of all the historic figures to be found in *Holinsbed's Chronicles*, Myles argued it was significant that Marlowe chose to write about Edward II. Indeed, Myles believed that Marlowe's intense interest in Edward II and Piers Gaveston's relationship was biographically significant as one more indication of Marlowe's homosexuali-

ty. Complaining that in reading scholarly discussions of *Edward II* “one would never know its theme was homosexual love,” Myles held that any literary criticism that ignored this element of the play was defective at its core.⁶³

Penetrating even further into the heart of the Western cannon, in *Gay Liberator* Don Mager attempted to claim William Shakespeare for a gay literary heritage. Here Mager depicted Shakespeare’s patron, Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, as a wayward, effeminate, young aristocrat who fell in and out of favour with Queen Elizabeth, refused an arranged marriage at considerable personal cost, and frequently shared a bed with handsome male soldiers under his command. Supporting Shakespeare when an outbreak of the plague closed theatres in London, Wriothesley saved the still relatively unknown playwright from dire financial straits. Consequently, Shakespeare dedicated the poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* to Wriothesley. And Mager hypothesized that the “fair youth” of Shakespeare’s homoerotic *Sonnets* referred to none other than his aristocratic saviour, who appeared to be the perfect candidate in numerous respects. Not only was Wriothesley eleven years Shakespeare’s junior, his fair complexion was evinced by surviving portraits, and much like the fair youth of the *Sonnets*, he refused to marry countless female suitors. While never suggesting that the *Sonnets* necessarily indicated sexual relations, for Mager, at the very least the *Sonnets* demonstrated an affectionate and homoerotic bond between Shakespeare and Southampton that was a source of artistic inspiration. Thus the relationship between Shakespeare and an ostensibly homosexual, aristocratic patron resided at the core of “one of the most memorable and soul-searching love poems ever written in English.” And as the *Sonnets* were the most “directly personal utterances we have” by Shakespeare, for Mager they represented, in a hermeneutic circularity, a tantalizing sign of the bard’s own sexuality.⁶⁴

Certainly, by the mid-1970s the project of a liberated gay literary history and criticism was not restricted to features in movement periodicals that claimed famous authors as part of a gay heritage. For example, in 1974 the academic journal *College English* turned its pages over to a group of gay liberationists who published a special issue addressing the theoretical and methodological problems of such endeavours.⁶⁵ Moreover, 1975 saw the publication of Ian Young’s *The Male Homosexual in Literature*, which drew on Canada Council funding to document nearly 3000 texts with male homosexual and homoerotic themes, and included methodologically oriented essays on homosexuality within a range of literary forms and genres.⁶⁶ Professors and graduate students associated with the gay liberation movement also began offering courses addressing homosexuality in literature at universities such as California at Los Angeles, Massachusetts at Boston, Nebraska, Rutgers, Concordia, and Toronto.⁶⁷ Yet even as gay literary criticism and history grew increasingly sophisticated and began to engage ever-larger bodies of literature, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Whitman, Wilde, Dickinson, Stein, Woolf, and other canonical authors remained essential. For

example, Jacob Stockinger, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, argued that it was “crucial for gay criticism to invade the traditional realms of literature.” And the celebrated authors so often highlighted by gay liberation’s projects of genealogical appropriation were the Trojan horses of this “invasion.” While scholarship on contemporary gay writers such as William Burroughs or Allen Ginsburg could be easily ignored by the academic establishment, reinterpreting the lives and oeuvres of authors residing at the heart of the Western canon was seen as more likely to force scholars into contact with gay interpretations and disrupt heteronormative heuristics.⁶⁸ Although gay liberationist projects of literary history and criticism had strongly minoritising tendencies in the sense of claiming a corner of the republic of letters for the gay community, such projects simultaneously contained the universalizing objective of revealing homosexual or homoerotic dimensions of classic texts long celebrated as expressing something universal about the human experience.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the mid 1970s also saw growing criticism of approaches to gay history that focused on famous homosexuals. A common complaint was that focusing on such figures, particularly those notable for achievements in arts and letters, reproduced tired stereotypes that gays were particularly artistic. For example, writing in *GLP*, Graeme Tubbenhauer argued that gay liberation needed to suspend its “tendency to drop Big Names” because doing so often implied “something mystical about homosexuals and homosexuality; that gays are more witty-charming-artistic-sensitive-intelligent than their heterosexual counterparts.”⁷⁰ *With Downcast Gays*, an influential British booklet published in North America by *The Body Politic*, similarly attacked “the list[s] of famous names that gay people so eagerly make,” which were regarded as “apologetic” and therefore “self-oppressive.”⁷¹ In *Gay News* Derek James attacked Britain in particular as “a society where the dead fuck us, a society stifled by blind hero worship and tradition,” and bemoaned the movement’s “deification of Oscar Wilde.”⁷² Taking a more generous tone, in *Gay Marxist*, Susan Bruley acknowledged the value of features in the gay liberation press on figures such as Whitman, Carpenter and Casement, but argued that “the chief drawback of this sort of history is that it becomes a history of great homosexuals ... rather than the far more difficult history which attempts to locate homosexuality in a wider stream” – namely, within the stream of social history. Asserting that “homosexuals have lived together and loved together throughout history,” Bruley believed that the time had come for activists to investigate the socio-economic foundations of gay oppression, as well as the “origins of collective activity among male and female homosexuals.”⁷³

To be sure, there were some initial steps in the direction of a gay social history by 1975, the final year covered by the body of this article. Indeed, a few

pioneering efforts sought to capture the experiences of ordinary gays and lesbians, gain knowledge of their forms of community, and map their subcultural spaces using sources such as newspapers and records generated by disciplinary institutions. For example, in *Gay Sunshine* Rictor Norton published extensive research on the molly-house subculture of eighteenth century London, while the *Gay Liberation Front Diary* similarly drew on newspaper research to profile early nineteenth century police raids on a molly house on Verve Street in early nineteenth century London.⁷⁴ In *GLP*, an activist explored the connection between male homosexuality and Australia's history as a collection of penal colonies, arguing that Australia's predominantly male population during the period of transportation and the same-sex environments of prison facilities led to a "prevalence of sodomy" that became a source of concern for colonial officials and church leaders.⁷⁵ Drawing on everything from conquistador accounts to modern court records and newspaper reports, in *Gay Sunshine* Clark L. Taylor Jr. constructed a sweeping historical account of homosexuality in Mexico from the eve of the Spanish colonisation to the present.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, social histories of homosexuality were scattered and generally limited in this period; most studies appeared after 1975, with Jonathan Ned Katz's *Gay American History* and Jeffrey Weeks' *Coming Out* constituting important milestones and catalysts for further research.⁷⁷

More substantial within the scope of the present article was scholarship recounting the earliest forms of organised homosexual activism from the nineteenth century which provoked a flurry of excited reviews, distillations, and critical analyses. To borrow the historian Ian McKay's formulation, this scholarship proceeded in the broad spirit of *reconnaissance*, insofar as gay liberationists set out to survey the struggles of past gay activists in order to obtain strategic lessons of their victories and defeats.⁷⁸ Such reconnaissance histories focused on the homosexual activism that emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth century and continued until the 1930s, while largely ignoring or marginalising post-Second World War homophilism, which was often viewed by early gay liberationists as a competing, even embarrassing political formation that had overstayed its welcome in the present.

One of the most influential of these reconnaissance studies was Jim Steakley's series on the "Gay Movement in Germany," which appeared in *The Body Politic* between the spring of 1973, and the summer of 1974.⁷⁹ Framing his series in contradistinction to heroic approaches to gay history, Steakley championed the tools of Marxist theory and the new social history, and insisted that the late nineteenth century emergence of homosexual political organisations such as the Scientific Humanitarian Committee (*Wissenschaftlich-Humanitares Komitee*) were explicable primarily with reference to broad, socio-economic forces. In examining the rise of homosexual politics in nineteenth century Germany, Steakley explored everything from the mechanisation of German agriculture, urbanisa-

tion, the expansion of the wage-labour system, and the emergence of gay subcultures in major cities.⁸⁰ Yet at the heart of Steakley’s narrative were scattered intellectuals and activists who articulated highly specialized conceptualizations of homosexuality and founded small political organisations, many of which had little interest in broader community mobilizations. Towering processes of social transformation and economic history quickly receded into the background. And for a series that denounced heroes, Steakley’s articles contained quite a few of them. For example, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a Hanoverian civil servant, was described as “a gay pioneer” who publicly argued as early as the 1860s that since homosexuals were congenitally attracted to members of the same-sex, it was cruel and useless to punish them.⁸¹ Magnus Hirschfeld emerged as a courageous founder of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, and a tireless public campaigner against Paragraph 175 of the German Penal code, despite “major tactical blunders as a gay leader.” Moreover, Kurt Hiller occupied a prominent place in Steakley’s narrative not only as a formidable jurist who fiercely attacked legislation governing sexual morality, but also as a skilled political organizer able to amass considerable support for homosexual law reform among the German left.

Heroic forbearers appeared even more numerous in John Lauritsen and David Thorstad’s influential reconnaissance history, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)*.⁸² In addition to Ulrichs and Hirschfeld, the study devoted considerable space to “gay pioneers,” such as the German labour leader J.B. von Schweitzer and the Austrian-born activist Karl-Maria Kertbeny who coined the term homosexuality in 1869. While Steakley’s study focused primarily on Germany, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement* adopted a pan-European scope. And although Steakley was generally sensitive to temporal and conceptual ruptures between political formations, Thorstad and Lauritsen often fused past and present in an unbroken chain. For instance, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement* opened with a jarring opening proposition: the 1969 Stonewall Riots simply marked “a new wave of gay liberation ... indeed, one might say the 100th anniversary of gay liberation.”⁸³ Nevertheless, “The Gay Movement in Germany” and *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement* dovetailed considerably. Both studies sought to “contribute to the gay liberation struggle today and the revolutionary movement as a whole” by unearthing a strategically useful knowledge of past struggles.⁸⁴ And both studies generally agreed on the primary reconnaissance lessons: the gay movement faltered when it primarily pursued the support of experts and elites; conceptualised scientific knowledge and rational argumentation as sufficient to awaken consciences and provoke legislative change; adopted non-partisan stances; and attempted to appeal to politicians across the political spectrum. Conversely, the early gay movement was strongest when it asserted itself as widely as possible in the public sphere; staged political demonstrations; and allied with Social Democrats, Communists, and other leftist political forces.

The influence of Steakley, Thorstad and Lauritsen on English speaking gay liberationists can hardly be overstated. Gay liberation periodicals in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australasia, and New Zealand printed reviews and distillations intended to transmit Steakley, Thorstad and Lauritsen's research to as many activists as possible. Astonishment that homosexual political activism existed as far back as the nineteenth century was a common reaction. For example, in *Gay News*, Laurence Collinson expressed "surprise" that challenges to normative sexual morality in the Victorian era "were not the prerogative of a few isolated men and women."⁸⁵ In *Gay Tide*, Ian Mackenzie similarly voiced amazement at the extent of campaigns to repeal the German penal code at such an early historical period, and suggested that widespread ignorance of these political antecedents was a function of historiographic oppression, charging that "historians have taken care to suppress [the early gay movement] from their official versions of the past."⁸⁶ In reviewing the new reconnaissance research for *Gay Marxist*, Steve Cohen marvelled that the "backwardness of the Left groupings in Britain today on the question of gay oppression" did not necessarily reflect the attitudes of leftists in the past. Cohen also criticized the German gay movement's excessive faith in the parliamentary process, reliance on the support of elites, and failure to undertake mass mobilization of homosexuals. In Cohen's reading, gay liberationists needed to "learn from these mistakes, precisely because the gay movement today ... is also confronted by the forces of the right and sexual repression."⁸⁷ In an address to the Auckland Humanist Society reprinted by *The Gay Liberator*, Dick Morrison similarly sought to connect the history of the German movement to conditions in his own country, albeit in a very different way. Regarding the German movement's instigation of a lively national discussion on homosexual law reform as one of its greatest accomplishments, Morrison believed that lessons abounded for activists fighting for the decriminalisation of homosexuality in New Zealand. And here Karl-Maria Kertbeny stood out as a key figure because he asserted as early as 1869 that "the state has no business sticking its nose into peoples bedrooms [sic]." Here Kertbeny was positioned as a heroic individual, indeed as an early champion of law reform in ways "that we could easily associate with the gay movement today."⁸⁸

Reactions to the new reconnaissance histories were far from uncritical, however, and many gay liberationists took issue with Thorstad and Lauritsen's interpretation of gay liberation as a straightforward continuation of earlier, Continental European forms of homosexual activism. For example, in *GLP* Graeme Tubbenhauer criticized the premise that 1969 was the 100th anniversary of gay liberation, and argued that the movement needed to be understood "as an entirely new struggle on a different plane."⁸⁹ Similarly, in *Gay Left* Jeffrey Weeks emphasised the problems with drawing lines of continuity between past and present so starkly, and criticized Thorstad and Lauritsen's effacement of histori-

cally specific forms of oppression and activism. Foreshadowing his own historical framework in *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain since the Nineteenth Century*, Weeks insisted that the early homosexual rights movement “would make more sense if located in the threefold development of new legal controls on sexuality (not just homosexuality); new ideological forms adopted as the ‘medical model’ of homosexuality; and the growth of a relatively complex and recognisably ‘modern’ type of subculture.” Nevertheless, Weeks stressed that the new reconnaissance research was “very useful,” and not only provided “valuable ammunition” for the present struggle, but fertile soil for further research.⁹⁰ As Sam Deaderick put it in a review of *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement* originally published in *The Northwest Gay Review* and reprinted by *Gay Tide*, Thorstad and Lauritsen had taken a vital first step “in the massive task of uncovering [our] political past.” For Deaderick, their work constituted “a weapon in the hands of gay liberationist everywhere,” and offered lessons with which to face present and future struggles with greater wisdom.⁹¹

Gay liberation’s intellectual history has too often suffered the condescension of posterity with reference to theoretical frameworks and scholarly norms that were either unavailable or irrelevant to activists themselves. While routinely disqualified as rudimentary, naive, and embarrassingly essentialist in relation to social constructionist and poststructuralist frameworks, early gay liberation’s projects of historical knowledge-making appear more complex and productive when investigated in a non-normative and historicist fashion. Even following the mid-1970s backlash against genealogical appropriation, gay heroes remained intimately connected to gay liberation’s historical knowledge-making projects throughout the decade and beyond. While Jim Steakley cursed heroes in the pages of *The Body Politic*, the newspaper’s editorial collective ironically found in his series an ancestral hero in the person of Kurt Hiller. Indeed, the newspaper enshrined a 1921 quote from Hiller on its official masthead, which read: “the liberation of homosexuals must be the work of homosexuals themselves.”⁹² To be sure, in the latter half of the 1970s *The Body Politic* increasingly published scholarship by an emerging cohort of activist historians such as Jonathan Ned Katz, John D’Emilio, and Robert Padgug, who variously adopted Marxian, social historical, and social constructionist methodologies. But this trend by no means signalled the death of the hero within projects of critical, historical knowledge-making that the newspaper facilitated. For instance, *Body Politic* affiliated activists Allan Miller and Michael Lynch organised the first major history conference in Canada to explore themes of homosexuality under the banner of Walt Whitman. Held in 1980 at the University of Toronto’s Erindale College with a small grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the “Whitman in

Ontario” conference featured papers addressing interconnections between Whitman’s biography, homosexuality, and oeuvre.⁹³ Furthermore, it was with reference to Oscar Wilde perhaps the first major, international gay history conference was held in Toronto in 1982 as part of a *Body Politic* sponsored conference called “Doing It! Gay Liberation in the 80s.” Bringing together activists and scholars from across the English-speaking world on the hundredth anniversary of Wilde’s 1882 North American tour, the conference featured papers on gay urban, social, legal, intellectual, literary and political history presented by Barry Adam, Allan Berube, Karla Jay, Jonathan Katz, Michael Lynch, Gayle Rubin, Martha Vicinus, and others.⁹⁴

Simply put, the figure of the hero has had a long, recurrent, and chameleon-like utility within queer communities and social movements. For gay liberationists, heroic figures were at once bound up with projects of politico-ethical self-fashioning, socio-cultural integration, and historical knowledge-making in ways that cannot be fully disentangled. Another element of the complex relationship between gay liberation and its historical heroes was emotional in nature. Far from seeking to elaborate the distinctions and differences between sodomites and invert, homosexuals and uranians, or sapphists and lesbians, gay liberationists sought a sense of connection across the mists of time. To borrow Christopher Nealon’s evocative term, gay liberationists longed to “feel historical” and establish some sense of an enduring collective subject, which they achieved in part through practices of genealogical appropriation.⁹⁵ To use Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept, gay liberation’s heroes acted as vehicles for the “fusion of horizons” by merging past and present into a single historicity of affect and struggle, and opening new horizons of historical inquiry.⁹⁶

NOTES

I wish to express gratitude to Alan Miller and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives for facilitating my research. I’m also very grateful to Jessica Cammaert, Karen Dubinsky, Braden Hutchinson, Erin Mandzak-Heer, Ian McKay, and Reēju Ray for suggestions, constructive criticism, and ongoing encouragement. A final thanks to the anonymous Left History reviewers who provided thoughtful feedback and helped me to refine this article.

Jim Steakly, “The Gay Movement in Germany, Part One: 1860-1910,” *The Body Politic* (hereafter *TBP*), 9 (June 1973); “The Gay Movement in Germany, Part Two: 1910-1933,” *TBP*, 10 (Sept 1973); “Homosexuals and the Third Reich,” *TBP*, 10 (January 1974); “The Gay Movement in Germany Today,” *TBP*, 13

(May-June 1974).

Here Steakley singled out Noel I. Garde, *Jonathan to Gide: The Homosexual in History* (New York: Vantage Press, 1964).

Jim Steakley, “The Gay Movement in Germany, Part One.” For enlightening treatments of epic theatre, see: Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971); Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998).

Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Martin Bauman Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr., “Introduction,” in Martin Bauman Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. eds. *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989); David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 7. To be sure, Halperin’s tone softened considerably in his subsequent intervention, *How To Do the History of Homosexuality*. Having absorbed Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s trenchant criticism of social constructionist extremism, Halperin abandoned a former insistence on the absolute alterity of the sexual past, and accepted resemblances, connections, and identifications with ancient figures as potentially legitimate aspects of “our personal, political and cultural projects.” Nevertheless, in recounting the dropping of a Queer Nation leaflet over New York City during the city’s 1990 gay pride parade, which claimed Proust, da Vinci, Marlowe, Socrates, Whitman, Auden, and other luminaries as part of a common heritage, Halperin admitted that “this sort of identification still gives me the creeps.” David Halperin, *How To Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 16.

This article is inspired by the sympathetic spirit that Jeremiah Wilson Moses adopts in his work on African American popular histories. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). It also adopts Cameron Duder’s respectful and informed sidestepping of queer theoretical debates regarding the appropriateness of imposing categories such as “lesbian” and “gay” on disparate historical actors, and instead focuses on the meaning-making of the actors themselves. Cameron Duder, *Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-1965* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press).

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (London and New York: Routledge,

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⁴⁰ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994): 283.

⁴¹ James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York: Arno Press, 1975); The Scientific Humanitarian Committee, “The Problem of Sexual Inversion,” in Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); Norton, *Myth of the Modern Homosexual*, 218.

⁴² John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 111.

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⁴⁷ James Coleman, “The Good Gay Poet,” *Detroit Gay Liberator*, 1.9 (February 1971).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

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⁵⁰ Rictor Norton, "Walt Whitman, Prophet of Gay Liberation," *Gay News*, 48 (1974).

⁵¹ "Among the Multitude," *Come Together*, 14 (1972). Also see: Michael Mason, "A Simple Separate Person," *Gay News*, 27 (1973); Rictor Norton, "Walt Whitman, Prophet of Gay Liberation," *Gay News*, 48 (1974); Richard Dey, "Neither the First Nor the Last," *Gay Community News*, 2.44 (26 April 1975).

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⁵⁵ Don Milligan, "Oscar Wilde," *Gay Marxist*, 3 (October 1973); Don Milligan, "A Wilde Eyed Radical," *Gay Liberator*, 34 (February 1974).

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⁵⁸ Stan Persky, "Roger Casement Against Imperialism" *Gay Tide* (June 1975).

⁵⁹ For example: Andre Stein, "Hombres by Verlaine: First Publication of a Long Suppressed Gay Poem," *The Body Politic*, 8 (March 1973); Ken Popert, "Mikhail Kuzmin: ... 'and the people grew wings,' *The Body Politic*, 12 (March-April 1974); Rictor Norton, "Materials Towards the Life," *Gay News*, 55 (1974); Ian Young, "Constantine Cavafy: Young Men Even Now Are Repeating His Verses," *Gay News*, 38 (1974); Tom Myles, "Hart Crane: Poet Extraordinaire," *Gay Community News*, 2.51 (14 June 1975); Andy Dvosin, "Maurice," *Gay Sunshine*, 14 (1972); "Maurice: A Gay Novel," *The Body Politic*, 1 (Nov/Dec 1971).

⁶⁰ Don Mager, "Gay Patron of the Arts," *Gay Liberator*, 28 (July 1973); Satya, "Uncensoring Shakespeare's Sonnets" *Gay Community News*, 3.25 (20 December 1975); "Christopher Marlowe," *Come Out*, 1.1 (14 November 1969); Tom Myles, "Edward II Falls Again," *Gay Community News*, 3.16 (18 October 1975); Jane Rule, *Lesbian Images* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, N.Y.: 1975).

⁶¹ Gay liberation's hermeneutic circle was in keeping with the concept's traditional sense of a circularity between parts and wholes, wholes and parts. See: Judith N. Shklar, "Squaring the Hermeneutic Circle," *Social Research*, 53.3 (Autumn 1986); Consuelo Conraddi, "Text, Context, and Individual Contexts: Rethinking Life Stories in a Hermeneutic Framework," *Discourse and Society*, 2.1 (1991); Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

⁶² Jennifer Woodul, “The Truth about Emily,” *Gay Liberator*, 22 (November 1972). For a recent critical assessment of perspectives on Dickinson’s sexuality and erotic relationship to her sister-in-law Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson, see: Kristin M. Comment, “Dickinson’s Bawdy: Shakespeare and Sexual Symbolism in Emily Dickinson’s Writing to Susan Dickinson,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 18.2 (2001): 167-181.

⁶³ Tom Myles, “Edward II Falls Again,” *Gay Community News*, 3.16 (18 October 1975). Also see: Joseph Winter, “Spies, Tobacco, and Boys,” *Gay News*, 80 (1975), which unequivocally claimed Marlowe as a homosexual in relation to his “gay writings” such as *Edward II* and *Hero and Leander*.

⁶⁴ Don Mager, “Gay Patron of the Arts,” *Gay Liberator*, 28 (July 1973). Mager was deeply influenced by A.L. Rowse, *Christopher Marlowe: A Biography* (London: Macmillan & Co. LTD: 1964); A.L. Rowse, *William Shakespeare: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); and G.P.V. Akrigg, *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968). Debates surrounding the identity and meaning of “the fair youth” of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* continue to swirl and no doubt never be settled. While Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, has been considered a plausible candidate, so too has William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, among others – Pembroke being the preferred candidate in Satya, “Uncensoring Shakespeare’s Sonnets” *Gay Community News*, 3.25 (20 December 1975). It is impossible to do justice to the complexity of the questions surrounding Shakespeare, Marlowe and Wriothesley’s sexuality here, but the following provides a brief indication that some of Don Mager and other activist interpretations were neither without precedent, nor destined to die in the 1970s. Maurice Hunt gives considerable credence to the possibility that the “fair youth” of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* referred to Southampton, and he suggests that sonnet 20 may subversively imply that “Southampton’s sexuality included the capacity for relations with men.” Maurice Hunt, “Bertram, the Third Earl of Southampton, and Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*: A Speculative Psychosexual Biography,” *Exemplaria*, 21.3 (Fall 2009): 333. For a broad overview and history of the various interpretations and debates, see: Bruce R. Smith, “Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the History of Sexuality: A Reception History,” in Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard eds., *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works, Volume 4: The Poems, Problem Comedies, Late Plays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

⁶⁵ See Rictor Norton and Louie Crew, “The Homosexual Imagination: An Editorial,” *College English*, 36.3 (Nov. 1974).

⁶⁶ Ian Young, *The Male Homosexual in Literature: A Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1975).

⁶⁷ J. Lee Lehman, *Gays On Campus* (Washington, D.C.: United States National Student Association, 1975), Harry Langhorne Papers, 1972-1977, #7304, Box 3,

Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

⁶⁸ Jacob Stockinger, "Toward a Gay Criticism," *College English*, 36.3 (Nov. 1974).

⁶⁹ Rictor Norton, "Ganymede Raped: The Critic as Censor," *Gay Sunshine*, 23 (1975).

⁷⁰ Graeme Tubbenhauer, "Review: the Early Homosexual Rights Movement," *GLP*, 6 (Jan-Feb 1975).

⁷¹ Andrew Hodges and David Hutter, *With Downcast Gays: Aspects of Homosexual Self-Oppression* (Toronto: Pink Triangle Press, 1977): 23. Originally published by London's Pomegranate Press in 1974.

⁷² Derek James, "Liberation Jottings," *Gay News*, 68 (1975).

⁷³ Susan Bruley, "Gay History?," *Gay Marxist*, 4 (Jan. 1974).

⁷⁴ Rictor Norton, "Gay London in the 1720's: The Great Raid on Mother Clap's Molly House," *Gay Sunshine*, 24 (Spring 1975); "The Verve Street Coterie," *Gay Liberation Front Diary* (Dec. 21-30, 1972), Gay Liberation Front, Box 4, Hall-Carpenter Archives, London School of Economics Library.

⁷⁵ Sodomy and Transportation: Some Attitudes Concerning Sodomy in Britain and Australia (1765-1850) and a Short Bibliography of Sources," *GLP: A Journal of Sexual Politics*, 8 (Spring 1975).

⁷⁶ Clark L. Taylor Jr., "Mexican Gay Life in Historical Perspective," *Gay Sunshine*, 26/27 (Winter 1975-76).

⁷⁷ Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: Avon Books, 1976); Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1990 [1977]).

⁷⁸ Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005); *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008).

⁷⁹ Jim Steakly, "The Gay Movement in Germany, Part One."

⁸⁰ Here Steakly took an initial step in the direction of John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," as well as Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharan Thompson (eds) *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

⁸¹ Ulrichs of course used the term Urnings.

⁸² Which began as a short survey in the Socialist Workers Party's *Internal Discussion Bulletin* 1973, but was quickly expanded into a booklet published by New York's Times Change Press in 1974.

⁸³ John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)* (New York: Times Change Press, 1974): 5. The booklet began as a

short survey in the Socialist Workers Party’s *Internal Discussion Bulletin* 1973.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Lauren Collinson, “Gay Lib – The First Wave,” *Gay News*, 63 (1974-1975).

⁸⁶ Ian Mackenzie, “Book Review: John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)*,” *Gay Tide*, 1.5 (April 1974). In a generally similar distillation of Lauritsen and Thorstad in *Gay Liberator*, Allen Young also provided ordering information for Steakley’s “excellent series of articles in the *Body Politic*,” which Young opined did a better job of examining the internal contradictions and cleavages of the early movement. Allen Young, “Early Gay History,” *Gay Liberator*, 36 (April 1974).

⁸⁷ Steve Cohen, “Notes on the History of the German Gay Movement,” *Gay Marxist*, 5 (June 1974).

⁸⁸ Dick Morrison, “The Nature of the Gay Liberation Movement,” *The Gay Liberator* (March/April 1974).

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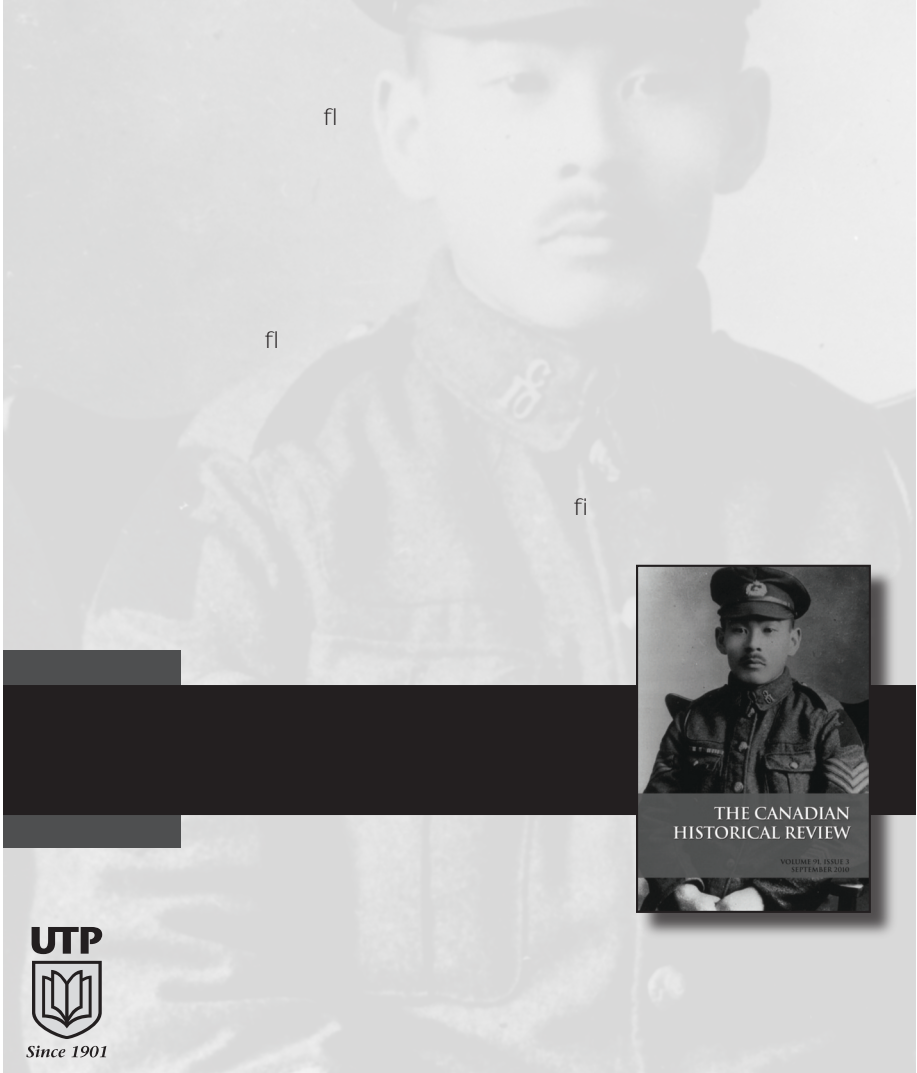
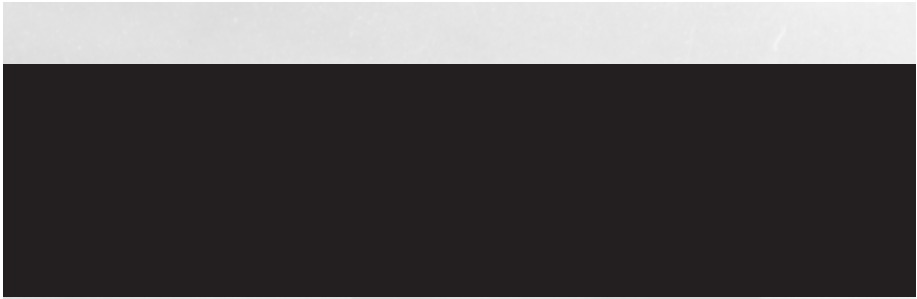
⁹² This quote first appeared in *The Body Politic*, 16 (Nov./Dec. 1974) and remained on the publication’s masthead until its demise in 1987.

⁹³ Whitman in Ontario Conference Program, October 1980, Canadian Gay Archives, 5.5.4., 82-020/01, Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives.

⁹⁴ Wilde 82’ Conference Program, June-July 1982, Canadian Gay Archives, 5.5.4., 82-020/01, Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives.

⁹⁵ Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 8.

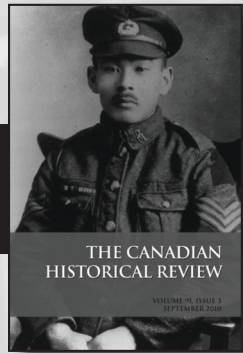
⁹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004).



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THE CANADIAN
HISTORICAL REVIEW

VOLUME 91 ISSUE 1
SEPTEMBER 2008



Since 1901