Springsteen's "Working on a Dream" and Remembering Thirty Years of Activist Collaborations in Canadian Labour and Social History

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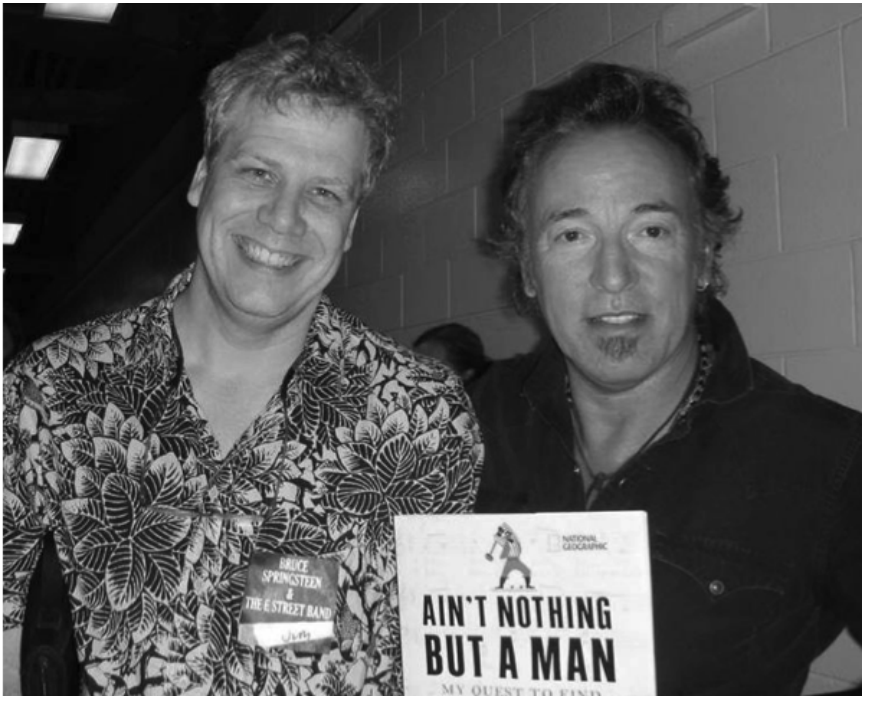
Having decided to reflect on my and Craig Heron's thirty-plus years of collaboration in politically engaged scholarship and activist history through Bruce Springsteen's "Working on a Dream" and his other songs, as well as a few other musical references, it occurred to me that I did not actually know whether Craig is a Springsteen fan. But then I thought, so what! Because if he is not, then he should be. Certainly, many of the committed unionists and activists with whom we have worked were Bruce fans. I knew, too, that there would be Springsteen fans among the Canadian labour and social historians in the audience, feminists like myself included. I am pleased to learn now that Craig is indeed a fan. Moreover, judging by the reaction of the audience to the video clip I just showed of Springsteen and "the mighty E Street Band" in action during a 2009 concert in Glastonbury, UK—heads bobbing to the beat of the music and intense faces watching Springsteen seduce the Glastonbury crowd with one of those rocking sermons that promised to transform (if only for a few hours) the fear, doubt, sadness, and injustice in the world into "a house" of love, support, joy, and sexual healing—I think I also just witnessed the secular baptism of some newly awakened Springsteen fans.[1]

To be sure, no labour or social historian in this room or anywhere else will ever be referred to as "the rock and roll laureate of a generation," no matter how "distinguished" we might become.[2] Nor will our collaborations, however important, ever achieve the celebrity fame of Springsteen's collaborations with the E Street Band. Perhaps the most that some of us diehard Springsteen fans might hope for is something along the lines of what Scott Nelson, a US labour historian and friend to several Canadian labour historians here, received with his award-winning book *Steel Drivin' Man*: an endorsement and a meeting with "The Boss" himself. Scott's book is both a fascinating detective story about tracking down John Henry, the real (probably) man behind the famous American ballad, and a superb analysis of the work songs and lives of African American railroad workers in the southern United States. Springsteen's blurb could have been penned by a labour historian: "Written at the crossroads where American myth and reality intersect, *Steel Drivin' Man* is a tribute and requiem to the real steel drivin' men who built this country."[3] In a photograph of Scott and Springsteen meeting backstage during a concert, Springsteen is holding a version of the book that Scott wrote for young readers.[4] Scott sent the following message along with the image: "Tell Craig, I wish I was as rock and roll as him."[5]



Scott Nelson and Bruce Springsteen (photo provided by Scott Nelson)

Still, what better way for a working-class Italian-Canadian girl (think Patti Scialfa, member of the E Street Band and Springsteen's partner) who grew up across from the railway tracks on Dupont Street in Toronto, before being displaced to the suburban wilds of Willowdale, to reflect on the career of the tall red-headed boy from the back streets of Scarborough who became a student radical and labour historian, than to invoke that Jersey-born, Irish-Italian, modern day troubadour whose songs capture the dreams and disappointments of working people?[6] Whose songs speak of restless kids who were born to run, the struggles of precariously employed workers in my hometown, falling in love with the queen of the supermarket, loss and love in the darkness on the edge of town, and searching for the promised land.[7] Equally important here is Springsteen's own evolution from a working-class kid with a simple dream (become a rock star and get girls) to a politicized songwriter, voracious reader of labour and people's history, and an activist as well as accomplished musician. Indeed, Springsteen himself has attributed his political awakening in large part to reading the highly influential *A People's History of the United States:*

1492 to the Present by the left historian, playwright, and activist Howard Zinn.[8] The unusually optimistic lyrics of Springsteen's 2009's "Working on a Dream" are supposedly linked to Barack Obama's anticipated presidency: "I'm working on a dream, Though sometimes it feels so far away … I'm working on a dream, And I know it will be mine someday." Alas, things did not go as well as many had hoped and Trump's darkness looms, so as Bruce reflects, theorizes, and re-organizes, so do we.[9]

Springsteen has said of his collaboration with the E Street Band that he "told a story" with the band "that was and is bigger" than he could have told on his own.[10] So, too, did Craig, and others here know that we could not just tell workers' stories from the ivory tower, but had also to join forces with working people and each other; build bridges with the labour movement and social movement activists; and even build a workers' centre, to help bring those stories to wider audiences. Just as in Bruce's songs, where everyone gets to have some dignity and, on occasion, really change their lives, Craig and the committed scholars, unionists, artists, and educators with whom he has worked have sought to dignify workers' lives through careful study, to teach and inspire with them, and to sear them into a wider consciousness.

The context in which I first met Craig, at a Blue Collar Workers' Conference (later renamed the more gender-inclusive Workers and Their Communities) in Hamilton in 1981, reflected the critical linkages between labour studies scholars, the labour movement, and social movements like socialist feminism, which animated labour history's rise to prominence and influenced its content and analysis. That web of alliances and negotiations would shape many of my collaborations with Craig. But in 1981, I was a neophyte, though I had been involved in political theatre and anti-poverty work. I went to the conference as an MA student with Ian Radforth—then a PhD candidate writing a labour history dissertation on logging that became *Bushworkers and Bosses*.[11] We had only just met through the York University Graduate History Program, or, more precisely, the match-making efforts of the, alas, now deceased Varpu Lindstrom, and I did not know anyone at the conference.[12] Stricken with a severe case of laryngitis, I also could not speak to Craig—then a postdoctoral fellow in the York University History Department—or Greg Kealey, or Bob Storey, or any other labour scholar I met that day. So I went away thinking, "damn, they'll think I'm shy and quiet," though they soon learned otherwise.

I got to know Craig a year later (he landed a tenure-stream job at York in 1982), when I became the teaching assistant (TA) in the first Canadian social history course he taught at York. As a PhD student of immigrant workers, I was pleased to be the TA, but never would have guessed that our lives would overlap as much as they have. Indeed, initially, I did not know quite what to make of Craig—he did not fit my stereotype of the male Marxist labour historian. Besides being very tall, he was very thin, clean-shaven, soft-spoken, polite, careful, crisply dressed, and well-groomed: just as Bono of U2 said of Springsteen when he was inducted into the

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999, "he's never had a bad hair day."[13] Craig could be a bit doctrinaire or obstinate, but he did not embrace an adversarial persona. He probably was not sure what to make of me at first either. I did not fit a labour feminist stereotype: I wore a lot of make-up, dressed up, and looked a lot like York's many not-particularly-militant Italian-Canadian students. But rather than merely see me as a working-class ethnic girl with potential—something that others said of me—Craig respected the fact that I had become a serious student of Marxist and feminist history and theory. He knew that one of my PhD comprehensive fields was Marxism (well, really, E.P. Thompson and his critics) and that I belonged to a York feminist reading group that included his then long-time partner, Daphne Read—and I very much appreciated it.

As a graduate student, I did not fully appreciate the challenge of breaking into the culture of a new department with many strong-willed historians. But if Craig initially looked uncomfortable—even pained—at History events, he and his close colleagues later became the driving force of the graduate program. What I did quickly learn, however, was that Craig was not just smart, but extremely hard-working. A night owl myself, I knew he worked late into the night because he sometimes gave me a lift to York and, both groggy-eyed, the two of us said very little in the car until the coffee kicked in. But in those wee hours of the night, Craig produced sweeping, thorough, and animated lectures that, like Bruce's songs, were virtually epic-like in their quality. He exposed the students to a Canada peopled with fisherfolk, navvies, farm women, working-class evangelists, factory girls, street children, short-hour-day activists, immigrant socialists, and revolutionaries, who in different ways struggled, rose up, fell down, organized, and envisioned a better world. He spoke about family economies without romanticizing families and introduced students to critical concepts in the social historian's toolbox, such as structure, agency, and history from below. He placed Canadian history in a broader frame that recognized ordinary people's pre-migration contexts, customary practices, modified urban cultures, and the rich tapestry of immigrant socialist communities. Toronto, Hamilton, and Montreal were part of a wider canvas of industrializing cities that workers traversed and confronted. The lectures were also jam-packed, so in subsequent years Craig likely slashed chunks of detail out of them. That's what I did with my own lectures a decade later.

In 1988, Craig was on my dissertation and oral defense committee, but our relationship was mostly shaped by more informal, more egalitarian, and very rigorous contexts like the Toronto Labour Studies Group (initially the Labour Studies Research Group). Study groups that read members' thesis chapters, first articles, and books influenced my growth as a feminist historian of immigrant workers, and Craig played a big part in it through "Labour Studies." He joined the group—initially composed of sociology graduate students including Bob Storey, working with Jim Turk (then at the University of Toronto)—shortly after it formed in 1981, and he helped open it up to other historians, beginning with Ian Radforth and Ruth Frager.

With Craig and Ian as its longest-standing members, the group has had its ups and downs, but its success is amply evidenced by its longevity; the many people who moved through it (usually leaving because they got jobs too far outside Toronto); and the many publications first discussed there. Besides those already mentioned, the tight group of members who met on a monthly basis during the 1980s and early 1990s included Ester Reiter, June Corman, Heather McAllister, and Charlene Gannage, all of them then University of Toronto (U of T) Sociology PhD students; Chris Huxley (a sociology professor at Trent University); and Jim Naylor and I, York history PhD students. Many other York folks left an important mark in various periods: graduate students including Geoffrey Ewen, Lynne Marks, Adele Perry, and Steve Penfold; and faculty including Patricia McDermott, Eric Tucker, Judy Fudge, Kate McPherson, and Bettina Bradbury (also of the famed Montreal History Group). Many of Craig's PhD students would also join the group, among them Todd Stubbs, Cindy Loch-Drake, and Jason Russell. So, too, did an array of graduate students that Radforth, Penfold and I supervised or otherwise mentored at U of T.[14] Acknowledgements to the Toronto Labour Studies Group graced the opening pages of an impressive array of Canadian labour history volumes, albeit primarily English-Canadian ones.[15] And, in the group's heyday, we did get the odd letter from someone wanting to affiliate with the Toronto Labour Studies Institute and asking for funding.

Also about working on a dream, "Labour Studies" was a microcosm, I think, of what was happening in labour studies circles more generally. There was a collective commitment on the part of a mixed-gender, increasingly intergenerational group of students and faculty to share and critique our research on working people, to support politically engaged scholarship and encourage its dissemination, and to make class analysis—sometimes alone, but often in combination with gender and race/ethnicity—central to the teaching of Canadian history. A history of the group would likely find that it offers a revealing window into the complex dynamics involved. Certainly, there were challenges and negotiations. The social scientists sometimes thought the historians overly empirical and narrative in approach; the historians sometimes found the social science method a little too formulaic. Student presenters sometimes felt justifiably overwhelmed by the momentum of critique their work received. Aiming for gender balance was a recurring issue and, on occasion, gender tensions got pretty thick. So did some of the debates over treating oral history material. There were partners and ex-lovers in the group so that also shaped dynamics. For a time, there was an elaborate vetting system that—while based on important principles of inclusivity—sometimes compounded the tensions. For a while, we met in people's homes, but we moved to a U of T seminar room (and the faculty pub afterwards) because the increasingly elaborate displays of food and drink created too much work for the host, who was also the paper-presenter. As labour history lost some of the limelight, and some members turned to other subjects, the group became more flexible, even allowing Ian Radforth to present work on the

1860 royal tour to Canada for his *Royal Spectacle* book.[16]

If my joining Labour Studies in 1982 was the start of my relationship with Craig, by the late 1980s and the early 1990s—by which time I landed a job at U of T—Craig and I worked closely together on so many projects that Ian took to calling him "The Boyfriend." Those of a more scholarly but still politically engaged nature, which promoted social and feminist histories, included co-editorships in three University of Toronto Press book series: *Social History of Canada*, *Themes in Canadian Social History*, and *Studies in Gender and History*. We eventually split up and got new editor-partners.[17] We were also part of the same social scene, where the personal and political overlapped quite literally, so this too was important. Craig was not the only one to observe that Ian and I never agreed on the details of any story we told, but he remembered the discrepancies better than others. Along with other friends, Craig teased Ian and me for getting married, but then forgave us because the wedding was so wonderfully "ethnic." When I was enraged or paralyzed by family crisis, and painful loss, Craig supported me in quiet but meaningful ways. I hope he thinks I reciprocated.

The biggest collaboration of all was the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (WAHC). The website says WAHC "was conceived in the late 1980s by a dynamic group of labour historians, artists, and union and community activists who gathered together to discuss the need for a place where workers' history could be celebrated," and that "in 1996, after intense work by a volunteer board of directors, [WAHC] purchased the historic Custom House … in the north end of Hamilton … ideally situated in the heart of a working-class neighbourhood." Calling WAHC "much more than a museum," but also "a contemporary multi-disciplinary arts centre," the website also explains the centre's mission—"to communicate and preserve … the historical, cultural and contemporary experience of working people in their diverse identities," and vision—"a Canadian society that recognizes, remembers and values the experiences and continued contribution of all workers, their unions, organizations, and communities to the quality of life we enjoy."[18]

These fine but brief statements do not, however, quite capture all the volunteer blood, sweat, and tears that went into working on this dream. In eight heavy-slogging years, we went from being a "motley crew" of committed men and women with a similar vision and different skill-sets and networks, to lefty somebodies with a 1.3 million dollar provincial grant and a big old custom house that had to be renovated to heritage standards. From 1988 to 1995, when we had our first opening (200 people came), the core group consisted of academics (like Craig and Robert Storey), artists (Karl Beveridge and Carol Conde), curators (Rosemary Donegan), unionists and labour educators (D'Arcy Martin, David Sobel), archivists (Karen Teeple), and writers (journalist Lorne Slotnick). As some of us focused on securing endorsements from the Ontario Federation of Labour and other labour bodies, others mounted early displays, and still others secured funds for a video. Craig went into the heritage world, in part to access its vocabulary and methods of operation

to help us gain support for our purposes. We raised funds for a feasibility study, published a newsletter (*Worklines*), held conferences, and, thanks largely to Robert Kristofferson's efforts, produced walking tours of working-class Hamilton. Dealings with Queen's Park went very badly before they went well. We had long discussed the relative merits of being a moveable "centre" with rotating exhibits, or acquiring a building, when Bob Rae's New Democratic Party (NDP) government—shortly before going down to stinging defeat—offered us the Customs House deal. Concerned the building might suck up too much of our energy, we initially rejected the offer. But well-placed Hamiltonians like Mayor Bob Morrow—who said "this is as important as the Tiger Cats"—convinced us to do otherwise. As we hired the consultants, architects, and contractor, lobbied Hamilton City Council for support, and applied for government grants, labour leaders like Wayne Marston and local Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs) like David Christopherson remained important allies.[19]

The major labour history conference and Sam Lawrence fund-raising dinner in 1996 were milestones, but we, and our very hard-working paid staff (Renee Johnson, Mary Breen) and volunteers, never seemed to stop working in those early years.[20] The Torontonians got used to frequent meetings in Hamilton—the car pools allowing us to strategize. We worked at administration (as board members, and co-chairs), fund-raising, and even curated/mounted some exhibits—Craig's *Booze* (later a book), and my Italian Workers exhibit.[21] It was amazing watching Rosemary Donegan and Carol Conde—a labour artist with long ties to WAHC—do their magic with an exhibit. The concerts, plays, and openings were exciting, though we were so busy setting things up, taking them down, and putting up the next "show" that it took outside museum folks to tell us we had accomplished a tremendous amount. We learned some hard lessons along the way, such as: it is difficult to attract workers, who work long hours and juggle many responsibilities, to a museum that tells them workers have long worked too hard and have been over-burdened by too many responsibilities. The tension between workers' history and labour arts remains a creative one for WAHC. There were tense moments both on and outside of the Board, but we also got to work with great sisters and brothers from the labour moment. We also learned a lot about each other.

Twenty years after WAHC opened its doors, some of us remain involved while most have moved on to other "active history" projects, such as the Toronto Workers History Project (in Craig's case) and Rise Up! A Digital Feminist Archive of the Canadian Women's Movement 1970s–1990s (in my case). All this activity resonates with Springsteen's reflections on his history of collaboration with the E Street Band, when the band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2014:

> [It] was a dance … an idea, a wish, a refuge … a destination …
> We struggled through, and sometimes with each other, and we

> bathed in the glory, and the heartbreak, and even confusion … We enjoyed health and … illness … We heard one another in big and small ways … The narrative you tell together is bigger than any of the ones you could have told on your own … I thank you my beautiful men and women of E Street. You made me dream and love bigger than I could have done without you.[22]

NOTES

[1] For the 2009 Glastonbury concert just described see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bt1aCI-gg6U (accessed April 1, 2017). Springsteen's opening welcome to the crowd offers an excellent illustration of how he combines the style of a preacher and the use of working-class metaphors (e.g., "we got all the tools we need on this stage and in this field out there to build a house of music…and spirit… and noise…" For the official video of Working on a Dream (2009), see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3ZMfPXgd_M.

[2] I am quoting from President Barack Obama's speech during the 2009 Kennedy Center Awards for the performing arts ("…we honor the quiet kid from Jersey who grew up to become the rock and roll laureate of a generation"): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oS1-BLl_H30 (accessed April 1, 2017). For full text of the speech, see Wendy Jewell, "Musician Hero: Bruce Springsteen," http://myhero.com/hero.asp?hero=Bruce_Springsteen_2013 (accessed May 7, 2017). Readers will recognize similar phrasing used in relation to Bob Dylan, the first musician to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016. See, for example, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/14/arts/music/bob-dylan-nobel-prize-literature.html?_r=0 (accessed June 6, 2017).

[3] Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of an American Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[4] Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Ain't Nothing but a Man: My Quest to Find the Real John Henry* (with an essay by Marc Aronson) (*National Geographic*, 2008).

[5] Email exchange, April 2, 2017.

[6] Scialfa is a singer-songwriter in her own right. See Joe Bargmann, "Patti Scialfa, Her Own Person," New Jersey Monthly, December 14, 2016, https://njmonthly.com/articles/from-the-archives/patti-scialfa-person/ and CBC News, "Married to the Boss: Rock Star's Marriage Be-

hind the Scenes," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yklbswodPM.
[7] This is my "riff" on lyrics from Springsteen songs, but it is hardly original. For similar commentary, see Obama's Kennedy Center Honors speech cited in note 2. See also text of Obama's speech when awarding Springsteen (and others) the Presidential Medal of Freedom on November 22, 2016: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/11/22/remarks-president-presentation-presidential-medal-freedom.
[8] Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); interview at https://peopleshistory.us/news/bruce-springsteen/; Brian Hiatt, "True Bruce: Springsteen Goes Deep, From Early Trauma to Future of E Street" (interview), *Rolling Stone*, October 5, 2016, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/bruce-springsteen-goes-deep-on-revelations-in-new-memoir-w443387; Springsteen performing the John Steinbeck and Woody Guthrie inspired "Ghost of Tom Joad" on the documentary film The People Speak (2009), inspired by Zinn's *A People's History* (http://www.thepeoplespeak.com/), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r02-he7x0vY (all accessed February 8, 2017). I thank David Frank for making this point at the conference. In expressing his appreciation for my decision to reflect on the career of activist historians like Craig and his allies through a Springsteen lens, David raised a critical point: there was nothing inherently radical about the "working-class realism" that marked Springsteen's early career, but reading Zinn played a key role in his transformation into a politically engaged musician. On Zinn, whose *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to the Present* was first published in 1980 (New York: HarperCollins), see Martin Duberman, *Howard Zinn: A Life on the Left* (New York: The New Press, 2012).
[9] He first performed the song with Patti Scialfa during Obama's presidential campaign in Cleveland in 2008. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmKMkXV_US4.
[10] See, for example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO53Rmp8gDs (accessed April 1, 2017).
[11] Ian Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Ontario, 1900–1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
[12] My "On Envying and Admiring Varpu: An Exceptional Woman," delivered as part of a memorial service for Varpu Lindstrom at the R.S. Kane Funeral Home in Toronto, July 6, 2012 detailed her rise to prominence as a labour and women's historian of Finns in Canada.
[13] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3T8nnqPCMs.
[14] Given the occasion, I have highlighted those with connections to

Craig and to York. But I should note that most of the other members came from the University of Toronto (e.g., Robert Ventresca, Ruth Percy, Jenny Carson, Dennis Molinaro), while a few came from universities near Toronto. Also, several members who joined early on as graduate students in Toronto continued to belong to the group after landing tenure-stream jobs in or near Toronto.

[15] Examples include: Craig Heron and Robert Storey eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), which included essays by several group members; Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses* (1987); Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883–1935* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988); James Naylor, *The New Democracy: Challenging the Social Order in Industrial Ontario, 1914–1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Gender and Ethnicity in the Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Kathryn McPherson, *Bedside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1996); Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). In addition, many articles were penned by these and other members.

[16] Ian Radforth, *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of the Wales to Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[17] I even joined collectives that Craig and other labour historians (such as Greg Kealey) had earlier formed or joined, notably New Hogtown Press.

[18] http://wahc-museum.ca/our-story/about-us/ (accessed 10/28/2017).

[19] I was part of those City Council pitches, mainly because we hoped that my presence might help with the Italian members on council, and they did know my *Such Hardworking People*.

[20] Franca Iacovetta, Conference Report on "Brothers and Sisters: Gender and the Labour Movement," Labour/Le Travail 52 (Fall 2003): 364–367. This was organized in conjunction with the Canadian Committee on Labour History.

[21] Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003).

[22] The full speech is at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO53Rmp8gDs (accessed April 1, 2017).