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On the Historical Ordinarity of Pederasty

JARETT HENDERSON

Unspeakable: A Life beyond Sexual Morality begins with historian Rachel Hope Cleves's account of her family vacation to Italy, a trip that included a visit to Capri. Cleves tells us she purchased a copy of the 1917 novel *South Winds* by Norman Douglas to read during her visit to the tiny island off the coast of Naples in the Mediterranean. The novel, set in early twentieth-century Capri, revolves around an eccentric community of cosmopolitan expatriates involved in "nudism, free love, adultery, bigamy, whispers of homosexuality, and a premeditated murder you can really get behind."¹ I admit to loudly chuckling when I read that last bit and thinking: tell me more about this murder. This was my first encounter with *Unspeakable* and — like Cleves's time in Capri and her introduction to Norman Douglas — it left me wanting more. Or, as Cleves put it: "I wanted to know more about the real people who inspired the novel."² And honestly, so did I. Intrigued by Douglas's "very funny and completely amoral" novel, Cleves explained that she then tracked down Douglas's 1933 autobiography, *Looking Back*, only to discover it included "numerous stories about his sexual encounters with children."³ Male and female. To our inherited twenty-first-century sexual sensibilities, these were brazen accounts of sex between adults and children.

At the New York Public Library, the archive fever hit. There Cleves read Douglas's transcriptions of the travel diaries of Giuseppe "Pino" Orioli. A companion of Douglas, Orioli also lived in Florence in the 1920s and 1930s. Pino's diaries of their time together do not sanitize Douglas's sexual encounters with children. Instead, they made his sexual practices explicit. "Orioli's diaries are unique because they give firsthand accounts of adult-child sexual practices that are graphic but not pornographic," Cleves writes. "Instead of fantasies of virile handsome men and beautiful willing boys, the diaries describe the men's impotency, the boys' pimples, and the crude commercial calculations involved in the majority of their sexual encounters."⁴ Later, I return to this question of fantasy. For Cleves, a vacation to Capri, a critical read of Douglas's autobiography, and a visit to the Berg Collection convinced her "to attempt a book about Douglas. Even if," as she contends in the introduction, "it was doomed to become more kindling on the bonfire of earlier failures."⁵

Given that our assignment here is to reflect upon and think carefully about *Unspeakable* — the winner of the 2021 Wallace K. Ferguson Prize — this prediction, and not the book itself, missed the mark. To be sure, not all will be happy that a book on the history of pederasty or pedophilia, a subject seen in 2022 as so distasteful and disgusting that scholars and publishers alike have kept their distance. However, as *Unspeakable* convincingly and brilliantly demonstrates, if we are to take the work of doing the history of sexuality seriously, we must critically engage with sex in all its forms and histories. This means, then, while we may not *like* a book like *Unspeakable* that gives pederasty a history — especially one that argues for its historical ordinariness up to the mid-decades of the twentieth century — one thing ought to be obvious: as a piece of history, Cleves’s life history of Douglas is no flaming failure.

Yet as if to demonstrate the historiographical conundrum in which Cleves researched and wrote about Douglas and the seventy years he had sex with children, the two-paragraph-long citation penned by the Ferguson prize committee did not even include the word pederasty.⁶ The closest the committee’s citation came to acknowledging the subject focused on Cleves’s predicament “in telling this story about intergenerational sex.” Whether intentional or not, to leave unnamed the very history of pederasty at the heart of *Unspeakable* that made it worthy of praise for its “archival work spanning many types of documents and places, its pioneering use of children’s letters, its layered appeals to theory and secondary sources, and its smart, sensitive, elegant writing” in the first place, makes visible the sexual dangers (and, one might also argue, opportunities) that lie outside the charmed circle.⁷

The point here is that *Unspeakable* is not a failed Douglas biography. It is an award-winning history of the social world of pederasty and deserves to be acknowledged as such. A sexual history so unspeakable yet so well documented — as Cleves shows in this reluctant biography — is more taboo in the twenty-first century than in the twentieth. As such, *Unspeakable* is not entirely safe from becoming kindling. The book’s very queerness may yet be fuel for book-burning fires, especially in those parts of the United States of America where books are again being banned and sexual and gender nonconformists made outlaws. So — to the author, thank you for writing *Unspeakable*; to the University of Chicago Press, thank you for publishing it; and to the Canadian Historical Association, thank you for recognizing that a history of pederasty can also be excellent history.

Now let me tell you about *my* summer vacation — not to Capri, but to Palm Springs, California. Palm Springs in August is oppressively hot. It is perfect for doing nothing. As I discovered on our most recent visit, it is also the sister city of Victoria, British Columbia, home to the university where Cleves works. Palm Springs is also super gay. Although, my students and others younger than me might call it “queer.” Daily, my partner Mike and I would walk our very large dogs along Tahquitz Creek at dawn and after dark to avoid the sweltering summer heat. For three weeks, as we did so, we strolled past tourists and locals alike. The majority were men of various ages and races out cruising for sex. In the mornings, we would pass an elderly white man sitting in his car, windows down, cooling himself with a paper fan. He was there every day, observing. As the air and asphalt cooled in the evenings, we would walk past other men seeking — or sometimes having — sex under the pedestrian bridge that bisected the dusty creek bed or in the brittle bushes lining the way. This was basically Capri without the water.

It felt fitting that I first read *Unspeakable* in Palm Springs. Like Cleves on her vacation, this was my first encounter with Douglas. As a historian of gender and sexuality, I did not consider myself a stranger to the explicit subject matter or some of the methodological, interpretative, and affective challenges of studying intergenerational sexual encounters like those Douglas and his friends engaged in from the late 1880s through the Second World War. But even for those familiar with such things, *Unspeakable* makes clear that the elite white men and women who occupied Douglas's social world followed very different rules. The extant archival evidence illustrates that they engaged in various sexual encounters that included incest, adultery, sodomy, pederasty, and homosexuality. Douglas and his friends made sense of their sexual proclivities by practicing what Cleves terms “active not knowing.”⁸ So commonplace was their behaviour that they jokingly referred to their sexual rendezvous as the Pederastic Congress.⁹ This complicity, argues Cleves, illustrates the historical ordinariness of pederasty. Regardless of how we might *feel* today, their very lives remind us that matters of sex and sexuality were context-specific, constantly changing, and never static.

To give pederasty a history, as *Unspeakable* does, is to help students of history move past tired queer narratives — of “were they” or

“weren’t they” — to interrogate the larger social, cultural, and legal worlds that gave meaning to the myriad of sexual encounters in which people participate. Gross indecency cases from early Alberta that students and I have transcribed for this same period similarly speak to the normalness of intergenerational sex.¹⁰ But as historians, we do not talk about that. The framework provided in *Unspeakable* therefore allows us to make better historical sense of those multiple instances when adult men, like the forty-year-old Calgary lawyer J. B. Smith, had sex (repeatedly) with Walter McHugh when the boy was between fourteen and sixteen years of age.¹¹

The second time I read *Unspeakable* was for the gender and sexualities graduate student workshop I teach at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I do not recall having any particular visceral reaction — though I did ramble on to my scientist partner about how skillfully Cleves used Douglas’s natural science publications to better understand his sexual worldview. I also remember my students struggling with the subject matter in unfamiliar ways. Perhaps this was because I have been exposed to such content for nearly twenty years. Maybe it was because I had just transcribed a case from Upper Canada in 1831 of a man convicted of having sex with a sheep.¹² Perhaps it was because, as a gay man, I occupy a cultural space that sexualizes Sons, Daddies, and even Uncle Normans (Part Three). Nonetheless, my students made me wonder why I did not have a *visceral* reaction to the sexual encounters — to use Cleves’s catch-all phrase — that was akin to theirs; or, for that matter, to those Cleves thoughtfully articulates in four Reflections that appear throughout her retelling of Douglas’s life as sex radical.

I returned to *Unspeakable* a third time to prepare for the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association (and a fourth to revise that talk for publication here). And while my fellow panelists and I have many thoughts and many things to say about Douglas, the man, our task is not that. We are here to address *Unspeakable* — and that is different. But like moving beyond “monster narratives” of pedophilia,¹³ this has been a challenging assignment. With the space remaining, I offer some brief comments on the “seams turned outward” approach to historical biography that makes *Unspeakable* so very good.¹⁴ I conclude with two observations sparked by my reading of *Unspeakable* and the historical ordinariness of pederasty. One is about the concept of “erotic mentorship,”¹⁵ and the second is about how, in the mid-decades of the twentieth century, heterosexual and homosex-

ual understandings of intergeneration or transgressive sex converged and diverged, especially within queer culture.

My favourite chapters in *Unspeakable* are the ones in which Cleves details the many past efforts of (and reactions to) those who dared to write biographies of Douglas, and I was not alone in this. The graduate students in the gender and sexualities workshop were also keen to think critically about biography, memory, and history in *Unspeakable*. I do not believe it was an attempt to avoid a discussion of pederasty, but rather illustrative of how all of us as students of history might engage with *Unspeakable* as a form of historical biography. Those familiar with Cleves's other scholarship will know she is no stranger to such an approach. Both *Charity and Sylvia* (2014) and "Six Ways of Looking at a Trans Man? The Life of Frank Shimer" (2018) find methodological companions in *Unspeakable*.¹⁶

In *Unspeakable*, Cleves describes her methodology as a "seams turned outward" biography.¹⁷ She attributes her inspiration to the work of the early-twentieth-century experimental biographer A. J. A. Symons, who, in the 1930s, wrote a seams-turned-outward biography of Frederick Wolfe (Baron Corvo). Symons's biography of Wolfe, *The Quest for Corvo*, did not shy away from descriptions of Wolfe's sexual encounters with the young male gondoliers of Venice, though, as the author, he thought it to be a "strange history." Douglas thought the book "fascinating" and written just as "such things ought to be written."¹⁸ Given the connections that crisscrossed the literary world of the early twentieth century, it should be no surprise that Symons had gifted Douglas a copy or that Douglas expressed nothing but praise for a biography that did not shy away from sex between men and boys.

Writing a "strange history" with seams turned outward required Cleves to do so in the first person. As she did so, Cleves carefully narrated her efforts to track down elusive sources and unspeakable histories. She has reimagined the biography as a mystery rather than a parable and has meticulously exposed the text's inner workings to the reader. Significantly, this seams-turned-outward biography highlights the many historical, historiographical, and interpretive questions that Douglas's pederastic life provokes.

Worthy of particular commendation are those instances in *Unspeakable* where Cleves documents and engages with the contra-

ditory accounts of the same story in her archive. Two instances stand out. The first revolves around the various accounts of Douglas, his marriage to Elsa, and the hatcheting to the death of stray dogs at the Villa Maya. The archive reads like a bloody R-rated version of a Hardy Boys Mystery. The second involves René Mari, a fourteen-year-old boy from Menton, France, and their written accounts of their time with Douglas. René and Douglas met in 1919 and spent the next four years (with the permission of René's middle-class family) together. Over that period, Douglas mentored and tutored René. Together they explored Europe and each other's bodies. René's travel journals for 1921 and 1922 are preserved in two separate records; one primarily in French, and a second in English, the language Douglas helped René learn. Both record "enthusiastic observations of the landscape and food in Australia" and "a couple of encounters" René had with girls he met during their travels. Douglas's third version of events was published as *Together* and gave far greater attention to René's "lustly appetites" than the boy's diaries. Such perceptive interpretative lenses drive *Unspeakable*, blending contradictory archival evidence and Douglas's published works into a seems-turned-outward biography that does not flatten his life but calls attention to its messiness.

I want to conclude with some final observations about the historical ordinariness of pederasty, the concept of "erotic mentorship," and how histories of sexuality converge and diverge when it comes to questions of intergenerational or transgressive sex within queer culture. My reading of *Unspeakable* helped me think more carefully about my work on same-gender sex and intimacy in the British settler colonies that became Canada in 1867. For the past few years, a team of undergraduate researchers and I at the University of California, Santa Barbara, have been searching newspapers, Colonial Office records, and remaining legal records for instances of sex between men.¹⁹ What we have found for the period from 1790 to 1850 ranges from extensive records documenting accusations hurled at colonial politicians, ministers, teachers, and newspaper editors to brief two-line entries in the press reporting the conclusion of a sodomy trial or prison records documenting punishments meted out. To help make sense of extant testimonies archived during moments when upper-class men were accused of unnatural sex, Cleves's concept of "erotic mentorship" is particularly useful.

Though the phrase “erotic mentorship” appears only once in *Unspeakable* (as far as I can tell)²⁰ — in Reflection II — following Cleves’s careful detailing of the sexual encounters Douglas had with young men like René Mari and many others, it is helpful for both naming and interpreting the nature of queer sexual encounters between adults and children. It immediately reminded me of the testimony given in 1838 by seven young men as part of the secret investigation launched by the Executive Council of Upper Canada into the sexual “habits and character” of Inspector General George Markland.²¹ Take, for example, Henry Hughes’s assertion that “Mr. Markland never said or proposed anything improper to me. And he gave me good advice as to my conduct.”²² Another of the young men who testified, James Pearson, agreed: “Mr. Markland never said anything improper to me and never used any familiarity with me. He gave me much good advice.”²³ To conceive of these intimate interactions between Markland and young men in Toronto as a form of “erotic mentorship” enables us to read these archived desires of same-gender intimacy as including both the bodies and burgeoning careers of those young men who were rumoured to have had sexual encounters with Markland. Cleves’s expansive definition of sexual encounter when fused with the concept of erotic mentorship allows us, as students of history, to place Douglas, Markland, and others within historiographies of pederasty *and* sex between men.

Though many instinctively think of sex between adults and children today as intrinsically homosexual, we know that such sexual encounters also occur in opposite-gender couplings. Consequently, *Unspeakable* left me wanting to know how the changing social world of pederasty that Douglas knew and lived through fit within mid-twentieth-century sexual histories. In other words, what effects did new and competing notions of heterosexuality *and* homosexuality have on understandings of intergenerational sex? Was intergenerational sex an inappropriate form of sexual desire and expression for everyone? I ask this because it was in Palm Springs that I purchased a collection of 1960s and 1970s gay pulp novels published at the very moment when pederasty was becoming less acceptable. These fantastical quasi-pornographic tales of young muscly farm hands having sex of all kinds in the barn or behind haystacks with each other and their buddy’s father — the plot of *A Hand in the Bush*²⁴ — will make an excellent honours thesis one day. Like Douglas’s novels did in the first half of the twentieth century, these books made details of

taboo sexual encounters public and persistent in the latter half of the century. Indeed, these texts' readers and users differed from those who read Douglas's stories and limericks. Yet surely, these novels, with fantasies of incest, sodomy, bestiality, and pederasty, made them desirable fetishes, even kinks, to modern readers. Where did the social world of pederasty that closed around Douglas go? Put differently, did making pederasty monstrous popularize such sexual encounters and fantasy worlds of "virile handsome men and beautiful willing boys" like those in my pulp novels? We will need to wait for a future student of history inspired by Cleves to cruise the library on their terms before we might have answers to these questions. But thanks to *Unspeakable*, they now know where to begin their search.

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Endnotes

- 1 Rachel Hope Cleves, *Unspeakable: A Life beyond Sexual Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 2.
- 2 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 2.
- 3 Cleves, 3.
- 4 Cleves, 5.
- 5 Cleves, 4.
- 6 "Wallace K. Ferguson Prize Committee Citation (2021)," CHA Prizes, Canadian Historical Association, <https://cha-shc.ca/english/what-we-do/prizes?category=3>.
- 7 Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1984), 267–319.

- 8 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 86.
- 9 Cleves, 156–57.
- 10 See, for example, Jarett Henderson, with Jackie Jansen van Doorn and Kenny Reilly, “Indecent Alberta: On Trial for Gross Indecency – A Digital Archive,” <https://indecentalberta.wordpress.com/>.
- 11 Jarett Henderson, “*Rex v. J. B. Smith* (Calgary, 1902): Queer Carnal Acts and Heterosexual Settler Colonialism in Canada’s Prairie Empire,” *Prairie History: The Journal of the West* 5 (Summer 2021): 82–86, <https://www.history.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/82-86.pdf>.
- 12 *Rex v. Winters*, Bestiality, October 1831, RG22-390, Box 20, Assize 1829–1832, Assize for Home District, the Bench Books of Sir John Beverly Robinson, Judges Supreme Court of Ontario, Archives of Ontario.
- 13 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 10.
- 14 Cleves, 12.
- 15 Cleves, 149.
- 16 Rachel Hope Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Rachel Hope Cleves, “Six Ways of Looking at a Trans Man?: The Life of Frank Shimer (1826–1901),” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27, no.1 (2018): 32–62.
- 17 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 12.
- 18 Cleves, 11.
- 19 Thanks to Gracelyn Barmore-Pooley, Juliana Garcia, Luis Garcia, Sabrina Hall, Madeline Josa, Zoë Lo, and Jaina Tarman for the many hours they have worked with me to locate, transcribe, and catalogue instances of unnatural sex.
- 20 Cleves, *Unspeakable*, 149.
- 21 Jarett Henderson and Ed Jackson, “Sex, Scandal, and Punishment in Early Toronto,” in *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*, eds. J. Lornic, T. McCaskell, M. Fitzgerald, J. Farrow, and S. Chambers (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2016), 86–90.
- 22 Hughes Testimony, page 259, RG1 E3, File M - Vol. 50, Library and Archives Canada.
- 23 Pearson Testimony, page 239, RG1 E3, File M - Vol. 50, Library and Archives Canada.
- 24 Lance Roberts, *A Hand in the Bush*, Trojan Classics series (Chatsworth, California: GX Inc., n.d.). There were five main categories among those we collected in Palm Springs — the Redlight series, Zorro Books, Trojan Classics, Golden Helmet Classics, and Gay — which included such titles as *Never Too Young*, *Daddy Knows Best*, *Young and Tender Boys*, *Baby Stud*, and *Coming Thru The Y*.