

Queer Musings on Masculinity and History

Steven Maynard

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Queer Musings on Masculinity and History

Steven Maynard

NOT LONG AFTER I first met Ed Jackson, an activist whose political roots go back to the early days of the gay liberation movement in Canada, he drew my attention to an article that appeared in the very first issue of what was then called *Labour/Le Travailleur*. Published in 1976, "To the Dartmouth Station: A Worker's Eye View of Labour History" was meant to be a humorous parody of a conversation between a dockworker and a construction worker about labour history. Much of the article's "humour" rested upon replaying stereotypical expressions of working-class sexism, homophobia and anti-intellectualism. As Ed indicated to me, the sexist comments about women's bodies were vaguely challenged within the fictional frame of the conversation, while references to "longhaired professor fags" were allowed to stand as is. Ed, who I think would consider himself a friend of labour's cause, did not at the time find this piece amusing, only disappointing and irritating. In 1976, he wanted to write a letter to the editor of the journal, but, much to his regret, he never did so.¹

While perhaps not a momentous moment in the history of homophobia, "To the Dartmouth Station" does say something about the still rudimentary development of sexual politics in the mid-1970s, as well as about the distance between gay politics and labour history during one of its founding moments. Clearly much has changed. Articles and book reviews in lesbian/gay history now regularly appear in

¹Michael S. Cross, "To the Dartmouth Station: a Worker's Eye View of Labour History," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 193-208.

the pages of *Labour/Le Travail*.² Still, the anecdote serves to capture the subject of my comments: the problems with and prospects for an encounter between labour history and gay history. In particular, I want to raise some questions about the historical study of working-class masculinity, questions raised by recent work in gay history and queer theory.

Within the practice of labour history, the study of masculinity is no longer a novel enterprise. Numerous articles and books on the history of working-class masculinity have been published over the past ten years. After more than a decade of work in the field, a debate is emerging about the usefulness of masculinity, and gender more generally, as categories of historical analysis. Feminist historians are debating whether the focus on gender history over women's history has blunted feminism's critical edge, whether it is even productive to cast the discussion as women's versus gender history.³ Another focus of debate has centred on the relationship between studies of masculinity and feminism, including the politically suspect project to establish something called the "the new men's studies."⁴ And this is not the end of the trouble with masculinity. The problem with masculinity that I want to highlight is its seeming inability to address sex and sexuality.

*"Rough Work and Rugged Men" Reconsidered or,
Confessions of a Macho Historian*

BEFORE LOOKING at the relationship between masculinity and sexuality, it will be necessary to make a brief digression for if there is one concept that most writers on masculinity feel compelled to address it is the "crisis of masculinity." A concept imported from sociological theory in the mid-1980s, the crisis of masculinity seemed to hold some promise in thinking about masculinity in historical terms.⁵

²See for example, Gary Kinsman, "'Character Weaknesses' and 'Fruit Machines': Towards an Analysis of the Anti-Homosexual Security Campaign in the Canadian Civil Service," *Labour/Le Travail*, 35 (Spring 1995), 133-61.

³Joan Sangster, "Beyond Dichotomies: Re-Assessing Gender History and Women's History in Canada," *left history*, 3 (Spring/Summer 1995), 109-21; Karen Dubinsky and Lynne Marks, "Beyond Purity: A Response to Sangster"; Franca Iacovetta and Linda Kealey, "Women's History, Gender History and Debating Dichotomies"; Joan Sangster, "Reconsidering Dichotomies," *left history*, 3/4 (Fall 1995/Spring 1996).

⁴See for example, Meg Lexton, "Dreams and Dilemmas: Feminist Musings on 'The Man Question'," in Tony Haddad, ed., *Men and Masculinities: A Critical Anthology* (Toronto 1993), 349-74; Blye W. Frank, "The 'New Men's Studies' and Feminism: Promise or Danger," in Haddad, *Men and Masculinities*, 333-43; Joyce E. Canaan and Christine Griffin, "The New Men's Studies: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?," in Jeff Hearn and David Morgan, eds., *Men, Masculinities & Social Theory* (London 1990), 206-14.

⁵One of the first attempts to apply the contemporary crisis of masculinity to history was Michael S. Kimmel, "The Contemporary 'Crisis' of Masculinity in Historical Perspective," in Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (Boston 1987), 121-54.

For those of us who jumped on the crisis bandwagon, however, we were too little cognizant of some dangers hidden in the concept, particularly a lurking essentialist or fixed understanding of gender. In "Gender History and Historical Practice," Joy Parr scrutinized the crisis of masculinity. Parr's critical take on the concept was directed primarily and deservedly at my use of it in "Rough Work and Rugged Men," a review article on masculinity in working-class history published in 1989. Parr argued that the crisis of masculinity contained a fixed notion of gender for the very concept of a "crisis" implied that at other historical moments masculinity was a stable formation: the "raising of a 'crisis' alert each time masculinity is found to be mutable or to exist in mutuality with other parts of the social life, when 'change' or 'response' might seem adequately to serve as descriptors, shows how ordinary and common-sensical the fixity of masculinity has remained even among those who have undertaken its critical study."⁶

Parr was not alone in drawing attention to the way the crisis approach paradoxically reinscribes masculinity as a stable, coherent entity. R.W. Connell has written that "as a theoretical term 'crisis' presupposes a coherent system of some kind, which is destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis. Masculinity ... is not a system in that sense." Connell suggested that it would be better to speak of the "disruption" or "transformation" of masculinity.⁷ Despite the problems with the "crisis of masculinity," it continues to be one of the primary tropes employed in writing on masculinity.⁸ But in view of its conceptual deficiencies, it may be time to recognize that the crisis of masculinity has served its purpose and move on.

⁶Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," in Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld, eds., *Gender and History in Canada* (Toronto 1996), 17. Steven Maynard, "Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 159-69. The "crisis of masculinity" was not the only problem with "Rough Work and Rugged Men." The article was a review of Craig Heron's *Working in Steel* and Ian Radforth's *Bushworkers and Bosses*, and I extended this critique to encompass the work of other Canadian working-class historians, including Greg Kealey and Bryan Palmer. My goal was to point out some of the silences surrounding gender in these studies, and to initiate some discussion about masculinity in Canadian working-class history. Written while I was reading for my comprehensive exams, the review was cranky and ill-tempered. Written as I began to conceptualize my doctoral research, it was marked by the familiar efforts of a graduate student trying to carve out a space within a field of study. The review was also marred by unnecessary political potshots and posturing on my part. While I stand by many of the *historical* critiques I made about the two books, I regret the macho tone of "Rough Work and Rugged Men." So I will do now what I have wanted to do for some time and that is offer a public apology to Craig Heron and Ian Radforth (and, for that matter, to Kealey and Palmer) who handled my academic chest-beating with much grace.

⁷R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge 1995), 84.

⁸See for example, Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities* (New York 1994). Michael Messner uses a modified crisis approach. See "Men's Responses to Historical Crises in the Gender Order" in Messner, *Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements* (Thousand Oaks, CA 1997), 8-11.

Sedgwick's Axiom #2

READING "Gender History and Historical Practice" prompted me to consider another problem with our theorizing on masculinity, that is, how a focus on masculinity tends to make sexuality drop from view. In her article, Parr, following R.W. Connell, quite rightly stresses the necessity of differentiating between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. "The history of gender relations must include studies of how hegemonic masculinities emerge, and also of the ways in which some masculinities are marginalized among the powerful. Some masculinities historically have been subordinated by their association with subordinated class and race identities."⁹ Given the long history of the brutal subordination of gay men — a subordination often aimed directly at gay men's gender identities — this would have been an obvious place to mention gay masculinities. But masculinities subordinated by their association with subordinated sexual identities remain conspicuous by their absence. It is a particularly curious oversight given that, as Connell and his colleagues have made clear, the "very important concept of hegemonic masculinity" was first articulated within "the gay movement's theoretical work."¹⁰

The failure to include gay men and to acknowledge the contribution of gay scholarship is characteristic of historical writing on masculinity. It is striking how so much of this work remains resolutely heterocentric in orientation. Consider three of the most widely cited anthologies on the history of masculinity. *Manliness and Morality*, published in 1987, contains no contributions on gay history or gay masculinity, and neither is gay (or feminist) scholarship cited in the introduction as the intellectual conditions that enabled a history of masculinity in the first place. Similarly, in the introduction to *Meanings for Manhood*, editors Mark Carnes and Clyde Griffen, more intent on criticizing feminist history for neglecting men (!), note that "the absence of essays on blacks and on homosexuals is glaring: it is indicative of the work to be done on these subjects." This is more than a little disingenuous given that it would be easy to demonstrate that at the time of the anthology's publication in 1990 the writing of black and gay history, including work that addressed men's gender identities, was much further developed than the nascent field of the history of masculinity. Finally, in *Manful Assertions*, published only one year later, Michael Roper and John Tosh (in obvious contradiction to the claims of Carnes and Griffen) explain that among the preconditions for a history of masculinity "first in the field, and still the most productive of scholarly work, is gay history." The editors recognize that "the decisive contribution of gay history to date has been to dissolve the 'essence' of homosexuality — and by inference

⁹Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," 20. R.W. Connell, "The Big Picture: Masculinities in Recent World History," *Theory and Society*, 22 (October 1993), 597-623.

¹⁰Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, "Hard and Heavy: Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," reprinted in Michael Kaufman, ed., *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change* (Toronto 1987), 174.

other sexual orientations too —and thus to undermine one of the central planks of 'commonsense' masculinity." However, gay history's decisive contribution is nowhere to be found in the anthology (except occasionally in the footnotes) for, again, there is not a single contribution on gay history or gay masculinity.¹¹

Heterocentrism extends as well to the more theoretical and philosophical writings on masculinity. I choose a text from my bookshelf more or less at random: David Morgan's *Discovering Men*. Given the broad frame of reference suggested by the title, one might expect to find at least a chapter on gay men. Morgan's book, however, would be more accurately titled *Discovering Straight Men*.¹² At best, authors attach a chapter on gay men, most often toward the end of their monographs. This textual strategy serves to reinstall gay masculinity to its subordinate position to a dominant heterosexual masculinity. A very different analytic manoeuvre would be to use the oppositional standpoint of gay masculinity as the beginning place for a critique of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. Connell and company, who have done the most to elaborate the concept of hegemonic masculinity, have also been the most consistent among writers on masculinity to insist on the significance of gay sexuality and history. As they wrote over ten years ago: "The emerging history of homosexuality ... offers the most valuable starting point we have for constructing a historical perspective on masculinity at large."¹³ In order to fulfil the still mostly unrealized promise of such an analysis, gender historians will have to become more critical of the heterocentrism in much of even the most recent historical and theoretical work on masculinity, and begin to familiarize themselves with and incorporate into their analyses the scholarship on gay sexualities and masculinities.¹⁴

¹¹ J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (New York 1987); Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago 1990), 6; Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800* (London 1991), 5. The Parr and Rosenfeld collection, *Gender and History in Canada* (cited above), which includes contributions on the history of sexuality, including gay history, is proof that a more expansive and inclusive anthology on the history of masculinity/gender is possible.

¹² David Morgan, *Discovering Men* (London 1992). There are important exceptions to this heterocentrism. The Kaufman anthology cited above includes two pieces on gay masculinities. In all her work on masculinity, Lynne Segal devotes significant attention to masculinities subordinated by their association with dominated identities of class, race and erotic preference. See Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London 1990) and "Changing Men: Masculinities in Context," *Theory and Society*, 22 (October 1993), 625-41. In the Canadian context, Joan Sangster has pointed to the failure of historians to address "the heterosexism" and the "the heterosexual masculine identity" of men workers. See Sangster, "Beyond Dichotomies," 118.

¹³ Carrigan, *et al.*, "Hard and Heavy," 176.

¹⁴ For a sampling of gay writing on heterosexual and gay masculinities see Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York 1998); Tim Edwards,

But the trouble with masculinity and gender, and the way they can rule out a focus on sexuality runs even deeper. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it best in "Axiomatic," the introduction to her book *Epistemology of the Closet*. As Sedgwick explains in the second of her axioms: "It may be ... that a damaging bias toward heterosocial or heterosexist assumptions inheres unavoidably in the very concept of gender ... Although some gender-based forms of analysis do involve accounts, sometimes fairly rich ones, of intragender behaviors and relations, the ultimate definitional appeal in any gender-based analysis must necessarily be to the diacritical frontier between different genders. This gives heterosocial and heterosexual relations a conceptual privilege of incalculable consequence." This leads Sedgwick to conclude that "the development of an alternative analytic axis — call it sexuality — might well be, therefore, a particularly urgent project for gay/lesbian and antihomophobic inquiry."¹⁵ Sedgwick's call to address the heterosexual privilege of the category of gender by sharpening the analytic axis of sexuality is only one example of the recent and remarkable proliferation of studies in what is now often termed "queer theory." While initially a response to particular theoretical and political dilemmas within the already existing field of lesbian and gay studies, queer theory has gone on to capture much wider attention, seizing a significant seat for sexuality at the intellectual table.¹⁶

Erotics and Politics: Gay Male Sexuality, Masculinity and Feminism (London 1994); Mark Simpson, *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (London 1993); Gary Kirisman, "Inverts, 'Psychopaths' and 'Normal' Men: Historical Sociological Perspectives on Gay and Heterosexual Masculinities," in Haddad, *Men and Masculinities*, 3-35; Marlon Riggs, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen," in Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother: New Writing by Black Gay Men* (Boston 1991), 253-7; Jamie Gough, "Theories of Sexual Identity and the Masculinization of the Gay Man," in Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis, eds., *Coming on Strong: Gay Politics and Culture* (London 1989), 119-36; Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "Race, Sexual Politics, and Black Masculinity: A Dossier," in Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford, eds., *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London 1988), 97-164; John Marshall, "Pansies, Perverts and Macho Men: Changing Conceptions of Male Homosexuality," in Kenneth Plummer, ed., *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London 1981), 133-54.

¹⁵Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley 1990), 31-2. Sedgwick was by no means the first to argue for the analytic separation of sexuality from gender. See Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston 1984), 267-319.

¹⁶The literature on queer theory is already voluminous. For an introduction see, "The Queer Issue: New Visions of America's Lesbian and Gay Past," *Radical History Review*, 62 (Spring 1995); "Queer Subjects," special issue of *Socialist Review*, 25, 1 (1995); Lisa Duggan, "The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History," *GLQ: a journal of lesbian and gay studies*, 2, 3 (1995), 179-91; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in her *Tendencies* (Durham 1993); Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ*, 1, 1 (1993), 17-32; Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis 1993); Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review*, 22

Early on in the development of queer theory problems became apparent. Feminist critics of queer theory worried about the complete separation of sexuality from gender when obviously they exist in complex relation.¹⁷ The challenge has been to make a space that allows for some analytic distance between gender and sexuality while at the same time insisting on their interrelations. Queer theory has also come under fire for its failure to address class issues and to engage with materialist and Marxist traditions. In an interview with Gayle Rubin on things queer, Rubin laments queer theory's disregard for Marxism: "I find the current neglect of Marx a tragedy, and I hope to see a revival of interest in his work. Marx was a brilliant social thinker, and the failure to engage important and vital issues of Marxist thought has weakened social and political analysis."¹⁸ To fully draw out the implications of queer theory for the practice of labour history is beyond the scope of this brief commentary, but I do want to pose a few questions that may begin to move us in that direction.

What the Fairy Said to the Labour Historian

DAVID ROEDIGER has recently written that "George Chauncey's *Gay New York*, much acclaimed broadly but too little claimed by labor historians as a classic in working class history, offers perhaps the most far-reaching interrogation of the dynamics of gender and class."¹⁹ Perhaps a bit of an overstatement — Chauncey's book has been well-received in labour history circles²⁰ — but I concur with Roediger that *Gay New York* and other work in gay history will make it increasingly difficult for studies on working-class masculinity to gloss over issues of sexuality. Chauncey effectively demonstrates that gay sexuality, far from a discrete realm of experience important only to a minority of the population, was in fact deeply constitutive of heterosexuality and heterosexual masculinity. Chauncey not only shows how middle-class men defined their heterosexuality against homosexuality, but he also describes the astonishingly wide array of gender and sexual identities held by working-class men. In the complex sex/gender system of the early 20th

(January/March 1992), 11-31; "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," special issue of *differences: a journal of feminist cultural studies*, 3 (Summer 1991).

¹⁷Biddy Martin, "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias," *Diacritics*, 24, 2-3 (1994), 104-21 and "More Gender Trouble: Feminism Meets Queer Theory," special issue of *differences*, 6 (Summer-Fall 1994), edited by Judith Butler.

¹⁸"Sexual Traffic: An Interview with Gayle Rubin by Judith Butler," *differences*, 6 (Summer-Fall 1994), 90. For further materialist critique of queer theory see Rosemary Hennessy, "Queer Theory, Left Politics," *Rethinking Marxism*, 7 (Fall 1994), 85-111 and Hennessy, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," *Cultural Critique*, 29 (Winter 1994-95), 31-76.

¹⁹David Roediger, "What If Labor Were Not White and Male?: Recentring Working-Class History and Reconstructing Debate on the Unions and Race," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 51 (Spring 1997), 79.

²⁰See for example, the review of *Gay New York* in Carolyn Strange, "Bad Girls and Masked Men: Recent Work on Sexuality in US History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (Spring 1997), 261-75.

century, some working-class men had sex interchangeably with women and men without calling into question their identity as "normal" workingmen. Other men — the flamboyant, working-class street fairies — expressed their dissident homosexual identity through a conventionally feminine gender self-presentation.²¹

I think the figure of the fairy poses a sharp challenge to historians of working-class masculinity. Put another way, how do Chauncey's fairies fit in existing narratives of (even engendered) working-class history? The answer is not very well. The effeminate gender style of the working-class fairy suggests that it is unwise to assume that all working-class men's gender identities took the forms of conventional masculinity. The fairy suggests that we should perhaps rethink calling our project the study of "working-class masculinity" and begin instead to talk about "working-class masculinities." Yet as Jeff Hearn has noted, "the recent move to the plural concept of masculinities represents an advance, but does not fully resolve [the] difficulties" with the concept of masculinity.²² I suggest it might be more useful to think in terms of "working-class men's gender identities." Such a formulation would better allow for the historical variation of workingmen's gender identities, identities that sometimes took the forms of conventional masculinity, but at other times also included men who powdered their faces, painted their lips, carried themselves in a stereotypical feminine manner and had sex with other men.

To give another example, consider some of the men who were members of the militant Marine Cooks and Stewards Union in the US during the mid-20th century. Allan Berube's research on this union demonstrates the vital importance of "feminine" gender identity for some men. Members called themselves "queens" and adopted women's names. This, coupled with their placement in specific job areas — what Berube calls "queer work" — helped to foster sexual community among queer crewmen on the freighters and ocean-liners. That sense of community played no small part in the working-class and race solidarity integral to the impressive union organizing and strike activity engaged in by queer men.²³ Keeping the question of men's gender identities as open-ended as possible will help prevent us from reaching too quickly for an easy, catch-all "masculinity." Remaining alert to the subtleties and variations of men's gender identities will also encourage us to deal more carefully with forms of masculinity, be they constituted racially, sexually, occupationally, or in some other way. As Jeff Hearn suggests, "when mascu-

²¹George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York 1994), esp. Part I.

²²Jeff Hearn, "Is Masculinity Dead?: A Critique of the Concept of Masculinity/Masculinities," in Mairtin Mac An Ghaill, ed., *Understanding Masculinities: Social Relations and Cultural Arenas* (Buckingham 1996), 213.

²³Berube's research has not yet been published, but takes the form of a slide show presentation currently touring throughout North America, especially in trade unions. For a brief report on Berube's findings see Sara Miles, "All in a Gay's Work," *Out Magazine*, (October 1996), 78-81.

linity/masculinities are referred to, they should be used precisely and particularly." And because an unqualified or undefined masculinity usually carries with it the presumption of heterosexuality, attending to and naming the particularities of men's gender identities, allowing for both "masculine" and "feminine" components, should also help us avoid heterocentric assumptions. Again as Hearn has written, echoing Sedgwick's thoughts on gender's diacritical mark as heterosexual, "to assume a priori that masculinity/masculinities exist is to reify the social construction of sex and gender, so that the dimorphism [e.g. masculinity/femininity, men/women] is assumed to be natural ... This in itself reproduces a heterosexualizing of social arrangements."²⁴

To pursue these questions of gender, sexuality and labour history a bit further, let me turn to one of my favourite subjects: bushworkers. In his article "The Shantymen," Ian Radforth writes about the "rugged masculinity" of lumberers, a masculine identity that for some men included heavy drinking, carousing and fighting. While undoubtedly this describes a good number of bushworkers, research on workers in other places cautions against attributing a rugged masculinity to all men. In the memoirs of and in interviews with old, Swedish lumberjacks, Ella Johansson discovered "an evident absence of a 'machismo' type of masculinity, as well as the strong, hard, silent manliness which constitutes a widespread stereotype of the typical lumberjack." In fact, Johansson reports she was "astonished by the gentleness of these men."

When we turn to sexuality, Radforth asks "Was sex a part of the nightly shanty routine?" "Given the scarcity of evidence so far come to light," Radforth suggests, "it seems likely that among campmates there was no openly acknowledged subculture of sexual intimacy in the all-male shanties." He goes on to pose some of the basic questions for which we still lack answers. Noting that "furtive same-sex liaisons did occur," Radforth wonders whether these were "widespread but well-hidden practices" or isolated incidents "of rooting out unusual behaviour"? Among the Swedish lumberjacks "there was an almost total absence of concern with or abhorrence of homoerotic relations between men." Johansson notes that this may have been due to "an absence of homo-sexual practices" or to "a non-recognition of their meaning."²⁵ Or, perhaps, homosexual practices existed and had meaning, just not the same meanings we would ascribe to such activity today. During a historical period in which homosexual activity did not necessarily confer a homosexual identity, perhaps some bushworkers, like many workingmen in early 20th-century New York City, had sex with other men without it calling into question their status as "normal" men. In other words, we might ask whether there existed

²⁴Hearn, "Is Masculinity Dead?," 212.

²⁵Ian Radforth, "The Shantymen," in Paul Craven, ed., *Labouring Lives: Work & Workers in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto 1995), 235, 230. Ella Johansson, "Beautiful Men, Fine Women and Good Work People: Gender and Skill in Northern Sweden, 1850-1950," *Gender & History*, 1 (Summer 1989), 200, 211.

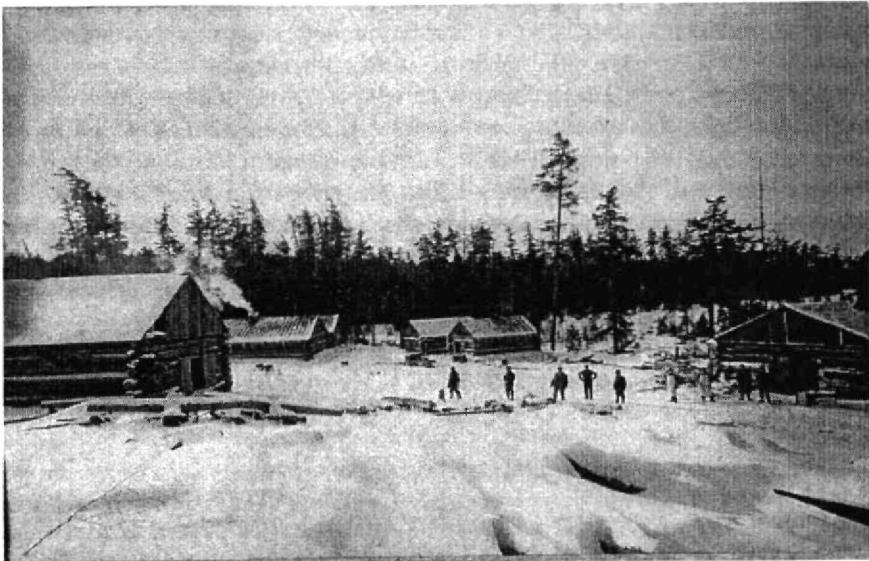
a camp equivalent (pun intended) to the city-based fairy? In asking this question, the call for historical specificity is imperative. We do not want to reify the fairy as a transhistorical figure or role; it may very well be that fairies such as those described by Chauncey did not exist or differed substantially in different urban/rural places or across different ethnic groups and work settings. Still, I think it might be useful to be on the lookout for men who eschewed conventional masculinity, adopting in its place forms of femininity, and to ascertain whether such gender presentations propped up an erotic system of homosexual relations between "effeminate" and "normal" men. Or, perhaps homosexual practices were able to flourish in all-male work settings to a greater or lesser degree precisely because gender difference between the men was *not* the most salient determinant of same-sex relations. Perhaps it was age. Research into the gold and diamond mines of South Africa reveals a long history of highly structured sexual relations between older miners and young miners. T. Dunbar Moodie has unearthed a rich language of sexual relations between men among black South African miners and well-established traditions of "mine marriages" between the labourers.²⁶

As we pursue questions of sex and gender in all-male camps and mines, the questions we ask must be framed as broadly as possible. For instance, Radforth suggests that no "openly acknowledged" subculture of same-sex relations existed in northern Ontario shanties. But must a subculture — or something not quite so elaborate as a subculture, perhaps sexual networks — be openly acknowledged in order to exist? Sedgwick would be the first to encourage us to ponder whether the epistemology of the shanty closet was one that functioned on the basis of the "open secret," that is, something known by many but rarely acknowledged in any overt way. As we get on with the essential task of establishing an empirical basis of knowledge about same-sex activity in these locales, it would be unwise to get bogged down in questions that remain pitched at the level of the incidence or extent of same-sex practice: was it widespread or was it rare? More interesting, it seems to me, are questions relating to the social organization and meaning of same-sex activity, whether that sexual activity comes to light through an exceptional scandal or through a more extensive history of a particular community or region over time. Taking our cue from scholars of the South African mines, we could ask questions about the complex relationship between sexuality and economic systems. Moodie explains that because mine marriages provided a degree of stability among the miners — they were even condoned by mine management — sexual relations between men served the interests of capitalist development. But Moodie notes that

²⁶T. Dunbar Moodie (with Vivienne Ndatshe and British Sibuyi), "Migrancy and Male Sexuality on the South African Gold Mines," in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York 1989), 411-25. See also Patrick Harries, "Symbols and Sexuality: Culture and Identity on the Early Witwatersrand Gold Mines," *Gender & History*, 2 (1990), 318-36 and Moodie, *Going for Gold: Mines, Men and Migration* (Berkeley 1994).

homosexual relations also functioned as a brake on proletarianization. For some young men, dependency on wage labour was lessened if they were at some point able to return to farm land back in their rural homes, parcels of land given to them as gifts by older miners during their mine marriages.

Finally, we come to sources. Radforth notes that “sexual relations and practices in the lumber camps are hard to document and assess.” In view of this difficulty, we need to think about the kinds of historical sources that might yield information about men’s gender identities and sexual practices. Consider commentators who wrote sketches of life and work in the bush. In a 1936 piece, “The Lumberjacks Go Sissy,” Stewart Holbrook bemoaned the decline of the rough and rugged lumberjack. In the days before the jacks had all gone sissy, the “lads slept sixteen to the bunk, one hundred to the room. Ordinarily they didn’t shave all winter long, although the camp dandies might on a dull Sunday run a whetstone over the single-bitted ax, slap some yellow soap into their whiskers, and then and there shave ... But such effeminate doings were regarded with suspicion by most of the jacks.” Chewing tobacco was one way to prove your manhood. “They were mighty chewers of plug, those old shanty-boys, and no punk considered himself a man until he could spit fifteen feet into a head-wind and hit a sapling fair in the crotch.” Holbrook never mentions sexual relations between men, but his choice of language is interesting. In the 1930s, “sissy” and “punk” had specific sexual connotations. Sissy could be another word for fairy, and punk — in the language of hoboes and tramping workers — referred to the younger partner in the erotic system of wolf-punk relationships. Tracking the use and teasing out the meaning of such language in



Logging Camp

lumberjack literature and life might tell us more about the place of effeminacy and sex among bushworkers.²⁷

We need to reread familiar sources such as published reminiscences. Based on this type of material, Adele Perry has begun to explore the "homosocial culture" that thrived in the gold mines in the backwoods of 19th-century British Columbia. In particular, Perry looks at all-male households and discovers that "relations between men could range from the practical to the emotional to the sexual." Perry tells the story of D. W. Higgins and Henry Collins, a man Higgins met at the mines. This is Higgins relating his over-heated thoughts about Collins: "I could not understand my feelings ... Why did the sound of his voice or his footsteps send the hot young blood bounding through my veins? What was he to me that every sense should thrill, and my heart beat wildly at his approach?" Higgins resolved his excited homoerotic impulses by having Collins turn out to be a passing woman. All-male domestic arrangements, homoerotic thrills, and passing women, all this is quite different from the usual tales told about backwoods men and their dalliances with female prostitutes. As Perry concludes, "rather than reaffirming heterosexuality, these memoirs, in exploring love between men, suggest the dual significance of and fear of male homoeroticism in this colonial context."²⁸

Oral histories have always been an important source in reconstructing mine and bushcamp life. But to get an old bushworker to talk about sexuality — never mind homosexual practices — undoubtedly poses formidable challenges. Interviewers will have to be alert to the dynamics of disavowal. In this regard, we may be able to learn from Eric Sager's oral histories of seafarers. In an article on seafarers' masculinity, Sager devotes several pages to a consideration of sexuality, including same-sex relations. Rather than accept seafarers' denial of homosexual relations — using the lack of evidence to claim that homosexual practices did not exist — Sager foregrounds the contradictions in seafarers' memories and masculinities. As Sager writes, "it is remarkable how many insist that it never occurred but proceed to cite an instance when it did."²⁹

A perhaps less obvious source is divorce records. Susan Lee Johnson, in an article on 19th-century California's gold rush communities, relates the story of the miner Jeremiah Allkin whose wife divorced him because he was in the habit of bringing men home for "purposes of buggery." Johnson also discusses the common practice of men bunking down together, reproducing entries from Alfred Doten's

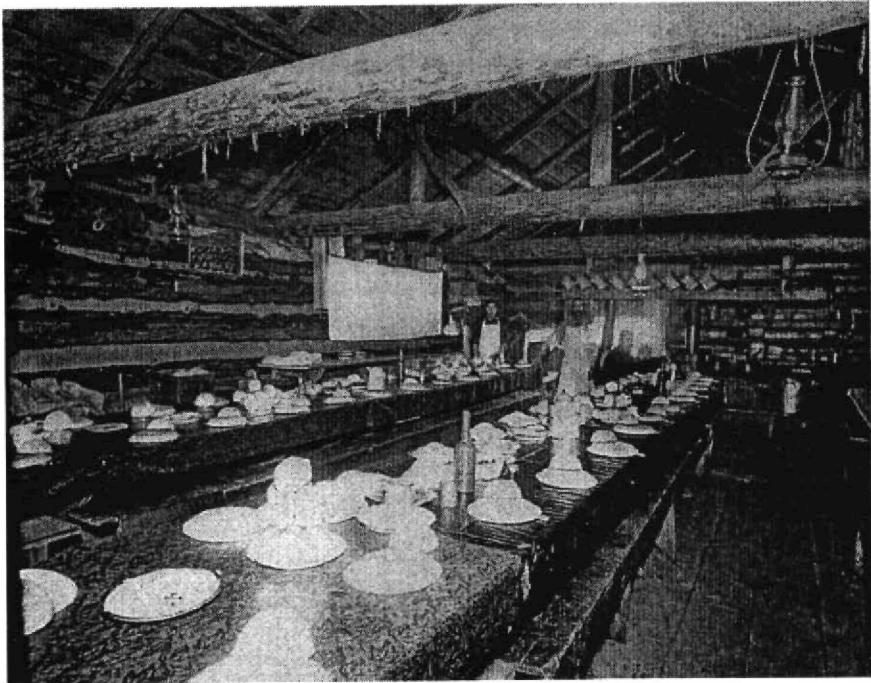
²⁷ Stewart H. Holbrook, "The Lumberjacks Go Sissy" (1936), reprinted in Laurence E. Spivak and Charles Angoff, eds., *The 'American Mercury' Reader* (Philadelphia 1944), 339-42. My thanks to Bryan Palmer for passing this source on to me. On wolf-punk relationships see, Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 86-95.

²⁸ Adele Perry, "'Fair Ones of a Purer Caste': White Women and Colonialism in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia," *Feminist Studies*, 23 (Fall 1997), 515-6.

²⁹ Eric Sager, "Memories of Work, Family, and Gender in the Canadian Merchant Marine, 1920-50," in Parr and Rosenfeld, *Gender and History in Canada*, 261.



In the Bush



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diary, a detailed record of all the men with whom he slept. As Johnson notes, "Doten could make life in the camps sound like a game of musical beds." In assessing this practice, Johnson reminds us of the distinct material setting of mining communities and comes to balanced yet sufficiently open-ended conclusions: "It would be foolhardy to suggest that bed partners commonly shared sexual pleasures. But Doten and his friends bedded down together in a particular setting — one characterized by the presence of curious young men and lonely husbands, by close dancing and hard drinking, by distance from customary social constraints and proximity to competing cultural practices. In this context, it would *also* be foolhardy to suggest that Jeremiah Allkin was the only man in the Southern Mines who ever reached for a friend in the heat of the night."³⁰

Similar to divorce proceedings are criminal court records. My own search through court records for "homosexual offenses" in late 19th- and early 20th-century northern Ontario has turned up over one hundred cases, some of which touch down in or closely around the region's mining communities and bushcamps.³¹

As we search for and interpret the sources, the goal is not to establish that in all times and places there existed utopian communities of libidinal and tolerant bushwhackers. Sexual relations between men had multiple meanings. Writing about the "'homosocial' world" of early 20th-century British Columbia, Angus McLaren relates a 1901 murder case in which a young soldier living in the Work Point Barracks outside Victoria claimed to be driven to murder in an effort to defend his manhood against rumours that he had been sexually involved with a comrade. As McLaren concludes, "this incident says something about how serious the charge of being a homosexual could be taken in an all-male environment."³² As this example and some of the others cited above indicate, the current interpretive thrust moves us beyond stereotypical or one-dimensional accounts of gender identities and sexual practices in all-male environments. Conclusions reached thus far capture the existence of and complexity of meaning in same-sex relations yet do not strain belief by claiming more than our current evidentiary base can support.

We need to make greater use of the analytical power of sexuality to explore the variety of workingmen's gender identities and sexual practices, whether these

³⁰Susan Lee Johnson, "Bulls, Bears, and Dancing Boys: Race, Gender, and Leisure in the California Gold Rush," *Radical History Review*, 60 (Fall 1994), 25-6.

³¹This is part of research for my next project entitled "Saturday Night in the Bunkhouse: Essays on Working-Class Gay History in Rural and Northern Ontario, 1880-1940." One of my key interests is to explore how different work environments and material settings set the range and limits on men's gender and sexual identities and practices. I would like to acknowledge the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies of the City University of New York for providing start-up funding for this project through a Ken Dawson Award in Lesbian and Gay History.

³²Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930* (Chicago 1997), 124-5.

represented stolen moments of pleasure among rugged and gentle men in rough work conditions, or a terrain upon which to reestablish, sometimes even violently, a man's sense of conventional heterosexual masculinity. In light of masculinity's tendency to overshadow sexuality, we need to think seriously about the assumption, one very common among writers on masculinity, that it is possible to theorize and historically analyze masculinity without reference to sexuality. Noting that "sexuality has been leached out of much of the literature on masculinity," R.W. Connell warns that "masculinities as cultural forms cannot be abstracted from sexuality, which is an essential dimension of the social creation of gender."³³ Employing sexuality as an analytical tool, partially pried apart from gender, would also free us up from the often damaging heterocentric bias of a gender difference model of identity construction, opening up possibilities that men's identities were sometimes formed in relation to other men (and boys).³⁴ Finally, we will want to investigate how men's sexual and gender relations existed in relationship to other forms of power, to pin down, for example, how men's gender/sexual solidarities and antagonisms fostered or inhibited working-class resistance. I hope even this brief discussion highlights the potential of gay history to complicate and expand — *to queer* — our historical understandings of working-class men's gender identities.

An early version of this article was presented as part of a round table discussion on "Historians and the Politics of Masculinity," Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, Brock University, June 1996. I would like to thank Labour/Le Travail's reviewers for some very helpful comments. Although I was unable to incorporate all of their suggestions in this short piece, I thank them for saving me (I hope successfully) from more than one moment of self-indulgence. And, as always, my thanks to Bryan Palmer for his critical commentary and Taylor-like editorial efficiency.

³³Connell, "The Big Picture," 602.

³⁴In terms of boys, I am thinking, for example, of the history of adult men printers whose masculinity and sense of skill were sometimes threatened by the presence of boy apprentices. See Ava Baron, "Questions of Gender: Deskilling and Demasculinization in the U.S. Printing Industry, 1830-1915," *Gender & History*, 1 (Summer 1989), 178-99.

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