Committee on
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender History

Spring 2016 • Vol. 30:1 • http://www.clgbthistory.org

IN THIS ISSUE
Co-Chairs’ Column 1
Call for Papers 2
Prize Winners 3
Members’ Announcements 4
Book Reviews 5

Reviews in this issue
Robert Beachy, Gay Berlin 5
Rachel Hope Cleves, Charity & Sylvia 7
Jim Downs, Stand by Me 9
Michael Helquist, Marie Equi 11
Mary Louise Roberts, What Soldiers Do 13
Clare Sears, Arresting Dress 14
Victor Uribe-Uran, Fatal Love 17

Committee on LGBT History
Co-chairs: Amanda Littauer and Nick Syrett
Book Review Editor: Dan Royles
Newsletter Editor: April Haynes

It is now halfway into our term as co-chairs, and the time has already flown by. As ever, CLGBTH board members continue to help us in all that we do on behalf of the Committee, and members have recently spearheaded a number of efforts themselves. Chief among these was the new mentoring program begun by Cookie Woolner and now former board member Alex Warner. Many pairs of mentors and mentees met up at the most recent AHA or got in touch in the months that followed; Cookie will be matching up new pairs in the months leading up to the AHA next January so stay tuned for details on that front.

The AHA in Atlanta was a great success, if we do say so ourselves. We sponsored or co-sponsored ten sessions, many within our special “Queer Migrations” track, which echoed the overall theme of the conference. Amanda also chaired an informative session on publishing in queer history (featuring book and journal editors) and Nick participated in one exploring the outcome of the report by the Task Force on the status of LGBTQ historians. That report outlined a number of areas of concern among queer historians, the most significant of which was that jobs for those focusing on queer history are few and far between. Secondary respondents reported on a variety of others issues: discrimination on campus and among colleagues; lack of support for queer history classes and/or expectations that simply being queer qualified one to teach such a course; as well as difficulties with negative/prejudiced student evaluations and their effect upon tenure cases. The session was profiled in Perspectives, the AHA magazine.

The first and most significant outcome of that report is that the AHA has now appointed a Committee on LGBTQ History and Historians. This committee, like the Committee on Minority Historians or the

In his new book *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation*, Jim Downs rebuts the popular view of gay life in the 1970s as one of hedonistic sexual excess. Instead, Downs describes the decade as one of community building among mostly white gay men who organized religious affinity groups, published newspapers, and advocated for gay prisoners. He argues that gay men from New Orleans to Philadelphia, New York, and Los Angeles created a gay identity rooted in moral reasoning that “theorized, explored, and investigated the meaning of sex,” as “many gay people sought community and their own culture over legal rights and political recognition” (5, 14).

Downs begins with the gay religious movement. The Metropolitan Community Church, for example, often used gay nightclubs to hold community services in the daytime. Congregating in public, however, exposed the group to hostilities. Downs uses police records, memoirs, and oral history to recount the June 1973 arson attack on New Orleans’ Up Stairs Lounge, which killed thirty-two and injured fifteen. The apathy that followed the attack showed widespread disregard for the lives of gay people and their families. Still, reformist groups in the 1970s sought inclusion into mainstream religious institutions. Religious advocates such as Father Robert Clement “encouraged their congregations to openly and publicly embrace their sexual orientation” and to see it not as “antithetical to their faith but as central to it” (45). Here Downs challenges the view of gay liberation as a rejection of organized religion. However, he might have buttressed or complicated his analysis by investigating the experiences of Black gay men, who likely organized in more conservative spaces. While Downs presents a useful corrective to depictions of the 1970s as a decade of sexual excess, his analysis of gay religion only captures the cultural development of a narrow band of religious communities.

After religious advocacy, Downs delves into the vibrant world of gay literature and newspapers. From homophile Craig Rodwell’s Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookstore in Greenwich Village to Jonathan Ned Katz’s early play *Coming Out!* and seminal book *Gay American History*, Downs shows the centrality of letters to gay culture in the 1970s. Still, Downs notes that these spaces remained few and far between compared to gay bars, bathhouses, and pornographic theaters. Despite their overlapping interests, Rodwell and Katz “rarely found themselves in the same room because there were still few rooms where they could meet” (112).

Gay newspapers also offered gay people a way to connect with one another. One of the most far-reaching of these, *The Body Politic*, was founded in 1971 with distribution in the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe. Together with figures like Rodwell and Katz, the gay newspapers sought a “useable past” to “provide legitimacy, meaning, and, most of all, a genealogy to their plight” (116). For example, in 1974 *The Body Politic* ran a series of essays on the history of homosexuality and the Holocaust. While white gay intellectual historians, playwrights, and essayists often gestured towards the Civil Rights Movement as a model for gay liberation, they also looked to Black history as a model for understanding gay oppression. As Downs writes, Katz “interspersed current events” about racism and sexism in *Coming Out!* “to force the majority-white audience—and the majority-white movement—to think about racism” (103). It remains unclear whether Katz achieved his intended effect.
The penultimate chapter of *Stand by Me* most clearly demonstrates how some built coalitions across lines of race and class to offer a more inclusive vision of liberation. Downs finds evidence of solidarity between gay men of different communities in his analysis of prisoners’ letters (150-151). According to Downs, “gay inmates reminded the gay community that discrimination and prejudice prevailed inside prisons despite the many changes occurring outside of them” (146). The Metropolitan Community Church published inmates’ letters and poetry, including those that described experiences of sexual violence. Downs asserts that poetic exchange “functioned as the ‘hidden transcript’ of the gay liberation movement” (148). Men victimized by the policing of gay sexuality bonded with others who affirmed their desire for love.

Downs’ most novel contribution comes in the concluding chapter. Here, he asserts that the “macho clone” stereotype—clad in Levi’s and a flannel shirt, with “broad shoulders, chiseled forearms, biceps the size of cannonballs, and a flat stomach,” and always white—led to a masculine vision of gayness that excluded people of color, the feminine, and the gender non-conforming (169). For Downs, the rise of this body type facilitated the decline of anti-racist and intersectional organizing during gay liberation. Evidence for this kind of solidarity between Black and white activists is scant, but perhaps because it was already so short-lived. For this reason, the causal importance Downs assigns to the macho clone seems misplaced. The story of *Stand by Me*’s central protagonists and their social worlds remains a “forgotten history” of white gay men. Nevertheless, Downs’ argument is a useful departure from the hypersexualized depiction of gay life in the decade before AIDS. But whose culture was it, anyway?

In reconstructing the social life of the gay Left and its religious reformers, *Stand by Me* ignores the contributions of gay men situated in more conservative settings who lacked the capital to archive their social lives. The fact remains that fewer records exist for Black and working class groups. In a footnote, Downs writes that the book “focuses on the experience of gay white men and does not by any means purport to chart the diverse experiences of the LGBTQ community,” continuing, “the preponderance of white men throughout the historical record reflected a shift in how the gay community defined itself at the end of the decade” (n5, 206). Despite the sudden emergence of the homogenized white “macho clone” that Downs blames for declining solidarity between masculine and feminine gay men, the reader is left with little evidence of other social worlds. It is unfortunate that this historical problematic is squirreled away rather than confronted within the analysis. Left in the shadows, anti-racist action on the part of white gay activists and their use of and participation in the Black freedom struggle feels tangential, even though groups like the Gay Activists Alliance and the Black Panther Party frequently debated and collaborated. 1

*Stand by Me*’s core argument, however, remains unassailable. The trauma that persists from the AIDS epidemic has flattened the historical view of gay culture in D.C., see Downs, *Stand by Me*, 235n28; Kevin Mumford, *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 89-91.
the 1970s. In his research, Downs “saw countless examples of gay people sidestepping activism and putting more effort into creating gay culture” (234, n5). Cultural production and agitation for change remain intertwined. This work raises important questions for future research about how clergy weighed demands for gay inclusion and recognition, how white gay social circles racialized masculinity, and the extent—or limits—of anti-racist organizing during gay liberation. Downs’ book has given historians a rich cultural history, which deserves further, holistic inquiry.

George Aumoithe
Columbia University


Michael Helquist’s biography Marie Equi: Radical Politics and Outlaw Passions tells the compelling life story of Marie Equi, a female physician who pursued both intimate relationships with other women and radical political causes during the early twentieth-century. Equi participated in a wide range of social justice movements, including those for labor rights, women’s suffrage, access to birth control, and against war. While much of Equi’s activism was confined to the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, she maintained connections to other activists across the United States. It is fitting, then, that Helquist weaves together the personal and the political in an intimate telling of Equi’s life that situates her in regional and national histories of the Progressive Era.

Marie Equi’s intimate relationships were exclusively with women. Like historians of nineteenth-century “romantic friendships,” Helquist is careful not to read sexual intimacy into these relationships, since his sources do not make such behavior explicit. Equi did, however, cohabitate for long periods with a few different women during her adult life. These included Bessie Holcomb, whom Equi met in Massachusetts and shared a home with in Oregon beginning in 1892. While Helquist refers to Equi as a lesbian, it is unclear whether she described herself using that term. Equi did describe herself as “queer,” although Helquist is careful to point out that “queer” at the time still commonly connoted “the unusual or peculiar” in addition to sexual non-normativity (199). Helquist suggests that she may have used the term to describe her radical politics or her sexuality but draws no definitive conclusion on the subject.

In detailing Equi’s relationships with other women, Helquist makes an important contribution to scholarship on female-female sexuality in the Progressive Era. Most histories of homosexuality during this period focus on relationships between men. Although authorities cracked down on male homosexuality in Progressive-era Portland, Equi carried on relationships with other women with relative ease. She did, however, face scrutiny for her private affairs, including in two cases before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Equi’s life story suggests that Western communities may have provided more opportunities for intimate relationships between women than other parts of the country, although these relationships were still subject to judgment and repression.

Marie Equi is not merely a biography, but a chronicle of the Progressive Era, both in the Pacific Northwest and across the United States. Helquist contextualizes every aspect of Equi’s life, connecting her story to the history of settlement in Oregon, the professionalization of medicine, Progressive-era political debates, and public attitudes regarding sexuality. For example, Helquist