



1. WHAT DOES OUR PROGRESS MEAN?

Canada is often regarded as a country that is highly evolved in acknowledging the rights of queer people. The American media, for example, often refer to Canada as a “queer utopia,” especially relative to themselves. This perception is largely due to the 2005 federal legalization of same-sex marriage, making Canada the fourth country in the world, and the first in the Western hemisphere, to do so. With that milestone, many assumed that an “end of law” had been reached for queer Canadians in reforming the legal system. We had also certainly managed to outpace our southern neighbours, who continue to struggle in doing the same.

But is our queer-friendly designation justified? Canada is indeed one of the most progressive countries in the world when it comes to the formal rights of queer people. Officially, we enjoy nearly all of the same legal rights as our heterosexual counterparts, from marriage and adoption to access to housing and employment. But some crucial factors need to be kept in mind when considering Canada’s reputation: first, that this has not always been the case. Young people — queer or otherwise — are likely aware of this simple fact, but likely much less aware of the specifics. Such as how the 1965 arrest of a mechanic in the Northwest Territories triggered the partial decriminalization of homosexuality four years later. Or how, in 1981, police violently raided a series of gay establishments

in Toronto, resulting both in one of the largest mass arrests in Canadian history and, shortly thereafter, the largest demonstration for lesbian and gay rights in that same history. Or how, in 1989, a group of AIDS activists stormed the International Conference on AIDS in Montreal, stealing the stage from Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to protest his government's ignorance of how AIDS was affecting gay and bisexual men. The examples are countless and each offers a glimpse of the pervasive system of formal and informal sanctions and persecutions that have challenged queer Canadians. They also offer a better understanding of the climate we exist in today.

“Examining historical experiences and practices can help us understand from where lesbian and gay oppression and, more generally, oppressive sexual regulation has come, where it may be going, and the possibilities for transformation,” Gary Kinsman writes in *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*, one of the foremost studies regarding the history of Canadian sexuality.¹ By looking at some of the key events and processes, we can historicize queer issues in Canada, thereby gaining comprehension of the present. Certainly this will highlight the fact that in a relatively short period of time, queer activism and advocacy have achieved extraordinary goals. But it's also important to ask what exactly these changes mean, especially the public policy and law reforms, such as same-sex marriage. To the extent that there has been change, how deep are those changes and how diverse are the constituencies affected by them? This is really the core question about this history.

Many people writing on queer issues in Canada dispute the significance of the official progress made in terms of actual social change. Gary Kinsman, for example, argues that many queer people have been regulated and normalized by all these legal victories.² This observation stems from the ideology of lesbian and gay liberation, which was the bold, militant movement born in the early 1970s that spearheaded the fight for the rights of queer people in this country. Tom Warner, another leading voice on the subject, defines the impetus of the gay and lesbian liberation movement as the “products of

anger and outrage channelled into collective action.” Fundamentally, it was about changing self-image. “Changing a few laws and achieving tolerance are necessary, but insufficient in themselves to achieve fundamental social change,” Warner writes in *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada*. “At the risk of oversimplification, lesbian and gay liberation may be summed up as a revolutionary struggle that seeks the eradication of heterosexism and the overthrow of the dictatorship of compulsory heterosexuality.”³

Liberation activism was gradually surpassed by a more conservative, assimilationist advocacy fighting for legal recognition of same-sex relationships. While on one end of the spectrum, some argue that this achievement does not coincide with what gay and lesbian liberationists originally intended, others argue that drastic changes in public opinion toward queer people prove that these victories have indeed brought forth significant societal acceptance. But most can agree that there are drastic variations in progress and privileges across the “queer spectrum.” One of the defining features of Canada’s queer community is also one of the principal characteristics of Canada itself: remarkable diversity is found under this umbrella. Spread across different cultural regions and co-defined by a variety of races, ethnicities, classes and belief systems, Canada’s queer community is not easily generalized and is not particularly equal either. Same-sex marriage, for example, is not an “end law” and certainly not an “end issue” for a large portion of Canadian queers. The term “queer,” it should be clarified, refers to all non-heterosexual people. In most cases, “queer” ends up being shorthand for “gay or lesbian,” which are the identity groups primarily discussed in this book. However, the word is intentionally more inclusive and ambiguous, as further explained in Chapter 7. Gays and lesbians are not alone in experiencing the two overarching and inter-connected problems of homophobia and heterosexism.

In the 1970s, the term “homophobia” was adopted as “the preferred term to describe the cause of the oppression of and discrimination against homosexuals.”⁴ In a 1975 leaflet distributed by

the lesbian and gay liberation group Gays of Ottawa, homophobia was described as follows:

Homophobia like other kinds of prejudice — racism, sexism — manifests itself in many ways... Today there is a whole gamut of homophobic reactions — outright queer-bashing, psychiatry’s attempts to ‘cure’ the homosexual, discriminatory laws and employment practices, inability on the part of social service agencies to deal with the homosexual, the media’s demeaning and stereotypical images of the homosexual, pseudo-liberalism’s tolerance of the homosexual so long as she or he remains invisible — all reactions from a combination of ignorance and fear.⁵

As this description suggests, homophobia can manifest itself in many ways. Individualized homophobia refers to one individual’s belief that homosexuality is wrong or immoral and, at its extreme, can result in verbal or physical abuse. However, this book focuses instead on institutional homophobia and thus provides an analysis of broad social relations in Canadian society. Institutional homophobia, which refers to various institutions discriminating against people because of their sexuality, is largely outlawed thanks to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* but is far from eradicated. Having legislation to protect queer people from discrimination is one thing, but changing the heterosexist ideologies that drive the institutions — and the individuals behind them — is quite another.

Heterosexism is a complex term described by Tom Warner as not simply the manifestation of ignorance and fear, but also of “the power wielded by the state and by social and commercial institutions that systematically promote, tolerate, or sanction prejudice.”⁶ Essentially, it is the social system that favours opposite-sex sexuality and relationships, including the presumption that everyone is heterosexual or that heterosexual attraction and relationships are “normal” and therefore superior. Gary Kinsman prefers to frame his

noted work *The Regulation of Desire* around heterosexism, explaining that homophobia can be seen “as a particularly virulent personal response organized by heterosexist discourse and practice.” He sees heterosexism as relating the practices of heterosexual hegemony to “institutional and social settings and to sex and gender relations without reducing gay and lesbian oppression to an ‘effect’ of gender.”⁷ Either way, these interrelated effects of heterosexism and institutionalized homophobia are dominant villains in the queer Canadian history narrative and remain intensely active today, affecting a wide range of issues, including censorship, the *Criminal Code*, the education system, the health industry, the media, and the emotional and physical harassment of queer people, which sometimes turns violent.

That is why it is important not only to understand the history of queer Canada, but also to utilize that understanding to look past the myth of a “queer utopia” that same-sex marriage has perpetrated. This is the mandate of this book. While momentous strides have certainly been made, today’s society is not the result that gay and lesbian liberationists — the people who started Canada’s queer rights movement — envisioned. The “overthrow of the dictatorship of compulsory heterosexuality” has not occurred. If anything, same-sex marriage has seen privileged lesbians and gays assimilate into the norms of this dictatorship, leaving behind their queer comrades who can’t participate because their lifestyles do not “fit” into mainstream society.

We must keep in mind that the purpose of this book is *not* to create an encyclopedic and inclusive detailing of Canadian queer people. We are a vast and complex bunch, with thousands and thousands of fascinating stories, pivotal figures, hard fought victories and unjust losses. It is impossible to fairly chronicle in a book of this length, or perhaps even one fifty times longer, this entire rich and complex history. What this book *will* do is introduce a history that is widely misunderstood and widely underreported, and then provide direction to continue that educational journey. Books by noted writers like Gary Kinsman and Tom Warner, as well as works by Dionne Brand, Line

Chamberland, Elise Chenier, Brenda Cossman, Ross Higgins, Bruce MacDougall, Steven Maynard, Donald McLeod, David Rayside, Michael Riordan, Becki L. Ross, Makeda Silvera, George Smith, Miriam Smith, Rinaldo Walcott and Thomas Waugh, among others, collectively provide an exhaustive schooling on queer Canada. As do the many human resources we may not realize surround us. Oral histories remain one of the most effective ways to learn, and it was largely through them that this book came together.

Unlike many of the aforementioned authors, I am not writing from first-hand experience. Instead, this book comes from the enlightenment provided by those very authors, as well as from a variety of other resources, like the 135 issues of the *Body Politic*, Canada's pre-eminent gay and lesbian liberation magazine, or the exhaustive website of late queer activist Rick Bebout, chronicling both his own life and the queer history that surrounded it.⁸ And from dozens of queer Canadians themselves, who offered their time and their stories to illuminate the intricacy of our shared history, a history I admit was not as well known to me as I had once assumed. As a white, middle-class, gay male who entered my twenties as same-sex marriage was being passed into legislation, the experience of writing this book made it all the more clear how easily social privilege can produce ignorance. Thus the primary goal of *About Canada: Queer Rights* is to provide the first step forward for readers to become aware both of how one of Canada's greatest social movements came to be, and of how much work is left to be done.