



Making Gay History



MEMOIR OF A
SCHOLAR-ACTIVIST

.....

JOHN D'EMILIO

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Cover art: (*Top to bottom*) New York Pride March, mid-1970s;
with Jim Oleson, Greensboro, 1984; with Amber Hollibaugh,
San Francisco, 1979. Photos from the author's collection.

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In Loving Memory of

ALLAN BÉRUBÉ

KEN DAWSON

AMBER HOLLIBAUGH

CARLOS NEGRON

JIM OLESON

URVASHI VAID

Each of you enriched my life!

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Prologue

As I write this prologue in the first months of the second Trump presidency, we are living in a time when attacks on the LGBTQ community have escalated dramatically. While these are taking many forms, a key target of the queer-and-transphobic right wing involves books and history. In many states and localities, public libraries are having to remove from their shelves books dealing with LGBTQ life. Quite a number of states have banned the inclusion of any LGBTQ material in history and social studies school curricula. “Don’t Say Gay” has become the descriptive phrase used to characterize these efforts.

This movement to restrict accurate information about the history and contemporary lives of an oppressed minority is certainly cause for concern. But we also need to remember that, if we jumped back in time to the late 1960s, there would be no LGBTQ history to ban from classrooms and virtually no LGBTQ-positive books to remove from our libraries. “Don’t Say Gay” efforts are happening now because of the huge accomplishments of the movement over the last half century. Across fiction, poetry, biography, memoir, and many academic disciplines, queer books have poured off the presses of publishers. One could almost fill a library with the work that is now available. In particular, a rich history long hidden and unexplored has been discovered and written about extensively. College faculty are constructing entire courses around this history, and many universities are able to offer LGBTQ studies as a minor. Some states have mandated inclusion in middle and high school classes.

How did this happen? How did queer history move from the unimaginable and nonexistent to become a vibrant subject of study with a huge number of books that cover it? And how has this history been a resource for the LGBTQ movement as it has fought against oppression and sought equality and recognition?

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This memoir offers insights from one person's engagement with the uncovering of an LGBTQ history and its use as a tool for social change. As a graduate student in the early 1970s, motivated to study US history in order to better understand the upheavals I had witnessed in the 1960s, I had the good fortune to connect with what was then described as the gay liberation movement. A group of us came together in 1973 to explore how intellectual work—research and writing that served a social movement—could be a vehicle for progressive gains toward a world without oppression. These initial discussions motivated me to take a plunge into this unknown area of historical study, and, over the next years and decades, I wrote, published, lectured widely to community audiences, and brought to LGBTQ activist organizations the insights that history offered. I also built strong ties across the country with a small but growing network of folks who were likewise engaged with history as a resource for resisting oppression as well as a guide for creating a better world.

This memoir charts my journey through three decades—the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Part I covers the period from 1971 until 1983 when I lived in New York City. It describes how my identities as a young gay man in the post-Stonewall decade and as a graduate student exploring US history came together. It portrays the activist study groups that I and others formed, the politically conscious social networks we built, and the challenges involved in finding and interpreting a history that no one had yet written about. It captures the joy of having my research lead to the publication of my first book, which proved to be a pioneering work in this newly emerging field. And it recounts how, in this first decade after Stonewall, I explored the rapidly growing sexual world created by gay men in a city like New York and how it eventually led me into an intimate relationship that would last for decades.

Part II stretches from 1983 to 1995, when this native New Yorker moved to the Piedmont area of North Carolina. Supporting myself financially as a gay writer and activist proved impossible, despite my efforts, and so I began to search for an academic job at a time when LGBTQ history was still marginalized. Through social contacts that my partner Jim had, surprisingly, I received a faculty position at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro teaching US history courses. These chapters describe the rewards of teaching and of integrating materials about sexuality and identity into classes for a student body in which most had never encountered such history before nor ever known someone who was openly gay. These years in the classroom generated many unforgettable teaching moments.

In the mid-1980s, North Carolina did not have anything like the large and visible LGBTQ community that I had experienced in New York. I worked to

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develop connections in the state as I maintained ties with my LGBTQ activist comrades and public intellectuals in New York and in California. In this era of AIDS, the LGBTQ movement was growing rapidly, and the work of historians was contributing to activist efforts. Staff at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force had read my history of activism in the decades before the Stonewall Uprising, and they invited me to join its board of directors and make my historical insights accessible to audiences of activists. The years on the board let me see how the movement was exploding in size across the nation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it allowed me to contribute to these organizing efforts.

Rewarding as my teaching experiences were, the absence of a strong and large community of LGBTQ activists and public intellectuals in the Piedmont as well as my reconnection with movement networks through the Task Force made it clear that I wanted to return to a major urban area with more vibrant networks of folks engaged in the kind of work I was doing. Few institutions of higher education in the early 1990s were hiring faculty who researched and taught LGBTQ history, and my efforts to find an academic job in a large city did not succeed. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force came to my rescue, as it offered me the opportunity to join the staff and create a policy institute. Part III covers my years in Washington, DC, when I found myself in the midst of nationwide networks of activists and worked to build an institute that provided information and guidance on key policy goals that the LGBTQ movement was pursuing. My time with the Task Force allowed me to see at close range how the movement had exploded in size since my early engagement with queer activism in New York in the 1970s.

Throughout the years in North Carolina and while working for the Task Force as well, I continued to do new historical research on sexuality, identity, and social movements. With my closest friend and comrade, Estelle Freedman, I coauthored *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, and I had begun research on a biography of Bayard Rustin, a civil rights and peace activist whose life had been largely ignored. Rewarding as the work with the Task Force was, I missed the opportunity to devote significant amounts of time to historical research and writing. Leaving the policy institute, I meagerly supported myself over the next two years with speaking gigs, small writing opportunities, and research grants. I also applied for academic jobs and found that the profession had become somewhat more receptive to the kind of work that I was doing. As a sign of how much had changed since I had first searched for academic jobs twenty years earlier, I was recruited by the University of Illinois in Chicago specifically to teach LGBTQ history and studies. A brief epilogue describes a few highlights from those years in the early twenty-first century.

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One of history's greatest values is that it can offer us encouraging lessons in difficult times. Without underestimating the dangers and challenges that the LGBTQ community and other oppressed, marginalized groups are facing, I hope this account of my experiences serves as an empowering reminder that historical knowledge can be a force for progressive change and that intellectual work does not need to exist only in an ivory tower.

A note on terminology: The words used to describe sexual and gender identity minorities have changed across time. Today, a common term is LGBTQ, and I use it frequently throughout the book. But I also at times use *gay* or *gay and lesbian* in order to bring back to life with accuracy the perspective of the times I am writing about.

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PART I
New York

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Reading as a Pathway to Change

I came from a family in which almost no one read books. In the three-room apartment where I spent my first nine years, there was a thick red Bible with gilt-edged pages that sat atop the dresser in the bedroom I shared with my parents. Now and then, Mom stroked the cover reverentially, but I never saw her open it. In the closet in our apartment's hallway, where bedsheets and towels were piled up, there were a few cookbooks. Occasionally Mom took one out and paged through it as she sat at the table. But, since we had the same half dozen or so dinners week after week, she clearly did not absorb much from those pages. At Grandma's house, where I spent a lot of time with Mom's large extended Italian family, there was a boxed set of Jane Austen novels in the living room. Its location remained unchanging, and I never witnessed a family member reading one of them.

The exception to all of this was a child's version of *The Lives of the Saints*. On afternoons when there was no more housework or food shopping to be done, and after Mom had made phone calls to her sisters and mother, she might sit with me on the living room sofa and read aloud the stories of those holy individuals who lived the ideals of Jesus. These tales from another time and place fascinated me. I took in the message that this was what a good boy should aspire to—devoting himself to making the world a better place.

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At some point early in my elementary school years, Mom learned from Mrs. Bailey, a neighbor, about a high school for smart Catholic boys. Located on Manhattan's wealthy Upper East Side, Regis was a tuition-free, fully endowed Jesuit school. Acceptance came through excellent performance on its entrance exam, and only a very small number of boys in each Catholic parish received the opportunity to take the exam. The climax of Mrs. Bailey's description came when she told Mom that every boy who graduated from Regis attended college with a scholarship. None of the adults or older grandchildren in my extended family had ever gone to college; many had not finished high school. Mom recognized that this was the path to a better future because, from that moment on, she pushed me to excel in school. If my grades were not the top ones in my class, she often repeated, I might not be selected to take the Regis entrance exam.

The conversation with Mrs. Bailey also seemed to provoke Mom into acquiring books for her son to read at home. How she figured out what to buy I will never know, but soon my birthday, Christmas, and Easter presents began to include books: *Treasure Island*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and fairy tale collections by the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen among them. By third grade my reading level was such that I could devour these without the help of my mother. They were so much more interesting than the boring readers about Dick and Jane that we used in school. And, apparently, as Mom would recall in later years, I enjoyed reading a lot more than playing with the set of building blocks and other toys that I received each Christmas.

The age of ten was the time when, according to the policies of the neighborhood public libraries in the Bronx, children could borrow books on their own and patronize the adult section of the library. Now, every couple of weeks, instead of gathering with friends after school to play basketball or touch football, a group of us made our way to the library and roamed the aisles looking for books to bring home. Occasionally one of our teachers, like Brother August, would meet us at the library and offer advice on which books to borrow.

I did get selected to take the entrance exam for Regis, and Mom accompanied me on the subway to Manhattan's elegant East Side, dramatically different from our Bronx neighborhood. A few weeks later, I learned that I had won admission. Regis provided its incoming students with a summer reading list filled with the great works of nineteenth-century fiction. I had now graduated to novels that were several hundred pages long, and I happily raced through them. Once school began in the fall of 1962, Regis took my reading to an even higher level. The school prided itself on the three hours of homework it assigned students each day. While some of that involved science and math, the bulk called

for reading works of history, literature, theology, and, most of all, the so-called classics. Taking classes in Greek and Latin immersed me in the literature of the ancient Mediterranean world. For a boy who grew up in a conservative, traditionally Catholic, Italian family, the idea of gods and goddesses who fought each other, who schemed and plotted and competed for one another's love, was irresistible. I wanted to live in that world forever.

Regis also added another key element to my engagement with the written word. Early on I was recruited to the Hearn Society, its club for speech and debate. Regis excelled in this competitive activity, and soon the faculty coaches had me giving extempore speeches on current events as well as researching and preparing cases for each year's debate topic. I had rarely paid attention to the newspaper that Dad brought home each evening or to the television news reports that came on at the dinner hour, but now I was immersing myself in the issues of the day. The *Herald Tribune* became my daily companion on the subway ride to and from Regis, and I read *U.S. News and World Report* from cover to cover each week. Summer found me traveling to midtown Manhattan to do research at the Donnell Library, where I learned about the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and scanned the *New York Times Index* to find the countless articles that helped me prepare debate cases for the coming year. Before long, I felt myself an expert on why nuclear weapons should be controlled by an international organization and on the desirability of global free trade.

Mrs. Bailey was correct in what she told Mom about Regis being a guaranteed pathway to college. All of my classmates applied for and were accepted to multiple colleges. Of the options I had, I chose Columbia. Dad had told me that I could live on campus rather than commute each day from the Bronx, and the idea that I might reside in Manhattan, which seemed awash in bookstores and theaters, was irresistible. Living on Morningside Heights, taking a full load of courses, and completing the reading assignments that made the three hours of homework at Regis seem like a vacation, I saw my vision of the world expanding. Confronted by two thousand years of Western philosophy, I began questioning the existence of God. Reading about the destructive wars that Christians waged against each other, I soon found myself saying goodbye to the Catholic Church.

Reading also opened a critical pathway to self-acceptance. As I traveled on the subway to Regis every day, I noticed myself feeling strong physical attraction to some of the men riding on the train. These feelings were new to me, and I had no name or explanation for them. That changed when, in sophomore year, Mr. Ridley, my English teacher, assigned me James Baldwin's novel *Another Country*. Set largely in Manhattan, it was filled with passionate explorations

of love and sexuality, including men who were attracted to and had sex with men. I now had a name, homosexuality, for what I was feeling, but the feelings and—soon—the actions associated with those feelings brought me nothing but shame. Then, in college, one of the men I met cruising the streets of Manhattan saw the internal struggle I was experiencing. Reaching for a volume in his bedroom's bookcase as we lay in bed talking after sex, he urged me to take it home and read it. *De Profundis* by Oscar Wilde became the book that saved my life. Wilde's proud and uncompromising acceptance of the love and desires that had sent him to prison transformed what had once seemed my road to hell into an acknowledgment of my true self. "Whatever is realized is right," Wilde proclaimed again and again. I took that message in. Reading was proving itself a pathway to change.

Amid all this transformative reading, I was also exploring another route to change. My years in college coincided with the height of the movement against the war in Southeast Asia. Growing up in a staunchly conservative Republican family that unflinchingly supported the Cold War, I had never given much thought to the growing US military involvement except as the potential subject of an extempore speech in high school. Now I was seeing rallies on campus, hearing activists describe the violence experienced by Vietnamese civilians, and listening to pacifists elaborate on the moral underpinnings of their commitment to a world in which nonviolence was the norm. The boy who had read about Catholic saints devoting themselves to making the world a more just and compassionate place now found himself translating that model into activism against a war whose impact on the people in Vietnam was horrific. Joining the Catholic Peace Fellowship, I absorbed the work of Catholic advocates for peace like Thomas Merton. I declared myself a conscientious objector to my draft board. I also trained as a counselor to help other young men evade military service, and I read closely the detailed regulations of the Selective Service System concerning who was draftable and who was not.

As the end of my college years approached, I had not a clue as to what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. The adults in my mostly blue-collar family did not have careers. They had jobs, the sole purpose of which was to provide "a living." Around me at Columbia, as well as among my Regis friends, almost everyone seemed to have a clear sense of the direction in which they were heading. Some planned to pursue academic careers and were going to graduate school. Others were headed to law school or medical school or to careers in engineering or finance. I had applied to graduate school in European history, which was my major, but mainly because I liked reading about it. But when the time came to make a final decision, I turned down all my acceptances and

fellowships. Campuses were exploding in antiwar demonstrations that spring after Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia, and the killings of students at Kent State and Jackson State University by National Guard and police escalated the protests dramatically. I could not imagine devoting myself to years of studying the history of nations centuries ago and thousands of miles away. I decided to remain in New York and keep working against the war in one way or another. This would also allow me to continue to benefit from the bits of knowledge that I had acquired about the underground gay life that existed in Manhattan. And so, I looked for a job.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the job I found was as an assistant in the periodicals division of the library at Long Island University in Brooklyn. It offered another opportunity to read and learn, but this time without the pressure of exams or deadlines for turning in research papers. My boss, Joe Duchac, had the resources to expand the library's collections, and he asked me to become familiar with the host of left-wing publications that the movements of the 1960s had spawned. I began reading journals with names like *New Left Review*, *Radical America*, and *Socialist Revolution*. The articles in them gave depth to the rhetoric of activist leaders. Rather than simply attack "the system" or the "war machine"—two phrases commonly used by speakers at campus rallies and antiwar demonstrations—these writers defined, described, and analyzed what that "system" was and why it produced wars with such devastating effects.

Many of the articles also referenced a new body of literature in American history, which they described as "revisionist." A name that surfaced more frequently than any other was William Appleman Williams, and I soon found myself poring through his work. A historian of foreign policy, Williams characterized the United States as an imperial power, one whose expansionist predilections produced tragedy across the globe. His interpretations made the war in Southeast Asia seem less like a terrible mistake by a few political leaders and more like the logical outcome of decades of policy.

Of all Williams's work, the book that most affected me was *The Great Evasion*. Its subtitle—*An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of Karl Marx and on the Wisdom of Admitting the Heretic into the Dialogue About America's Future*—suggested the perspective from which he approached US history. As Williams analyzed and interpreted the past, he repeatedly asserted that the workings of capitalism destroyed any sense of community. Capitalist America reduced us all to the status of individuals struggling to survive and competing against others, whether consciously or not, for the resources necessary to live.

I had not taken a single course in US history or politics during my four years of college. Reading Williams, as well as the work of other radical historians

who published in these left-wing journals, was revelatory. I became convinced that this knowledge was a critical tool in the effort to achieve the dramatic, systemic change that segments of the antiwar movement, New Left student activists, and the Black freedom struggle held forth as a goal. For the first time, I felt as if I had a calling. I needed—and wanted—to be part of the effort to research, write, and spread throughout the land this new interpretation of the nation's history. I reapplied to graduate school, but this time only to Columbia. My record as an undergraduate was strong enough that I knew I would be accepted.

Major changes in the shape of my gay life also motivated my desire to stay in New York. A week or so after starting my job, I met Carlos Negrón, who became my partner—or “lover,” as gay men then described relationships—for the next several years. From the time of our first date, we spent every night together, and by the end of the summer I had moved into his compact little apartment in a single-room-occupancy building on Manhattan's West Side. In his early thirties, Carlos had recently abandoned a career in the airline industry to go to college and participate in the political and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s. He was majoring in psychology at New York University and avidly reading the psychological literature that challenged the norms of the baby boom. Immersing ourselves in the counterculture ethics of that historical moment, we read together one of its popular creeds, *You Are All Sanpaku*, a passionate call for a revolutionary transformation of eating. Soon this Italian boy from the Bronx, who had grown up on a diet overflowing with tomato sauce and meatballs, had adopted a macrobiotic regimen of food consumption.

As I expected, the following spring the letter of acceptance came from Columbia, including the announcement that I would receive a fellowship that fully paid tuition and fees as well as providing a modest stipend. The dream of a future in which, yes, reading—and writing—played a central part was becoming real. I told Joe that I would be leaving my position at the end of the summer. Fortunately, I also learned that the Morningside Heights apartment I had shared as a senior with three close classmates was about to become vacant. If Carlos and I found a couple of guys to whom we could rent the extra rooms, it would be affordable and provide the convenience of easy access to campus. At the end of August, we packed up our limited belongings, and I found myself returning to Morningside Heights. A few days later, I walked the short distance to campus to register for my fall semester courses. I was eager to discover where this newfound passion for reading and researching American history would take me.

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