

## Prologue

*VICTORY*, the book cover shouts—and its tagline raises still higher the triumphalist beat: “How a Despised Minority Pushed Back, Beat Death, Found Love, and Changed America for Everyone.”

Have we wandered into a revival meeting? No, *Victory* is one of several recent books, a whole new genre really, that portrays the improved public perception of LGBTQ people in hyperbolic terms skirting dangerously close to parody. Among other recent narrative histories that fall into the “triumphalist” camp—though less given than *Victory* to exaggerated tall tales—are Michael Klarman’s *From the Closet to the Altar*, Jim Downs’s *Stand By Me*, George Chauncey’s *Why Marriage?*, Debbie Cenziper’s *Love Wins*, and Nathaniel Frank’s *Awakening*.

It is not wrong to claim that the past fifty years have marked a notable, even remarkable change in attitude toward sexual minorities in the United States. In the past half century we’ve gone from being all but uniformly pathologized and condemned—yes, even *bunted*—to being widely accepted as a legitimate minority (something like an ethnic one, though nobody

seems sure). In 1950 fifteen states included us under their “sexual psychopath” laws, some of which defined “sodomy” as anal or oral sex with humans (with “beasts,” too), and allowed indefinite confinement following arrest. Jumping forward fifty years, the U.S. Supreme Court has not only declared us “fit” for marriage but in 2003 decriminalized “sodomy” between consenting adults (more about that mixed blessing later), and in 2011 Congress repealed the military’s grotesque “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. An improved status?<sup>2</sup>—unquestionably yes. Yet the extent and content of our “progress” are badly in need of deconstruction.<sup>1</sup>

I’m not alone in feeling limited satisfaction with what most gay people are hailing as the speediest success story in all of our country’s long history of social protest. The grumblers among us are a decided minority. We’re overrepresented among gay academics and public intellectuals, but scarcely represented at all in the LBGQTQ population at large. When complaining among ourselves, someone invariably cites the contrast between the movement’s recent “assimilationist” agenda—marriage rights and “permission” to serve openly in the armed forces—with the far broader agenda that had characterized the Gay Liberation Front at its inception following the 1969 Stonewall riots. GLF had called for a fierce, full-scale assault on sexual and gender norms, on imperialistic wars and capitalistic greed, and on the shameful mistreatment of racial and ethnic minorities.

Or had it? Were we mythologizing the early years of the movement, exaggerating its scope in order to substantiate our discontent with what we viewed as the shriveled posture of the movement in its present guise?

In search of an answer, I took down a book from my shelves that I hadn’t looked at in a very long time: *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, the pioneering anthology that Karla Jay and

Allen Young, both of whom I knew, edited and published in 1972. Karla was at the time a graduate student at NYU and Allen had earlier been active in SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and the Liberation News Service. Their anthology contained many of the crucial articles and manifestos that had emanated from the radical gay movement in its first three years of existence. I soon located a raft of other books from the period, including two additional anthologies Karla and Allen had edited (*After You're Out* and *Lavender Culture*).<sup>2</sup>

Many months of reading followed—along with a complex set of reactions, and somewhat more confusion than I'd anticipated. Yes, GLF had expressed empathy for nonconformists of varying stripes, had usually been clearheaded about our country's predations abroad and its indifference to misery at home (though GLF's rhetoric was sometimes more clamorous than its practice). And, yes, it had taken a generous swipe at traditional gender roles, the nuclear family structure, and lifetime, pair-bonded monogamy. Yet it had often done so at the top of its lungs, in utopian language of sometimes lofty (and stupefying) abstraction, and with more than a little self-righteousness. And like most left-wing movements for social change, GLF's internal debates had often been strident, with members frequently and passionately denouncing one another, often along gender lines.

Qualifiers aside, I came away from my self-imposed refresher course reaffirmed in my view that the modern gay movement in the period immediately following the 1969 Stonewall riots had indeed been broadly radical. It presented a substantive challenge to national values and institutions and was strenuously at odds with a merely "liberal" politics that simply called for integrating increasing numbers of people into what was purportedly a beneficent system. None of which came as much of a surprise,

since I knew that many of those who joined GLF had earlier been energetically involved in the militant student, civil rights, feminist, and antiwar movements. A significant number of GLF recruits—people like Martha Shelley, Jim Fouratt, Ellen Shumsky (a.k.a. Ellen Bedoz), Michaela Griffio, Michael Brown, Karla and Allen—had previously marched on behalf of black rights, participated in early feminist protests, and joined actions against the war in Vietnam. The Stonewall riots had refocused their energies on gay liberation, yet in shifting priorities they'd maintained their prior concerns with racism, sexism, and imperialism.

The gay left—like every other kind of left in this country—has rarely represented more than a small minority. GLF and its less radical successor the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) together probably numbered no more than a few hundred people—though more, doubtless, attended their dances. The straight left has periodically enlisted many more, with membership mushrooming during periods of uncommon economic hardship—like the Great Depression of the 1930s and the labor wars of the late nineteenth century—or in response to immoral foreign interventions (like the war in Vietnam). Yet once conditions improved, left-wing protest in this country has disintegrated with notable rapidity; it has historically failed to develop the sustaining power characteristic of the left in Europe.

If GLF's membership remained small, it spoke out against an impressive range of national shortcomings and hypocrisies. The group was quick to name the obstacles, such as racism and misogyny, that kept so many stalled on the first rung of the ladder, and it rejected the kind of patriotic sloganeering that served as cover for capital expansion overseas. As well, GLF deplored the embedded class structure that most Americans denied existed (even as it kept them locked in the cellar) and rejected,

too, the claim that traditional notions of “maleness” and “femaleness” were biologically grounded—that our genes and hormones dictated and warranted the view that women were *intrinsically* emotional and men *intrinsically* aggressive. Further, and centrally, the early gay movement affirmed sexual pleasure as a positive good, vigorously condemned the nuclear family as nothing more than a detention center for women and children, and viewed monogamy as unnatural.

Most of the radical young recruits to GLF had previously been in the closet in regard to their sexuality; they felt that now, in “speaking truth” about their own lives, they would forthwith be welcomed and would link arms with those telling the truth about racism, sexism, and unjust war—with the result of creating a powerful political coalition that would refashion society as a whole. As the very first issue of the GLF paper *Come Out!* put it, “We are going to transform the society at large through the open realization of our own consciousness.” To advance that goal, GLF stressed the importance of consciousness-raising groups.<sup>3</sup>

In giving voice to heretical views and denouncing what the vast majority of Americans (including most gay people) viewed as sacrosanct, GLF could sometimes be shrill, its analyses a jumble of simplistic, ill-digested notions, its views naively optimistic and at times downright Panglossian. Yet their dissent from established pieties, their passionate search for ways to alleviate suffering, and not merely their own, still warrants our attention and regard. It’s easy enough to mock their lapses into extravagant rhetoric, their wholesale indictments, their ingenuous sloganeering. It can be convenient too: by focusing on their sometimes chaotic antics, we’re able to ignore as well the injustices they deplored.

The overwhelming majority of gay people, unlike those in GLF, remained closeted, their energy bent on avoiding detection. They sought to go unnoticed, to “get along,” and they silently scoffed at those who blatantly paraded their dissent—or in the case of prominent earlier homophile activists like Frank Kameny or Barbara Gittings (genuine heroes in the context of what was possible in their own day)—openly deplored GLF’s countercultural “nonsense.” Yet in the face of widespread hostility, GLF persisted, somehow persuaded that a small group, if sufficiently dedicated and vocal, could set a generation’s political agenda—or at the least plant the seeds for the later emergence of a larger progressive force. Vociferous and demanding, GLF announced the advent of a new kind of queer: boisterous, uncompromising, hell-raising.