Do Tell:

Recovering LGBT History for the LGBT Movement

By Amy Hoffman

Recovering or reframing history—creating a "people's history"—has been important for all identity based social movements, but it's been crucial and particularly revelatory for the LGBTQ movement. Michel Foucault, quoted in Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, says,

> There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying … things…There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.

What he means, I think, is that silence itself communicates specific, complex social messages, for a variety of reasons. We had a nice example of this recently, when the reporter Anderson Cooper came out in a statement to blogger Andrew Sullivan. The curious thing about Cooper's statement was that it was already widely known that he is gay. Even I knew it, and I rarely watch TV news and know almost nothing else about Cooper. The media eagerly covered Cooper's statement while, paradoxically, also maintaining that it was not much of a story—which the *New York Times* business section, for one, hailed as a sign of today's acceptance of gay men and lesbians in the media.

In a perceptive op-ed commentary in the *New York Times* (July 3, 2012) a few days after Cooper's nonrevelation, the gay author and essayist Daniel Mendelsohn noted that "gay celebrities enjoy the protection of a cozy *omertà* among the social and media circles like the one that shielded Mr. Cooper." Interestingly, Mendelsohn continues, this enabled Cooper to "den[y], in effect, being closeted. 'I have always been very open and honest about this part of my life with my friends, my family, and my colleagues,' he wrote to Mr. Sullivan. 'In a perfect world, I don't

think it's anyone else's business.'" This is getting complicated: if it's nobody's business, then why the need to be "open and honest"? And how "out" must you be to be truly "out"? If Cooper wasn't out to his media audience, was he indeed being "open and honest"? Mendelsohn points out that Cooper wrote a book in which he discussed other personal issues—but not his sexuality. He goes on to say,

> The high-minded appeal to privacy is, indeed, now a trope in the coming-out process of public figures and celebrities…[But] if you're really 'happy, comfortable ... and proud' to be gay, as Mr. Cooper says he is, the simple fact of being gay should be no more a 'privacy' issue than being straight is for straight people.

In a recent essay collection, *The Fan Who Knew Too Much* (2012), the gospel historian Anthony Heilbut points to another instance of this sort of "out but not out" status: black gay men in the black church who, Heibut maintains, are the sources, as singers, musicians, and dancers, of the church's very "spirit" and "soul." These men are far from elite, but like Cooper's, their sexuality is an open secret, so much so that there's a name for it: gay men in the church are called "the children." Writes Heilbut,

> The church and its gospel music have offered a second home, and often a friendlier place than the homes where boys might face ridicule or worse…Gospel has allowed the worship of a loving male…. I have seen five-man groups weep and stagger as they sang, "When sorrow has taken my heart by surprise, He never has left me alone"….They'll wave glad hands when some old mother exhorts them, "Children, take it to Jesus, you don't need to tell nobody else. Just step into your secret closet."

(This is a reference, says Heilbut, to Matthew 6:6: "But though, when thou prayest, enter into the closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.") James Baldwin's wonderful final novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979), is about just such a black gay gospel singer—and for this reason (I believe) was dissed by critics when it was first published and continues to be undervalued.

So what is the meaning of this particular silence—about something that, as the singer Leonard Cohen would say, "everybody knows"? Oscar Wilde's lover Lord Alfred Douglas famously called homosexuality "the love that dare not speak its name." And as any kid worrying about whether and how and when to come out to his or her family can tell you, there's a big difference between everyone *knowing* you're gay, and *telling* them you're gay. A cousin of mine, whom my brother used to call the pink sheep of the family, begged me, when he (rather unnecessarily) came out to me, not to tell his grandmother—my great-aunt. She, like everyone else in the family, of course knew he was gay—but to *tell* her he was gay would have been to risk their loving relationship. The problem is not *being* gay; it's breaking the silence, acknowledging it, forcing it into the cultural discourse. Don't ask, don't tell.

LGBT folk history has it that the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, which basically banned male homosexual acts in the UK and was not repealed until 1967, did not include lesbianism because Queen Victoria denied the possibility that women would or could engage in such behavior. According to many historians, most influentially Carol Smith Rosenberg, in her groundbreaking 1975 *Signs* essay, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," Victorian women's letters and diaries show that they did form deep, loving, lifelong relationships that were often more important to them than their marriages. They were physically affectionate and even slept together—although it's not clear if they had what we'd define as sex or thought of their relationships as sexual. The lesbian historian Lillian Faderman, in her 1981 book *Surpassing the Love of Men*, comes close to arguing that it was sexologists like Havelock Ellis and then even worse Sigmund Freud who ruined everything, by labelling such unions homosexual and making it impossible for women to remain innocent of the sexual component of their relationships. Before Freud, Faderman says, the relationships were seen as healthy and normal. "The

sexologists' theories frightened, or attempted to frighten, women away from feminism and from loving other women by demonstrating that both were abnormal and were generally linked together," she writes of the sexologists' influence. "In America," she says, "it took the phenomenal growth of female autonomy during and after World War I, and the American popularization of the most influential of the European sexologists, Sigmund Freud, to cast the widespread suspicions on love between women that had already been prevalent in Europe."

And although the Queen Victoria/Labouchere Amendment story is apparently not quite true, since the queen had nothing to say about acts of parliament, some historians believe that the amendment did not mention lesbianism because parliament *did not want to call women's attention to it as a possibility.* This impulse has so many wonderfully contradictory layers of meaning to it that it's almost impossible to parse: lesbianism doesn't exist; well yes, it does but most women don't realize it; but it is so powerfully appealing that the mere mention of it will send previously heterosexual women flocking out of their marriages and into one another's arms.

Quintessentially, the first thing children of my generation—I'm 60—did when they began to suspect they had same-sex desires was to look in the dictionary for the words they may have encountered for people who felt such things—homosexual/gay/fag/lesbian/dyke/queer/etc. Asking parents, teachers, or friends for even the most basic information was, you somehow knew, to invite rejection, scorn, derision, and even physical violence. Not to mention confusion: a junior high school teacher of mine recommended that I read a book about Tchaikovsky, who referred to his homosexual desires in his diaries as "it." The reference was so encoded, and I was so naïve, that I never exactly figured out what "it" was—or why my teacher had recommended the book. The dictionary was not much more of a help to most people than my Tchaikovsky book

was to me. Although today, dictionary.com gives an admirably value-free definition for homosexuality—"of, relating to, or characterized by a tendency to direct sexual desire toward another of the same sex"—dictionaries from earlier decades, if they bothered to define the term at all, tended to use trauma-inducing words like "perverted" or "deviant." (It's probably worth noting that even today's online definition is followed by a long string of comments about biblical injunctions against homosexuality, at the end of which is a sad, wildly misspelled plea: "jst discoverd my finance is guy wat mst i do.")

Our laundry list name for our movement—LGBTQ—to which some add "QI" for Questioning and Intersex—demonstrates that we are still struggling with definitions and identity. Who are we, anyway? And how can we find out? At the outset of the movement, after the Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village in June 1969, we didn't have much history—because we didn't have the language in which to communicate it, to speak about our experience, our knowledge, our selves. When there were no images of LGBTQ people—no definitions, no words, no stories, no Ellen DeGeneris selling lipstick—you came out into a void. I mean, I'm Jewish. In my family, we had Jewish friends, we ate Jewish food, we sang Jewish songs, we celebrated Jewish holidays, we used Jewish words. We studied Jewish history: from the patriarchs to the Holocaust to the land of Israel. My parents taught me right from the start, never deny that you're Jewish. It's not like that if you're gay. Nobody says to you, "My sweet little lesbian—let me tell you a bedtime story about our Mother Sappho." They sure don't say, "Never deny it." If the quintessential first act was to look up "homosexual" in the dictionary, the quintessential first reaction was, "I thought I was the only one." For some, even a definition of "pervert" was a comfort. At least you belonged to a category; you weren't some kind of monstrous biological sport. This is one reason why the late Vito Russo's 1981 book, *The*

Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, caused such a sensation among us: even if Hollywood showed us as silly, isolated, self-destructive, and violent, it affirmed our existence as recognizable types. In 1980, there were LGBT protests around the country of the film *Cruising*, by William Friedkin, a story of a gay killer of gay men starring Al Pacino. My friend Michael Bronski, the film buff and historian, claims that after the protests, he and other gay men would sneak in to watch the movie—because it showed gay men in the leather bars of Greenwich Village, and they'd never before seen themselves depicted onscreen.

But there's a paradox about the experience of seeing yourself reflected in the media. On the one hand, as I've mentioned, it can be affirming, a demonstration that you have a definition, a social role, "reality"—a layered concept in LGBT culture. In Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*, about drag competitions among gay men of color in New York City, participants are judged on "realness." Obviously the contestants had not literally transformed themselves into glamorous women: *realness* was about their skill in performing a certain gender role—which according to the philosopher Judith Butler is what gender is all about anyway. Butler says, in her usual complex language:

> [G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity, instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" [1988])

On the other, though, the media is a distorting mirror. There's a well-known passage at the beginning of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which the main character, Janie, is shown a photograph of herself and her playmates. She is the only black child among them, but at first she doesn't recognize herself. Eventually she realizes that the child

standing where she stood when the photo was taken, who is wearing her dress and has her hairstyle, must be her. “Aw, aw, I’m colored!” she cries, in great distress. Everyone laughs at her. “But,” she reflects, “before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest.” “Colored” is her role in a racist culture, but this role is in total conflict with her experience of her own essential humanity—and indeed the rest of the book is about how Janie becomes a self-actualized woman despite racist and sexist mores and assumptions about who she is or should be.

It followed from the classic experience that you weren’t “the only one” that the foundational slogan of the LGBT liberation movement was “We are everywhere”— in all cultures, at all times. When I worked at the Boston weekly *Gay Community News* in the late 1970s, we ran a front page story about an ornithologist’s discovery that geese or swans or some other large sort of large bird sometimes formed life-long, same-sex attachments. It seemed momentous: we could be found even in the animal kingdom: the birds proved we were “natural.” (A friend recently told me that you can see pairs of male penguins loving it up on youtube.) I should point out here that every word in our newspaper’s name, *Gay Community News*, which sounds so innocuous now, was deliberately chosen and controversial. To quote myself, from my memoir *An Army of Ex-Lovers: My Life at the Gay Community News* (2007),

> ***Gay***: The early gay organizations of the 1950s and sixties had used the most arcane kinds of references in their names so their nature would be clear only to initiates: the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis. Even organizations founded later often had names that were obscure, quaint, or bland: the Lambda Legal Defense Fund; the Homophile Community Health Service; the Human Rights Campaign Fund. In contrast, we were out loud and proud.
> ***Community***: Although it may seem too obvious for comment now, at the time the claim that gays were a class of people with a common culture and interests—rather than isolated cases of perversion—was revolutionary, the heart of the gay liberation movement.
> ***News***: Not only that, but the things we did together and as individuals were noteworthy, interesting, and had an audience.

And it follows from the slogan, "we are everywhere" that the foundational LGBTQ political act was coming out—both to find one another and create a community, and to affirm our existence and our participation in society to the rest of the world. As real, social beings—ten percent of the population according to Kinsey—we deserved basic human rights and respect. In pride marches we chanted, "We are everywhere/And we shall be free!" And there's a basis in fact for this coming out strategy: polls consistently show that people who know an LGBTQ person are more likely to support same-sex marriage, for example. And by the way, despite the geese, and massive LGBT pride marches in all parts of the world, and Ellen DeGeneris selling lipstick, this assertion, which may seem like a truism in my liberal home Commonweath of Massachusetts, is not universally accepted. Proponents of the Anti-Homosexuality Law in Uganda, which would prescribe the death penalty for some homosexuals, argue that homosexuality did not exist in Africa until it was brought there by European colonialists. And many young LGBTQ folks, no matter where the live and how digitally connected they may be, still experience coming out as a step into the void.

By name-checking all these people—Lord Alfred Douglas, Ellen DeGeneris, Queen Victoria, Anderson Cooper—I'm performing one of the first kinds of history reclamation the LGBT movement engaged in: call it "name that gay." We'd claim personages—accurately nor not—from the biblical Jonathan, to Sappho, Michelangelo, Abraham Lincoln, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman—to show that not only did we exist at all times and places, but also that we were virtuous and accomplished individuals who made valuable contributions to society and culture—not perverts. It was also important for us to discover LGBT people who had led happy fulfilling lives, even if they weren't exactly famous. So we were interested in stories such as that of the Ladies of Llangollen, Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler, two upperclass English women

from the late eighteenth century who fled to Wales to live together rather than marry the men their families had chosen for them. As they grew older, their story began to seem romantic rather than scandalous (this was the era of those romantic friendships), to the point that receiving an invitation to visit them became an upperclass coup. The subtitle of Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men*, which I mentioned above, expresses this universalizing tendency: *Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present.* We made no distinction between a Renaissance artist like Michelangelo and, say, nineteenth-century North American Indian berdaches—men who played women's roles in their communities.

In 1976, Jonathan Ned Katz published *Gay American History*, an invaluable collection of primary source documents about same-sex loving people in North America from colonial times to the present. In 1979, Allen Berube of the San Francisco Gay History Project toured the US with the project's slideshow about those he called "passing women"—nineteenth-century San Francisco women who had dressed and lived as men. Some had married women. We'd probably call them transgender now. Allen discovered accounts of these women in newspapers and other sources, including *Gay American History*: they ended up in the news when their sex was revealed, often when they became sick or died. It's hard for me to convey to you how thrilling it was to see Allen's slideshow when he brought it to Boston. Although I could recite a list of "famous gays," to a young lesbian like me, it nevertheless felt as though my generation of out, politicized women—"dykes to watch out for," the cartoonist Alison Bechdel called us—was a new phenomenon. On a personal level, I had no idea how I'd live: my parents were sure I'd end up poor, lonely, oddball, and miserable. The women in Allen's show, however, were courageous, daring adventurers. And they were not that far away in time. They even dressed like us: pants, rough flannel shirts, boots. (In 1998 the late biographer Diane Middlebrook published *Suits Me:*

The Double Life of Billy Tipton, about a "passing woman," a jazz musician who lived as a man from age 19 until he died at age 74 in 1989. Billy Tipton brought this phenomenon even closer to us in time.) Everywhere Allen went, people were inspired to found their own LGBT history projects. Here in Boston, the History Project, which still exists, has produced exhibits of photos and artifacts and a book, *Improper Bostonians* (1998).

Since LGBT history, unlike the histories of other subcultural groups, could not be passed down from generation to generation, we had to keep rediscovering it. As thrilling as it was to hear of Berube's miners and factory workers, it was perhaps even more exciting to learn about the women who'd come up just before us, such as the New York bar girls described in Ann Bannon's 1950s pulp novel series, the Beebo Brinker Chronicles. Beebo herself was a handsome butch who dressed in suits on her nights out and worked as an elevator operator during the day—partly because the job allowed her to wear pants. Joan Nestle, one of the founders of New York's Lesbian Herstory Archives, which for years was housed in her apartment, gave a lecture in Boston in the mid-1980s on the femmes and butches of the 1950s lesbian bars, wearing a black lace slip that clearly identified her as one of the femmes. She admonished us young people to stop disrespecting our foremothers—and this is an impression that many older lesbians had of the feminist lesbians of my generation. I don't think it's quite right—we didn't disdain them or their unique culture; we were simply ignorant. And indeed how could we have been anything else? Pulp fiction like the Beebo Brinker books, lesbian publications like the *Ladder*—these were hidden deep, deep underground. The *Lesbian in Literature* bibliography by Barbara Grier; *Lesbian Images* by Jane Rule (which dared to make fun of *The Well of Loneliness*, that information source second only to the dictionary, which had traumatized so many of us); Audre Lorde's memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, in which she recalled the black lesbian

houseparties of the fifties, where she'd met friends and lovers—these were more than books to us: they helped us to reinterpret ourselves and understand where we'd come from. Sometimes it felt as though there was a new revelation every day. I went to hear Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich read at Sanders Theater in Cambridge in 1978; Rich read from the collection she had just published, *The Dream of a Common Language.* She read "Power," about Marie Curie; she read "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," about the leader of a group of Russian women who had died climbing Lenin Peak in 1974. A woman scientist! Women mountain climbers! Shatayev's husband later climbed the mountain to retrieve her body, but in her journal, quoted by Rich, she had written, of her team, "*...Now we are ready/and each of us knows it I have never loved/like this I have never seen/my own forces so taken up and shared/and given back."* Is that lesbian or what?

As much fun and as fulfilling as "famous gays" was, though, it eventually became apparent that it was not accurate. Just as feminists were realizing that, as Simone de Beauvoir famously put it, "One is not born but rather becomes a woman," LGBT liberationists were coming to understand that simply having gay sex (whatever that means) doesn't make you gay. (Gore Vidal maintained this about himself to the last: he insisted that he was, in his personal terminology, a "homosexualist," but not a homosexual.) In some cultures or historical periods, it was something people did at a certain stage of life, or under certain circumstances. And there were extremely varied cultural opinions about it: the ancient Greeks, for example, thought of sex between men and boys as beautiful and a useful pedagogical tool. In the US in 2012, pedophilia can get you locked away for life. In the West, homosexual sex evolved, roughly, from being treated as a sin, to a crime, to a mental illness. In all these formulations, though, it was seen as a behavior, not an identity: something you did, not something you were. Homosexuality as an

identity, a defining desire, historians such as Jeffrey Weeks and literary critics such as Eve Sedgwick said, was something that had evolved relatively recently, around the middle of the nineteenth century.

Some claim the turning point was the trials of Oscar Wilde. Even more well-known than Wilde's penchant for boys—since after all for most of his life he was able to keep up a respectable front as a married man with two sons—was his *persona*. He traveled the US and England promoting the doctrine of art for art's sake—and he embodied this in his self-presentation, with his distinctive and glamorous style and such a wonderful wit that his quips are still repeated today. Illustrating his love of the beautiful, his last words were supposedly, "Either that wallpaper goes or I do." (According to CNN.com, the Paris hotel where Wilde died finally did replace the wallpaper in a November 2000 renovation.)

In fact, Wilde was not originally tried for being gay, exactly; his trial was the result of a libel suit he had brought against the Marquis of Queensberry, his boyfriend Bosie's father, who had handed Wilde a card that said, illiterately and illegibly, "To Oscar Wilde, posing [as a] somdomite." Or as some have read it, "posing somdomite." Either way the accusation presents a neat existential problem: Wilde's so[m]domitical aspirations are both disgraceful and simply a pretense, here and gone. But the important thing for us is that Wilde had cultivated an identity that his notorious trials brought into the public eye: graceful, cultured, pretentious, waspish—with unruly desires that did not stay properly confined to his own class. Some believe that what led to his conviction and severe punishment was not that he had had sex with other men, but that his sex-partners had included lower-class men.

Lesbian identity, as I've implied above, was more complicated, since women were able to carry on loving friendships and even so-called Boston marriages through the early twentieth

century, often without exciting comment. Nevertheless, it's possible to see the obscenity trial of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 as bringing a certain kind lesbian identity to public attention similarly to the way Oscar Wilde's trials brought attention to gay men. Of course, Radclyffe Hall was quite a different character from Wilde. Butch and authoritative, she was decidedly not clever. Although her right to publish the book was defended in a petition by numerous elite English writers, including Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Virginia wrote, "The dullness of the book is such that any indecency may lurk there—one simply can't keep one's eyes on the page."

Similar to the incremental "becoming" that de Beauvoir posited for gender, LGBT identities grew both more established and more complex throughout the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. Studies by LGBT history projects and individual historians have documented and described LGBT subcultures in US cities from Buffalo to New York to San Francisco. We may be approaching a new turn in this evolution. In the gay historian John D'Emilio's introduction to a new book, *Chicago Whispers: a History of LGBT Chicago Before Stonewall*, by St. Sukie De La Croix, D'Emilio writes this:

> In the nineteenth century, doctors wrote about gender, or sexual "inversion": men and women behaving as if they were the other gender. Eventually, they came to understand that this was "really" homosexuality—love for, and sexual attraction to, members of the same sex. As the twentieth century wore on, a self-conscious gay and lesbian community emerged. Implicit in this—and sometimes articulated in the rhetoric of political activists—was the sense that "gay" and "lesbian" was the real thing, while "drag" and transsexuality was a form of false consciousness, a reflection of internalized homophobia. [and, I would add, sexism]. In the last two decades, transgender activists have vigorously challenged these presuppositions, and transgender historical research has emerged…Reading *Chicago Whispers*, I found it hard not to notice how pervasive gender-crossing has been. It stretches across the time span covered by the book. It exists on stage and on the streets, in public and in private, as drama and as comedy, as a form of mocking social norms and as a means of finding one's true self. It is both individual and collective. It is something that individuals can turn on and off, and something that simply is. Gender crossing—as social role and as identity—seems more encompassing and enduring than homosexuality. Is it possible, I wonder, that fifty years from now, the reigning wisdom will argue that gay and lesbian proved to be relatively short blips on the

historical screen and that transgender—or what I am referring to as gender crossing—provides the more robust framework for historical understanding?

D'Emilio sees the "Q" in LGBTQ as the item in the list that will, in the end, be the most encompassing and useful definition, identity, and frame for history.