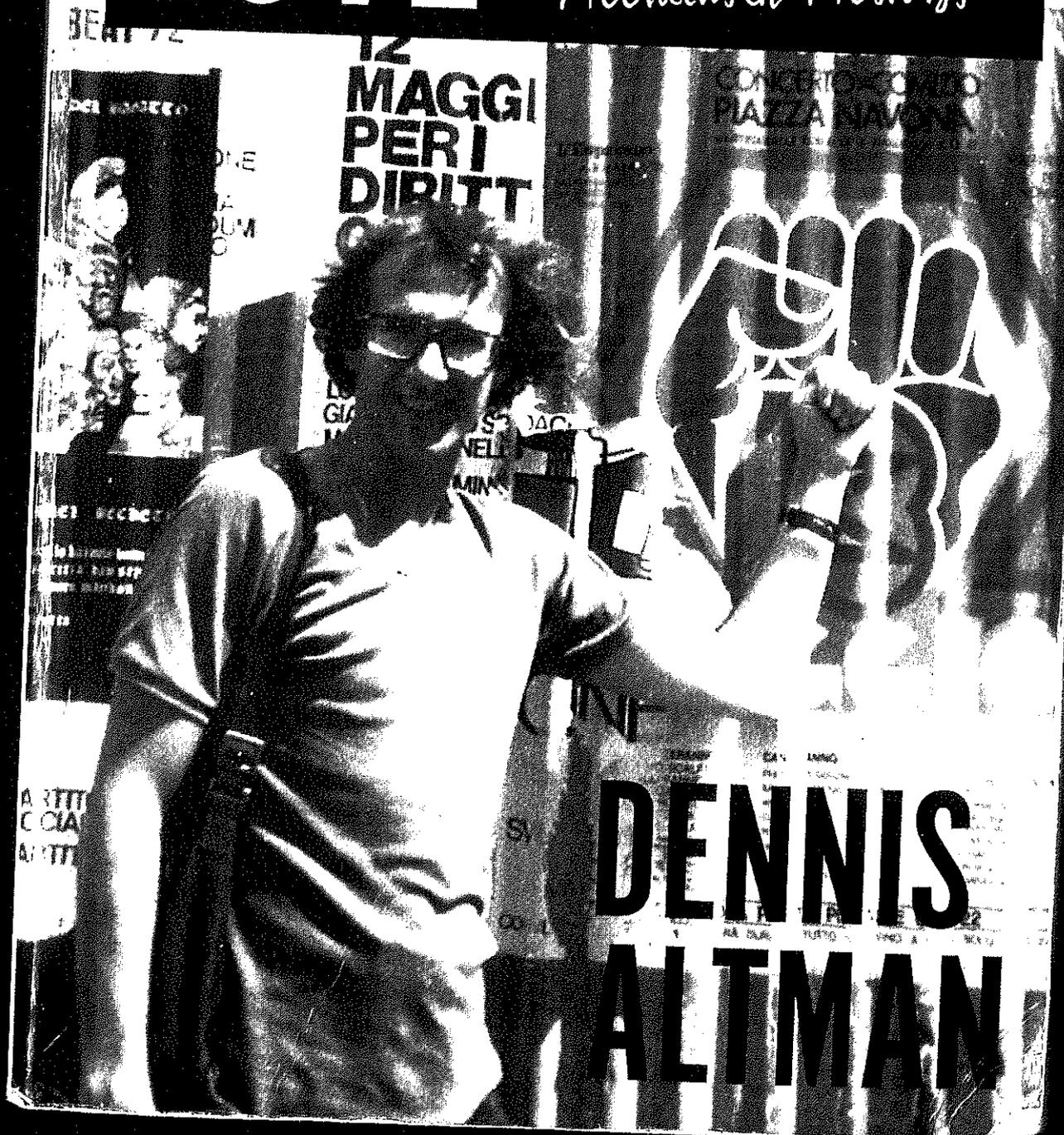


# UNREQUITED LOVE

*Diary of an  
Accidental Activist*



**DENNIS  
ALTMAN**

of a century later. Within a decade, developments in jet aircraft made the sea voyage unsustainable, but in 1961 my family spent several weeks at sea, travelling on a P&O liner. Like Deakin we stopped at Colombo and Aden, where my father proudly haggled for a suitcase which promptly fell apart as soon as we set sail. Seaboard life was a lot less formal than it would have been for Deakin, but there were probably similar rituals, such as the silly partying on crossing the Equator, and the fancy-dress evenings. We disembarked in Marseille, and took a slow train to Paris, my first real sight of a European city. The continuity between Deakin's world and mine as a student was in some ways greater than between the early 1960s and today.

Coffee with Todd Fernando, who's writing a doctoral thesis on Indigenous homosexuality. He's charming and smart, and not quite thirty. We talk about the importance of generations, and whether the experience of Indigenous Australian queers is necessarily different to that of others. I suggest that there are three generations of gay men, marked by major shifts in social attitudes towards homosex: those, like me, who came of age when we were criminalised and feared disclosure; those who came of age in the early years of AIDS, when the equation of sex and death was commonplace; and those, like him, whose experiences came in a period of much greater social liberalism and effective HIV therapies.

My generation first learnt about our possible selves through books; his through film. Now adolescents have access to enormous amounts of imagery and information through the internet and seem to be 'coming out' earlier than before. My nephew, Peter, came out on Facebook while still at school, and his mother rang to tell us as we were watching Kurt come out to his father on the television show *Glee*. Yes, dividing whole populations by generation is of limited use: the talk of the 'baby boomers' ignores the deep divisions of class and education that marked the experience of the Vietnam War, when young men both went to war and were imprisoned as draft dodgers. But certain experiences are linked to age, whatever else divides us, and this becomes more marked as technological change hastens.

I am increasingly asked what lessons radicals today can learn from my generation, perhaps a reflection of the strange nostalgia of the Left that showed itself in young voters flocking to support Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. The most important is that while gay liberation asserted our identity as homosexual, we also saw ourselves as part of a larger move to transform society, rather than only concerned with our own immediate goals, although reassuring ourselves that it was fine to be homosexual was central to everything we did.

Much like the feminists of the time we lived our politics, and for gay men that meant casual sex which was as much about creating community as it was about instant gratification. On an informal speaking tour through the States for my first book I was billeted with a couple of guys in Cincinnati who asked me politely with whom I'd prefer to sleep, as if a shared politics was enough to produce desire. What we did share was a sense that we needed to declare our sexuality, confront the demons, both internal and external, that plagued us. In one of the first gay liberation books Peter Fisher wrote: "Many people will go to enormous lengths to avoid seeing themselves as homosexuals, no matter how extensive their homosexual activity may be."<sup>15</sup> Peter was one of the founders of the Gay Activists Alliance; I recall a scrawny young man with a mass of curly brown hair who took me back to his basement apartment near Columbia University one night.

Gay liberationists scorned the older world of bars, carefully screened from the streets, and cautious street cruising; instead we organised dances and used meetings to hook up. One of my memories of the early 1970s in New York is of leaving a performance of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Lincoln Centre to take the orange number one train uptown to a gay dance at Columbia, the strains of bel canto melding into jubilant disco. The world of gay liberation was very small, and when I look back at the writing of the time I am reminded how interconnected we all were, long before the development of large community organisations and openly gay professionals. Today there are medical clinics that advertise to 'the LGBT community' with glossy promises of thicker

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15 Peter Fisher, *The Gay Mystique*, Stein & Day, 1972, p.15.

hair and whiter teeth; then we swapped names of sympathetic doctors and told stories of unsympathetic treatment in VD clinics. We had virtually no role models, unlike kids who today struggle with 'coming out'; the few depictions of lesbians and gay men in popular culture invariably presented us as either comic or tragic.

Vito Russo, whom I first met when he waited on me in a West Village restaurant, has written at length of the ways in which homosex started to infuse movies in the 1960s. He would gather friends in his apartment in Chelsea to show us clips from movies he was beginning to discover. The first film I remember that spoke to my sexual possibilities was John Schlesinger's *Darling*, even though the homosexual character was secondary. We were struggling to make sense of ourselves, with little guidance, grasping at whatever pieces of information came our way, the few novels (*Giovanni's Room*; *The Well of Loneliness*; *The City and the Pillar*) and those few psychology texts that didn't condemn us. I was outraged by David Reuben's best seller, *Everything you wanted to know about sex ... but were afraid to ask*, which repeated old stereotypes and invented a couple of new ones, such as the claim that "food seems to have a mysterious fascination for homosexuals". (His publisher refused to buy the British rights to my first book because of my criticisms of Reuben). For us what was crucial was *coming out*: by declaring our sexual identity we believed we could change everything.

Gay Liberationists—we stressed the capitalisation to distinguish ourselves from the more single-issue gay *activists*—were determined to position ourselves as part of a broader radical movement and insisted on our ties to the black movement. Leonard Bernstein attracted Tom Wolfe's scorn when he courted the Black Panthers; the New York Gay Liberation Front sent a contingent to several Panther sponsored conventions in late 1970. I have a vague memory of confusion and frustration at the November Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Washington DC, where the gay liberation contingent gathered at St. Stephen's Church in multifarious caucuses and rap sessions but remained largely irrelevant to the main meeting. The DC police imposed various restrictions on the larger meeting, which failed

not only to incorporate sexual liberation but to present a united front for radical back activism. Perhaps fittingly the longest entry in my diary for those few days is about the long shared ride back to New York City where: "We got lost three times and it was a very long trip." Indeed.

It's wet and cold, but that evening I drive down to the Lesbian and Gay Archives to hand over a collection of magazines and T-shirts. The Archives already possess a tantalising collection of ephemera, and I've brought a hand knitted sweater with the image of Lou Reed (from his album *Transformer*) knitted into the fabric. I admit that I have no memory of where it came from, and Nick Henderson, queer history's most professional archivist, promises to track it down. Some years ago I contributed a rather decaying collection of matchbooks from gay venues, souvenirs of an epoch when every bar and restaurant was wreathed in cigarette smoke, and handed out matchbooks with their logos and addresses. Nick made a slide presentation which I used as the basis for a talk a few years later.

### *September 6: Melbourne*

Back in Mario's, this time with cartoonist and activist, Sam Wallman, who talks about union organising among migrant workers on the fringes of the economy. He's been meeting with people from the Rohingya community, currently under siege from Burmese troops.

Sam has been asked to do cartoons for the *New York Times*, now setting up their Australian site, and we talk about the constant Australian fear of becoming too American. I wrote about this a decade ago, in a little book called *Fifty First State?*, which Russ Radcliffe at Scribe had commissioned. This was during the Presidency of George W Bush, and lasting anger at the disaster of the second Iraq War. Since then we've lived through Julia Gillard's romance with Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, the Anglophilia of Abbott and the initial strained relations between Turnbull and Trump. But there remains the reflex, slowly developed since World War II, of seeing the United States as our ultimate protector, to whom we need pay homage through providing troops for its overseas adventures. I always found it odd that

and companies like Emirates and China Eastern were still to be imagined. It's a reminder of how the world has changed since a boyhood lived during the dwindling of European empires. An early political memory is the Bandung Conference in 1955, when Indonesia's President Sukarno hosted Asian and African leaders in the first steps towards building a non-aligned movement in the Cold War. As an earnest schoolboy I wrote an essay, long lost, about the significance of the meeting, possibly for a competition on the ABC's children's program *The Argonauts*, which shaped several generations of Australian children. The following year came the events around Egypt's annexation of the Suez Canal and the Russian invasion of Hungary, and I started to follow international politics more seriously.

### *October 3: Melbourne*

Already the number of ballots returned in the marriage poll exceeds the participation rate in most democratic elections. But we still need to keep campaigning, say the Equality folk. They repeat this, perhaps too often, in the ritzy upstairs room at Crown Casino where nearly 300 people have gathered for an evening of *fun*raising. For \$150 we get to graze and drink with other supporters, and to bid on auction items ranging from Marquee tickets for the Melbourne Cup to personal consultations with a bridal couturier. The most generous estimate of what the evening might return is that it could buy a couple of minutes of advertising on prime TV time.

I feel old and short: the crowd are primarily young professionals, the men mainly gay, the women more ambiguous. Genuinely moving speeches from Campaign director Tiernan Brady, who'd been central in the Irish campaign to amend the Constitution to allow gay marriage in 2015, and Labor Senator Penny Wong, who talks a lot about 'Australian values'. She and I spoke on a panel last year when I acknowledged that despite my cynicism about marriage I could hardly be on the same side as Cardinal Pell against Penny Wong. The crowd tonight seem like any random group of young urban professionals, very few of them veterans of earlier queer movements. "The most interesting

question", I remark to Tiernan, "is where all these energies will go after the ballot". "Into community organising," he says, "Not politics."

This was not the world we expected getting on for fifty years ago when the contemporary gay movement emerged, and we took tentative steps towards claiming equality. 'Equality' then meant the end of criminalisation and enforced psychiatry, but it also meant a sense of community with others who were oppressed and a desire to radically transform society. Now the marriage movement seems bent on assimilation into society as is, and brave talk of creating new forms of family and community have largely disappeared.

### *October 8: Melbourne*

There are over 400 people in the grand foyer of the Melbourne Town Hall for the inaugural Coming Back Out Ball. This is the brainchild of the extraordinary Tristan Meecham—dancer; performance artist; event entrepreneur—who sought an event to honour "LGBTI elders". More women here than men, most of us over 60—"The women", I'm told, "are happier to acknowledge they're ageing"—a three course meal and a string of legendary performers. Gerry Connolly welcomes us in his drag persona as the Queen; Carlotta, founder of the Kings Cross drag show *Les Girls* more than half a century ago, totters onto the stage in impossibly high heels; Robyn Archer, cabaret artist and artistic director, sings Lorenz Hart's 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered', noting that she, a gay woman, was singing an ostensibly heterosexual love song written by a man who hid his desires for other men. And Deborah Cheetham, Indigenous opera singer and composer, who took the theme song from *Evita* and turned the lyrics into a song for marriage equality, brings us all to our feet. Tristan, a compact man in tuxedo with *Kinky Boots* platform shoes, gives an emotional speech of thanks to his elders, a phrase that makes the Peter Pan in me cringe.

Drag queens, acrobats, sequins, dinner suits, wigs, a couple of people on walkers, and one man with his guide dog: this was a snapshot of the queer world, past and present, but it built upon an extraordinary

week. The Ball culminated a two-day workshop on "LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care", which had drawn 200 people to a Collins Street hotel, many of whom were here tonight. Early gay liberation meetings took place in small rooms or university campuses; now our events sprawl across the City, and the Town Hall displays rainbow flags.

The day after the Ball social media lit up with enthusiastic comments. My own post mortem took place in a large gilded Italianate café, with three gay men: Nick Henderson and I tantalise the others with glimpses of the evening. I start talking with Dino Hodge about his life and work in the Northern Territory, some of which is recorded in his book *Did you meet any Malagas?* (1993). I'd met Dino when I visited Anthony in Darwin in the winter of 1990, and we went to the 'Queen's Ball'. The evening featured a visiting drag star from Sydney, who unleashed a series of racist and sexist jokes. "Darwin has changed", remarked Dino, and so has the country: none of the events I've been to over the past week could have happened even twenty years ago. Ironically the marriage poll has revealed huge wells of acceptance, often in unexpected places, such as the Rugby League Grand Final crowd who cheered US rapper Macklemore's 'Same Love', to the fury of the no campaign.

There's anger in 'the community', but alongside a certain sentimentality, expressed in constant messages about caring for each other. This has led, probably inevitably, to a certain amount of hyperbole; at an opening event of the Melbourne International Arts Festival the Director spoke of this as "the most difficult time for the LGBT community ever", which ignores the far darker times of police persecution and AIDS deaths. There's also, to be honest, something of a search for victimhood. Yes, the poll has unleashed some nasty and threatening cases of homophobia, including several random acts and threats of violence. But hunting down every instance of overt support for the 'no' case, and posting it constantly on social media, conflates hatred with resistance to change, and only furthers the feeling of being under siege. That a skywriter smokes "Vote No" over Sydney Harbor is not, itself, homophobic, and best left to fade away.

But the campaign picks at old scars, and thousands of people across the country feel they are forced to relive adolescent traumas, to come out again, in the spotlight of national attention. One of my friends spoke at length of her fears about talking to her family, above all her deeply religious mother, and her relief when her mother told her she'd voted yes. I want to dismiss the fears and anxieties every mention of the no case provokes when I come across words from Nelly Sachs:

We are so sorely hurt  
 We feel that we must die  
 If the street throws a harsh word at us.<sup>21</sup>

### *October 13: Melbourne*

The Forum on Flinders Street is one of the world's great kitsch theatres. Built in 1929 in the Moorish revival style, popular in the late nineteenth century for theatres and synagogues, it features a cavernous hall, lined with pseudo-Roman statues, and a deep blue ceiling studded with lights. For two weeks the Forum is home to the anti-Trump centrepiece of this year's Melbourne Festival, Taylor Mac's very queer *History of Popular Music in America*. Over twenty-four hours—four slabs of six hours—Mac sings, camps, dances, talks, involves the audience in the history of the United States, backed by musicians, dancers, acrobats and anxious recruits from the audience, whom he drags on stage as living props.

Tonight's show covers the second half of the nineteenth century, complete with an audience re-enactment of the Civil War, in which our weapons are gestures and ping-pong balls. The festival publicity didn't tell us that he calls his show a "radical faerie realness ritual"—nor that 'judy' eschews gendered pronouns. But as Nic Holas wrote on Facebook: "Last night, I embraced my queer siblings from all over the country. My privilege meant I knew many people in the room already. And I know what we're going through. We came together,

<sup>21</sup> <https://nellysachsenglish.wordpress.com/2013/04/29/>.

and it felt like the beginning of a healing.” Mac’s queerness proclaims itself throughout the show; huge hooped dresses and Versailles-style wigs are homage both to traditional drag and contemporary trans\* affirmations.

It’s a tricky business, negotiating the journey from drag to trans\*, and one which I’ve never fully understood. My earlier assumption that transsexuals, as we then called them, would disappear as gender roles became less restrictive, and people accepted varied forms of sexual desire, reflected a much simpler understanding of gender than has proven the case. Historical, anthropological and psychoanalytic evidence of the ability of humans to experience diverse and changing patterns of sexual desire are increasingly reduced to an identity—‘bisexual’—which only makes sense in the framework of a hetero/homo binary. But if we take the trans\* critique of gender seriously this particular binary ceases to mean anything.

It is fascinating how apparently upfront trans\* critiques are being used in popular culture to reinforce conventional heteronormative attitudes. The musical *Kinky Boots*, which played in Melbourne last year after triumphs in New York and London, is largely a feel-good glossy version of an old style drag show, with men dressed up as women to reinforce conventional notions of sex and gender. Australia does drag pretty well—Dame Edna, *Priscilla*—and for all its talk of acceptance and diversity *KB* could easily play in the Gladstone Bowls Club. Lola, played here in a stunning performance by Callum Francis, insists that he is a drag queen who likes women; his apparent love interest, factory owner Toby Francis, ditches his fiancé, but for another woman.

But trans\* people, as Lola acknowledges in an aside, are not drag queens or cross dressers, but rather people who wish to challenge the gender identity ascribed to them thorough biological characteristics. Some believe they are really a man or a woman and need reshape their bodies to accord with this reality; others are happy to present as neither. In fact there is not a single genuinely trans\* or gay character in the entire show, and the ensemble numbers are high energy Broadway musical, without any hint of sexual pairings that would discomfort the

Christian Right. The publicity suggests we come away with greater love and acceptance, but we also come away with the idea that boys might dress up as girls, but in the end they go home with girls, even if they get kicks from knee high stiletto boots on the way. There are no drag kings in *KB*: the women in the show are there to be worshiped, wooed and, occasionally, to upbraid the men.

Last year I went to a queer Midwinter Ball in the appropriately plush settings of Crown Casino, where the entertainment included one of the longest drag numbers ever: men in dresses; men in skimpy shorts showing off their bodies. But the grand finale paired drag queen with muscle boy in ways reminiscent of nineteenth century ballet. Performing gender can allow heterosexual coupling of the most conservative sort.

The audience for Taylor Mac doesn't strike me as predominantly queer, whatever that term now means; it's young, white, leftist. But the show clearly speaks to the mix of anger and affirmation unleashed by the marriage debate. Unlike many visiting Americans, Mac acknowledges this is Australia and we might miss some of the references; Judy deems us all Americans for the night. An attempt at local relevance falls flat when we are asked to mock Governor Macquarie, and few in the audience recognise the name. No matter: we are in the presence of a charismatic performer, able to swing from choreographing large audiences to quietening us with a song. And if some of the history is new to most, the music is deeply familiar, underlining the extent to which we are all part of the American multitudes. When Taylor Mac sings *Hard Rain's Goin to Fall*, or even the minstrel songs of Stephen Foster, the songs resonate more than the references to Governor Macquarie.

### *October 15: Melbourne*

Social tennis in the Edinburgh Gardens. One of my earliest childhood memories is watching my parents play tennis with other Jewish refugees in Sydney, and like many other Australian children I learnt tennis from my father on local school courts, and my parents regularly complained that the school did little to encourage me, preferring to