



Washington History in the Classroom

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“Washington History magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**”

Washington History is the only scholarly journal devoted exclusively to the history of our nation’s capital. It succeeds the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, first published in 1897. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images and is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists. **Washington History** authors explore D.C. from the earliest days of the city to 20 years ago, covering neighborhoods, heroes and she-roes, businesses, health, arts and culture, architecture, immigration, city planning, and compelling issues that unite us and divide us.

The full runs of *Washington History* (1989-present) and its predecessor publication the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1897-1988) are available through JSTOR, an online archive to which many institutions subscribe. It’s easy to [set up a personal JSTOR account](#), which allows for free online reading of six articles per month in any of their journals, or join the Historical Society at the [Membership Plus](#) level for unlimited free access to our publications.



Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.

A Third Citizenship

BY QUIQUE AVILÉS

When I came to Washington, D.C. from El Salvador in 1980, one of the first things I remember was my mother talking about this thing, “*La Manpleza*.” I found out what this was my second Sunday here. Early that morning, my mother was nagging at me and my sister, “¡*Vayan a lavar la ropa!*”—go do the laundry. We put all the dirty clothes in a cart and walked about five blocks to the laundromat. And that’s when I got my introduction to “*La Manpleza*.” It turned out to be Mt. Pleasant Street NW, *La Mt. Pleasant. Una calle*. A short street. A little street. A nightmare and a dream. Somehow, Mt.

Pleasant always represented both. It was a safe welcoming mat for people of all races and colors but, back in the days, it also had its seedy parts—dealers, prostitutes, strip joints. There was a strip joint called the Oasis where the Caribbean Botanica is in the basement under the beauty salon at the corner of Mt. Pleasant and Lamont. What is now Haydee’s at Mt. Pleasant and Irving also used to be a strip joint. Many of the homeowners who lived down the side streets were not aware of Mount Pleasant’s seedier side, but for the low-income renters on the main strip, this was all a part of life.



Quique Avilés in 1982, new to Washington and to *La Manpleza*. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs appear © Rick Reinhard.

At the age of 17, I moved out of my mom's house—she had moved from Irving Street NW to the Brookland neighborhood in Northeast—and into a group house on the corner of Mt. Pleasant and Hobart Streets. As a poor student living out of a very small room, I used to feed myself at Lorenzo's, a carry-out joint owned by Cubans and managed by Salvadorans on the corner of Mt. Pleasant and Lamont. I'd sit in a booth by the large windows with lots of light doing my homework and looking out at where the bus turned around, the 42 bus or the "free Spanish class" we used to call it, for the small number of native English speakers who took the bus back then.

I drank my first beer on Mt. Pleasant Street—a "bumper" (a 32-ounce beer) given to me by Miguelin, one of the old-timers who probably came in the 1970s. Miguelin used to stand in front of the Pan American Laundromat playing *claves* by tapping an empty bottle, singing Ruben Blades songs out loud. He was the first Salvadoran *salsero* I ever met.

That laundromat was right next door to the Raven Grill, which is still there at 3125 Mt. Pleasant Street. Some of the first poems I wrote in the United States came from the Raven. Back then, it was a joint for old-timers—blacks, whites, then us Latinos. All you could get at the bar was liquor and American beers like Miller or Budweiser. If you were broke, you could get them on credit from Jessi, the bartender with the thick eyeglasses. Jessi was from Chicago, lived on Park Road, and always seemed to be going to or coming back from Vegas. The other two bartenders, Mary and her daughter, whose name I can't remember, lived right upstairs. The neon sign at the Raven's front window featured a cocktail glass, so Latinos called the place "La Copita"—the little drinking glass.

The most important milestones of my life have had some connection to Mount Pleasant. As a high schooler, I was lucky to meet Rick Reinhard, an artist-photographer who taught me the magic of black-and-white images. He then hired me to print black-and-white photos in his dark room on Park Road. Printing photos for him helped me pay my way through high school. And here I am, more than 35 years later, working with Rick, one of my first mentors and teachers, on *La Esquina*.

It was through Rick's extended family of lefty, hippie-artist revolutionaries and through working out of the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) and *Centro de Arte* at 15th and Irving Streets NW that I started my artistic life as a writer and an actor. My first summer job was at the LAYC, thanks to Mayor Marion Barry's Summer Youth Employment Program. I worked with the Afro Latino Youth Theater, an attempt to integrate blacks and Latinos and question all the warped ideas we had about one another. As I started to get serious about my life as a working artist, GALA Hispanic Theatre took me in. I ended up developing and directing a workshop for youth, *Paso Nuevo*—a New Step—that to this day continues to be a place for kids from the neighborhood to find their voice.

For most of us—Salvadorans who came in the '80s and '90s—landing in D.C. meant landing on Mt. Pleasant Street one way or another. If you didn't live there, you were told about it. There was this notion that "if you go there, you will feel better." And we needed to feel better. Many of us fleeing Central America were young men avoiding being drafted into the military. This is when Mt. Pleasant Street became a haven for lonely men. Here you could find a cure for the heartbreak and loneliness of being away from home because, well, it was home. The Pan American Laundromat was



A Mariachi band in typical Mexican dress performs in the 2007 Fiesta DC on Mt. Pleasant St.

the first Salvadoran-owned business on Mt. Pleasant Street. The owners and the people at Leon's Shoe Repair brought you back to Guatemala. Casa Diloné was a bit of the Dominican Republic. At Los Primos [the cousins] grocery, we were all cousins. At Pinky's bike shop, you were reminded of Spain and Puerto Rico.

Mount Pleasant has been a home-away-from-home for a steady stream of immigrants from México, Central America, the Caribbean and other countries. Mt. Pleasant Street and its surrounding corners are where we, Salvadorans, became Latinos. We had to learn about people we didn't know about, like Cubans. A lot of Cubans came to D.C. at the same time we were flooding the city. This is when you could find Francisco Rigores and his Cuban *Rumbas* on different corners, and where Miguelin's *claves* made sense. This is what I would call the Caribbeanization of *El Barrio*—where we started to learn how to keep the rhythm, the pace, the tempo.

To this day, Mount Pleasant is a place you go to find companionship—*panas, migos, broders, primos, y que ondas*—pals, friends, brothers, cousins, and what's happening. When I go there and walk those seven blocks—stopping to talk to folks at the pharmacy, getting a haircut at the beauty salon, buying *carne* for soup at El Progreso, having a beer and tacos at Corado's—I just feel better. When you go to Mount Pleasant, you know you will see familiar faces, hear a good story, and have a good laugh. Mount Pleasant is the only place in this city that feels to me like *un pueblito*, a small town. Like any small town, people know each other by their nicknames, their *apodos*: *El Pajarín, Chiclé, El Rana*.

When I'd just arrived in Maryland, I asked my sister if there wasn't some other place to go; I told her, "look, I don't like it here." And then someone brought me to work here in Mount Pleasant, and here I stayed. I liked the atmosphere, and felt more in touch with other people. Don Gilberto, who was the owner of the Progreso, he cashed checks for me, and I bought from him at his shop. No longer, because the new owners don't cash checks. . . . And then all the *rideros*, the people who used to give rides to shoppers with their parcels, they started dying—almost all the Mount Pleasant *rideros* have died.

—Maribel Garcia

Mire, cuando yo recién llegue a Maryland, allí le dije a mi hermana si no había otro lugar—le dije: "fíjate que no me gusta" y alguien me trajo a trabajar aquí en la Mount Pleasant y aquí me quede. Me gustó el ambiente, me sentía más en comunicación con la gente. Mas antes, Don Gilberto que era el dueño del Progreso, el me cambiaba los cheques de donde fuesen y yo le compraba allí en la tienda. Ahora no porque ya no cambian los dueños. Los nuevos dueños no cambian los cheques allí. . . . Más antes cuando se empezaron a morir todos los rideros (los que daban ride a las personas con sus compras)—ya se murieron casi todos los rideros que estaban en La Mount Pleasant.



The well-known neon sign at the Raven, 2017. Courtesy, blogger Ear Meal Webcast



Shops on Mt. Pleasant St., 2002.



The 2016 annual "Day of the Dead" commemoration, a traditional Mexican festival organized in Mount Pleasant by Quique Avilés.

All of these thoughts and memories bring me back to Mama Tey. If anyone asked me to tell a Mount Pleasant story, it would begin with Mama Tey, *La Señora Ronca*—the lady with the husky voice. For me, Mama Tey meant resilience and sustenance. At Mama Tey's apartment, there was always homemade soup. Mama Tey, along with my Aunt Julia and my mother Teresa, came here from El Salvador in the 1960s. These women helped pave the road from Central America to D.C. and shaped the story of Latinos here in the nation's capital.

Back when I had first arrived in D.C. in 1980, Mama Tey sometimes took care of my little brother Oscar—the first Avilés to be born in the United States. Within a few years, I came to know Mama Tey as the healer of Mt. Pleasant Street. A group of us had become friends with Mama Tey's sons and in those days, we were all usually broke—due to the usual reason of paying bills on a minimum wage job of \$3.35 an hour. We went to school and we worked part time to help our parents pay rent, at least for those of us who had parents here. We all knew we could stop by Mama Tey's apartment any time to get some good food. As soon as you walked in the door, the first thing she would ask you was "*Ya comiste? Tienes hambre?*"—Have you eaten? Are you hungry? While you ate, she'd tell you about her latest trip to the doctor, what hurt where, and what the prognosis was. I believe she would make herself sick just so people would come by to visit her and ask her about her ailments. Mama Tey was healed by talking to her visitors and we were healed by her food—and sometimes a visit to her medicine chest full of pills.

[As to the folks on the corner,] you have to point out that lots of people don't have papers . . . so the only way for them to get work, honestly, is as a day worker, waiting at the corner for someone to come along and choose them for a job. There's no other way. Until everybody in this country has papers . . . but just now, that's in doubt with this government. There are lots of restrictions, lots of deportations. The guy who's in there now—there's a feeling of trying to restrict us Latinos, when in reality Latinos are the backbone of this country, truly. This policy, it should be improved.

—Eduardo "Causa" Moscoso Sánchez

Claro, en este caso se puede decir muchas personas no tenemos . . . entonces la única manera de trabajar bien, honestamente, es de esta manera como jornalero, esperando a que a uno lo recojan para llevar a trabajar. No queda otra solución. Hasta que en este país todo mundo tenga papeles . . . pero ahora la cosa está en duda con este gobierno; hay muchas restricciones, mucha deportación. Este señor que ha entrado—ese aspecto que está un poquito restringiendo a nosotros, los latinos, cuando en realidad los latinos somos la columna vertebral de este país, verdad. Esa cosa, uno debería mejorar.



CARECEN staffers, 1986.



Poet and spoken word artist Quique Avilés performs on Mt. Pleasant St., 2013.

Mama Tey lived in the building right across from the 7-Eleven at the corner of Mount Pleasant and Kenyon Streets. So going to see her meant passing the men who gathered at that corner, *El 7-Eleven, La Esquina*. At that time, despite how borders were being redefined by the beginning of gentrification in Adams Morgan, and the colors and accents of Mount Pleasant were starting to change, that corner was a constant.

Ask the old-timers and, owing to the fuzziness that comes with the passing of time, you'll hear different memories of what used to be where the 7-Eleven is now. Wilson, the owner of the only auto repair shop still on Mt. Pleasant, will tell you it was a gas station. José at Corado's will tell you it was a used car lot. Since I've been here, it's only been the 7-Eleven and the men on the corner next to it.

La Esquina has been a constant amidst change. A lot of the new neighbors don't know that there was a time in Mount Pleasant's past—during the crack years of the 1980s and '90s—when the neighborhood streets were full of seediness and crime. A lot of shady activity. People got mugged and robbed all the time. I got mugged and robbed a few times. But there was always the other side.

Yes . . . I know the sexy, proud and chunky mother pushing life on a stroller, walking tall, thinking good the twin stick-up boys, hazel eyes, matching guns the pot dealer on a wheelchair, no legs, one arm yes, getting by, getting by

Yes . . . I know the lawyer of the lily white wingtips fresh flowers in one hand, wine and lustious thoughts in the other

the poetic drug boys with the Remy Martin bottle, the fronting, the tears the old lady that feeds the pigeons daily, talking with them, singing yes, getting by, getting by

There were always people who would help you, including some of the men on the corner. My wife Hilary always reminds me of how, in the mid-'90s, she often walked home late from her office in Dupont Circle. As soon as she got to the 7-Eleven, a few of the regulars would insist on walking her the rest of the way home to 18th and Newton, and she always felt protected.

As Mt. Pleasant Street became a hub for new people arriving by the day, it also became a hub for artists who came together to tell our story. Perhaps still believing at the time that we were only passers-by waiting for wars to end, we started to tell our own story through music, theater, poetry, and murals. We were creating art that was speaking about what would become a diaspora that would birth generations of new Americans. Rumizonko, Lilo Gonzalez, *Teatro Nuestro*, Alicia Partnoy, Jorge Somarriba—the pioneers of Latino arts in the nation's capital—were fed by Mount Pleasant. Literally fed.

Mt. Pleasant Street also became a center for community agencies that sprang up to meet our basic needs. Community organizations like CARECEN and *Adelante*, with offices in apartment buildings or row houses on Mt. Pleasant Street, helped us navigate the systems we counted on for our survival here.

Many organizations found their homes in buildings around the corners of Mount Pleasant, especially at 15th and Irving Streets NW, where

you had *Centro de Arte*, the Latin American Youth Center, *La Clínica del Pueblo*, and Barbara Chambers Children’s Center. Those of us who worked in these organizations went to Mt. Pleasant for our coffee and sweet bread in the morning, for lunch in the afternoon, and for beers after work. Mount Pleasant Street has truly been a beating heart that pumps blood to the arteries that are its corners, side streets, and adjoining neighborhoods.

So what is *el rollo de hoy*, the story today?

Our experience as Salvadorans is connected to the histories of other diasporas: Nicaraguans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, Dominicans. Almost every pocket or community of immigrants in the United States—whether from the Middle East, Africa, Asia or Latin America—is here as the direct result of U.S. foreign policy, of U.S. actions defending “American interests.”

Recently, I became a U.S. citizen—a decision driven again by U.S. policy, but this time by the fear of the Trump administration’s efforts to kick us out, send us back to where we came from. So now, as a Salvadoran and an American, I can say that Mount Pleasant is my third citizenship. Mount Pleasant citizenship is not one that you are born with or one you apply for, but one that you earn. You earn it by

being present over many years no matter what. Wherever I am in Mount Pleasant—walking down the street, sitting at the park, having a beer at Cora-do’s or buying meat at El Progreso—I feel a sense of ownership. I have earned the memories. One of my poems says it best:

*I know something belongs to me
I know this is my place
Place of many owners
Place of torment
Place of belonging
Place where I shall encounter my true name and move on.*

Quique Avilés is a poet, performer, and teacher based in Washington, D.C. Originally from El Salvador, he has been performing, leading community arts projects, and helping young people find their voice for more than 35 years. He is the author of The Immigrant Museum, a cross-border art-poetry book produced with Raices de Papel in Mexico City. Avilés’s poetry and commentary have been featured on NPR, local public radio, and in several anthologies, including How I Learned English, Al Pie de la Casa Blanca, and The Wandering Song, a new anthology of Central American writers in the United States.



**Mayor Muriel Bowser
congratulates the
Historical Society of Washington, D.C.
on their new DC History Center
at the Carnegie Library.**

Muriel Bowser, Mayor of Washington, DC

On September 19, 2019, we had a historic Congressional Hearing on the Washington, DC Admission Act (H.R. 51) - the first in over 25 years! We fulfill all of the obligations of American citizenship, but are denied full and equal representation in Congress. As I stated at the Hearing,

“ I was born without representation, but I will not die without representation. ”

~Mayor Muriel Bowser

While we have achieved record levels of support, we still have more work to do - and it's not too late to get involved. We are hoping to see additional movement in Congress with a House floor vote and a hearing on this legislation in the Senate.

If you are interested in learning more,
please contact Rachel Williams at Rachel.Williams3@dc.gov and
visit statehood.dc.gov.

**DC’s population of 702,000
is greater than that of two states**

State	Population
VERMONT	626,299
WYOMING	577,737

**DC residents pay more
federal taxes per capita
than residents in any other state**

**DC residents have
fought and died
in every war**

**Yet, DC residents have
no voice in policy-making
decisions or declarations of war**

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
MURIEL BOWSER MAYOR