Dyke Strike

Beth Hastie dishes with Amber Hollibaugh about real-live lesbian AIDS, old boys clubs and her dangerous new book.

February 1, 2001 By Amber Hollibaugh

When I was newly diagnosed and feeling very isolated as a lesbian with HIV, Amber Hollibaugh was one of the first people I heard speak publicly about us. Though Hollibaugh is not positive, her groundbreaking activism -- and that of the Lesbian AIDS Project (LAP) she launched at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) -- inspired me to cofound the grassroots Lesbian AIDS Project of Massachusetts. I recently spoke with the longtime hellraiser, prize-winning filmmaker and femme fatale about her literary debut from Duke University Press, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*, a 20-year collection of deeply provocative dispatches from the faultline where lesbian feminism and AIDS activism meet (complete with a scrapbook of personal snapshots).

POZ: Why publish your essays now?

Amber Hollibaugh: I do a lot of public speaking about the issues that I care about -- class, race, sexuality and HIV among lesbians -- and often people are confused: *Why do I care about all this?* I wanted to show that my politics come from my own experiences, from being raised in trailer parks with little hope for a middle-class future, to becoming a femme lesbian, an AIDS activist and a writer. From my perspective as an uneasy member of many movements, I wanted to help people to feel that the women's, queer and community-of-color movements aren't mutually exclusive -- they can deal with one another's issues.

How was it, running LAP at GMHC, a largely gay male organization?

Very hard. It was important to be there because GMHC was a huge AIDS organization with good services that a lot of women used, whether they were out or not. The problem was, GMHC didn't understand that HIV affects different types of people differently -- like the simple fact that thrush shows up differently in women than in men.

LAP started up in 1990 -- early in terms of women's issues. A group of dykes just went to GMHC and asked them to fund this project. We knew lesbians were getting HIV, but this was invisible because woman-to-woman sex is not the primary way lesbians get infected. Drug use, poverty and sex work were only just becoming part of the conversation. LAP got women to do outreach at the detox centers, outpatient clinics, community centers and alternative-to-prison programs they had used themselves. Through this, we found tons of dykes who were positive who had never been

reached.

Why not serve lesbians through broader programs for women with HIV?

That works only if you have good women's programs where lesbians don't get left out or have to self-declare in order to get information. It is critically important to create space for women who partner with women, so you can talk together about the decisions you are making, the way you partner and what your risks are. We need each other. And we need to talk truthfully about our complicated lives, which rarely fit one way of understanding how women build a community, friendships or their sexuality.

When I tested positive, Keri Duran of ACT UP/Boston was the only lesbian I knew who had HIV. I remember you and Keri speaking at a 1993 forum on lesbians and HIV. I came to that very confused and upset, but left feeling inspired.

I can't tell you how many times I would give a talk somewhere that people thought was not the "right" place to discuss lesbian HIV issues -- fancy girl's colleges, say -- and have an incredible fight with the audience. Then everybody would clear out, and the five HIV positive lesbians who couldn't speak up because of the audience's attitudes would come up to me and ask, "What do I do?" What's the problem here? *Lesbians get AIDS*. We are not outside the world and everything that puts people at risk.

You write that many lesbians have learned a lot from gay male sex. I'm certainly one. I came out in gay male clubs, because feminist culture wasn't as visible, accessible or liberating to me -- partly because women feel so much shame about sex, because of the abuse we have suffered.

I, too, feel passionately that my own survival is connected to gay male sexual culture. I'm not sure that many gay men feel the same about lesbians. Feminism has rarely been proactive around sex, let alone lesbian sex, or encouraged women to educate themselves about desire or danger. Gay male culture has been a home for those of us who felt marginal in the lesbian feminist community, but it doesn't answer the question of how you are going to have a life as a gay woman. That's what my hopes were for LAP and for this book.

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