



AIDS Tales

ACT UP veteran Keiko Lane puts her memories to paper.

February 10, 2025 By [Tim Murphy](#)

Keiko Lane, a Los Angeles-based therapist and author, was only a high schooler when she joined ACT UP LA and Queer Nation in the late 1980s and early '90s.

Through those AIDS and LGBTQ activist groups, she met older queer people who became her mentors, protectors and “chosen family”—among them men living with AIDS with whom she became incredibly close, only to witness their deaths in the years ahead. Lane left LA for college but has for decades carried the memories of those years of protest, performance art, parties and self-discovery.

Now, she has captured them in [Blood Loss: A Love Story of AIDS, Activism, and Art](#) (Duke University Press), a deeply poetic and moving memoir of a queer political immersion at an early age. Lane talked with POZ about her book.

You're a longtime therapist with a strong focus on HIV and AIDS and LGBTQ issues. Did your early activism lead you to that career?

I'm sure it did. In LA, there was so much organizational overlap between Queer Nation and ACT UP, but people took different tracks—some were good at policy, or art and graphics, or community mobilization. But I was more interested in the care work [of being in those groups] and the slowness of intimacy. There was so much franticness to working on policy and a sense of urgency, but it wasn't my comfort zone. It took me a long time to figure that out.

When did you get the idea for this memoir, and how did you go about writing it?

I was always writing about it, but my first literary training was in poetry, not prose. I tried to write this as fiction about 15 years ago, but it didn't work for me. I had no experience as a fiction writer, and I felt like I didn't quite know what I was doing.

And I was fictionalizing it to not have to deal with myself, but then, I also felt like I wasn't doing justice to these incredible people whom I'd loved—and still love. To fictionalize them felt like a disservice.

But it still took me a long time to figure out how to write this as a memoir. [The performance artist] Ron Athey [a key figure in the LA scene] was giving a lecture about 10 years ago, and I was there.

As part of a slideshow, he showed one of the covers of [the zine] *Infected Faggot Perspectives*, which Cory [Roberts-Auli, an artist who died of AIDS in 1996] and I produced after Wayne [Karr] died in 1995. I asked Ron, "Are you writing about Cory? Someone should." He said, "It's your turn—you do it."

So when I started, I thought I was writing a long-form essay about Cory's art practice and resisted for a year or two the idea that I was telling a bigger story that I was a significant character in. I was grappling with how to bring myself into the story and center my voice in a way that felt ethical and made it clear that I was remembering from my own subjectivity and not trying to write biographies about them.

Did you work from some sort of outline?

I didn't have one for a long time. I started with the questions I was obsessed with, that I couldn't let go of—that first section about how we remember things. Then, a draft or two in, once I felt like I had the feeling of all of us, I went back and started making a political timeline—of what we were fighting policy-wise when this or that particular personal thing happened.

The years in question are the late 1980s and early '90s.

I'd started doing coalition-building work with ACT UP. In LA in the late 1980s, if you wanted to mobilize the left fast for a demonstration, you called ACT UP, you called the Student Coalition, a young person's activist group that initially formed around apartheid, and you called CISPES, which was the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. I'd started going to ACT UP demonstrations in 1989 and meetings of ACT UP and Queer Nation in early 1991, when I was 16.

What was proximity to so much illness, death, grief and loss like at that age?

From the age of 12 or 13, I'd already been involved in activism—working in community with refugees and asylum seekers, at demonstrations against police brutality in LA and at demonstrations at the South African Consulate in LA against apartheid, so that was already my normal.

So when I was in ACT UP and Queer Nation, I was heartbroken and traumatized a lot, but I also couldn't imagine walking away from the sense of community those groups gave me as a young person. And because I was one of the youngest in the group, if not the youngest, I was loved and taken care of. People were very protective of me.

How do you think the experience shaped you?

It's both an easy and complicated answer. The easy answer is that I was absolutely traumatized—I think we all were. But there's often a fantasy that if something has been traumatic, that if we could go back, we wouldn't do it again. But if I had to go back, I wouldn't walk away from it just to avoid loss.

You write in the book about your mother, who is Okinawan and was born in a U.S. internment camp for Japanese Americans during WWII. Do you think that family history shaped you in any way?

I grew up knowing about that as a story in my family that was told in a pretty matter-of-fact way. Understanding the emotional toll of it was something I came to much later.

A lot of the people in your inner circle were people of color, like yourself. What percentage of ACT UP LA was people of color?

I'm not the political historian of the group, like the people working on the ACT UP LA Oral History Project. I have no idea what the percentages were like overall at different points in time.

Among my close circle of friends, family and comrades, I remember the percentage being about half or more than half. There was a lot of whiteness in the room, but the People of Color Caucus was extremely loud. The people I was closest to weren't the white people on the problematic side but rather the folks of color and the white people coming out of antiracist organizing.

Did you feel no fear about the risk of getting HIV?

The virus wasn't as big a fear for me as the fear of losing people and hence grasping at the kind of intimacies that were available to us.

Did people in the groups ever ask you what you were doing there? Or were you ever self-conscious about being HIV negative while in the company of so many people with AIDS?

I was most self-conscious when faced with the decision of leaving to go away to college. I could leave. I wouldn't be surprised if some people had critiques or questions about me, and I would've understood. But also, by the time I started going to ACT UP meetings, I had a solid group of people I'd been going to Queer Nation with whom I was very close to. So that was another buffer.

Why was it important for you to tell this story?

I wanted to show how I was shaped by it and also how those of us who are left have continued to be with each other.

The question that organizes my life is "How did we end up who we are?" And when I ask that question about myself, those years are so core for me. I've always felt responsible for remembering because [most of them] are no longer here.