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My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home

Amber L. Hollibaugh
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In the introduction to her collection of essays and interviews, activist Hollibaugh asks a series of brutally honest question, the kind of straightforward queries one would expect from such a candid and insightful woman. Why should her ruminations and memories matter, she asks, why should you care? Why should you, the reader, be interested in “what happened one night in some faggot’s hairdressing salon in a small agricultural town in California” or “the evening a queer rebellion called the Dan White Riots erupted in the streets of San Francisco”? With an educated and provocative tone, she asks why we should be talking about the first picket lines of feminist against feminists or about the sex wars of the 1980s.

Hollibaugh’s answer is formulated with a mixture of articulation and passionate intensity: “I believe that history matters, that it is one of the few tools within our grasp which we can use to reconstitute our understanding of our individual human lives and longings and larger collective experiences-experiences which shape and situate each of us.” In the rest of the book, she uses these tools well to craft a description of what it was like to grow up fighting against personal situations and move into battling political injustice.

The experiences Hollibaugh shares are, by turns, alarming, inspiring and sometimes heartbreaking. A child of a Gypsy father and a Irish mother, she survived childhood incest and violence. She writes of her parents, “They were not my choice, but they were my survival, what I required to endure, and to create a worldview layered with my fusion of sex and color and class.”

She turned her anger at her past toward activist causes, first working with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in New York. After getting pregnant by a draft dodger, she became so ill from an illegal abortion that she went to Canada with her lover so that he could take care of her. A try at marriage made her miserable, and soon she was living alone in Montreal, organizing a strike at McGill University and eventually acknowledging her deep attraction to women.

Searching for a community of understanding fellow activists and working-class lesbians, as she called herself, she moved to San Francisco. In the early 1970s, when she arrived, the city was undergoing tremendous change, displaying an array of diversity, both in terms of race and sexuality. Hollibaugh was there to witness the birth of a struggling women’s movement, of a gay movement, and of the Left’s rise. She describes in vivid detail what it was like when openly gay mayor Harvey Milk was killed and the riots that followed the light sentencing of the killer.

While she marched and handed out political pamphlets by day, Hollibaugh had to take work as a stripper and prostitute by night, forced to earn a living by sordid means while her friends drew on trust funds. The duality of her existence is covered in some detail, as she lambastes the men of the Left, who espoused free love in order to have as much sex as possible, making Hollibaugh feel even more like a hooker with them than with any paying john.

In the mid 1990s, she coproduced and directed a documentary, The Heart of the Matter. She has also founded and directed the Lesbian AIDS Project at Gay Men’s Health Crisis in New York. Throughout her intense life, she wrote. In

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these essays are considerable pain, pride, humor and passion, and all display a combination of feeling and intellect that make for powerful reading.

Hollibaugh can go from calling herself poor white trash to discussing the false categorization of butch and femme lesbians in the space of a few lines. The pieces included here give a full picture of the activist, both through the depth of her internal exploration and through the sheer variety of material. As well as standard essays, she also includes conversations with other writers like CherrÃ-e Moraga and Jewelle Gomez, and her own interviews that have appeared in magazines and books. Her subject matter, like her life, ranges widely in terms of personal and political topics. All of the writing, whether about her mother or her feminist beliefs, is searingly frank; she refuses to lie to herself and, by extension, to the reader. The result is a shimmering, important work that speaks volumes about facing one's personal truths and our shared political landscape.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (November / December 2000)

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