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Sexual politics

by Meryl Alman

My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home

by Amber L Hollibaugh

Duke University Press, 2000, 272 pp., $49.95 hardcover, $17.95 paper.


Amber Hollibaugh, Durham, NC.

in interviews, Gordon has denied having a feud with Wilson. And even though she was mentored as a Harvard fellow, by Wilson's science successor, bio-

logist Richard Lewontin, this book gives little reason to doubt her. Indeed, she is clearly no E.O. Wilson either in nature or in intellect; this book has neither the scholarly breadth nor the sweeping (and often politically charged) observations of Wilson's volumes. And to her credit, Gordon never attempts to make it so. Instead, she focuses on her own research and experiences clearly and simply, with a dis-

armingly frank tone even at the height of what could be construed as her criti-

I have lived on the wrong side of sex since birth. This is both who I am and who I was meant to be, though it isn't all there. I grew up a mixed-race, white trash, girl in a country that considered me dangerous, corrupt, fascinating, exotic. I responded to the challenge of this mounting alarm, hazardous, sexually disruptive woman. Most often this happened without a plan or a design.

Look, it's Amber," said B, in that southern stoner whack

per you could hear across Broadway during rush hour. "Did you know she was a femme? Did you know she's Esther's girlfriend now? Did you know she once worked in the sex industry?"

Wow," I said. Obviously I was sup-

posed to have already heard of the unusually tall woman coming toward us, dressed in what looked to me like regular old jeans. It was 1980, and I had walked up to the library into what was about to be the Sex Wars. I was about as well qualified as a member of the planning committee for the barnard conference to know what was going on, and just as well aware it was more complicated for you than for a laboratory rat, or an ant, but the principle still holds. What an animal does in an experimental situation depends on how and where the situation is embedded in its everyday life.

(p. 99-100)

Not surprisingly for a scientist so attuned to the context of her observations, Gordon's details about life in the field are clearly worth. She warns stu-

dents about the painstaking nature of the work (up at 4:30 am, baking in the desert, back in the lab by 7), and the daily

exposes on the difficulties of measur-

ing colony locations (triangomery is not an intuitive solution), and talks us along as she carefully disturbs colonies with toothpicks and enclosures to test the ants' responses. Despite her choices, it feels as though in the desert, she is no mythical hero scientist, going it alone. Graduate student assistants are always coming up with invaluable ideas, and at one point Gordon even enlists the aid of a local Boy Scout troop in making traps for the winged ant alates. By the most influential piece of criticism directing Gordon's work is her con-

cern with understanding complexity in a colony, where as many as ten thousand individuals work in concert to "can achieve complex, global behavior." She sees such complexity mirrored in a myr-

iad forms, from the actions of individ-

ual ants creating trails to how thought to the behavior of ecosystems. In such just a way, this little book on a physical ant tiny subject touches me in ways that go beyond the scope of the book itself—and moves on. The real satisfaction for readers, perhaps for Gordon as well, always lies behind the hardcover, dust jacket, and the words that go into creating a book. It goes back to the books we read. And this is not just a book about sex, or gender, or evolution, or life, or death, but the whole of our lives. It is a book about the complexity of what it means to be human, and how we navigate through it. It is a book about the power of stories, and how they shape our understanding of the world around us.

(p. 12)

The idea that theory could be the sum of collective insight into a text is a profound idea. It is also a dangerous one. It is a dangerous one because it has the potential to make us think that theory is something that we can simply learn, and then apply to our lives. It is a dangerous one because it has the potential to make us think that theory is something that we can simply learn, and then apply to our lives. It is a dangerous one because it has the potential to make us think that theory is something that we can simply learn, and then apply to our lives.
ter,” from the hard-won refusal to have one’s desires, whatever they were, labeled “false consciousness” by anyone, whatever the movement creed of that person might be; and its mirror image, a principled refusal to apply that label to anyone else.

At this distance, I can also see an attempt to hold on to radical social constructionism without losing a focus on something older, which Hollibaugh is not ashamed to call authenticity. “My fantasy life has been constructed in a great variety of ways. My sexual desire has been channeled. But what that view [that there is only one correct sexuality] takes from me is my right to genuinely feel, in my body, what I want.” Even though, as she insists, “we do not know what makes people gay. We do not know that,” nonetheless each person has some invisible sexual core which is both rooted in specific cultural experiences and an inalienable right.

This may be the inescapable and productive irony: a desire for sexuality and identity to remain fluid, to allow for change, informed early lesbian-feminists’ resistance to butch/femme expression, but also the resistance to the resistance. Something called authenticity which sur- vived the closet, survived political lesbianism, is surviving postmodernism and will survive next thing, whatever it is. But the debate survives, too. For Hollibaugh, the affirmation of desire as a value, of sexual feeling as a gift, is at the heart of all liberation movements. And it isn’t that for everyone.

Hollibaugh was one of the first to “come out” about having done “sex work,” not as a victim in need of feminist rescue and re-education; in pieces reprinted here, she made the case that “working in a peep show is not the end of the world,” that sex work may well be a good economic alternative to the other lousy jobs available to working-class women, that making money off men’s desires can be an expression of power, even an expression of feminist anger. More recently such accounts have proliferated, which is probably a good thing, but… I mean, when she calls her- self a sexual outlaw it is not about some thing you buy at Eve’s Garden and try on and feel sexy in. It’s about sensing the real possibility of being killed or badly hurt for expressing your desire or doing your work, and doing it anyway.

Hollibaugh’s statement that it took feminists a long time to talk to prostitutes, is, historically speaking, not quite right: see for example the Contagious Diseases Act, or Kate Millett’s The Prostitution Papers—little read today, and very strange, but preserving a sixtyties feminist insight that unless you understood what it was to be a whore you didn’t understand what being a woman was about. As Hollibaugh herself says, the threat against whores, like the threat against lesbians, can be used to police all women. And if we are going to look at ways women are “exchanged,” at the ways sex is inter- twined with money, we need to look at a pattern, even, ah, not a social form of exchange. But the trick is, how not to exotify this, especially around class, how not to turn it into some new of a peep show into a peep show, in a way that insu- lates “us” from what we’re trying to understand. How to remember that “whore” is not a metaphor or an analogy.

Mention can be the best feminist genre. It can also be the worst. Without a deep commitment to truth and authenticity on the one hand, to connection and community on the other, it can turn out as a self-absorbed and seri- ous stories into recovery-speak and other forms of solipsism. There is a great deal to be said for straightforward, unsen- timentalized accounts of the impact of violence and poverty on women’s lives. This book is such an account. It is also political theory, the kind we still need in order to claim what has happened, under- stand it and move forward. And if I’ve said less here about the class dimension of the book, it’s not because I find it less than absolutely crucial, but because that’s the dimension where I find it most impossible—and in a sense, wrong—to translate from her voice to mine.

When Hollibaugh says that “we are asked not to know the actual contours of the world around us” I think she’s still right; but it’s harder for me to agree that this is because there is no language to name her experiences. When she was growing up, ok, but now the problem is how to shake free of the languages that are all over us like glue already. It’s just not true any more that there are no work- ing-class people on TV. There they are every day on Jerry Springer making fools of themselves, set up for “us” to laugh at, right alongside the incest survivors and “my son had a sex-change operation.” As gay people generally have learned, visibility is not enough. The problem is not silence but the suspicious way all stories can come to sound alike, just as all images of naked ladies in a slideshow could be read to mean the same thing.

Twelve-step. Tonic parents. This book could easily have been a pathology written from the outside—for or from the inside. It is only sheer will and good writing that resists an easy coherence, that insists on leaving the fragmentary, glorifying with better edges.

Dorothy Allison’s Forwood makes the point that writing is scarier than sex. And it should be, damnit. To offer one’s own desire as a way of thinking about the world is probably crucial, but it’s fraught with dangerous temptations, too. This is also why I like the conversations with Morris, Rubin and the rest: the form matters, is the point. I do not feel I am being lectured to. The essays also have for me the flavor of that hope not so much “if one woman told the truth about her life, the world would split open,” but that if a group of women each did, and listened to each other, there is a possibility of getting somewhere, far-ther than one woman on her own ever could. Community was never supposed to be a set of mirrors. Even “identity” was never just a mirror. Amber Hollibaugh offers more than history here. She offers a method.

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