

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **AMBER HOLLIBAUGH**

Interviewed by

KELLY ANDERSON

December 15 and 16, 2003,

January 20, 2004

New York, New York

This interview was made possible  
with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

### Narrator

Amber Lynne Hollibaugh (b.1946), a “lesbian sex radical, ex-hooker, incest survivor, Gypsy child, poor-white-trash, high femme dyke,” grew up in a mixed-race, working-class family near Bakersfield, California. Hollibaugh’s movement politics date back to Freedom Summer in 1964 and she’s been a fulltime movement activist—whether New Left, feminist, or queer—ever since. For the past two decades, Hollibaugh has been at the center of feminist debate over sexuality and a leader in the fight against AIDS. She was the founding director of the Lesbian AIDS Project at the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, the first project of its kind in the nation, and produced an award-winning documentary on women living with AIDS, *Heart of the Matter* (1994). She is the author of *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (2000) and is currently the senior strategist with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

### Interviewer

Kelly Anderson is an educator, historian, and community activist. She has an M.A. in women’s history from Sarah Lawrence College and is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. History at the CUNY Graduate Center.

### Abstract

In this interview Hollibaugh details growing up in a mixed-race (Romany and Irish), working-poor family in rural California. Her family stories are incredibly rich—from tales of her grandmother Gypsy’s fierce independence—and incredibly painful, from the Klan to her mother’s loss of a child. Hollibaugh describes a sexually fraught and complicated adolescence, boarding school in Switzerland, dancing in Vegas and sex work in San Francisco, and finding radical politics and alternative communities. The interview focuses on themes of sexuality and politics and Hollibaugh weaves her changing consciousness and desire through the details of her marriage, coming out process, relationships, and women’s movement politics. She describes SNCC, the Red Family in Berkeley and New Left politics, lesbian feminism, the sex wars and the 1982 Barnard conference, and her work in the queer movement, particularly around AIDS. Lastly, Hollibaugh talks about her life as a writer and filmmaker and about the class politics of doing both. Hollibaugh’s vivid memories and keen intellect make this an exciting and invaluable interview.

### Restrictions

None

## Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Ten 60-minute tapes.

## Transcript

Transcribed by Lisa Miller and Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kelly Anderson and Revan Schendler. Transcript has been reviewed and approved by Amber Hollibaugh.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Hollibaugh, Amber. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Video recording, December 15-16, 2003 and January 20, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Amber Hollibaugh, interview by Kelly Anderson, video recording, January 20, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Hollibaugh, Amber. Interview by Kelly Anderson. Transcript of video recording, December 15-16, 2003 and January 20, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Amber Hollibaugh, interview by Kelly Anderson, transcript of video recording, January 20, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 23–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted DECEMBER 15-16, 2003, and JANUARY 20, 2004, with:

AMBER HOLLIBAUGH

at: New York, New York

by: KELLY ANDERSON

ANDERSON: So, okay, for the record, it is December 15, I think. I'm with Amber Hollibaugh at her apartment in the East Village, the quickly gentrifying East Village. She won't be here for much longer. And we're on East Seventh Street, between C and D, in her 6th floor walk-up. And, we're just going to start, I mean, let's just start by talking about your, your early childhood memories and years, I mean, that you write a little bit about, there's some anecdotes and some laying out of the chronology of your life in your, in your memoir and your collection of essays, but there's a lot that's missing. So, let's just start with your parents. I was, you know—how did they get to California?

HOLLIBAUGH: Okay. Oh, that's interesting.

ANDERSON: Your family background—your father, as you said, is Gypsy, your mother's Irish, how did they make, how did their families get to California?

HOLLIBAUGH: My mom got to California— she really was traditional Irish, poor Irish out of the dustbowl, out of the migration from, I think, I think my mother— I can't remember exactly— but I think she was born in Kansas City, Missouri, or she was that part of Missouri, Arkansas, something. And her mother was married to a — I'm trying to remember, actually it turns out it's hard to remember everything. My mother's mother was married to an Irish cop. And she married him and divorced him three times, and had three children. So she had the oldest daughter and my mother in like, Kansas City, or in some part of — and then they came as part of the migration. And they really came to Los Angeles, that's what the assumption was— her mother was fleeing this bad marriage—divorce for Catholics is just, especially in that period of time, just was unheard of, so she just left. With her, with her kids.

ANDERSON: So she went alone with the kids.

HOLLIBAUGH: And she got to LA, and like a lot of people that tried that, LA had appeared to be a place that had endless work, but in fact there wasn't endless work, and so people got there and then had nothing, and had nobody to rely on. I mean, they didn't have a system, they were poor people. And Hoboville in *Grapes of Wrath* is Bakersfield. And so she went to Bakersfield. Bakersfield and Oildale, which is really where, kind of where my family was on that side, um, was an oil town that had a small kind of ruling class that were oil people and then everybody else were migrant workers and kind of Mexican or Mexican-American workers in the growing fields. And then the oil fields.

And my grandmother became a washerwoman for the kind of the ruling class families that wanted someone to take care of their laundry. And then the guy she had been married to followed her out, became a cop in Oildale. They married again. They married three times and divorced three times and he was really a bastard. He was really a mean, mean, mean, mean, mean son-of-a-bitch, and he abused them. What else is new? But, you know. So, I guess he was a charming, Irish-you know-lad, who also did things like burn them with hot irons and you know what I mean?

So my mother had a really hard life. This guy was kind of in and out of it...but basically she was raised by her mother, she had two sisters, an older and a younger sister, and they were desperately, desperately poor. And kind of the family story is about how once a week they would get hamburger gravy. My grandmother would buy one pound of hamburger and cook it with tomatoes so that it, it would go further, and they would have that and bread, for their meat. And they had meat once a week. And other than that, they never had meat. I mean, they just had nothing. And they were really, my grandmother on the Irish side did not go to school, I think she maybe had a second-grade education, she could read a little tiny bit, she could write, but pretty sparsely. She could read the TV Guide, that was kind of like, how she could read. And they were pretty desperately poor. Finally my grandmother kicked the guy out and said don't ever come back. Because the abuse was so bad.

But my mother, because of this kind of family, well, you know, for a lot of reasons including this kind of family, um, married for the first time when she was 14. And of course, you know, the other thing about it is, I mean, poor working class families—at any point, but certainly then—the only way to escape was marriage. That was really— girls, you know, working worlds were not very open to anybody—

ANDERSON: It's not like she was told she could go to college and be economically independent.

HOLLIBAUGH: And she never assumed it. She didn't finish high school. So she figured that the best way out— and she and her mother did not get along. She was the middle daughter, she was argumentative, she was a tomboy, she was really stubborn and moody, I think, and, and furious that they were so poor. And hated it. And so she married a kid that she was in school— and she knew nothing about sex, this is the other thing that was kind of a notorious family story. She constantly said that when she would sit on boys' laps, she would put down a phone book, because she knew there was something about that area of their body that could impregnate you, but she didn't know what or how. And so, she would put a phone book on, down before she would sit on a guy's lap because she didn't want to get pregnant. And it's not like, good sex education. It didn't look good on her, and it didn't look good on me! So she didn't talk about sex and she didn't particularly like sex, as far as I could figure out.

She married this guy at 14; she was pregnant, she had her first child before she was 15. And this was kind of the tragedy of her life and really, probably, of my family's life. When the baby was about a year old, she and this guy were still together, she was doing laundry, she had the baby in a high chair, and was going to give the baby a bath. Had pulled a — you know those kind of washer-tubs, full of water, hot water, that she had put on the floor next to the baby's high chair, and it was cold, and she had the baby tied, kind of with a sash and stuff around his waist to kind of hold him in the high chair, and she ran outside to do, to hang up the laundry. And she had a heater on in the, a space heater. And the baby rocked the high chair over, fell into the bath, hot water, the bath of hot water, and in grabbing, pulled the electric heater into the bath water and electrocuted himself.

And my mom was not yet 16. And she never really got over that. She really never got over it. And it was kind of, it a terrible story, and it completely framed her life. And I mean, she wasn't even 16 yet, she'd already been married and lost a kid, and the guy dumped her. Left, took off, and she was by herself.

And it really, it was interesting to me growing up, I knew this story. And it was the only thing that ever would make my mother cry. My mother never cried, not for any reason. Ever. And, but when this would come up, she would have to leave the room. I mean, she never, it was so raw, that she never ever came to terms with it— she didn't talk about it, and she didn't know how to forgive herself. She didn't know how to ever live with the history of, as she would say, "being a murderer," as she once said to me. Um, and so it shaped then everything, every other choice I think, that she ever made in her life, and her ability to experience joy. I think that she really, I think she might have always had some struggles there. I think she was a person that, because of the poverty she came out of, looked at the glass half-empty rather than glass half-full, but whatever was true about her character was completely framed by this, which happened to her at such a young age. And she never, after that point, had hope, in some way. She was pretty desperate,

she was pretty miserable, and she never had faith that things would work, or that things could be good, or that you might have a better life, or something like that. That was just not part of her axiom. She just couldn't imagine it.

She married again when she was 17; that marriage lasted for like, a year and a half. That guy went on to marry one of her other sisters. (Laughing) You know, it's really a poor white trash family, what can I say?! It's like, 'O God, what a story!' He wasn't a particularly fabulous guy either, but he wasn't—he didn't beat her. That was a good thing.

My father had known my mother from the time they were 7 or 8 years old. In Oildale. Oildale was one of the places that was— had a kind of permanent camp, a Gypsy camp. Romany camps kind of flourished up and down the coast, that people would go in and out of on the caravans. And so my father was raised a lot there, though he traveled all over the United States and certainly up and down the west coast. But they had known each other from the time they were 7 or 8, and so then through many different kinds of paths wound up marrying when my mother was 23 and my father was 25, when he'd come— I think he'd just entered the service, or he just was about to be shipped out for World War II, something like that.

And they married. And this was then the marriage that they both stayed in for the rest of their lives. My dad had also been married once before to a woman named Vendetta— good old Vendetta! And my dad's first name was Ace, so it was Ace and Vendetta, which I always thought was kind of perfect. And so. And then they had a very complicated relationship. But— so that was like my mother's side and that part of the Bakersfield family, which is still there.

ANDERSON: The sisters, and your cousins....

HOLLIBAUGH: The sisters, everybody. And that's kind of the only part of the family that I'm still connected to at all, although it's tenuous. They don't quite— they certainly didn't like my being a lesbian, and even when they got through that, my life doesn't make any sense to them. They know that I've made films, they know that I've written a book, they know all these different pieces, but, if you're sitting in a trailer park in Bakersfield, California, or in Oildale, California it doesn't really have any reality. So, you know, the films that I've done about AIDS— and I would come home and my family would say, all the kids would run out and say, "Oh, you'll get me in films! I want you to make films about me!" and I'd say, "No, you really actually don't want me to make films about you," you know?! Really! You really don't want to be...

ANDERSON: Right. Like, I hope I don't have to make a film about you.

HOLLIBAUGH: You really don't want to be in one of my kind of films! Not really a good idea. So, my life is so profoundly different than my family's life. They're all either cops or they're in prison; they've never left that part of California. At best, somebody moves 20 miles away from a primary parent. There's you know, there's never anything but that world that people live in, and they don't leave it. And I left it. As did my mother, finally. You know, my mother and my father finally ended up in Canada.

ANDERSON: I didn't know that.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, in fact it was interesting, because they— neither one of them had ever finished high school. This is not exactly chronological, but it's—

ANDERSON: That's okay, we can come back to it.

HOLLIBAUGH: We can come back to it. But—

ANDERSON: No, no, finish with that story then, about how your parents moved out from California and we'll go back to the chronology.

HOLLIBAUGH: To the, to the college thing, go back to that? Or to, just tell the story?

ANDERSON: No, no, just finish the Canada story and then we'll go back to your dad's family.

HOLLIBAUGH: Okay. My dad had always wanted to go to college, had always dreamed of college, but he'd never finished high school. So he— when I was a teenager, he went back to school. And he went to night school. He was a carpenter and a mechanic. And he went to high school at night and he got a teacher who was this lefty teacher who was teaching at a school that was just about to open in British Columbia, outside of Vancouver, British Columbia. And he finished high school, and this guy said to him, John Leggett, who's I think a sociologist or anthropologist, said to him, "You should, if you want to go to college, you know, there's never a good time, you know? I could probably get you in and you could get scholarships and Canada's a good place."

And they were in their late forties, I think. And they sold everything they owned. And by that time, they weren't doing— they weren't rich, but they were, they had a good established life. They sold every single thing they owned, and they moved to British Columbia. They emigrated.

My dad went to college. And my mother actually tried to go to college, and just couldn't do it. But that's where she ended— but she got involved in feminism, and my parents were in the anti-war



movement. My father was a lefty in SDS. I mean, it's very, it was a very odd history, because most people, even if they come from red diaper families, their parents aren't in the same movements that they're in. So suddenly I was like, in all these demonstrations with my parents, and in sit-ins with my parents, and running against my father for SDS!

ANDERSON: So you had already left home by this time?

HOLLIBAUGH: I had, I had long— I left home at 15.

ANDERSON: So you're, you're in your twenties at this point?

HOLLIBAUGH: I'm in my late, I'm in my early twenties. And my parents have moved, they've gone to— my dad's in college, and they've become activists. They've joined the New Left. I had really, I was close with them, and I had really stayed in with them, and when the anti-war movement started, I talked to them. And they couldn't believe that the government would lie— and when it became clear, they became very disillusioned. And when they then moved, they were already thinking in a more unorthodox, more untraditional way. And then the world opened up. I mean, they really began a new life. And they began a life in the left.

And then my mother got in the women's movement— my mother actually got me in the women's movement.. I mean, she was— there was no feminism yet, but— or women's liberation even yet— but there were caucuses and small groups of women who met as part of the left, and my mother was in it, and I was in the left, and she kept saying, "You've got to come to one of these meetings with me." And I said, "Ugh. I can't think of anything I want to do less than sit around with a bunch of broads who cry all the time. And listen to them bitch about the men in their lives and how nothing works!" I was just like, I'm political, blah, blah! And my mother said, "You really want to, like, re-think that maybe." And I said "No!" But I— my first women's group I ever went to, I went with my mother. And we quickly figured out, we couldn't be in the women's movement in the same like, small group structures and stuff, because you can't...

19:45

ANDERSON: Not a lot of room to explore there?

HOLLIBAUGH: No, you can't— you know, I once said, at the very beginning, in a small group, a consciousness-raising group, that I knew my parents loved me, but they had wanted a boy. That the baby clothes had all had my dad's initials on them, and the reason that I was named Amber Lynn Hollibaugh was that it's A-L-H, which is my dad, Ace Leroy Hollibaugh, and my mother was reading *Forever Amber* in the hospital

and when they had to come up with a name, I got named Amber Lynn Hollibaugh. And I said this in the CR group. My mother started crying. She left the room. “We always wanted you! How could you say we didn’t want you!” You know, I said, “No, no, I didn’t say you didn’t want me, I said you wanted a boy!” “No, no, we wanted you!” I said, “No, really, we can’t be in consciousness-raising groups! You get to remember what you remember, I’ll remember what I remember, but that’s going to take care of it!”

ANDERSON: So, you would have been Ace, Jr?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. Ace Leroy Hollibaugh, Junior. Oh, God, almighty. Unbelievable. So that’s, I had a long history then with them, sometimes close and sometimes not, in the women’s movement and in the left. My mother and I had terrible fights about sex radical politics. My mother was working in, around battered women’s shelters and around pornography, and we had terrible fights about it.

I mean, and so, for me the thing that was interesting, what was interesting to me even then was any of us who did politics through the 60’s, 70’s, 80’s, 90’s often had conflict with parts of our families about the things we believed in. But most of us did not have our families in the movements, where the disagreements were the internal disagreements that were emerging from those movements. Rather than somebody from the outside— your sister or your mother or somebody— saying “Eh! Why are you in the women’s movement, you know, what’s your problem?” This was a very different kind of dynamic because it was questioning from the inside, not from the outside.

My mother never said to me, you know, “Why do you have to believe in women’s liberation,” it was, “Why don’t you believe that pornography is bad?” That was always a very interesting kind of context to me, and I’ve had it with my family, through my whole life. You know, when I was doing organizing with the United Farm Workers, I was doing it in Bakersfield, and it was my cousins who were busting me. You know what I mean?

So, I don’t think most people have that history, because class is such a— and in some ways that’s why class has always meant so much to me. My family was not a class of people who had privilege, and I separated from that privilege and pursued a radical life. I came from the kinds of people that didn’t get involved in political movements, and that meant I had a different kind of engagement around the anti-war movement, around the women’s’ movement, around capitalism, around the workplace, all of that stuff was not just shaped by what my own experience was like, but what I, to this day, live through with my family. Not only was it all the guys that I was raised with who went to Vietnam, but now, in the Iraqi war, you know, it’s— that’s my generation’s kids that I was raised with. Their kids are now in that war.

So, I've always had a different kind of relationship around class to the meaning of politics than I think a lot of people sometimes had that came from those movements. It does challenge you differently when your family is in a different relation to those issues. And I think that is what you see more in the Black movement, and in movements for people of color, that people are much closer to the reality of what they're resisting than the hypothetical reality of something that's wrong. And it does also put you in a very different relationship to power, but also to powerlessness. And you know it, you know how unique it is if you've gotten out. Precisely because they were so— because nobody else in your family did.

ANDERSON: So, let me just ask one question about that—

HOLLIBAUGH: Yep.

ANDERSON: —and then we'll go back to your, your dad's family. You say your mom was active in the battered women's movement, and yet your mom was also the perpetrator of violence in your home.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yep.

ANDERSON: So is that one of the ways that this issue got worked out between— I mean, how did your mom get to that place? How personal did it get in terms of the two of you working out forgiveness, healing, all that— did it happen there? Did it happen decades later?

HOLLIBAUGH: No, no, no. In fact, finally, I was cut off from my parents. I mean, my parents disowned me. You know, I always think, you know, you see these things on Oprah and all these kind of talk show places where they tell the happy-ending stories of incest survivors talking about it and their family reconciling. I wrote a review of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* where I was not explicit about the incest in my family, but I said that I came from a family where incest was a part of that history, and that one of the things that was never talked about is what that did to women, between women. Not just between a woman and a man, or women and men, but women and women, because you never believed a woman would have your back if you were a, you know, a victim of incest, and you weren't defended by the women in your family. And somebody, I suspect in the anti-porn movement, sent that "Women's Review of Books" review to my family, and um, I got a letter from my father that said, you are no longer our daughter, and we disown you, and that was it. And they never spoke to me again.

ANDERSON: So, you weren't—you and your mom weren't talking about these very personal issues of violence and sex in your home when you were both active in a movement....

HOLLIBAUGH: No. Or, we were very occasionally. My mother— so that was kind of the ending. But we had times when we were close and not close. My mother never believed me around the incest, and never, I think, could never afford to hear me. Because it would've changed in a fundamental way, her relationship to my father. However that would've worked out, she would've had to be willing to risk it in order to believe me. I told her when I was eleven; she didn't believe me then. I told her again when I was twenty, she didn't believe me then, and I, you know, blah, blah, blah.

But around violence— my mother once said to me that the only thing she ever regretted about my childhood, of how she raised me as a kid, was that she, was so out of, so physically out of control. And that it was the one thing she felt like she really would change, if she ever could do anything differently again. That she knew she hit me a lot, she knew she really was wacky, in the way that she was out of control herself and that she really was sorry for it. So it was clear— and that was the end of that conversation, I mean, we never pursued beyond that.

My mother was not a person that did self-criticism easily. When she would criticize herself, she was a terrible person, and then in reaction to being a terrible person, she would go to the other extreme and say, "I never did anything wrong! I'm a good person, you can't make me say I'm bad." So she didn't have any tools that really would help her understand herself. I mean, I always felt that that was really a tragedy for my mother, that she was never able to both see what she had done that she hated in her own life, and then could cut herself some slack. She either excuse it completely or say it didn't happen, or she was the worst person in the world, and worse than anybody else and a terrible person. And if those are the two options that you can give yourself about your own history, frankly you can never, you can never really face it. Because—

ANDERSON: And it doesn't allow you much room for you to— in a relationship, there's nowhere for you to go.

HOLLIBAUGH: No, there's nowhere to go with it. And you can only be wrong or right. And in fact, I mean, I have to say the thing that was always tragic to me about my mother, is that my mother only believed in right or wrong. My mother always lived her life with like, a life where it was always about a line in the sand. And you stepped over that line, and you were you know, never to be spoken to again. I mean, she really cut off fundamentally important people through the course of her life that were the most significant friends of her life. I have a brother, she cut out my

brother and my parents disowned him. I mean, I didn't particularly like Bill but you know...

ANDERSON: What was his crime?

HOLLIBAUGH: His crime — I don't know— I mean, I'll tell you the story, I mean it was like this really wacky story, but—and he was pretty wacky— but, you know, I— it was always interesting to me that the, the choice wasn't to like, not invite him home for Christmas, the choice was to cut him out. And she—that was for her, how you lived your life. That for her, was having principles. That's what she would have called it. "Having principles," you lived by your principles. And so, you know, you— this was a decent person or a vicious person, a good person or a bad person. And so my parents came out of this very— they were kind of — my mother was a Democrat because she was Irish, you know; my dad — who knew?

But they came out of the class politics that they carried into the left, but they lived their, their value system with a new rhetoric, a new ideology, but the same kind of mechanisms of practice. So you had good people and bad people, and you had right people and wrong people, and you had decent people and un-decent people. So there was never, there was never a gray area my mother could entertain for any length of time, not about my father, not about me, not about my brother.

You know she had the most trouble with the people that were closest to her because she couldn't exactly cut us off in the same absolute way. But when push came to shove, she could. And that's how she lived. And so in the end, my parents cut off not only me, and my brother, but a huge amount of the feminist movement that they, my mother and father, had both been a part of in British Columbia, because she said to people, "If you don't believe...if you believe that Amber is telling the truth, then you don't believe in Ace and therefore you can't be our friend." And people said to them—feminists said to them—

ANDERSON: This is after the review, in the eighties.

HOLLIBAUGH: This after the review, and all the brouhaha hit— said to them— we don't know what happened. It could have happened, it certainly is the kind of story that's quite a classic story of abuse in a family, sounds like it could've.

ANDERSON: Happens to 30 percent of our families, so...

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly. Good people do it, so, blah blah. But we were not there, we have no clue. And my mother said, "You either believe us, or you

believe her.” And people said, “But we don’t believe either one of you, we don’t know what happened. What we believe is that you need to get into counseling and do some work around this, you need some help, but we don’t know what happened.” And my mother said, “That’s it.” And they moved to Chiliwac, British Columbia. That’s a small town, way way up, in British Columbia. They cut off all their political friends and they started over. And they were in their sixties. So, my mother’s pattern was to cut off people who she couldn’t tolerate a difference with. If she thought you were wrong, if she thought you had done something she didn’t agree with in a profound way, her response was that you were out of her life.

ANDERSON: So when you got that letter in the mid-eighties, is that when *Bastard* and the review happened?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah.

ANDERSON: When you got that letter, did you know enough about your mom at that point to not argue with that and to not try to respond, and to not try to have some reconciliation, or—

HOLLIBAUGH: I tried—Actually, I didn’t. I tried—

ANDERSON: Was there a lot of back and forth, or you got that letter, you said, this is my mom, this is....

HOLLIBAUGH: There wasn’t a lot. I tried to call. They wouldn’t answer the phone;0 they wouldn’t return messages. And then, there was a lot of back-and-forth kind of through other people because they were also having this terrible fight with all the feminists up there that they were cutting out of their lives, or they were threatening to cut out of their lives, who were then calling me saying, “Jesus, we don’t know what to do, you know, what are *you* doing?”

The one person that I have been close to all my life and that my mother was close to all her life was her older sister, my aunt. And the one thing that my mother— my mother was forcing everybody to cut away from me. She tried to do that to my aunt, to say to my aunt that she couldn’t ever talk to me again, but my aunt really rebelled and said, “I don’t have to tell you about it, but I’m not going to cut Amber out. That’s your choice, I’m not going to do it”. So my mother knew that Mary and I were still connected. And my mother would kind of tell Mary things that Mary would then tell me, it would kind of be third— it would be an odd route.

And my father actually called and left me a message saying he would be willing to go into family counseling. My father, I think actually— I mean, my father knew what he had done, and my father, I think, was willing to look at it. But my mother was not. And I think that was because my mother would have been to blame, too. That she had not protected me and she had not defended me and she had not, she had not challenged my father. She had not done those kind of things. Which is a real difference— if you look at *Bastard Out of Carolina* at least Dorothy's mom didn't think she was a liar. She didn't leave the guy, but she didn't think she was a liar. She tried to do what she could to protect her even though she was staying. My mother did not. My mother did something that I think is actually much more classic, which is that you claim the kid's wrong, and then you connect and kind of identify with the other adult, and you form a unit against the kid's exposure. And that's basically what my mom did.

And my dad, I think, when this all exploded, was willing to really look at it. I think he— he and I had had many confrontations about this, it's not as though I hadn't said it directly to him. But as long as my mother couldn't tolerate this as a conversation in the family, there was no movement that he and I could do, really. And so it, really, it stayed at a moment where there was conversation, and then, they moved. And they cut everybody off and all of that. And I just decided, you know what? The truth about incest is it already gives people who perpetuate it way more time in your life than they ever had the right to. Way more power in your life than it ever had the right to, and I, you know...

ANDERSON: You just decided to be done with it.

HOLLIBAUGH: You know, if they called me, you know— I've tried to call them, but this is not an unpredictable or unforeseeable thing, it's not as though I didn't know that if they ever found out they couldn't respond, they wouldn't respond this way. It was a risk I was willing to take in order to not have a secret that protected them. This is the end result. The truth is I need to get on with my own life. And they'll come into it again—I'd be more than willing to let them come back into it if they want to negotiate that, I'll pay attention to it. But I'm not really going to, —fuck this. You know, really, you could spend your entire life in some kind of conversation with parents that you never get over. Or you can actually live your own life and it's too bad.

And so it was a terrible, horrible year, and I was really in terrible grief. And then it was, it was like being an orphan. I mean, it's like, all of us go through this when we lose our parents. There are many things we've never come to terms with, there are a lot of issues that we've never been able to talk about or ever come to an agreement about, in the way that we lived our lives as the child with an adult. And that's the nature of parental and child relationships. Mine's not different. It's more

dramatic because of how it ended, but you know, they died. They're now both dead. Um, and that was the other part of it, you know, I was very worried that I would not know that they'd died because they'd cut me off, and so I made Mary promise that she would tell me. You know you think that's going to give you something that you need, but in fact, Mary only, for instance, told me that my mother had died after the memorial. So—

ANDERSON: Why did she do that? She thought your mom wouldn't have—

HOLLIBAUGH: She chickened out. She chickened out. She knew that if I had known my mom was in the hospital, that I would have gotten on an airplane and flown up there and risked her telling me to get out, in order to see her one last time. And because she knew that, and she knew that it was already very dicey that she and I were still connected when she was connected to my mother, she—

ANDERSON: But why wouldn't she have let you come to the memorial? Do you think that was honoring a wish of your mom's, or do you think—

HOLLIBAUGH: I don't know. I think maybe, and I think she was terrified of the family confrontation that it might cause. I think that everybody becomes more rigid around grief, and that she was then terrified that somehow she would betray my mother's wishes, and so she called me after the memorial. It was like, that's really not okay. And so we had a very rocky time of it, with that, because I was really bitter. And I knew I had put her in an impossible position and I had talked to her about it, that there wasn't any easy way— this was not going to be clean, ever. On the other hand, I needed her to tell me what I needed to know about my mother, so that if I could do anything— if she was in physical crisis, blah blah— and she didn't.

ANDERSON: Did your dad outlive your mom?

HOLLIBAUGH: And then my dad—

ANDERSON: Because that would've have been a gap there where you might have had a moment to—

HOLLIBAUGH: My dad did not, was not willing to communicate with me. He immediately got a new girlfriend, which was always what his fantasy was. He went out and got a motorcycle and a new girlfriend in about four minutes. I'm sure he probably had both of them, frankly, before my



mother ever died. And he — by this time it had become kind of the basis of friendship. So, my father died basically from being in — he went to the hospital way too late. He had a flu, it probably turned into pneumonia, he went to the hospital, they misdiagnosed it, and he died. Um, and I learned of his death when they called because they wanted to do an autopsy because it was an unexplained death, and they wanted to be sure that there was nothing like SARS or something like that. And so, that's how I learned about it. I mean, nobody in my family knew that my father had died until I got this call. And it turned out that all these people he had become friends with, and my mother had become friends with, who knew about this whole crisis, had tried to pretend to be the family so that they could get him out of the hospital and bury him without letting me know!

ANDERSON: This is still up in Canada?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, still up in Canada. So, you know, aach, so, what a mess.

ANDERSON: So did you go to your father's memorial?

HOLLIBAUGH: No, you know, it's like, they actually get to have their own lives, including the decisions that they've made. And they left everything to a woman that's about my age, who was their best friend. And you know, it's like people in my family said, "Are you going to challenge it, they've got a house and a car and a blah blah." It's like, no. You know what? They made their money, they lived their lives, they get to make their choices.

You know, we, we couldn't sustain as a family. They chose to kick me out. I'm not going to go after their death and try and challenge their estate. Their estate is their life. I would like the pictures that, you know, came from that estate. I mean, I would like some of things that I think are mine from my own childhood, but that's all I really care about. And I got a few, and yeah, you know, not much, but I got a little bit. But, it's over. You know, if, if they lived their lives, basically embedded in that bitterness, that's their lives. It's not mine.

I feel like, incest is a profoundly horrifying set of experiences, over time. Not just in terms of what it does to you when it's going on. It has enormous impact over the course of your life. And the only thing you control as an adult coming to terms with it, is how it will, how it will intersect with the way that you understand yourself and the way that you live your own life. You cannot guarantee that you will come to terms with it in, in relation to the perpetrator or the other parent, your siblings, any of those kinds of things. None of those things are the markers that you control.

The only thing that you— as a feminist—really have, is the tool of understanding, trying to actually understand why something happened, and how you'll live with that history. What it will or will not do to you, the choices it does or doesn't influence, the way that you'll be yourself as an adult around a child. All of those are in your control. Beyond that, none of the rest of it is open to a singular understanding.

And, so for me, I feel like, you know, I saw it rip our family apart over time. It ultimately meant that we could not stay united as a family because it couldn't be resolved. I think that's quite classic. I think in fact, all those stories that aren't the happy ending stories, very often end like that. With people never speaking again, people never seeing each other again. People never together agreeing on the nature of that history. And that you have to live with that. Because that, because that's not what you control.

ANDERSON: Where did you find the tools? I mean, what is also classic is that the little girl grows up to perpetuate, or to, you know, all sorts of outcomes that...

HOLLIBAUGH: Or be a victim of people who perpetuate.

ANDERSON: Exactly. And your life ended up quite differently. So, where did you find the tools? Was it through feminism, was it through therapy? Was it through other incest survivors and groups and I mean, how did you reconcile that?

HOLLIBAUGH: I actually think it was all of those things. I mean I came through a movement, meaning the women's movement, that gave me the right to have that history without being ashamed. Because you do have terrible shame, I think, connected to it, and you do think that you participated in it. In fact, I actually think you do participate in it. This is a part of the feminist movement that, that I think we often haven't talked about enough, that in fact there's often— whether you desired incest or not, there's parts of desire that play into the sexuality that happens. My father's hands were some of the, were the most beautiful men's hands I'd ever seen. I know I desired his hands. Did I desire him to rape me? No, I did not. But there was a way that he has always been a sexual figure to me. Was that true when I was seven? Yeah. Was it true when I was eleven? Yeah. And so, you know, I don't like to leave myself out of my own history. Things didn't just happen to me as though I didn't have my own complex relationship to it.

But feminism and the women's movement gave me a context to speak about and explore my own interior world and my own damaged history. And that is an extraordinary gift and I think actually the women's movement has given that to women, even though it's now

kind of pop culture instead of politics, it still is a very different world to be, to be incested and to try and recover from incest than it was thirty years ago, or fifty years ago, like when my mother was trying to deal with all the stuff that she had gone through. And so I think that that creates a different possibility in your life.

I also had friendships with women who, like Dorothy Alison, who—Dorothy was the first person I ever talked to about it, and Dorothy — and I was one of the first people that Dorothy had ever talked to about it. And that was as much about class as it was anything else, is that we didn't talk about in the women's movement very much because the class politics in women's liberation was so bad that it completely played into the way that feminism, or women's liberation, loved to describe sexism in an un-thoughtful way around class and race. They would always say, "And when construction workers whistle at you..." you know, but they would never describe college professors fucking you for an A. You know, it was just so fucking annoying. And Dorothy and I could finally say, we could really describe to each other, what our families were like. What the men were like and what the women were like, without being afraid that by telling the truth about our families, we were perpetuating the way that our families were hated because they were poor white trash.

And, so that was an enormous gift, to have relationships with women like that, who I could begin to look at it through. And you know I, I actually did therapy around it. Though that didn't— I don't know. I mean, that was, it wasn't unhelpful, but it— therapy has never quite been the place for me. And then I started doing a lot of writing. I mean, I really, I knew that it had to inform the way I understood desire. It was part of why I was interested in sex. It was part of why I was interested in complicated stories about sex. And it was part of what I really responded against in the way that I thought feminism presented a kind of monolithic victimized history of how women were acted on but never participated in the things that they were oppressed by. And I didn't think that that was a helpful— I didn't think that helped either victims or perpetrators, because I actually think, whether you deserve it or not, or whether you wanted it or not, it's not a question of blame. But it is a question of your own relationship to power and powerlessness.

And there is something, I think, about feminism that has resulted in a kind of description of the world of women and men as though there isn't something gray and connected, as well as oppressed and oppressor, that I find really disquieting. And it isn't just whether all men are bad and all women are good, but it's more— that's why I think I ultimately ended up loving doing AIDS work, precisely because the mess of life is much more what you have to deal with there.

The women that are infected by men who are HIV positive, almost invariably know that those men are likely to be HIV positive, know that they should use a condom, do not insist on it, the men don't want to do it either and don't do it. It's not right. But it's the story of how you

fuck, and how you know things that you know are dangerous that you still manage to avoid.

That's the history that I think we in the women's movement were not very good at allowing. It was much easier to create a world where we were finally valued, and men were finally the problem. And because of it, we were very unwilling to entertain anything that complicated the way that things were negotiated in sexism. And, if you come from a messy family where people did funky things, you really were always stuck, even in the women's movement, I think, in telling your stories.

You know, I talk about how it was very hard for me to talk about how my mother was the one who was violent, not my father. Because the story that everyone wanted to tell was: my father hit me, my father spanked me, my mother blah, but never that it was my mother did this. And so, if that was your history, you felt as though you were betraying women, to say that women were capable of this. Or that you were somehow diluting the way that oppression really worked. It's true, more men hit women than women hit women, that's true, but it doesn't mean it doesn't happen. And in complicated stories, I think you generate a very different kind of coming to terms.

I'm going to kind of bring it back around again, because I think, I think finally all the political movements that have a moral underbelly often position us in similar ways without having the possibility of complicated relationships to our own oppression and our own power. It's why it's so difficult to be white and deal with racism, and why people want to be— why they're so defensive in that conversation if they're white, why it's so hard to talk about sexism and talk about power relationships. Because there's never a way to really allow your messy history to not be cleaned up, and to not finally decide that you were right and they were wrong, you had no power and they had all of it. Rather than to look at the real framework of how you had very few choices in a world that never saw you, and you did the best you could.

That's how I look at my parents. Even with all the bad things that happened. They were not bad people. They did the very best they could. They had limited tools and limited understanding. They brought the best of themselves, they tried as best they could, this is what they could do. I got what they had. They used what they had. And when they didn't have it anymore, they didn't use it. And the job was for me to try and figure out how to survive my own history, and then make different choices. Not blame them for not having good choices. And I don't think you come to terms with things like incest unless you can forgive people who have acted on you in ways that you never deserved. If you are still enraged— I'm not saying it's right or wrong— but, I think if you are still consumed with that anger you really aren't at peace in yourself, you can't come to terms with your own life, and so it has no dimension, that then becomes just one more reality of who you are. And if it's not one more reality of who you are, it runs you.

The death of that child for my mother ran my mother's life, it ran her life forever. She could never forgive herself and she could never recover from it and she could never believe that she was a good person from that or that there was a world that was a world that could have hope. Because having hope would mean that you would then set yourself up to then be that kind of despair that you could never come to terms with. If that's the world that you live in, that's a really miserable place to try and you know, value yourself. And, you know, I always felt like that was the elephant in the family room. That because it could never be dealt with, it could never— there was never enough that my mother could ever get, or give, to make that be a piece of her history she could live with. And so she was haunted by it, and it haunted the rest of us, in a, in a way that was never visible.

ANDERSON: It's interesting that she even spoke about it, you could imagine another scenario where—

HOLLIBAUGH: She would never raise it.

ANDERSON: Yeah.

HOLLIBAUGH: I didn't learn about it until I was quite— I don't know, you know, I was in my teens.

ANDERSON: So you knew that—

HOLLIBAUGH: I heard references to it. I knew there had been another kid that had been born and died. That's all I knew, because there would be family stories and things. But that's all I knew. My mother was married three times; I never learned that she was married three times— including my father— until I was in my thirties or forties. Because she was so humiliated that she had been married twice before my father, not just once. It's like, I said to my mother, "What do I care? I'm a lesbian, I don't give a shit how many times you got married, it doesn't matter to me." She said, "Well, I care." And I thought, oh, bingo. You care. You think that you were a bad person because you married twice and it didn't work. That's why you couldn't tell me. Didn't have anything to do with me. So, you know. I don't know.

I definitely— I think in political movements we don't talk about reconciliation. And I've always been struck by the truth and reconciliation work that was done in South Africa. And I've always thought it was always a compelling, compelling model for a different kind of coming to terms. Nobody was going to get— nobody was suing anybody. Nobody was going to ever say that the things, that the stories

that were being told could ever be compensated for, that there was ever compensation for the kind of horror that people had gone through. But there was a real, a real understanding that things left unseen, and unstated, and untold, the secrets of grief, shape history. And that if people could come forward and say what had happened to them, and confront the people who had hurt them, speak directly to them, it was a different— that was reconciliation. Not because those people could ever compensate them, but because they could face the people who had hurt them, and say that it was unjust.

And I've always thought that political movements should spend more time thinking about frameworks that actually allowed us to both confront and reconcile grief with oppression. Especially in terms of class, in terms of things like sexism and violence, because the men that perpetuate, or the women that perpetuate either of those things, but mostly men, are also men you love. And so if we could find a way in our own movements, to both hold people accountable and still love them, I think we would build a different kind of movement, that could confront real powerlessness and real oppression differently, because we would not say to people that they had to choose not to love those people any longer in order to hold them to a standard of behavior that they did not match.

And, you know, it's not a conversation we talk about. And yet, when I look at things like violence and incest and substance abuse and all of that kind of stuff, reconciliation and truth are precisely what you actually need to do, in order to be able to live with. How oppression turns you into an animal! I mean, give me a fucking break! Being poor, being hungry, being addicted, being violated yourself, being disrespected and hated, doesn't turn you into a nice person. And if we're ever going to, in the women's movement, come to terms with the way that we are hurt, and we hurt each other, it will be because we can actually have a different kind of dialogue that doesn't assume that I'll sue you or I'll imprison you.

ANDERSON: Right, the truth-telling itself is the end, the process is the goal.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. Exactly.

ANDERSON: I hear you. I think we have to take a pause, because our tape's going to run out.

HOLLIBAUGH: Okay.

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

ANDERSON: Let's just go back and talk about your dad's family, first, and that'll tie everything back together. So. Let's talk about how his people came to California, you know, your dad's background, in particular, you're interested, obviously, in his racial identity, and how you thought of yourselves as a biracial family, the nomadic culture. I understand that also a lot of—that the motorcycle and the cars is also part of his cultural legacy — your mom joining that world. So let's talk about your dad's family and their history.

HOLLIBAUGH: Okay. My dad's family came—were Spanish Gypsies and they came in the early 1900's as part of, you know, the endless immigrants that came in this country. Hollibaugh, I think, was a name that they maybe got at Ellis Island—it was, it's not that it's not a Gypsy name, but it's more British than I think that their name really was, though it's definitely a Romany name, but it's not from the part of Spain that they—my grandmother was from the Black Hills of Spain and that was kind of where she was raised. But she came over very young.

She came over when she 5 or 6, and then she was sold, actually, at 12 to a very wealthy media mogul who worked for the Hearst's empire. And she had an entire first family. My grandmother had only twins and triplets, and so she ended up having like, 12 kids with this guy. I mean, some really phenomenal number of children. And then—he treated her very badly. She escaped from him with the kids, he came after her, got her and the kids. And I think there were maybe 8 kids, my father was not in this first family. And he brought her back to the house where they lived and then put every one of the kids into orphanages. And she spent her life looking for her first family.

ANDERSON: Is this how she got from New York to California? Do you know anymore details about this sale?

HOLLIBAUGH: All I know is that they were desperate for money, and that this guy was very wealthy, and she was beautiful, and 11. And it was not in any way unheard of for 11 and 12 years old to marry, in that culture, and that was what they had. So, they had traveled by caravan across the country. The man she ultimately married that was my dad's father was also Gypsy, and he also came from the east coast to the west coast. He was significantly older and he came across in a covered wagon, actually, and built it, he was a carpenter. The story of him was that he could build a house without nails, that he was so good that he could build a house without nails. So, he came across that way. And then they met when, when Gypsy—that was what my grandmother was called—

:35

ANDERSON: That was her name?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, it wasn't her real name, but —

ANDERSON: Okay, that was her nickname—

HOLLIBAUGH: That was what everybody referred to her as, is “Gyp” and “Gypsy”—when she came back to the caravan, to the kind of tribe that she came from when the marriage—the first marriage she had been sold into, failed—and she had lost all her kids, she was only probably 18 or something, but she had had twins and triplets, so that she had had 3 or 4 pregnancies and 8 or 9 kids. And she married, then, my grandfather and they traveled in caravans, in Gypsy caravans, and that's where my father was born, and where, I don't know, three or four other brothers. And they completely lived in caravans, but their home base was kind of Oildale. That was a place that they were for a certain amount of the year always, and so my father and my mother knew each other from going to school together, and from being poor, really, as far as I can figure out. That they kind of hung — you know, there was a kind of group of kids who had not much, and kind of hung together and were embarrassed about being in each other's houses or caravans or things like that. My father never lived in a house until he was, I think he said, 15 or 16.

ANDERSON: What did they live in when they were in Oildale?

HOLLIBAUGH: They— like trailer courts. Or, they actually really had like a car and a uh, a thing attached to a car, that they, I mean, that looked like a trailer but was very fancily painted and stuff, like Gypsy caravan things. Tents. Tent caravans, and they would, you know, travel.

And so my grandfather was a carpenter; my grandmother was a fortune-teller and a kind of performer, and a sex-worker and all that stuff that was kind of “the other part.” You know, they'd get into town, she would do— she would tell your fortune, and there are like endless stories of her training my father to work the crowd, so that he would like go through a crowd and get people's wallets, and then she would look at their wallets and know their, know the names of certain people, and then he would put the wallets back and then she would call out their names, and you know— all this crap, that was— and they did that a lot.

And there was also a very famous story of her and grandpa making bootleg liquor, and them getting caught and prosecuted in some tiny town, you know, during Prohibition, and Gypsy going into the trial in, you know, a dress slit up to here. And them doing very well and the trial was going very well, and then they brought my father who was, I don't know, 4 or 5, thinking of course that it would look good to the jury to



have this cute little boy and that, part of the exhibit was that the, that had been set up against my grandparents, was the still that they had worked with, and my dad walked in and said, “Oh Mommy, look, there’s our, there’s our stove!”

ANDERSON: And he knows how to use it! .And, yeah.....

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly. It didn’t go over well. But they did get off. Grandma did get off on that. And in fact, one of the stories that I think I referred to in the book, but was an important story in my family is a story of my father and my grandmother being branded by the Klu Klux Klan. My grandfather would travel in the caravans, but he would also break off if he could get construction work and stay in places, and grandma and dad would continue on. My dad’s brothers were older, and he was, he was the baby, so he stayed with them longer. And gram always worked as a hooker— she worked in brothels and she worked on her own and they were in—

ANDERSON: Was that typical? For their community?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, it was not uncommon. You know, you did what you did to get money, and that’s what you did. And she certainly wasn’t— she didn’t have any morals about it at all.

ANDERSON: And it wasn’t a conflict in the marriage.

HOLLIBAUGH: No. Not particularly. She was enormously independent and she was very powerful in the tribe that she was, she was very powerful in the structure—unlike a lot of women, I think, in Romany culture, she was very powerful. And so she could kind of do what, she made the rules for herself, and any guy that got to be around her was lucky, was kind of, as far as I can kind of figure out what the story was. And so she really did make her own rules. And if she wanted to be a hooker, she was a hooker. And you know, fuck you if you don’t like it. I make my own money and I’m never going to be dependent on anybody again, and she was pretty clear about that, and she would do what she had to do. And she performed in the circus, and she, you know, did— she had really a wild— in that sense— a wild life for a woman of the period she came from.

And they had been, she and dad had been part of a caravan that had been staying in a, a part of I think it was Oregon, or Washington, I’m not sure which. One of the areas where there was a huge Ku Klux Klan. Oregon and Washington had the second or third-largest Klans outside of

the South. It was all these white Southerners that had come for the timber industries and the shipping industries and things like that—

ANDERSON: That's something you really don't ever hear about.

HOLLIBAUGH: And you never hear people talk about it and it was huge. And she was on her own, she was not with the rest of the caravan at this time, and they were staying in a hotel where she was working and three guys came, broke in the door, branded both she and my father with big "KKK" on their bodies, burned it into their bodies, and then left. And one of the men my grandmother knew was a deputy sheriff in that town. And she went to the sheriff and said, "I know who did it, and I, I'll— and you either arrest them, or something else is going to happen." And he said, "Oh, no," you know, and "Who're you?" and "It couldn't possibly have been my deputy," and blah blah blah blah blah, a lot of bullshit. And she got a gun, and went and killed him. And she was—you know, they had no proof that she had done that, at all. But, I actually think I have, or I used to have, we used to have—she was put on trial for it. But there was no witnesses. And it then became so controversial they basically wanted to get rid of it and it was like a hung jury or something and that took care of that. And she left. But, that was the kind of person that she was. It was like—okay, I went to you and I told you you needed to bust this guy and you didn't bust him and now I'll take care of it myself. Because, frankly, nobody ever does this to me and my kid. So that was pretty big in my family.

ANDERSON: How was that story talked about in your family?

HOLLIBAUGH: Very openly.

ANDERSON: When did you, so you remember hearing about this as a little girl, and—

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah.

ANDERSON: And it was always talked about as—

HOLLIBAUGH: As racism. I mean, it was really talked about as— I mean, my father was very— did not look white, does not look white, did not look white. Very dark-skinned, and— he looked like Native American in that sense. Very red dark brown skin, and black hair. I don't think people knew exactly what he was, but they didn't think he was white. And he, um — nor did my grandmother, although my grandmother's skin wasn't as

dark.. But they, they knew that— they were proud of being outsiders, in a way.

I mean the one thing that, or one of the things that Romany culture really gave them, was an identity that was not about being white, and was not about liking white people. And in fact, it was a culture that did not want to assimilate, did not want to be like those people. And so, there wasn't a lot of confusion about it. So there was lots of discussion about white people in my family— it wasn't like, too friendly. You know, it was like — you know what those people are like, and you don't trust them. So that was the context my father was raised in, that was what my father believed, that was what my grandmother believed, and that was how it was framed for me, though it was a very complex thing for me because I was inside that and outside that at the same time. And, Romany culture, like Jewish culture, comes through the mother, not the father, so the fact that it was my father, rather than my mother, meant that I had no legitimate ties that allowed me in. My father never taught me the language. He would not teach me the language and told me that he wouldn't teach me because—

ANDERSON: But you said that they didn't want to assimilate, so what would be the reason for not wanting you to —

HOLLIBAUGH: Because it wasn't mother— the lineage wasn't correct. And once my grandmother died, I had no access. My father kept some access. You know, I occasionally went with him and we would meet up with people he had been raised with or part of the caravan that he had grown up in and I would see them, but once grandma was dead— and that happened when I was about eight— the real kind of intersection of Romany life and my life, really separated. And so, I didn't have a lot to do with it, my father had a little bit more to do with it while my grandmother was alive, and then after my grandmother died, he didn't really have a lot to do with it. And then he had already been pretty separated from it by choosing to marry my mother.

ANDERSON: Was there a lot of conflict in the family around that?

HOLLIBAUGH: Terrible conflict. And my mother was very clear that she wasn't joining Romany culture. She was not— it's like, women were not treated well there, and certainly foreigners were not treated well there— I am not going to be a slave to your mother. And so there was a lot of bitterness. And my grandmother was very jealous of my father's, of my father's wife. And so there are these horrific pictures of like, the three—but there would be pictures of my father and my mother and my grandmother,

that my grandmother had, where she would either cross out my mother's face, or she'd cross out her own face.

ANDERSON: Pretty direct!

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, and it's like— you really wouldn't have trouble figuring out what was going on here— I guess they really didn't get along!

ANDERSON: But she claimed you, right? Grandma?

HOLLIBAUGH: Absolutely. Absolutely.

ANDERSON: Even though you looked white, and —

HOLLIBAUGH: Even though I looked white, and—I looked like my mother, a lot—

ANDERSON: Yeah, and you aren't technically part of the tribe, so...

HOLLIBAUGH: Technically, but— exactly. But I was the girl child and she thought I was fabulous, and she loved me and wanted to be around me a lot. So I was around her a great deal when I was a lot younger. But it was tense because my mother and she were so tense. And so, I'd go with my father to be with my grandmother and then we'd come home, that kind of stuff.

But I couldn't really tell stories about wonderful things that had happened with my grandmother because my mother'd get so pissed, that this magical person had, you know, fascinated me and that I liked her better than I liked my mother— whatever the jealousy shit was, was, like, not pretty. And uh, and my grandmother was an astounding person. I mean, she was married to my dad's father. But the entire time— and she had stopped traveling in the caravan after a while, or she'd kind of join it, but she would— she had gotten a trailer herself, on a little piece of land in San Luis Obispo. Southern California. And she lived there in a trailer, and behind her trailer— with my grandfather— and behind the trailer was another smaller trailer that my uncle Pike lived in, who I had known from the time I was little, who was her lover. You know, finally my dad told me when I was an adult, you know, "Uncle" Pike is not your uncle. Uncle Pike was your grandmother's lover. I said, "You're kidding! How did she work this?" And Dad said, "Well, she basically told my father that he could stay and tolerate it or get out. But she wasn't giving up her lover, and that was how it was." So, she would stay in the marriage, no problem, but every night, she like, left, and went to Uncle Pike's trailer that was behind their trailer!

You know, this was like not done in many places, and it was, and there was really not a lot of consternation around it. I mean nobody seemed to think it was really— I mean, my mother found it appalling, but my father thought it was quite charming. And, you know, she was — she really was, a very smart, very interesting, very unorthodox woman in a culture where she had enough power to be respected. And she never assimilated or wanted to, and so she never then tried to “be white”.

My father had a extraordinarily committed— he felt very strongly about being Romany. He was born by the side of a river in California, he never had a birth certificate. He really, you know, was proud of being Romany. And he, he paid a pretty terrible price for it. Not just the branding, but often when he was a kid, getting beaten up for it, for being dark in a white culture. And he was very clear that it was racism. I mean, he wasn't confused about what it was that was going on. And then as I was in the world and he was a construction worker, he was often kicked off of construction sites because he was dark. He and the “Negroes” would be kicked off the site. He was a union organizer in that period and so he was also a troublemaker along with a lot of black workers. So, the other thing that was interesting is that in a world that was incredibly segregated, the 50's in California and a world that was only black and white, my father was something else, but often his friends were African American families that he had met at construction jobs and they'd all been kicked off the jobs together. So I actually had a lot of black people in my life, in a way that I think white families didn't if they came from poor white trash.

And there was enormous awareness of racism, and discussion about racism in my family, because my dad was constantly losing his job, constantly being threatened because they — he would be called a lot of things— people would guess about his race, but they wouldn't guess that he wasn't white. It was clear he wasn't white, and then what he was, was not clear, and he didn't look Italian.

ANDERSON: Was that also heightened when he would be in public with your mother? I imagine—

21:21

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. And my mother was, you know, blond, blond, blond, blond. I mean, she was a natural, light-haired, light-skinned blond. And so, they were just, night and day, together. And they loved that. And I think that they actually thought that was very hot. And you know, my mother didn't care, although she also was very aware about racism.

And it was an interesting thing that I think often white people married to people of color blame people of color for being a target. It's an interesting dynamic. It's hard when you've got no support as a white person, to not then blame your fate on the person whose fate is being affected, by racism. And instead— actually, both my parents were very

clear, it was very much an explicit conversation in my family— this is racism, this is why your father was treated this way, this is why, as his family, we have to be aware of this, and we are being treated this way, and this is why we have these friends rather than these friends. It was never a hidden conversation, and it was never, ever something about shame.

My dad really did come out of a culture that he loved and valued, and he was very proud of it, and it was the first thing he'd tell you about who he was, and what, why he was different. I mean, he loved being different. He really loved being different, and he was really different. He was not a traditional white person. He was not a white man— he was not the equivalent white man for that kind of poverty and class background. His life and his personality, but also his life was much more magical and engaged and willful and less, you know, he— he did not think that the world was an unwelcoming place for him, he was very excited by things; he loved to think and read and listen to all kinds of music. I mean, it was interesting, that he, in a way, being an outsider, I think, allowed him to not take on the presumption of class that he came from. So if he was interested in Shakespeare, he sat down and read Shakespeare, and if he was interested in "Popular Mechanics," he sat down and read "Popular Mechanics," and if he wanted to listen to opera, he listened to opera, and if he wanted to listen to Frank Sinatra, that was fine, and blah blah blah. I mean, he just didn't have traditional categories that were as meaningful to him.

And it also meant that he was not very worried about what other people thought. He really didn't— he got it. You know, it wasn't like he didn't understand if I was upset about the fact that we were poor and I didn't want to invite people home, it's not like he didn't understand it. But he didn't really have a lot of sympathy for it. You know, it was like— get over yourself. You know, the world's big. You can do a lot. You might not have this but you'll have that. You know.

ANDERSON: That's a real gift.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, and it was especially given that my mother was so in despair and so—her heart had been so broken, I think, her spirit had been so broken, that she was a very hopeless person, in a way. She really— you know, she would constantly say things like, "Don't believe in anything because that way you can't be disappointed." This was like, her mantra. Ecchh, eechhh. It just was like, you know and, of course. You look at her and think, You're constantly walking around longing for things, believing in things and being disappointed because you can't really come to terms with the world, but my father— I mean, they really were like night and day, I have to say. Really.

My dad was cheerful, he was— that was why the betrayal I think was so profound around the sexuality is that he and I were much more alike. I looked a lot like him in, in kind of my eyes and my nose and my hands and things like that though I had my mother's coloring. And my personality was much more like his. And I was a storyteller and you know, I was fed by him, and he was really the mediator in the family against my mother's disappointment. He was the one that would try and hold out for things, he was the one that would play and be adventurous, and, and my mother was, you know, that's not appropriate, we can't do that, why are we still poor? And he was like, well, you know it's not easy to be poor, but lets' get on the motorcycle and take a ride. Because we can still afford gas, and so, let's do it.

So, they were, they were always in contradiction to each other, and that may have been the point. Um, because they could I don't know, man, I don't know how they ever got together, frankly. It looked like, weird to me, but they were together! And so, uh, he was really, what a mismatched couple, in a way.

ANDERSON: But they lasted so long.

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, but you know, here's what they had in common. They had each other's back. And they were fiercely loyal to each other, and to the hard times they had come through. They also had known each other from childhood. So I think that there was something very profound about growing up with each other, and marrying, and knowing each other's lives and histories. And uh, they, they really had made a commitment that it was going to work with them, that they were not prepared to break. Even though, I don't think my mother thought of leaving except at one point, early on, when she got in the women's movement, and I really think she did think of leaving, for awhile, for like, six months, then closed up that possibility. My dad, I think, always thought of leaving, but didn't have the guts. So he was constantly, as I was growing up, talking to me about other women, and you know, asked me at one point how I'd feel if he married my aunt— who he had dated before he married my mother. You know, incest stuff is like, very weird, in poor white trash —

ANDERSON: Where does that come from, for him? I mean, does that come from his family, the incest? Do you know?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, he, he— it is not, this is not what I know, so again. This was not, this was opaque in my family, but — it was very clear that my dad was attracted to his mother, and his mother was attracted to him. It's also clear that Gypsy began to teach my father about sex when he was about

five—brought women in for him, and maybe participated, it's never been quite clear to me what her role was, but clearly there was real stuff that went on between them, which then when my father married my mother really became a problem, because the sexuality wasn't just on Gyp's part, it was my dad, too. I mean, clearly there was a sexual current between them that was intense, and that my mother found appalling. And didn't want to participate in, and didn't approve of. And my dad then, was himself, somehow compromised I think, in his own sexuality when he was young, by his mother. Um, so, it much, very much fits the pattern. And he was pretty much sexually out of control all his life. Now with men, that's a weird thing to talk about, because nobody ever thinks they're out of control—

ANDERSON: That's normal.

HOLLIBAUGH: That's normal, right? So the fact that he, as far as I could figure out, he slept with anybody he could sleep with, he—

ANDERSON: Do you think that included men? Or you mean only women and girls?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, I actually, I'm not sure that it did, but his best friend from high school was a gay man who married and had children and then talked to my dad about it, took my dad to gay bars and then ultimately committed suicide. One of those closet things that— and when I came out, my dad talked to me a lot about it, and said, "I don't want you to live like that, it is fine to be gay, he was a wonderful man, you can have a good life."

My mother was appalled when I came out, but my dad knew gay people. He didn't suggest that he had slept with men, but he suggested that he had flirted with men. And he was much more generous about sex. I mean, he thought sex was great; my mother thought sex was appalling. He believed in doing it as often as possible, my mother believed in doing it as rarely as possible. And he, he really, he was really an interesting guy around sexuality. But he always had lovers, always, endlessly, and I knew it from the time I was little, and I'm sure my mother knew it.

I think the kind of deal had been that he wouldn't get too deeply involved, and he would never leave the marriage, and in exchange for that, she would not leave him every time he started sleeping with somebody. I also think that that's part of how I got so trapped in their sexual dynamic, is that, you know, I then became the sexual object that she was unprepared to be, which is I think what part of her guilt was so heavy around.— is that she knew damn well that— the bottom line of a marriage is that you agree to remain someone's sexual partner through time. That is the deal. Not that you like it, but that you'll do it. And



that's how you can claim monogamy—I'll do it for you, you'll do it for me. When in fact that's not really very possible, that's a very difficult deal to keep.

And so mother did a whole lot in her life to structure the impossibility of sex. She had a bad back, and she wore a metal brace, she was often ill—I mean, she really, you know, psychosomatic illness. I mean, she really was profoundly influenced by her hatred of sex, and therefore made herself sick so that she wouldn't have to have it. And so my dad did what was both acceptable and what was really upsetting to her, which is he had a million lovers. And, he was kind of proud of it. I mean I think he thought was wily and uugh.

It's kind of disgusting but—and when I got in the women's movement the first period where I think my mother was really thinking of leaving my dad for the first time I was in a commune, and one night—you know, we were all sleeping in a million different rooms, and you know, it was like, those days—and I heard this woman in the room next to me having sex with somebody, and it sounded to me like my dad, and I got up the next morning, and it was! In my commune!

And so that was one of the first times that I had a confrontation with my father about incest. And said to him, "I know what you fucking have done, and I know what you're doing now, and mom doesn't know it, and this is like, unacceptable, and if you want me to expose you, I will— If you don't stop this affair, I'm like— because this woman that you're sleeping with is in mom and my's CR group, so mom is like, in her fucking CR group, this woman who's fucking you, this is like, unacceptable, she's twenty, mom's fifty."

ANDERSON: Oh my God. Did he stop?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. He did.

ANDERSON: He knew, though, that you lived in that house, when he came home with her?

HOLLIBAUGH: Absolutely!

ANDERSON: Yeah. Of course he did. Yeah.

HOLLIBAUGH: Aachh. He was really out of control, I mean, he was really out of control and he was very uh, willful, about what he wanted to do. I, you know, as much as I think that there were ways that he was quite wonderful and quite magical, he was really a rat about sex. And it was the way that my parents tormented each other.

My dad tormented my mother by always wanting sex, and she tormented him by never giving it to him! And, you know, this was the, this was the, the scripture between them, this was the, the fight, the undercurrent, the viciousness between them. And so my father would have these wild affairs that everybody knew about, including all the—you know, it's not like he was ever discreet. And my mother would have to tolerate it with the understanding that he wasn't going anywhere.

And at one point early on in women's liberation, I think my mother really thought of leaving him, uh, and then, couldn't get the nerve to do that. She was still a person that had two years of high school, she had no ability to support herself economically. She was then, by that time, in her late forties or early fifties—the idea didn't stick, the idea of having to take care of herself I think was really terrifying, and she couldn't leave.

ANDERSON: You said that even amongst your peers, your friends, the trailer park—you guys all stood out, that the Hollibaughs always stood out.

HOLLIBAUGH: We did.

ANDERSON: So what were some of the ways, even amongst the motorcycle culture—what are some of the ways, I mean, was it — was your dad's sexual activity one of the ways because everybody knew?

HOLLIBAUGH: No, I don't think so. In fact, it became more problematic when my parents had taken on a new life, because the world my dad was having sex in was a world that was close to my mother's world. In the former world, in the world where my dad was a construction worker and a mechanic and all these things, he had a world out there that he fucked around in and then there was the world of my mother and their couple friends. And he didn't cross that line too often, as far as I can figure out. Occasionally, but not too often. It's kind of like, you know, the way that non-monogamy often works in relationships, I think, is that you say, out of sight, out of mind, don't ask, don't tell, do it when it won't impinge on our life. And he tried to do that as much as he could. And they then, could tolerate it as a couple. The ways that we were really different—some was things like motorcycles and cars and speed, that was really very different in my family than most of the other families I knew, though we rode motorcycles with a lot of people that had, that were on bikes and stuff, but they didn't tend to have kids—

ANDERSON: Strapped to the gas tank!

HOLLIBAUGH: Strapped to the gas tank! They didn't strap their under-one-year old on the motorcycle, and they weren't part of a motorcycle gang. My dad was also a very gifted mechanic, car mechanic, and he raced cars, raced motorcycles, flew airplanes, he drove boats. I mean, kind of anything with speed and anything with—that you could tinker with he did, and he built. And he built me a motorcycle when I was five that was fabulous, you know? And I had my own motorcycle when I was five years old. And it—you know, you get raised in that, you don't know that it is so different, but clearly it was. Quite different than most of the people that I knew.

And they also, because Dad was Romany, they lived somewhat differently than other poor people. My dad would pack us up and put us in the car and there'd be a tent in the car, and we'd go someplace and he'd find a job, and we'd live there for six months. And then we'd come back to the trailer court where we had a trailer, and we'd move back in. But, it's like, they had a different idea about life, and how life was to be kind of framed and, and structured, that, at least when I was young, was much more open than a lot of people had. If we wanted to go someplace and do something, we took off. And if they had to take me out of school, well, big deal. They weren't worried about it, and I did good in school, and that was fine.

My brother wasn't with us at that point. And then, when I was about eight, the three boys who I was closest to, who were my cousins, my mother's sister's kids, came to live with us. And I was really raised with them for years. She had gone through a divorce, she had no money, and she was an alcoholic. And so, we raised the boys, for years. And so, they'd be with us for a year and a half and then they'd be gone for six months while she would try and take them back and it wouldn't work, and then they'd come back.

And then there'd be—we took all the kids in the family. Because the one thing that was true was that we were stable; we were poor, but we were stable, and their marriage was stable. Nobody else's marriage, that had kids, ever was stable. So, people were married and divorced, they had kids, they were by themselves, and so, we became the kind of, we were the institution that took kids in so that they didn't have to go into foster care, they didn't have to go into the military, they didn't—if they were troubled kids, we would take them before something would happen. So, I was both raised by myself, and then raised with all these other kids, and then my brother came when I was eleven or twelve and he was with us until I was fifteen, and so it was a very weird configuration of how many kids was I raised with, and how, did I have my own room, was I sharing with 17 different people?

IANDERSON: Yeah, tell me what your home looked like.

HOLLIBAUGH: Which one?

ANDERSON: Well, the one that you— well, you were stable in terms of coming back to a certain trailer park and so you had one that, that lasted for a number of years, right? That you had one stable home...

HOLLIBAUGH: There were two different ones that were really stable. For—my parents bought an acre of land that we had a trailer on for a long time while they built a house. So, that was kind of — so my dad would, for instance, take scrap lumber, and recondition it and then, you know, they would save enough that they could build a bathroom ,they could build, you know, so it took them years to build this fucking house. Because they never bought anything that ever went into this house. And they built it together.

My mother was very, very good at, and loved doing construction work, as he did. And that was their idea of fun. So, a good time, was, you know— it just really amazed me— was, you know, building the furniture that would go in the living room. That was what they thought was really like, a really good weekend. And I had no aptitude for this and they— it infuriated them. Because for them, these were class skills. You needed to know how to fix a toilet because you couldn't afford to get somebody in. You needed to know how to build something— and I was like, I want to read! And they were like, what kid did we get here? You know, what are you talking about?! You need to, you know, you need to work with your father, you need to work with me, you need to learn how to sew, you need to learn how to embroider, you need to learn how to— but they were willing to have it be all the skills, not just girl skills— but, fixing a car, fixing a motorcycle, you know.

My father had me underneath a car every four seconds. I, you know, it turned out I learned a lot but I hated it so much, and I didn't have much of an aptitude, and no interest. Uh, and so, we lived a kind of an unorthodox life in that, my dad was often, if he wasn't racing himself, he was in somebody's pit crew, and he then became part of the pit crew of many famous auto racers who were racing Porsches and racing class cars. They weren't just like hot rods that he was building, they were really expensive, Italian. I mean, he was really a remarkable mechanic. He could fix anything. When a part wasn't there he could figure out how to create one, and build it, without, you know, with glue— you know, it kind of always reminds me of the stories about Cuba, and how they keep the cars running and nobody can figure it out because they haven't had any of those car parts in the last 27 years, since the revolution. He was kind of like that, so he could keep anything going, he could fix anything.

It meant that I was then around speed all the time. My father raced motorcycles, raced cars. We were always at race tracks, we were always

in that, I was always in the area where the pit crews were while my dad was fixing something. And he also very early taught me to race, and so when I was about twelve, I guess, he wanted— there was a series of races in California, that were for kids under the age of 16, to race with, with parental permission. And he trained me, and I raced cars from the time I was twelve till I was about 16. And—

ANDERSON: And you really enjoyed that.

HOLLIBAUGH: I loved it. I loved, I love racing. I really loved racing. My father had, as far as I could figure out, was fearless. He really— everything about speed turned him on and focused his attention. I mean, when you're racing, you really need to not be afraid. You need to be smart, you need to look and see if this crash looks like it's going to kill you or not, but you need to not worry about it. You need to make a decision, and then keep going. I have to say that while I loved speed, there was a way that it scared me, and I knew that it could— and I knew that that was wrong. I knew that with speed, you have to be completely intelligent and focused, but not in any way frightened of how powerful it is, in order to survive it, otherwise you can't play there. Uh, but I have to say, that there were often times when I was racing cars and stuff that I was like, Ohhh shit!

ANDERSON: So you didn't go back to it as an adult.

HOLLIBAUGH: No, I didn't go back to it as an adult.

ANDERSON: I imagine the fear would only intensify as you get older.

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly.

ANDERSON: Just like, you can't go on a rollercoaster now, but you could when you were twelve.

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly! It's like, oh my God! But I was always like, behind my father, on his motorcycle. And I was always like, in a world where the people that were around us, that were in our friendship circle in my family, were about speed. The men and the women were always on motorcycles, always racing cars, always banged up, always in hospitals. My dad, you know, had steel plates in his head, and steel plates in his hands, and steel plates in his back. I mean, he had broken almost every bone in his body.

ANDERSON: Did that bankrupt you guys? You didn't have health insurance, did you?

HOLLIBAUGH: We didn't have any money. You know, I mean, those were pretty bad—

ANDERSON: So, were those the kind of things that you were in debt for? I mean..

HOLLIBAUGH: And that was part of — my mother liked speed too. She rode a motorcycle, she had her own bike. But that was where she would get mad at him for not taking good care of the family, is that he all of a sudden couldn't work for six months, and you know, she was always working, but now everything was on her plate and she had two years of high school. I mean, she was selling Avon door-to-door, she was —she was a seamstress and she was bringing people's clothes in, she was doing laundry, she was working in a See's candy factory. But it was like— Hello, you know, we need to actually, you need to not do this.

And he would not give it up. He didn't care what it meant. He was not going to stop speed. Speed was the thing he adored more than anything else in his life, and he was good at it. And part of the price of that choice was that there were injuries. You couldn't avoid it even— you couldn't avoid it, period. And that was how it was. And so you tried to, but you didn't stop. And he, he was very clear with me that that was why— that was what gave our life a framework that wasn't traditional, and that that really mattered. That he couldn't give me Gypsy culture, he couldn't give me nomadic life, which he loved. Um, and he'd had to settle down, in order to have a family, but he could still do speed, and he could be associated with speed.

A pit crew guy is completely connected to that car, even if he's not driving it. So he always found a million ways to do it, and he always had— we had no money, and we always had an incredible car. Because he'd get one that was a mess, and he would completely re-build it. You know, you can buy the body of any expensive car that's been destroyed, and if you've got the skill, you can rebuild the goddamn thing. He'd re-build it. So, when I was growing up, we'd have no money, and we'd have a Porsche. Because my dad had built the Porsche. Well, you know, I could then take that to school and have something— look as though I had something. You know?

It was really— it was an odd way to live, but it also meant that I learned to not, I had a perspective from a parent about not being traditional. And it doesn't mean that I didn't want to be traditional, of course I did, and I wanted to be liked, and I wanted to be normal, and I hated that my parents were so weird, and everything— made their lives hell, over it! But, but I had heard, and I had been raised with, a very different history, and that that was valuable. They— my parents didn't,

my dad did not hate how he was born and raised, valued it, loved it, and so I would hear that a lot from both of them. That was an important thing, that I should be proud of that. That it made me different in a way that was good, never, ever lie about it, never give it up.

And when I joined the civil rights movement— you know, coming from my kind of family, if you just looked at the kind of economics of my family, there wouldn't have been any support for that, and certainly, in the poor white trash part of my family, there wasn't. When I said to my parents, "I'm going South," they were terrified. They were really worried, they were really scared, but they did not stop me. It was like, racism is wrong, we understand why that's wrong, in our bodies, and we're glad that you— we value your choice. And so we're not very easy with you going so young, but we know why you, we know how big this problem is. We don't have any illusion that America is a country, because we're white, that is a safe place to live. And so, with our blessings....

ANDERSON: Tell me about when you went to boarding school. In your—is that a—as we're going to try and chronicle your escape from California, and you're gathering the tools to create a different life for yourself and have a different dream for yourself, is the boarding school year a critical experience in that?

51:45

HOLLIBAUGH: Critical. It's probably the most critical.

ANDERSON: So let's talk a little bit about that.

HOLLIBAUGH: I think that what's important about that is to kind of have a context. While my family rode motorcycles and stuff, I got into high school. I was put in an accelerated program because I was smart. And it was too accelerated and I didn't really understand what was going on, and I didn't have any help, and I started to fail. Now, I had been a straight-A student all my life. The only thing I could kind of do was read and stuff, so to fail. I remember my freshman year as one of the most horrifying years because I had never failed, and it was the only thing I really had. And so, I changed all my report cards. I'd get F's and change them to B's. And it was easy in those days, you know, they weren't very, technically very sophisticated. And uh—

ANDERSON: And that was just for your parents' benefit.

HOLLIBAUGH: That was for my parent's benefit. And in that failing, as my life unraveled there, I also was in terrible conflict with my mother. I had

told her about the incest and she had not supported me. I had started dating men that were much older, kind of in response to that. I was—and I was out a lot. I was out with girlfriends and boyfriends, I was fucking around, I wasn't exactly having a lot of sex yet, but you wouldn't have known that. I became a “bad girl.” And that actually had never been true for me. I had been poor white trash or mixed race in the schools, and often considered other and not someone you wanted to be a friend with or take home, but I had been a straight-A student, I had been a “good girl” in that sense.

In high school, as I began to fail, I really came undone. I just couldn't, to me there was only one shot out, which was to try and become a nurse, I mean that was kind of what I was thinking about, and I wasn't passing. I mean, I didn't even know how I could possibly get into school, it wasn't like my parents were talking about it. But I had hoped that maybe I could become a nurse and go to school and blah, blah, blah, technical school.

And it was clear I wasn't going to make it. And then, being different really began to have—I began to take on my own rebellion inside my family as well as in the high school. Uh, in terms of the way I dressed. I was—I didn't go to school very much. If I was going to fail, then fuck'em. You know what I mean? I was going to go down as a really bad kid. And I was in incredible rebellion against my mother, who was much more the person who tried to—my mother believed in rules. My mother believed in right and wrong. And so, you had to be home by a certain time, and you had to do things a certain way, and you had to dress a certain way, and blah blah blah blah blah. So, fuck you—if you really wanted to make my mother crazy—you know my mother got up at 6 or 7 in the morning every morning; if you slept until 9, she was like, out of her mind. It was like, “get up!” And so, to rebel, by wearing clothes that she would have considered inappropriate—

ANDERSON: Which would have looked like what?

HOLLIBAUGH: Oh, you know what those times were like. You know, wearing something that was low-cut. Wearing something that was revealing, wearing fuck-me pumps to a high school party, you know instead of tennis shoes. The high school was, you know, a poor high school, nobody had a hell of a lot, but you know there was demeanor! Even if you were wearing poodle-skirts or some horrifying thing. So my mother saw that I was really going down, and I think because we were so estranged from each other, I think have a clue what to do about it. I think that she was really in a panic. I mean, she had had a kid at fourteen, she did know that I was going to get knocked up, and that I was never—I don't know that she wanted me to get out of there, but I think she wanted me not to have a life like hers.



ANDERSON: She wanted you to graduate high school.

HOLLIBAUGH: Any parent that's been poor hopes that their child has options. And even if the options are very minimal, you know, like marrying a good man at 18, you know, not having sex before you get married, whatever it was, I wasn't going in that direction, it was pretty clear I wasn't going in that direction. My mother was at a doctor's appointment at a very fancy doctor and she read in his waiting room *Vogue Magazine*. Now, in those years, *Vogue Magazine* was a very elite magazine, it was not for public consumption in the way that now these magazines are, you couldn't even get them in a lot of places. They used to, in *Vogue Magazine*, list private schools. And so, my mother ripped out the pages in the magazine that listed private schools.

I don't know how she ever came up with this idea, but she wrote to every single one of them—and there were really probably 30, or 40—I mean, they were all across the United States and in Europe. She wrote to every single one of them, requesting information, and she asked if they had scholarships. How she ever came up with this idea, I'll never know. One of the schools had what they called a "High I.Q./Low Achiever" program, which they were beginning, they were trying. This was a very elite school, and they were trying this because they wanted diversity. I'm sure that that's what was going on.

Because they were a school that served the ruling class, basically, and they—this was a school that was in Lugano, Switzerland. It was both girls and boys, men and women. The school was in a castle. And it served families of, of wealth that, for instance, were in the Middle East, and wanted their kids not to be going to school in the Middle East. Or, you know, one of the kids that was in my class was the son of the president of Costa Rica, um, it was that kind of—but these kids, this school, because it was quite liberal and artsy for those days anyway, uh, also took a lot of kids that were rebellious. That were the rebellious ruling class kids that were listening to Bob Dylan when you know, nobody else was listening to Bob Dylan, or whatever. Listening to civil rights music. And so this school wrote my mother and said they had scholarships, and because they mostly pulled their kids from the east coast and overseas, they didn't have any kids from the west coast at all. So, they came out, they interviewed us. Unbelievable.

ANDERSON: They were like, this is diversity. We don't have any kids like her!

HOLLIBAUGH: Really! We don't know if she can do this. We really don't have any kids like her. And but, they accepted me. So I flew from California to Lugano Switzerland, I mean, I'd never been out of California—

ANDERSON: Or on an airplane? Had you ever been on an airplane?

HOLLIBAUGH: I think I'd been on an airplane. I think I might have flown an airplane between San Francisco— between the north and south— southern California. Something like that, and I think we'd one time gone to Mexico, because we lived near the border, but you know, I mean— nothing. And so— you know, Lugano, Switzerland?! I mean Lugano Switzerland is one of the most ruling class and beautiful, elegant towns in Switzerland. It's near Italy. It has its own opera, it has its own ballet company, it has its own Picasso museum and I flew to Milano and then they took us to Lugano. And like the, I've told this story before, but—

ANDERSON: We have like, two minutes left, Amber, so I'm wondering if I should put in a new tape.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, a new tape.

END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

ANDERSON: To, Lugano Switzerland...

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, it just, just because this is a telling thing, I think. The school gave out a book of rules and regulations and kind of information about, you know, you're attending the school, this is what you wear, this is, you know, how many blouses you can have, this is how many skirts you can have, you know, it was a boarding school, and so they had rules and regulations about what you could do and what you couldn't do. Now, the ruling class kids that attended this school paid no attention to this booklet, and you know, basically brought in whatever they wanted to, and it was like, fuck you, make me take my mink home.

Me and my parents believed this book, and it was tiny, the amount of things you could bring, and so my mother made all my clothes to take, and she made every single one of them reversible. So, every skirt was reversible, every blouse was reversible, and then we bought a pair of tennis shoes that matched every single outfit that she made me, so that I would always have matching shoes. Now, you know, it didn't occur to us that it snowed in Switzerland, or anything like that. We didn't really know very much about where I was going. So, I got over there, you know, and I bring my little trunk in, and all these other girls and boys, but girls especially are bringing their clothes in, you know, and they're bringing— it was just unfathomable to me that they could have that many clothes and that many books and—

ANDERSON: Had you ever been around that kind of wealth before? Ever seen it?

HOLLIBAUGH: Never, I knew nothing about it, because I also hadn't been raised in an urban setting, so I didn't even have city life, you know, where I think you can find the neighborhoods that are wealthy neighborhoods more easily and that kind of stuff. Poverty really does isolate you from certain kinds of things. And so, there had been people that were less poor and more poor, but I had never, ever met somebody of wealth. Ever, in my life. And now suddenly I was in a school that was completely about wealth. I went there, I had bleached blonde hair that I had tinted a kind of pinkish color to go with my magenta suit and heels— oh, this didn't go over well! And I think the school was appalled. I mean, I think—

ANDERSON: But they had come out and met you—

HOLLIBAUGH: They had come and met me, but I— you know I think that they, they had not understood for themselves what class really meant. And they had not come to our trailer, they had not come to our house. We had interviewed in a restaurant. You know, my mother and I had bought a very nice outfit to wear; and I don't think they looked very hard, frankly. There was only 3 kids in this whole program. There was only,

like, 60 kids in the school. So this was an experiment. And the other two kids that they brought were middle class kids, but they were Jewish. I mean, that was their idea of diversity, because these were all WASPS. So, I was, I was the other. And I really— I learned about class there in a way that I don't think I would have ever quickly understood. Nobody wanted to room with me.

ANDERSON: You didn't room alone, did you?

HOLLIBAUGH: No. People always had roommates. And uh, so people would refuse to live with me. People claimed that I dressed funny, that I smelled. I mean, all the kind of class stereotyping all happened. And then it was really awful. And I didn't know what to do. And, and also I didn't know how to be in school. I mean, I didn't know how to write papers. I didn't know— and this was a school that was scholastically very rigorous. This was not a finishing school. These kids went on to Vassar and Yale and Smith. And those were the schools those kids went to. And suddenly, I was in this place where people understood how to, how to study for a paper, how to talk in classes where there were 4 or 5 students, how to make an argument, and luckily I had a history professor who was a Lebanese immigrant, first generation immigrant who got it, that I was really in trouble. And I went to him and said, "I really am in trouble and I don't know what to do, I don't know why I'm failing." I studied, I mean, I really worked hard, I really tried. But I didn't know how to write a paper-

ANDERSON: And they didn't provide the extra support for you either, right? You didn't have any tutoring or extra—

HOLLIBAUGH: No! No! It's like you have a high I.Q. Well, you know that doesn't do you really much good. So, he said to me, "Well, I can't change your grade, but I can help you understand why." And he gave me the Communist Manifesto. He was a commie. And I took it and I read it, I was 15. And it blew me away. I mean, I really began to understand in a way that was so profound, that my parents hadn't done something wrong, that it was not my fault that I was poor, that that there was a structure, too, called class, that all of us were living through, and that this was my place in it, and that that was what I needed to understand in order to survive in this place.

And he said to me, "You know, I can't pass you but I can help you learn how to think." And he really did work with me. I mean, he really didn't think I was stupid, and so he helped me learn how to make an argument, he helped me figure out what to read, I mean, I didn't know what to read— I didn't know how to choose what book— you know, there's a million books— what books do you choose? If you don't know anything, what poetry book is the book to read? What book of good

literature? You know, what, what book of you know, world politics? What, blah blah blah. So he really helped me a lot.

And though I was flunking out of the school, they were so distressed, that they had never had anybody fail at that school, that they convinced a number of teachers to inch my grades up so that I could pass. This was my senior year, so, that I would get a high school diploma. And they did do that, uh, and then I went with Gil Shasha, which was his name, and his parents owned a hot dog stand in New London, Connecticut. And I went and worked in his parents' hot dog stand in New London, Connecticut and hung out with Lebanese—

ANDERSON: You mean, once you graduated.

HOLLIBAUGH: Hung out with Lebanese communists, and then joined the civil rights movement. But it was really his— I mean that was kind of in the air, there was lots that you heard even across the ocean about the civil rights movement and about Bob Dylan and protest music and the Beatles and all of that stuff was happening. This was 19, like, 63. But it was his giving me the Communist Manifesto that actually— well, one other thing, and I'll just kind of finish it with this story.

The other thing that happened is that there was a girl in the school who was the wealthiest girl in the school, but she was Southern. So all these Eastern, snotty, ruling-class kids dissed her, all the time. She came from a very wealthy, ruling class family, but from, like uh, someplace in North Carolina. She smoked a pipe, she was probably a dyke. And she saw how I was being treated, and she claimed me. She roomed with me, and she would take — she would decide to go to Paris for the weekend and she would take us. She'd decide to go to the opera, she'd take me. I mean, my parents got me in there, I was on scholarship, they mortgaged their house in order to have any money to give me, but they had almost none.

So there was you know, like all ruling class schools, all boarding schools, there's extra-curricular everything. My parents didn't have the money for extra-curricular everything. Their idea of extra-curricular was to go to La Scala for the season and listen to opera. Well, you know, my parents did not have that money, and so she paid for me. She took me there, she— and because, though she was dissed, she had more money than anybody else in that school, she made them suffer. And we formed this kind of united front, and she helped me survive it, along with this one teacher, who really explained class to me.

But it was one of the most important intellectual moments of my life. Because I had never known the world of ideas. Even as good a student as I had been up through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they weren't good schools, and then I had failed through high school, so I hadn't been in what might have been the most creative, if there had been any, classes. It had never occurred to me that this world existed— of literature, of poetry, of music, of plays and theatre and ideas. I didn't know that there

was a world where people lived with these things as what was commonplace. And I was hungry for every single piece of it, and I wanted it, and I didn't want to go home.

ANDERSON: And you were hungry, also, for the kind of culture she exposed you to, I mean, did you feel uncomfortable, did you feel, I don't fit in here, I don't understand this.

HOLLIBAUGH: I wanted it, and I felt completely uncomfortable. I mean, I didn't understand it. I certainly didn't understand it. But I saw that it was a world where people functioned outside of poverty. And they functioned with a kind of creativity that I had never seen. And so, I wanted that more than anything. Although I don't think it had any kind of shape to me. But when I— and I was desperate when the school was ending, because I knew that my parents had given me the only shot that they could give me, and that I was going to go back—it was unlikely—I mean, I almost flunked out from there— how was I going to get out? I mean, it didn't— it, it showed me that there was a bigger world, but it didn't show me how to enter a bigger world.

And I was just, I was beside myself. I hated my parents for not having money, I blamed them. I didn't appreciate that they had done this remarkable thing. I was humiliated. I knew that I could never bring anybody home, I knew that they could never read any of the books that I had read, even though I wasn't quite sure how I had read any of the books I had read! Still, I had read "The Magic Mountain." Who read "The Magic Mountain" when you were in high school? You know. But this school, you read "The Magic Mountain". And I read Chaucer, and I had an idea that there was this richness of complex, interesting intersections. And I couldn't figure out how you got there. Because it was clear to me you didn't just move to a city and then have it.

ANDERSON: You didn't think, oh I'll just stay here and I'll figure out a way to make it work.

HOLLIBAUGH: No. It was clear to me you had to have access and that they had access and I didn't have access. And that once I left that school, I wasn't going to have access and my parents didn't have any access, and so I was going to be dumped back, but now with, with named longings rather than unnamed longing. Before then, I'd been rebellious, but I had no idea how to get out. I'd longed to marry a movie star. You know, that was likely! You know what I mean? I'd had dreams before, but they had no reality at all. Now I had dreams that were in some way more likely than marrying a movie star, but no more likely for me. It was no more likely that I'd marry Elvis than I'd go to Harvard. In fact, probably I had a better shot at Elvis than I had at Harvard!

And you know, I mean, it just wasn't going to work. And I couldn't figure out what I was going to do. I mean, I was just in terrible despair

and bitterness— it was like— you showed me that there's a world that's a rich world, a world of expanse and creativity and elegance and —aahh! And now you're going to put me back in a trailer court?! I don't think so. And I was really, I was really beside myself. I really didn't know what to do.

I went home. I stayed home for a very short period of time, I then went and worked in New London, and then I went home again. It was clear to me— working at a hot dog stand in New London, CT didn't beat where I was. And I started going to a coffeehouse, which is what they had then, these were the alternative spaces. And they were really alternative spaces then, I mean, it wasn't chic to be hip. It was like these were really old beatnik hangouts that had begun to transition into alternative spaces for what would become the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, and all of that.

And I went to these places, this one coffeehouse, and heard a series of speakers about the freedom summers. The SNCC freedom summers, and the freedom rides and stuff like that. And I was just enamored. And I felt like, you know what do I have to lose? It's not like I have a good job I'm giving up! Fuck it, and I went. You know, I mean, that's really, you know, and it looked to me— I mean, I wasn't thinking of it as an alternative, I can't say that. But I knew I had a dead-end life and it looked like something that really mattered. And so I thought, the best I can do is have a life that matters. And I can try to do something that matters, and I'll try it.

And so I went south, but you know, I stayed a very short period of time. Because when I got there, they were looking at me like, how old are you? You know, I was sixteen. I don't think I— maybe I was seventeen, but probably I was sixteen. They knew how young I was, it was clear that— and I was so blond and so white, in the middle of Mississippi, I mean, it wasn't a good mix probably under any circumstances, but it certainly wasn't a good mix when I was that young. And they said, "You can't, you can't do this."

They sent me to Atlanta for awhile, which is kind of where the headquarters of the South were, and I worked there, but I hated Atlanta, and then they sent me up north to do a little work, which was in New York City. And then I just started finding my life as a political person. It was the most adventurous and the most open kind of cultural life, too. It was where nobody asked you— you didn't have to have a degree to love poetry, you didn't have to have a degree to go to the theatre, if it was alternative theatre, you didn't have to have a lot of money.

Alternative culture was an explosive part of the sixties and seventies. And so, It isn't that I felt comfortable as though I had a background, but I didn't feel uh, as though I didn't have a right to it, because I claimed the political perspective that those alternative creative worlds were functioning within. So that— it felt as though it was mine. It allowed me bookstores, it allowed me an intellectual life.

13:40

I was very inarticulate. I mean, I really, you know I try to say this to people who come from, from my kind of background—I really—I wasn't good at public speaking, I didn't know how to make a good argument. I really—the left was my college. And it really was an extraordinary college. I mean, I met brilliant people. I really had to learn how to defend an idea, because people had them. I really had to be able to read, because there was no right way to do it. So while there was profound sexism and profound racism and all the rest of it, there was also a profoundly open world of the possible, and the—if you think you're going to change the world, then frankly, you feel right at home, because the world that you're in, isn't right. And you're saying that, so the fact that you come from my kind of background—it didn't make me, I didn't talk about my background—I wasn't willing to let people know how poor I'd been or mixed race or any of that, that came later. But it did give me a sense that I had a right to it, and that I uh,, that I had a future in it. That I didn't have to worry about a career, I had not been raised with the assumption that I would have a profession, uh, or get married in that traditional way.

Living an unorthodox life actually was quite an unradical idea, given how my father had been raised so, in some ways, while it was unpredictable, that world looked to me like the most extraordinary way out of ending up in a trailer court, married to a garage mechanic, or a woman that looked like a garage mechanic—you know what I mean, woman or man, whatever it was going to be, this was a world that held out possibility. That was a world, at best, that held out Woolworth's make-up counter, and a working-class bar existence. I mean, it was clear to me I wouldn't have any life if I went back there. And this was a way to not care.

So, I got to rebel against my own background, I got to incorporate my own background in a way that I probably couldn't have and would had to have lied about it, and I got to have a future, even though the future was about revolution rather than career. Uh, and I got, within that mix, to be—nobody knew what they were doing, so everybody was trying to learn it—I mean we were learning from old commies, we were learning from the, from whoever had been—

ANDERSON: But you weren't at a disadvantage because of your lack of education.

HOLLIBAUGH: The fact that I didn't know how to do a leaflet was no different than everybody else that was sitting around. And it needed to get done. So, you know, you just had to like shut up and go to work. And I was very good at shutting up and going to work. And I was very good at working hard. I was incredibly—I was not middle-class in that way—I was like, if you need to stay up until four o'clock because it needs to get done, then you stay up 'til four o'clock to get it done.

And I was also good in a way at living with being with afraid. And I think that that—it was very frightening, to go up against institutions



with power. And quickly, people were really frightened about what the implications of those challenges were. Sometimes people, I think, were able to override their class assumptions or their fury fueled it, and so they could go up against it, but I came from a place where living with always being afraid because you're going to get caught, imprisoned, or targeted, was something that had been the trajectory of my own life, and of my family's.

And so, in that sense, stigma was not what frightened me and power, while it frightened me, did not stop me. Because personally, I think when you come from a certain kind of background and you intend to get out, you intend to get out. And you'll do what you have to do to get out. And I knew I wasn't going back. I was like, I'll die before I'll go back. And so it then gave me a way out that wasn't narcissistic, and wasn't individualistic, it gave me a community, and it gave me values. All of which were what I could never had had, even if I had gone back to my home town, been with nice people, come out, um, and had the very best of whatever the class possibilities were in that place, I could have never had a big life.

So, the irony for me was not that the movements were downwardly, made me downwardly mobile, those movements made me upwardly mobile. It gave me voice, and it gave me knowledge, that I could have never had, under any other circumstances. And I now see these working class kids who have gotten a scholarship to Smith or, you know, Harvard or whatever, and they are so strung out. They're so by themselves. They feel so odd, and so peculiar, in a class institution that appears to welcome them but really doesn't value precisely what they bring in their experience. And, and I, you know I just feel like endlessly saying to them, you are going to pay a price for trying to leave. But don't give up what you remember about your own life in order to go forward. You'll really be haunted by the messiness and the lack of perfection, unless you come to terms with how much your life doesn't resemble the lives of people around you. And you will not be able to figure out that their lives were probably more complicated than they presented too if you can't come to terms with your own. Because then you'll long for the rightness—

ANDERSON: A fantasy.

HOLLIBAUGH: That's a fantasy that they carry, too. So, you know, cut it loose, and you know, actually value your own history enough, to be able to speak from it, rather than use somebody else's words to give you value. You know? So, in that sense, it was the right moment and I was the right person for the time in this country when— and I feel like it was the greatest gift I ever got. My parents gave me the, the knowledge that there was a bigger world, and then there was a bigger world, which I could access. And the combination meant that in the end, I could have a life that was unheard of, unthinkable. That I could write a book, that I could make films, that I

could do what I've done in my life that I really am proud of and that I've really made a difference. And I could have an intellectual life, I could become an intellectual, I mean—

ANDERSON: And still honor where you come from, and the knowledge that life could still be—

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly. And not have to give up my own history in order to move to a place that really doesn't have much of an understanding of that at all, including the women's movement. You know, but it does mean, I think, when you claim those histories, you do stay other, even in your own movement. And that isn't fun. It really— you know, that's for tomorrow. But in some ways, I think that there is something interesting, even in movements that claim class and claim race and claim difference, the kind of unstated assumptions about who "we" are, and what that does then to create certain ideological perspectives, which is what I think about the Women Against Pornography stuff, and all of that, of sexuality, of desire, of power.

And there is nothing more painful, I think, than to be other, in a movement that claims otherness. There is nothing worse than hoping to finally have found some place where you really are okay and where who you are is valuable and what you think is agreed to by others, and then to have to be the critic, in that place, of the one spot where you've tried to be regular. It is what most people feel, I think, when they threaten any institution of power. When you come out of political movements that traditionally threaten power, that's not your values, you're not really worried about that in the same way, but challenging your own movement, when it means that losing it gives you no place to be, that's terrifying. And I do think that that's what people feel like whenever they challenge power in a place that they want to be accepted. And it's ugly.

ANDERSON: I'm sure you'll have lots to say about it tomorrow.

HOLLIBAUGH: I will. I will.

END TAPE 3

## TAPE 4

ANDERSON: Where do you feel like going today?

HOLLIBAUGH: I guess there are two different things, I think. One is I want to do the sexuality thing, I think that'd be easier than jumping into politics, which is just kind of a— really, it'll overlap, but it's, it's a very particular, longer kind of place to meander through, so I think that at least, starting for two hours on sexuality might be a good way to do it. But I also want to go back a little bit, and I think we should do that next time, not this time. I'll fill out another one of those family things—

ANDERSON: I'll leave you, yeah—

HOLLIBAUGH: Because I realized like, you asked a question like, how big was your house, or what did your house look like, and I thought, I don't actually want to lose that by too quickly getting into the politics, and so, I want to go back there.

ANDERSON: Great. That'd be great.

HOLLIBAUGH: So we can do that next time around, we don't have to do it today, I just didn't want to lose the, the memory of that.

ANDERSON: And what's nice about the next time we meet is that we'll probably have a transcript, so they'll be, I'll be able to go through and see what some of those loose ends are.

HOLLIBAUGH: Do you do the transcripts?

ANDERSON: Somebody else will do the transcription, and very quickly. It probably won't be edited by the time that we get together, but there'll be a rough...And, um, so when we say we're going to talk about sexuality today, let's not be as ambitious to think we're going to get up into the 1980's and politics. We're just going to talk about Amber and your, more of your personal life and your desires, and the sex work, all that kind of stuff. So, we ended yesterday at the age of, roughly seventeen, you get back from Switzerland, you go home, you realize it's untenable, and make your way to New London.

1:40

HOLLIBAUGH: I think, the part of it that I think, just kind of to re-frame it, I— at the point where the incest stuff was really, where I told my mother what was going on and she refused to believe me and believed my father—

ANDERSON: But that happened a number of years, right— you're talking at what age, here?

HOLLIBAUGH: Eleven or twelve. Um, and if you look at the pictures in my book you can clearly see a shift in how old I look— and it clearly happened, that

was really, really, really a big crisis— and there wasn't, you know, there's nothing you can do about it— your parents believe you or they don't believe you. But it's one of the more, it's one of the most isolating and kind of terrifying— because it's terrifying to bring it up and then it's terrifying to not be believed. And there's, there is no proof, that's the point. And so, It's true that it makes parents vulnerable if a child is off-kilter. It also means that the kid has absolutely no allies that are going to help them in that mix. And no possibility of being protected.

I remember very clearly, I had started to date when I was 11 or 12, but after that kind of crisis— and it was about a year of a crisis around it— I really started deciding to date older men, that I couldn't afford to not date men that would conceivably be able to challenge my father. And I remember thinking about it really directly, that they had to be men who, I thought, could help buffer and frighten my father. Which I knew, no 14 year old boy was going to worry my dad, my dad was incredibly strong and very athletic, and big. He was 6'4". And so, trying to figure— you know, you're 11, you're trying to figure this, you're trying to work it out— and there's no—

ANDERSON: It's a very creative strategy for ending the abuse.

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, and it really helped. I have to say, it really helped. And the other thing I figured out to do was to date somebody that my dad knew. I thought it was more likely that I would get help there and that my dad would not transgress in some of the same ways, if the person I was dating was somebody that was in his friendship circle. And so, I decided to date older men. And I wasn't really very interested— I mean, I wasn't really interested in guys anyway, but I was enormously interested in love that could save you. And that looked to me, heterosexual. And so, I was kind of obsessed with romantic love, but not very obsessed with boys.

ANDERSON: You talk about reading all the trashy novels.

HOLLIBAUGH: And just, endlessly fantasizing, you know, a marriage that would remove me, a relationship that would give me wealth and protection. Erase, kind of, my own history and begin to kind of catapult me into a world I couldn't figure out how to get to, and it looked to me like that was attached to men. But it didn't have anything to do with desire. It didn't, you know, I didn't dislike men, but I wasn't particularly, overwhelmingly, erotically drawn to them. They were just who girls dated. And I remember even early, thinking to myself this phrase, which I intend someday to make a film of, called, *The Kiss I Could Never Find*. That I kept thinking, I would go to movies and I would watch women making out with men on the screen, and I would think, it's not right, somehow, there's something missing there, you know, it's not the right person. But I couldn't figure out what that might look like. And I

think for fems, that's really complicated, because you're not looking for girlish girls. You're not looking for girl— your signifier isn't a girl in exactly a traditional way, and the signifier is a girl that's a boy that's a girl, and you can't find them, because they're not allowed on screen. So, if your imagery, if your sexual imagery is coming from books and movies and films, your love objects aren't available to you. So you might twist around how you could change blah blah— James Dean into blah blah, you're uncomfortable with it, and it doesn't quite give you comfort. It doesn't erotically tell you what you want to know. But the guy that I was dating and that I dated a lot through high school was a guy named Hack Hackley.

ANDERSON: Sounds like he would be friends with Ace Hollibaugh—

HOLLIBAUGH: One of my dad's best friends.

ANDERSON: Now, what does dating mean when you're eleven or twelve? What would you do?

HOLLIBAUGH: Go to movies, go to a drive-in, go to—you know this was rural California, so there were a lot of rural—there were a lot of drive-in restaurants, you know, where you parked your car, and women came out. In fact, I used to do that kind of work and they would serve you at the side of your car and they would bring the tray and that kind of shit. Go to football games. But in rural areas, a lot of dating is also driving in cars to isolated places and trying to figure out if you're going to have to fuck.

So I started smoking because it was clear to me that in a bad circumstance, you could always light up, that was completely permissible, and when you were smoking a cigarette, it was very hard for a guy to come on to you, but you could also use it as a threat. You could keep a person distanced from you by how you held it, blowing the smoke, I mean, it was just a tool. And, my entire family smoked like, smoked like chimneys, and so, it wasn't like I hadn't started smoking already trying it out, but I remember pretty consistently at twelve, starting to smoke, a lot. And that it was completely tied to dating and to fear about sexuality. Because I didn't actually— I loved being sexually provocative, but I didn't particularly want to date. I mean, I didn't want to fuck.

ANDERSON: Had you hit puberty at this point?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, I'd hit puberty. And, but, I didn't— you know, when incest is your— that doesn't tell you anything about sex, it just tells you about violation. So, it's not as though you know more, although you're not completely naïve and you know, unaware of where a penis goes, but it doesn't really make a lot of sense to you. So, I started dating this guy. We didn't actually have sex, although we messed around a lot. Um, but

he was really a protection, against my father. He was one of my father's friends. My father and he raced motorcycles together every Saturday; he was around all the time. He was somebody I'd known since I was four or five. My mother wasn't too wild that I was twelve and he was 30 or 32 or something, she wasn't like, thrilled on that front. But I think actually they were both, they knew I'd do it anyway. I mean, that was really the bottom line.

But the other thing is, I think because they— I don't know— in working class life, age is not the same thing. I know twelve seems young, and I get that it's young, but my mother was married at fourteen. You know, so the assumption about how old you are and how you date, it just doesn't correlate in the same way. And I know that people relate that to trash to, you know, having no ability to protect your child and therefore they're on their own, and it's part of what's out of control about that culture. But I mostly think that you actually, you do grow up quickly when you have very little. And you know, people don't protest that you have to get a job when you're eleven, they protest that you're dating. It's like frankly, I would have preferred to have dated and not had to have a job!

And I started working when I was ten, and I just lied about my age. And nobody asks too much, you're working in a hamburger joint, you show up, you're tall enough. You know, they didn't ask. You worked for the summer, and a couple of nights after school, and you had a little money. And so, it was a life constructed around things being difficult and nothing being taken for granted, and within that, a guy that was 30, was a hell of a lot easier actually, to deal with than a guy who was 15 or 16, and just learning to drive and pretty much out of control and hoping that you're going to be his first score. A 30 year old is a more negotiable— I mean, they're adult in a way that makes it a little hard, but men have power, so you know, it's never like, too easy a deal in there.

So, you know, I dated older men as much as I could, I wasn't popular in high school, so it wasn't as though a million guys were beating down my door. Men that dated me that were around my own age, basically always said that they had fucked me, so I had a terrible reputation, although I wasn't actually having sex with them. But you know again, it's another one of those things, you say you didn't do it, they say you did do it— who's believed? Not you. Um, and after a while, I just stopped caring. Dating was a ritual that got you through high school and that was clearly an assumption about desire outside of place. You did it because that's what you were supposed to do, and so, it was part of your conversation, but it wasn't really part of what you were drawn to, independent of anything else.

It was when I left home, which was— you know, I went to that school at 15, I came back at 16, that was when I was independently trying to figure out relationships differently. And I was kind of finding

my way on the left, the early part of the left, and the hippie movement and stuff, kind of before it had all those names. That was the only time in my life that men, that I was confused about men rather than thought about men as a necessary kind of product. I'd been very ruthless about men, didn't really, I don't know— I was in love with love, but I was not in love with men. But that period was a period where I started to have a lot of sex, I was either 16 or 17, and I wanted, I had started to believe in great love. I don't know, I started creating this fantasy in my head—not like anything I had ever seen, but somehow, something that was, you know, fictional and cathartic, and I started looking around for who I thought that could be, and that changed the way that I tried to find people, but it didn't change the dynamic of what was going on, and once I was out on my own, I had no job skills.

So, I picked tobacco in Connecticut, and I picked hops in Bakersfield, and I picked, I picked fruit and vegetables, and I worked in really lousy factory jobs, and no end dry-cleaning plants. I mean, if people have never been poor, they don't know what it's like to have those— to have you go from one really shitty job to another really shitty job, where there is nothing but that at its end. There's no upward mobility at a dry-cleaning job, unless you're willing to be management, that was the only way out at those kind of jobs at all, and I quickly became a union organizer, and so that pretty much took care of that, but then I'd get fired from the job. So, you know—

ANDERSON: And would management have been available to women anyway?

HOLLIBAUGH: It's not clear to me, but it was through the union, you could conceivably try to get yourself into one of those kind of positions and with unions backing you, you might have been able to do it. But it would have been an untenable thing. So the work circumstance was really um, pretty bad.

And I had also grown up, doing Hawaiian dancing. In the growing valleys of California, many of the people that were in those growing valleys were GI's who had married Hawaiians and brought them to the mainland. And these women had kids that they wanted to teach their dance and language and culture to and they didn't really have any way to get the kids to do this, unless they could rope kids like me into it, because then it made it American. And so, very young, probably 4 or 5, I started doing Hawaiian dancing with only Hawaiian kids. And probably the best kind of teaching that I— I mean these were women teaching their own children the dances and the language and the music that they had learned themselves and were incredibly good at. So it wasn't like going to a dance school. It was going to you know, Auntie Vera's house, and she turned out to be you know, the dance teacher, and it was beautiful, and I loved it, and I had a real skill for it. It was a really beautiful dance form, and I loved it. I just felt passionately about it.

And so I did it, very rigorously, all the time, and in my — when I became 11 or 12, we formed a dance group that was me and five

Hawaiian girls, who would dance all over California, and it was pretty amazing. And it was mostly Hawaiian settings— I mean, it was huge, like gatherings in Northern California that would bring the Hawaiian community— and there would be, like, a thousand people. And there would be dance contests, I mean one of the things that happened was that dancing was going on, being taught in all of these communities. And so they would bring—everybody would come together in you know, Grass Valley, or Fresno, or Modesto, or one of these California towns. And you would dance. And I was one of the few girls that — white girls— that danced in that kind of setting. And I was really good.

ANDERSON: Did you make lasting friendships, or intimate friendships with the Hawaiian community?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah— well, I did while I was there. I did while I was there. But they really demanded that you live in a place, that you be a part of the community, because they were completely wedded to being in each other's lives. They weren't professional dance things. Although that's how I ended up in Las Vegas, because we ended up going there, working in lounges, doing Hawaiian dancing. And it so flipped me out. Because this was something I thought of as enormously beautiful and honorable, and in Hawaiian culture, it is not a sex show. It's not considered, I mean, it's definitely considered erotic, but it's considered very beautiful, and very— it's a story-telling method with your body. So no one would ever try and grab your costume, or try and pull your top down, or whistle, or something— it was just unheard of.

When we took the troupe to Las Vegas, of course it was a night club, I mean, it was a night club. And that's what they were there for, these guys were there for, a sex show. And I was shocked, I mean, I really, and offended, and you know, bitter and angry. Plus we had also learned Polynesian, Tahitian dancing. Which is a very different form of dancing than Hawaiian dancing. Hawaiian dancing is slow and melodic. Tahitian has a very different set of hip movements that are very difficult to learn, so—but we had learned that so we could work in these clubs.

ANDERSON: Did you have a chaperone, somebody's mom came?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, but whatever . Yeah, we had a chaperone. I mean, you're working. You're working a twelve o'clock shift, a four o'clock shift, you know, there's no control. I mean, your parents have signed off, they did have to sign off, but who knew? So, at a certain— I did that a couple of summers and occasional gigs. Um, and that— I made better money doing it— there wasn't great money, because you had to pay for your own costumes and things like that.

ANDERSON: Did you always share your wages with your family? How did you do that? When you say you started working at the age of ten— so, would you split it, was it yours, was it theirs? How did that work?



HOLLIBAUGH: It was mine and I always threw in for, to kind of cover extra stuff. But I didn't have to give it all to my mother and then keep a little bit for myself. Um, there were moments when things were so bad that that's what I did, but the understanding was that because there was nothing, that if I could get a little something for myself, then that could be used to get whatever it was that I needed.

And so, the dancing brought in some money, and I liked that, but I hated Hawaiian dancing in clubs. I just— it had been one of the few things that I felt was a beautiful thing in my life, that honored me and that I honored it, and I didn't want to do it. And so I left this troupe, that performed a little bit more in Vegas and then stopped themselves, I mean, they were never going to be professionals. But that's how I got to Vegas, and that's how I realized that I was — especially in that period, I had the right body, and I was the right height, to get hired in those places. You have to be 6 feet tall to be hired, or very close to it, and I'm very close to it— they'll sneak around it a bit if you're very close, and if you have great legs, and I mean, it's a set of physical requirements and you can, you can not have one thing perfectly and have something else that they want, and you're a good enough performer, they'll put you in.

And they were always looking for girls that they could train to be in the chorus lines. The women that forever danced the back-up for whatever idiot was going to be onstage, and you know, and would wear, you know these headdresses would weigh 30 pounds. I mean, you know, you just had to be unbelievably strong. I mean, really— and you had to appear to be nonchalant and graceful when you were actually wearing costumes that weighed a hundred pounds and you had to try and skip across the stage in fuck-me pumps that were 4 inches tall! I mean, it was just ludicrous! How could you not be, you know, 16 and do it? I mean, women did it that were older, but I never figured out how they did it. Some women really had dance backgrounds. Some women were good dancers that didn't, but they had learned this, these kinds of routines. Some were like me that came, you know, out of a mishmash of things but could learn how to work on a stage.

I had a lot of physical stage presence. And that isn't something you could actually train somebody with. I had a lot of stage personality. So then I liked it, actually, I liked it a lot. But I didn't like the culture. Working in a place where people gamble, all day and all night, and you know that most of the people gambling are like your family, they've got nothing, and they're flushing every tiny bit of money they might have right down the sink, and then they're going to you know, hitch-hike home and nobody's going to eat for a month, doesn't exactly make you feel good about what you're looking at.

And I went out, one of the first times I danced as a showgirl, rather than as a Hawaiian dancer, I got my first check. I was stunned at the amount of money, I just couldn't believe how much money it was, and I went out and I have never been good at cards. It's one of the games I

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really can't play, and I get very freaked out if I don't win, I have to win, it's not pretty. And I'm not very good at it, so it's really not pretty because then I have attitude and absolutely no skills! So that's really a loser, and I went out and I played poker and I lost my entire paycheck in really, probably 11 minutes. And it was like a thousand dollars.

ANDERSON: It was really that much?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, it was just a huge amount of money, and it was supposed to cover my costumes and my this and my that, and I, I really, I never gambled again, with big money. It really taught me quickly that I didn't particularly like it, I liked slot machines with quarters, I mean, it was just killing time, that was kind of what I liked, if I liked anything; and that I wasn't going to work that hard, and lose everything. And that's really the deal, when you're in those professions, because they're time-limited. You're not going to stay in that job for— I mean, maybe you'll stay there for ten years, but that's a good run. And there's a million women behind you with just as good a legs, just as good tits, longer hair, more willing to sleep with somebody than you are. You know it's not a— it is a ruthless kind of business, and while the money is good for what women can often make that come from my kind of background, the job isn't.

And so I did that off and on, but that was really, that was really how I got into the sex trades in a certain way, is that, you know, when you're working in places that are sexually suggestive— it's kind of like soft core porn, or hard core porn. Everybody that you know is basically in the industries that service the population that wants sex. And so, that was when I first met a lot of hookers, that was when I first met a lot of women that did phone sex, dominatrix, you know, I met the kind of world of sexual players, and it didn't take much to become clear to me that if you could figure it out, and not use drugs, you could conceivably really make a living that was unlike any living you were going to make if you did a traditional job. It was dicey, and it was problematic, but you might be able to do it, and there were lots of different aspects of it. I mean, there was phone sex, and there was live sex, and there was stripping and showgirl, and then there was being a hooker, and there was all variations of sex trades within that. There was a lot to learn about the underworld of sexuality, and I did.

ANDERSON: Did you meet women through being a showgirl that helped to navigate that world with you or for you, or did you just sort of pick this all up through osmosis? Did you live with other women who were in the industry?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, yeah, you know, and it's pretty frank conversations, I mean, people were not trying to pretend they weren't doing what they were

doing, although in my experience, women are always, much more than men, defensive about their work lives.

Some women really love being sex workers. Most women do it because it's a job. And so, the explanation pretty quickly, whether they like it okay or not, is about the circumstances that made them make those choices. And so, you're always kind of bantering back and forth, class, really, you know, this is really the reality of where I come from. And so, I was in that mix, just like anybody else, but I have to say I was also interested in sex culture. It really— you know, frankly, it was a lot more interesting than factory life! To me, it was a lot more interesting than bad jobs in places where you got your hands cut off. You know, it didn't really look too engaging! And so, I was kind of fascinated by it, but I didn't want to get caught there completely, I wasn't quite sure what I was looking at.

I went home, and I had two high school girlfriends who both had big ambitions, and no skills. Pretty much like myself. And we began to talk about setting up our own business. And I by that time had kind of gotten into the left and had been kicked out of SNCC, and was back, in San Francisco. By this time then, I was in San Francisco for a first period. And we decided to set up shop there. Rent an apartment, that we thought the problem with it was that you had to have johns, and you had to have this, and you had to have that, and if we just— we were girlfriends from high school, we would work together, we would help each other, we would deal with clients, we would have each other's backs, and we would make money.

Sandy wanted to go to college and be a doctor, Kitty wanted to get married, and I didn't know what I wanted to do. So we did, actually, set up business, and we were pretty smart. I have to say, it was not a bad living, and we pretty much controlled — we never worked alone, we were very— we really were smart, we were not greedy. If people, if anybody had a bad feeling about something, it didn't happen. We always had another person there when any of us were turning tricks, so that there was always help, and we were not there by ourselves. And we started getting regular clients, which is, you know, the thing that really is the most important, is that you've got return business, because you've got protection in return business. So, it started to really gel.

ANDERSON: How'd you find clients?

HOLLIBAUGH: We worked bars. We, Sandy and I, were both mixed race— she was Native American and Irish, and I was Irish and Romany. Kitty was poor white trash! Um, and we would work bars as girlfriends— so we would go in, two girls, by themselves, and some of that, a lot of that is class. I mean, a lot of where you can get customers that pay a lot is where you can figure out how to look appropriate in the status of bars where rich people go. So, it's a complicated thing, because you have to both look trashy enough to be approached, but not trashy enough to get kicked

out. So, we worked hard! We were like trying to figure all of this stuff out, and we thought it was kind of a challenge! And the sex wasn't very interesting.

ANDERSON: And you always took them back to your home?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, we always took them back to the apartment that we lived in, and we, you know, we were, we thought we were very smart. I mean, frankly, we did think we were very smart. Now, this is where my brother comes in. Because my brother is a pimp— well, I don't know if he's a pimp anymore, but he was a pimp, and he ran independent whorehouses for his mother, who was the woman married to my father. Um— before my mother. And she was one of the—Vendetta was one of the most serious madams in San Francisco that ran independent houses. And he helped her manage those houses.

And so, I hadn't seen Bill in a long time, and I called him, and I don't think I actually understood what he did. Nobody talked about it too much in the family. And when I had known him, he had just come back from the Army, he had been in Germany, he came and lived with us, blah, blah. So, I called him, and you know we had dinner and stuff, and I was actually pretty open about what I was doing, and I told him, you know, I was hooking, and you know, I was making a good living, and I was in the left, and I was this and I was that, and he listened.

And then he called me the next day, and he said, "I think we need to have a conversation." And I said, "Why's that?" I don't know, you know, we had a conversation last night. And he said, "No, I think we have to have a business conversation." So I said, "Oh, why's that?" And he said, "Vendetta and I run brothels, and we would like you to be a part of that." And I said, "Well, we're definitely not interested, you know, we have our own business, and we're definitely not interested in that," and he said "Well, I don't think that that's a choice." And I said, "Well, I do think it's a choice," and he said, "Well, I don't think it's a choice, and I'm coming over, and we're going to have that conversation." And he did come over, and we did have that conversation, and he— and I told him no, we all told him no, and it was a very ugly scene, and he then sent people, when I was working a bar, to kick the shit out of me. And I was in the hospital for quite a long time, from him having me beat up because we would not join his system. He and his mother's system. And so Bill and I have not been close since that time— well, we were never really close, but that pretty much ended whatever familial kind of loyalty I might have had with him.

ANDERSON: Had you been afraid of him as a child? Was he intimidating to you, or rough with you as a kid?

HOLLIBAUGH: This was purely work. This is what he did. His mother ran independent brothels, and they ran them.

ANDERSON: Why did they think you were such a threat? I mean, why did they need to go to this level of—

HOLLIBAUGH: I don't think they thought I was a threat. Well, they did not like entrepreneurs that were doing well. Controlling the market is really actually an important thing, and when you're not connected to the mob, when you're not connected to kind of the underworld in a formal way, where you're paying them, you're already in a much dicier kind of world, where the parameters are pretty sharply controlled, and you, you don't want other people succeeding with your customers. Or finding new customers that you would like brought into your kind of scenario. You know, I don't think Bill would have ever found me on his own — maybe he would, I don't know, but I found him. And that was really terrifying. And I knew I couldn't work in San Francisco as a hooker. That there was just no way. We stopped living together. Actually, Sandy made enough money that she did go to school and become a doctor. And Kitty, I don't know what Kitty did, she married some bozo.

ANDERSON: But they were intimidated enough by his attack on you that it was over for everybody.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, I mean, I was in the hospital for pretty bad— I mean, he really did have the shit kicked out of me, and it was clear that they were, they had been doing this work for years. They— San Francisco is a small town. We were not going to just be able to go to another neighborhood and therefore be safe. None of us were in it for that. And none of us, I was not going to work for my brother. I mean, I had been in the most luxurious position as a hooker, I controlled my own space, I ran my own business, and I ran it with friends. And in my own physical space, so I controlled who came in and who came out, I was accountable to no one but myself and them.

Everything about the industry that's really difficult and problematic, I had less of a relationship to, than almost any woman that I have ever known. I didn't work the streets in the same way, once I had a pretty good group of customers, I didn't have to go and recruit all the time. It was a very privileged position, and a lot of that privilege came because we were primarily perceived as white, and could access a level of resource that meant that we didn't have to turn a million tricks, and we weren't addicted to anything. So we didn't, you know, if we had a bad Friday, we had a bad Friday, but our rent wasn't very high, and you know, we weren't paying anybody off. So, you just had a bad day. You know, or you got a jerk. And you never had to see him again. You got him out of your house and that was all there was to it. Um, so, for that short period of time, it was a very privileged kind of circumstance of hooking, I think, and because hooking is so— and the sex world is so class and race controlled, and around addiction. Addiction— I mean, you cannot be addicted and survive in that world and make money.

ANDERSON: How did you not become addicted?

HOLLIBAUGH: That was hard, I have to say. By that time, I was interested in women, uh, the sex world is much more open about who you partner with, people don't really have much of an attitude about it, I was attracted to women and I knew it. I wasn't clear yet whether I was also still attracted to men. And it is confusing when you are hooker, because you are doing it for work, and so you don't know whether you would— how that's affecting you— whether women look good because they aren't men, or whether you are actually independently attracted to women. Uh, and I wasn't quite sure how I thought about it. I wasn't prepared to stop fucking men, I actually never had trouble having sex with men, so that was certainly no indicator.

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ANDERSON: Were you starting to explore sex with women at this point, or were you just starting to notice an inkling of a desire?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, we messed around, but I can't say. You know the first time that I really fell in love with a woman was something so remarkably different than realizing because I was in a sex-neutral world, that you could be attracted to women as well as men. And in a world where kind of the coinage is sexual play, sexual entendre, sexual challenge, you know, it's hard to figure out what's authentic to you and what's just kind of part of the play, that occurs in that world. And I think it is one of the most complicated parts of sex work, is that it is very difficult to define sex for yourself independently on your own terms, unimpacted by the world of sex that you work in.

And so, in a funny way, like acting, or some other kind of professions like that, people marry inside the trades, because then the person understands it and gets what the values are, you're not sitting with somebody who's like, brokenhearted all the time because you fucked somebody. They understand that you have your job, and that's your job, or that, you know, being a sex tease on a stage is not the same as being attracted to somebody, blah blah. People who don't come, who are not part of that culture, have a terrible time because they have more traditional kind of assumptions about desire and fidelity and you know, play. And they don't think that playing on a stage with 40 guys is what they want to see their partner do. And so, it's easier to be in that world. Or to have a very separate world that you have your partners in, but they don't mix and one world doesn't know about the other. Um, and it was in that context that I was trying to figure out women.

ANDERSON: But you don't remember as a child, or as a teenager living at home, that you had any of those attractions or desires, or when you were in Switzerland and the Southern...

HOLLIBAUGH: I did.

ANDERSON: So it's not that the idea was introduced for the first time?

HOLLIBAUGH: No, the idea wasn't new, but the idea wasn't ferocious in the way that I think it has been for many women who knew they were gay from the time they were six. Or something like that. That was not—I found sex profoundly confusing, and attraction very bewildering. And I wasn't really quite sure, and I couldn't figure out, the problem for me was that the women that I ultimately ended up wanting, were unorthodox women—I'd never seen women like that. I really wanted a certain kind of woman, I did not want—well, you know, the woman I came out with, frankly, was very feminine, it wasn't like she was butch. But that was not as much about sex as it was about—that what I had really been looking for was a great love, and that great love happened with a woman, because women were capable of actually believing that they were capable of having those kind of feelings for a partner, and when you put those two together, you know, you're sunk in an erotic and emotional context that's unlike anything that most heterosexuality ever offers.

And when Laurel and I fell in love, I realized that I had never been in love in my life. Now, I had already been with women, casually, I'd been married, you know, I was married for, I don't know, nine months. Because I'd had a terrible abortion and it was physically so bad that I wound up having to join the guy that'd gotten me pregnant, and he was a draft dodger so I had to go up to Canada and stay with him, because he couldn't come down to the States to take care of me. And so I stayed with him for about nine months in the Arctic, and then came to Montreal, and fell in love with a woman there, and she left her husband, I left my husband, we both took off, she went back to her husband, I never did go back.

In that mix, in that period, in my like, late teens and early twenties, was all of this stuff. That I think is actually quite classic for all of us, you know, you're on your own and you don't really know what you're doing with your life and you're trying a whole lot of things that are pretty desperate. And I was trying a whole lot of things that were pretty desperate. One of those things, though, was I knew, more and more, that I didn't want to be with men. The guy that I married, I'm sure is a gay man.

47:01

ANDERSON: Why'd you marry?

HOLLIBAUGH: Because we were in a, in a town that you had to fly in and out of, there was no roads to it, it was in the Arctic, and the town council told McGill University, where he had a scholarship, that if we didn't marry, he would be—they would make him leave town. And he was a draft dodger, he couldn't leave. The only way we could stay together was to get married. And so we did.

ANDERSON: And you met through sort of New Left circles?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, we had known each other in Berkeley, I had lived in Berkeley. And you know, I'd had a wild kind of political life in Berkeley, the free speech movement, and all of that kind of stuff. And Peter was a graduate student there, and we liked each other. We lived together, I was never monogamous, not one single time with any man that I was ever with, and I was very clear about it. It was like, I do what I do, if like you enough I might even live with you, but I don't partner monogamously with men. Never ever ever ever, and I never have. Not one single time, and I've never lied about it. It's like, men are not interesting to me in that way that they can hold my attention and make me consider a primary life with them without other sexual partners. I was pretty ruthless about sex. And I actually knew what I wanted to get off, and I knew how to get it, and I wasn't prepared to not get what I wanted. And so, that period was very much like that, with Peter, with other men, looking for something that I couldn't find. Then when Peter and I were together in Montreal, I knew I was going to leave him, I mean, it wasn't— it was clear to me.

ANDERSON: It was the pregnancy and the abortion that precipitated you going to Canada? Okay, without that event, you would not have sustained...

HOLLIBAUGH: No, we'd broken up. We'd broken up.

ANDERSON: Do you want to talk a little about being pregnant and the abortion, or — when you said that you took a while to recover?

HOLLIBAUGH: It was really uh, it was really, I mean, when we talk about back-street abortions, it was completely a back-street abortion. I didn't have any money, I didn't know what the fuck I was going to do when I realized I was pregnant. And I got enough money to get an abortion, it was \$500, which was just an unheard of amount of money.

49:17
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ANDERSON: It's probably about \$2000 right now.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, exactly. And I didn't know how to find— and I actually talked to a lot of friends, but underground abortion is a very unstable trade. So even people that knew somebody couldn't find the guy that they'd had the abortion with two months before, he'd moved on, I mean it was a really — so I finally found a guy in Watts, in Los Angeles, an African American guy in Watts. And I went down for the abortion, and had enough money— stupidly brought traveler's checks.

ANDERSON: Did you go alone?

HOLLIBAUGH: I went by myself. Stayed in a motel under a false name. It was a terrible mistake. The guy I think maybe was a real doctor, I'm not convinced he



wasn't a real doctor. But he had a lot of issues with white people. And so, his idea of getting back at white people was really to torture you when you were on his table, and he did. And it was one of the most horrific experiences I've ever had. And I didn't— you know, you don't get off a table in the middle of an abortion, you're bleeding and you're— so he finally finished, and he packed me, as that's what they do, and I went back to the motel, and tried to call friends, because I knew that I was going to bleed to death. It was clear to me that I was in terrible trouble and I tried to call friends and I couldn't remember the motel's name, and when they tried to find me, I was under an assumed name, because I didn't want to use my own name.

Three days after I checked in, a maid opened the door, because she hadn't— you know, I'd had a "don't disturb" sign out and it was like already two days, and she luckily opened the door, and there was blood from one end of that room to another. And she was one of the nicest women. She came over and she said— she was an African-American woman— she came over and she said, "Oh baby, you are really in trouble." And I said, "I'm going to die." And she said, "You're close, we're going to see if we can get you out of here, and I'll stay with you." And I said, "Will you really stay with me?" And she said, "Yeah, I'll stay with you till you get to the hospital."

We'd never laid eyes on each other. You know. So, the miracle is, you have somebody that's really off, but you also have somebody that really, that does something extraordinary and so she stayed with me, and they got me to a hospital. And of course the entire time as they're rolling me in, they're grilling me, who was the doctor? We won't admit you unless you blah— and I wasn't going to say who he was.

ANDERSON: You weren't going to give him up.

HOLLIBAUGH: Absolutely not. It was clear to me that the reason—most of the women that I knew that had used him as a doctor had been women of color. He had done completely good procedures with them. That, this was about something else. And I was not going to recommend him to any white woman, but I wasn't going to give up one of the few doctors that worked principally with women of color. And that was really one of the worst experiences of my life. I mean, it really was one of the worst experiences of my life, and I think now when I hear the debate about abortion— and you know, I did not want to end up like my mother. I did not want to be a 14 year old or a 17 year old with a kid.

ANDERSON: You never considered having the baby?

HOLLIBAUGH: Ever. Really, I would have killed myself first. I wasn't going to be my mother. And I wasn't going to be like all the other women in my family. I wasn't. And I didn't care what the price was, and I have never regretted that decision, even though the abortion was so bad. I was not

ready to have a kid, I did not want to have kids. I certainly did not want to have kids when I was a kid myself, and so the rhetoric that surrounds abortion was very personal to me. I did have the right to control my own body, those were the decisions that I was making, and I didn't ever regret it, and I felt very ferociously about women needing better conditions, not choosing to not have an abortion, but having better conditions, so that you didn't have to pay the price that I paid for abortion.

One of the things that attracted me to the women's movement early on is my own experience with an abortion, and I knew that most women from my background exactly had that kind of experience. They didn't fly to Switzerland and have a clinic procedure and then recuperate at a nice hotel on Lake Cuomo before they flew home. That's like, not what was going to happen. And I was really unprepared to ever let women go through what I had gone through, and it really shaped a lot of my life and my politics.

So when I was in the hospital, I actually had to tell my parents, you know, I was underage, it was a mess. I also told Peter, but he couldn't come down and help. I mean, he and I were friends. We were not in love, but we were really friends, and he was really horrified that I'd had to go through that. I went up to stay with him because I was so sick when I got out of the hospital and so weak, I couldn't work. And you know, coming from poverty, it was a perfect example— there was no buffer. I guess I could have gone back and lived with my parents, but that was it. Because I was too sick to work. And if I was too sick to work, I didn't eat.

And so I called Peter and I said, you know, "I gotta come up there." And he said, "I live in a house that's really probably as big as this living room, but if you'll come, you know, I'll take care of you till you're better." And I said fine, and I flew up there when I was strong enough. And he was in the Arctic, for Christ's sake. In the Arctic. Unbelievable. What a mess. You know, how we mess up our own lives— you know, I look at my own kids and I think, oh Jesus god, please, let them not make as big a mess of it as I did!

But I went up there and we were fine and we were going to live together, and we understood exactly what the nature of the relationship was. But it was a town that had, like 800 people in the winter and 1800 people in the summer, because it was an iron-ore company town. And it was a kind of value— this was a French-Canadian [town] and they didn't believe in people living together, and they didn't allow it. Or actually, that's not true. They allowed it if it was a white man and a Native American woman. But they did not allow it otherwise. But certainly not for their university students.

And the town council contacted Peter and McGill University at the same time, and said that's the choice. He cannot work in this town if he

doesn't marry her. They can't live together. And Peter and I were just appalled. There was nothing we wanted less than to marry each other.

And I hated marriage. I mean, long before feminism, it's like, not interesting to me— forget this. But there wasn't really much of a choice. So we did it, it was pretty ridiculous. I don't think— but it did teach me, it actually did teach me that regardless of the individual politics you might have about an institution like marriage, once you marry, the power of that institution begins to frame your relationship. Suddenly, I was somebody's wife. And he was somebody's husband. And people related to us differently, and acted differently, and he acted differently toward me. We'd never been monogamous, I'd never taken care of him, I'd never been a traditional woman with him, and suddenly he's saying things like, I need my shirts ironed. It's like, yeah, well, do it yourself. I mean, really, forget this. I'm not going there with you, this is really ridiculous.

And we fought, then, a lot, because I was not, I didn't marry him to become a wife, and I didn't want a husband. We didn't agree. So I left him quite soon. But we had left the Arctic and gone to McGill University in Montreal. I was working in a library, he was a graduate student. And in the library was another woman who was married to a graduate student, who I fell in love with, Susan Smith. And we ran off together.

ANDERSON: And that'll begin the next chapter.

HOLLIBAUGH: You got it.

END TAPE 4

## TAPE 5

ANDERSON: We're going to start talking about Susan Smith, I suppose.

HOLLIBAUGH: We are.

ANDERSON: Talk about the beginning of your lesbian life, and the end of your married life. Did you ever take his name, when you were married for that year?

HOLLIBAUGH: I did—actually, I loved it. His name was Peter Gravatt, and it was a beautiful last name, I loved the last name, and I thought it was much more beautiful than my own, so I did. I was Amber Gravatt because I thought the name was so beautiful.

ANDERSON: And it sounded like you could have a new life.

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, you know, I never thought I'd be with Peter. I think Peter got confused in some ways because being gay was so problematic for him, that we never talked about it. I mean, I just—he was kind of effeminate, he was with women for a very short period of time, and then he'd be with another one. And all his primary relationships were with men and then he would be with a girl. And so it always looked to me like he was struggling with a kind of desire he couldn't allow himself. He was ruling class — his middle name was Rittenhouse, as in Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia. Peter Rittenhouse Gravatt. And his family freaked out when he and I got together, because they considered that I was a person of color. For them, I was a person of color. It didn't matter what my hair color was, they, you know, a Gypsy was like— oh my god! And his dad begged him, and then begged me, to never marry, to have an affair but never marry. They would give me money if I wouldn't marry him. You know, it was...

ANDERSON: They weren't worried about your class background, it was really only the race?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, kind of combined. They were just horrified that Peter would hook up with me. And I'm sure that, in fact, I was his act of rebellion against his family. Um, you know, there's no way to torment your parents more than to bring somebody in that they have to try and accept who you know, his parents' money— a lot had come from Cuba, from the sugar fields in Cuba, and I was a commie, bringing in Fidel and Che buttons, and you know, and just— you know if you really wanted to torment your parents, I was really the person to bring home, especially if they're ruling class. You know, they would they would have these elegant dinners, and they would, you know, they would have little finger bowls that you would, I mean, I was just like, oh, God, what is this? So, I'm

sure Peter got a lot out of his marriage to me, but it was not heterosexuality that he was seeking.

And then when we were in Montreal he wanted me to act like a wife. And that was the power that he had was to insist that I, for whatever our purposes had been originally, and now I had to do blah blah and blah. Well, I just wasn't going to, even for a minute, serve a man. I was just like— you've got to be out of your fucking mind. I am not going there. I was torn because I felt like I was a bad person and a bad woman, that I didn't want to do the things that women were supposed to want to do, but I didn't want to do them enough that I wasn't going to do them, I just felt bad that I didn't want to do them.

But it did teach me that an institution has a power independent of your individual choices. Even had Peter not been insisting on a more traditional, wifely response, I think we both would have been trapped in the institutional power that being a husband and being a wife, gives you and limits you with. And it's the first time I understood that an institution is bigger than the ideology you bring to it. That you don't get to not be a wife, when you're a wife. You don't not get married, when you're married. That those things that you think you control, you actually don't control, and that that actually has fueled for a long time how I feel about things like gay marriage. Because I don't think those things are neutral, and I don't think you just get to do what you do, or get to do what you believe, independent of the structures of century old institutions that are embedded— and desired precisely because they're embedded in a certain set of assumptions. And that you don't get to rebel against those things— you can hold out and not do them, but you can't try and do them and not do them at the same time. I actually don't think that's possible. So—

ANDERSON: So you feel like that's been a tactical error on the movement's part for the last decade or so?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. I think, I think it's been, I think it's— I had never wanted to be normal, so that already was where the door opened that looked to me like a real problem. But marriage, then, will finally nail our feet to a bourgeois world that we will never then decide to change, if what we decide to do is enter it on its own terms. And that's what marriage looks like to me, just for gay people. So what?

So, but in that— some of it really did come from trying to be married but not married, watching how it affected both of us, not just one of us, and simultaneously, having a best girlfriend who I was just in love with. And I knew I was in love with her, and she knew she was— or she knew something was happening between us, we were both very unhappy at being married, both of us were very independent women who had not meant to like, settle down and take care of men. So, I came to her and said, we need to leave together, we were meant to be together, and fuck these guys, let's get out of here and go have a life.

6:11
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Who knows what we're going to do, let's go find out what we're going to do. We were against the war, we were political, let's go back to the States, let's do whatever we're going to do. And, we did, we left.

ANDERSON: Dear John notes on the mantle?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, yeah, yeah. I had actually worked very hard to find Peter a girlfriend. Which I did do. So I, you know.

ANDERSON: So kind!

HOLLIBAUGH: And it was such an easier way to leave, because it was like, you know, somebody was going to take care of him, and he'd sob and cry and scream about me, but she was in place, he didn't have to go looking...so I was better at it than Susan was. But the night Susan and I left, her husband was coming back from a trip to Africa, I think, because they'd both been in the Peace Corps. I can't remember what country they'd been in. And he got busted at the airport, for marijuana or something. And the next day we found out about it, and Susan said, "I have to go back, I can't leave him in jail with no help."

ANDERSON: In the Arctic—no, you were in Montreal.

HOLLIBAUGH: We were in Montreal. And you know, I'm kind of ambivalent about this anyway, and I think my relationship was different than yours, and I'm going to go back. And I was just heart-broken, I really, I was just heart-broken. And I couldn't believe— and you know, you don't have any power to convince a woman that wants to be with a man, to stay with you, you know. It doesn't take a lot to know that if those are the choices that she thinks she has, then you're not going to survive it. So, she went back.

But I do want to tell a wonderful ending of this story, which is that— so that was in the 60's. In the 80's I was doing a talk in Boston. I had lost touch with her and with Michael, the guy that she was married to, knew nothing about her life or anything like that. I did a talk and a woman came up to me, a young woman came up to me who was at— I don't know if she was at Harvard, but she was at one of the Boston schools. And she said, "I really need to talk to you, I really want to talk to you." And I said, "Why?" And she said, "Well, my name is Judy blah, but before I changed it, it used to be Judy Smith, and I'm Susan Smith's lesbian daughter. And though you two couldn't be together, she ended up having a lesbian daughter." And I said, "Did she tell you about us?" And she said, "Yeah, she told me about the two of you running off together, and then her going back to dad. And so I want to tell you, that though it didn't work for you, thank you very much, that it helped me deal with my mother, because my mother actually had you know, fallen in love with you, even though lesbianism was not what she was going to do." And I thought, oh how— what a fabulously unpredictable world,

you don't know how this stuff is going to end! For me it had been horrible, and I was in love with her for years, and for her, that wasn't what happened, but she did have a lesbian daughter, and I thought, well, hey.

ANDERSON: Well, and obviously the feelings were reciprocated enough for her to have told her daughter about you. I mean, it could easily have disappeared into her past.

HOLLIBAUGH: Into a world that would have never been revealed. You know, one of those secrets of youthful transgression. Instead, she actually told her daughter about it.

ANDERSON: Oh, and what a great story for the daughter: you know, my mom almost ran off with Amber Hollibaugh! You know, that woman who's speaking! She probably got a lot of mileage out of that too.

HOLLIBAUGH: It was so wonderful, it was so fabulous. Really, it was so fabulous. You know, you recoup your life in unpredictable ways. And that was one of those places where I felt like, oh, I didn't make a complete ass of myself, a terrible choice. And you know, and it was about me, singularly, without her.

ANDERSON: So you went on back to the States, without Susan?

HOLLIBAUGH: Actually what I did, I went to live with my parents. Because my parents at that time were in British Columbia. And, because I didn't know what to—really, kind of didn't know where to go or what to do, I wasn't—you know, there was no movement yet that was obvious that you could join, there were some things happening. By then I think Stonewall had happened, but it was very fresh, it was 69, 68, 69, 70—those years were not, that was not the same as a movement. And I wasn't sure where to go, and I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I wanted to be political, but I had no idea, or continue a political life. I didn't want to be married or do all those kinds of things, but I wasn't sure where to go, or what to do, or how I wanted to be what I wanted to do.

And I was also very torn about staying in Canada. I liked Canada. The movement was much more European, kind of left movement, I had learned a lot. Working class people in the left were less unusual. And there was a social democratic party in Canada, and a huge communist party. And so, there was a richness to political life there that I really adored, but I also missed the United States. I missed the Black Panther Party and the civil rights movement as it had evolved, and all of these other things. So, I was not quite clear what I wanted to do.

So I was involved in the left, I went home to stay with my parents, but I was going to conferences and stuff up there all the time. And I went to a, like an SDS conference, but the Canadian version, I don't remember what the organization was called. And at that 3 or 4-day

12:35

conference, a group of us pulled out to create a women's caucus and a position on women's liberation in a Marxist movement. And one of the people there, doing that work— there were only eight women that were willing to do this, there were maybe two or three hundred people at this conference, of which surely forty percent were women. But not very many women wanted to take on women's liberation. It didn't make you popular with the guys, and you know, it was not, it wasn't cutting edge in any positive way. But we felt strongly about it and I had gone to a group while I went back to stay with my mother, a women's group had really confronted me about how I hated other women, and how that was why I didn't want to deal with women, and so I was going through a lot of changes myself trying to think about it.

And we pulled back, attended the conference but were, had gotten permission to do a special presentation on Sunday, about women's liberation, and the condition of women's oppression and Marxism. Oh God! And in this group of eight of us— it was all the kind of women that were the heavies in Canada— Peggy Norton—Morton?-Norton. And a woman named Laurel Limpas, who actually wrote, for the 60's, a very interesting and long ago important piece about women's liberation. And she was there and a part of this group of eight of us that were doing this work. She was also an American, she had come to Canada with somebody and ended up staying. She was going to the University of Toronto. There were probably in this group of eight, almost half of us were Americans.

Laurel was this wild, wild woman, who people were actually quite scared of. She was so intense and so intellectually ferocious, that people actually had warned me about her. You know, like, she's very smart but she's weird. She's really weird, you know, be careful of her, she's really weird. Um, and she was really weird. In the sense that she was, she didn't have a lot of female social skills, she didn't, and she wasn't prepared to be a girl in some way. She was not dykey, it was that she was odd, and she had been odd all her life, and that remained with her, and she made people quite uncomfortable. She really didn't smile if she wasn't in the mood, she didn't try to, kind of — she had none of the either the mothering or the mediating skills that women—

ANDERSON: All the nice, small-talk, polite—

HOLLIBAUGH: Not a single one of them. You know, if you had an idea, it was her idea, and she was going to tell you what it was. And she wasn't going to look at you the entire time she told you, and she wasn't going to smile. I thought she was the most brilliant person I had ever met in my life. And the fact that she was odd, I found only more compelling and I —she was brilliant. She was really brilliant. She was a very strange and beautiful looking person.

She was Scandinavian and Native American. So she had a complexion— in a way, it was like myself. She had a complexion that



was white, she had long, wavy, beautiful red hair, a mouth really, like Mick Jagger, but the kind of the shape of her head, and the way her eyes were set in, was really Native American. Once you knew what her racial mix was you knew that there was something different about this person. I thought she was just stunningly beautiful. But who knew? You know, you're falling in love, how— to go backward and try and explain why— it was because she was so fucking smart. I just— and ruthless. I mean, she just—

ANDERSON: And not female in the way that—

HOLLIBAUGH: She was not, she did not like that fact that people didn't like what she had to say, but it didn't stop her for a minute from saying it. I don't know how she felt about other women, really. Those early days, I think we all had pretty complicated ambivalent relationships to being considered a women's liberationist. Because we all saw ourselves as Marxists. And we wanted to create a revolutionary movement. I mean, we were not into separatism at that point. And so, being separated, when it isn't something that you're choosing, is a not-welcome thing. But I think all of us were unprepared to lie about what we saw about women's condition, and what we saw about sexism in the left.

And so we created a paper that we presented at this conference on Sunday that was very confrontational, about the condition of women, and then, about the condition of women in the left, and at the end of that conference-it was very controversial-the eight of us had basically stayed together for the whole conference, thinking through women's liberation in North America. We were all completely engaged by the ideas— though I don't think we were so engaged by the idea of being with women there was still a lot of — you knew that you were choosing, you weren't choosing an oppressed group that was going to get you far on the left. This is not like being a white person and choosing the Black Panthers. No, no, no. Choosing girls in the left didn't look good.

And at the end of it, it was in Toronto. This conference was in Toronto, God knows what conference it was, and at the end of it, Laurel walked up to me after we'd presented the paper and done all the stuff, and she walked up to me and said, "I'm in love with you, why don't you move in with me?" And I said, "I'm in love with you, too, and it's going to take me like a week to pack my stuff, and— sounds good to me."

And I moved immediately to Toronto. We tried to live in her commune, but people were very anxious about us being together. And being wildly in love. I mean, we were, we were so enamored and engaged with each other, we couldn't take our hands off each other, we couldn't take our eyes off each other, we were just like besotted. And we were besotted, and I'm sure it was really uncomfortable to be around. I mean, under the best of circumstances, it probably would have driven me crazy if it was somebody else doing it. And for sure, in a heterosexual movement and a heterosexual commune it was not what

people wanted to deal with. And I said to Laurel, you know, we really, we're not going to have a good life here. We really need to go and live by ourselves and not have to worry about what anybody else thinks. Not have to try and be hidden in our own living place.

So, we rented a house in a neighborhood that was called Cabbagetown, in Toronto, which is now a very gentrified, fancy neighborhood, but then was a working-class neighborhood that nobody wanted to go to and we pretended we were half-sisters, though God knows why we thought anybody would believe this! I was six feet tall and blond, and she was five foot four and red-headed, but in fact, what we learned quickly is that the closet is a very important structure that you, that you negotiate. I mean, we were not about being open, it wasn't like that. It was that we just didn't want to have to live in our private lives, a completely hidden life. And we couldn't figure out how to do that in the commune, where everybody would know, and so we moved out. We got this house that had two bedrooms— one upstairs and one downstairs— the upstairs big bedroom was ours but we made it look as though we each had a bedroom, and we moved in together.

And it was one of the most important relationships I've ever had in my life, though the sex was terrible, and we almost never made love. Because we really, because both of us had very fucked up sex lives, histories and we really didn't know what we were doing, and we hadn't fallen in love in a way that was exactly embedded in erotic understanding, we'd fallen in love because we were the smartest women each of us had ever met, and we were engaged with and wild for each other's lives. Sex was a part of it, and it was never the thing that kept it together.

And in fact, Laurel was very ambivalent about sex, she'd had a terrible sex life herself. It— she had a pattern of falling in love with women, and then being exposed. She had been at— was it, Brown, maybe? In a dorm, they had been found out, she and her roommate had been found out. The roommate was taken away and lobotomized. That's a pretty terrible thing to have connected to desire. She then went to another upper class school, and I can't remember which one, on the east coast. Again, fell in love with a roommate, they fell in love with each other, they were ratted out. And the roommate, her lover, jumped out of their dorm window, and Laurel saw it, and the girl died.

You don't want to be a lesbian when that's your earliest experience of loving women. And it makes you very ambivalent about desire, and about naming yourself as a dyke. It was horrible. And she never, ever got over it and she never considered herself a lesbian, and I was a I was a part of her pattern. And that was how she did it. She would claim she wasn't a lesbian, she was absolutely, vehemently clear she wasn't a lesbian, then she'd fall in love with yet another woman, like myself, and be with her for however long they could manage it. And then it would end for whatever reasons, either from exposure from the outside or

tensions from the inside, and then, she did it all over again. I mean, she did it, she has done it, over and over and over again. I have no idea where Laurel is at this point in time, but that's her pattern with women.

ANDERSON: You just said, she was not a lesbian—meaning that you were thinking of yourself as a lesbian at that time, that wasn't a term yet that you—

HOLLIBAUGH: No, but I thought I was gay.

ANDERSON: You thought you were gay.

HOLLIBAUGH: I thought I was gay. I— everybody lived in the closet, so the closet really wasn't what defined it, and I kind of didn't push, because what was unambivalent in our relationship was that we were in love. And if I didn't attach an identity to that, then I had pretty much what I wanted, which was somebody who was fabulously, unambivalently willing to say she was in love with me. If I then said, what's the context for this, or how are we going to pull this off, I had more trouble, but for the first couple of — for the first year or so, frankly, I didn't care, it was like so much better.

I finally figured out what it was like to be in love, I mean, that was the other thing I found really shocking. It made me realize how much I had never been in love before her— and really, maybe Susan, that had been the tease. That I had never been in love when I was straight, and that I didn't have a clue what it was like to love in a heterosexual context. That the first time I had opened myself up, the first time I had been willing to be vulnerable and trusting and a whole variety of — straightforward with my feelings, monogamous— was with women. And that was what the— that's kind of why the map looked so different to me. It wasn't that I hadn't tried to love men, it wasn't that I never loved them, it wasn't that I didn't get off on having sex with them, it was that I would never do it monogamously. I always loved them so that I could have love, not so that I could have them.

And I— it was a pretty easy place to leave. It's not that I never got hurt when I was straight, it's not that men never fucked around with me. They did, quite often. It's that what hurt me was my social status and the humiliation that came from men rejecting whatever it was that you brought to the table, but the personal part of it, the intimate part of it, the individual part of it, it's like 6 of one and half a dozen— and so, in a way, I loved men like men loved women— they loved you as an object, they loved you as a thing, they loved you as a possibility for something that they were looking for, but they never, never engaged with you as an individual that was uniquely who you were and that, that wanted and then brought very particular things. It was only with women that that was a possibility for me. I don't know what straight women have figured out, and how they have figured out loving men, but it's clear to

me that they must love some part of them that is more than the generic gender of the partner. For me, it was like, well, you know.

ANDERSON: Were you worried about the sexuality part of it, though?

HOLLIBAUGH: With Laurel?

ANDERSON: Yeah, because this was your first major love affair with a woman, and you've got all this intellectual and emotional engagement, but yet the sex wasn't so great.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, I was. Well, and it looked to me like we were both pretty confused. And I couldn't figure out what the hell that meant, but it was the place that she was the most ambivalent. And maybe it was true that she wasn't a lesbian— I mean, I don't know, what it means in terms of an identity. What I know is that she endlessly fell in love with women, but was not particularly interested in sex with them, over an extended period of time that was unambivalently erotically defined. And of course, the closet also makes that stuff very confusing— you have no one else to talk to, you don't know what you're doing and you don't know what you have the right to demand and expect from yourself or a partner, and you don't really have any idea where it's leading.

That period of time was also a time when homosexuality was defined by its hopelessness. The sex wasn't good— your problem! The relationship wouldn't last— yep, that looked like kind of the undercurrent of not being straight. That the things that you might have expected and held out for, in a straight context, were not the things you could ask for or get in a queer context. All you could really hope for was a possibility of loving that you could not find in any other way. And everything else that fell by the side because of that, was going to fall by the side. And that you were going to have a happy life— probably not.

And Laurel and I would talk about it, pretty straightforwardly, I mean, that we thought we would have a hard life, a bad life, a life where we were going to get punished. Those were the things that we assumed came with falling in love with somebody that was the same sex as you. And then you know, we didn't really have any answers for it, and we didn't really have anybody to talk to.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you didn't have any other friends who...

HOLLIBAUGH: None. And the women's movement was really ferociously homophobic, and brutal about it. In some ways because the oppression— to claim women's liberation as your movement was already so uh, dicey— it was so much worse than just being in the left, or just being in a nationalist movement or something. It was like, oh god, oh, you're one of those? It was just bitter, and ugly. And women did not want to be punished for something that they weren't, and that was to be queer. And so, any of you that were in that movement stood to make it worse for everybody

else, and the homophobia— nobody had any tools to work on, and so everybody lived in the closet, tried to kind of manage it. And the women's movement then adamantly denied that it was built on women who loved women. Absolutely not! You know, you can be a feminist and not be a — well, we didn't call it feminist then— you could be a women's liberationist and not be a lesbian. God forbid!

And so, we would — actually women would come to us, like there was going to be a first women's conference, and they would come to us and say, we don't want you to stay in the same room. Because we don't want there to be any assumption that this is about lesbianism. This isn't. This is about the class position of women and meanwhile we were the intellectuals of that movement. And we were helping create the ideology of the movement, and people were telling us that we shouldn't, you know, be too obvious.

The thing that was always true, though, with Laurel, and that I will love her forever for is that she was never willing to pretend she didn't love me, ever. You people don't like it, you people don't know what to call it, you people — we don't even know what to do—but she's mine, and I'm hers. And so, you know, you can dance on whatever head of whatever pin that means you have to dance on, and so will we, but I'm never going to not look at her, I'm never going to not recognize her, and I'm never going to not passionately identify her as my partner, and fuck you. Well, I have to say, to have somebody ferociously claim you when you're a kind of a lonely person who everybody's wanted to fuck and nobody's wanted to name, to flip it, is so powerful, and so compelling. And Laurel was the first person who I ever felt saw me in a realistic way, for who I was. Both the strength of that and the real problems that I brought to the table, that I didn't know how to handle.

I remember, when we first got together, I used to be very funny. And the way I was funny was that I made fun of myself. And I had really learned how to use myself as the object of a joke in order to make people feel comfortable and me feel as though there was nothing people could say bad about me that I didn't say first. But I didn't say it in a way that made people really uncomfortable, because it was so humorous. And Laurel came to me— we'd only been living together like a month—and she said, “You know what? There's something really off in what you do. You really hate yourself, and you really don't— you've got to stop it, you've really got to stop making fun of yourself. Even though it's going to make you awkward and uncomfortable and really socially pretty out of it for a while, because you're really not going to know what to do with yourself if you don't present yourself that way, because you've used it, and found a way to use it, that's very compelling, and people really laugh, and people really enjoy it, but there's something really ugly about it, and you've got to stop. And so, I'm saying to you, that I will stick around with you, while you try to do something different, but you've got to stop using humor about yourself

as the tool to have a social place.” And I cried for a week. And I said, “I can’t do it. I’m just going to be flat and unappealing.” And she said, “Well then you’re going to be flat and unappealing while you rebuild a way to be in a conversation with somebody that isn’t at your own expense.”

And it was really— I’ll remember it forever, because it really was how I hated myself and how I’d tried to find a way in the world that didn’t ultimately help me but that gave me visibility. And I said, “I don’t think I can do it.” And she said, “I don’t think you have a choice.” And I said, “Okay, I’ll try, I’ll try it. I’ll try.” And it really did mean that I was pretty much in a mess, for like a year. Because I really didn’t know how to— this was how I had figured out how to be in the world— “and let me tell you this one!” and since I was a great storyteller, I had used all the skills I had at storytelling to kind of create a way of seeing me that was not very pretty, but was very humorous, and very intelligent.

ANDERSON: In what ways would you be putting yourself down? Was it mostly about class stuff? Almost entirely?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, that was how I tried to protect myself, because I knew, unlike people, I think, that try to go to college and gain the skills of the class that they don’t belong to, I didn’t have any of that. It was clear to me how I spoke was different than how other people spoke, how I used words was different. How I had ideas was different. I couldn’t attach it to a you know a course, or a thinker.

ANDERSON: Or a political tradition

HOLLIBAUGH: Or a political— oh, this is what I think! Oh, well, you and who else? You know, it just, I was raw and it showed. And I was big. I was physically big, and I was never a small personality in a room, so the fact that it— the only protection I could figure out in that context, then, was to make fun of myself. And I tried to do it carefully, so that I would still have political credibility. You know, I didn’t just tell — I wasn’t exactly demeaning. What I did was try and frame what I knew made people nervous about me before they had a way to figure it out on their own, and decide they wouldn’t pay any attention to me. And so when Laurel said that, it was really shocking. And I really struggled with it, and I came back to her and said, “If you will help and not leave, I’ll try.”

And I spent the first year with her learning how to tell the truth. And that was, to this day, one of the most remarkable years of my life. I had never been with anybody where I was willing to really do the interior work of trying to talk about who I thought I was and what I thought that meant in terms of the world that I had been a part of and was now a part of. I didn’t, I don’t think I’d ever told the truth, frankly, when I look back on it now. I think I had always been careful and tried to tell some

semblance of the truth and some semblance of what I knew was called on to allow me to be in the world I wanted to be in. But I was pretty prepared to lie if I needed to, or shine on, in order to cross class and race.

ANDERSON: Did you have secrets from Laurel?

HOLLIBAUGH: There were things we never talked about, like incest and things like that. But it wasn't that I wasn't telling her the truth, it's that those things were never talked about, by anybody, to anybody.

ANDERSON: Was the abortion, for example, something that—

HOLLIBAUGH: Oh no, absolutely, I talked to her about it.

ANDERSON: The sex work was still a secret from your political friends at this point?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. I mean, she knew I had been a dancer in Vegas. She knew— if I told her about some part of my life, I told her the truth. But I didn't tell her about having been a sex worker. You know, I didn't know every job she'd had. And actually, I didn't really care very much. I mean, some of it was just — what we were trying to do, I think, was tell each other what it was about ourselves that would make us real, in a way that we had never, ever been able to tell anybody. The traps in our own lives that had undermined us, broken our hearts, betrayed us, the things that we despised about ourselves. Which were not necessarily the things that people outside of us despised, but the things that we hated about ourselves. Laurel was the first person, and the first woman, that I ever really ever tried to talk to, about the things that I despised in myself. And I think she did the same with me. Because we were both so committed to allowing the other person to be who we were and be unapologetic.

And if that was the earliest part of women's liberation, of all we could we figure out how to give each other, outside of really, a kind of theory, of what had been done to women. And also, we were learning ourselves. We were in those early, early CR groups that were mind-blowing. I mean, women had been so oppressed that we had forgotten what had happened to us. We had not known a language to tell our own stories. And so I don't think that there were things that I consciously decided not to tell her, there were things I didn't even know about my own life, and in fact, women's liberation and CR groups and all of that took years of work, I mean, that was years of therapy that it took to finally have a different equation about why you had done this, or why you had thought that, or why you had felt this, that she and I were only beginning to tiptoe into. Though we were, even then, by other women's liberationists considered to be kind of dangerous women because we were so brutally frank about what we thought had happened to ourselves as women.

And In Canada at least, there was a great commitment to class, that came out of the left movement so trying to understand sex and gender in the context of class was not considered either/or. It wasn't like a lot of American feminism and American women's liberation, which is, you were political and a Marxist over here, or you were a women's liberationist, over here. And you didn't mix those two ways of thinking. In Canada, you know, that just wasn't it. It wasn't like there wasn't a lot of sexism from men. But the women were much more politically sophisticated and came out of radical, left wing definitions to try and understand their own lives. And so, it was a much easier place to try and work on those things.

And Laurel and I were American, we were from the United States, and you know, we're going back and forth. I was constantly going to Berkeley and working with the Black Panther Party and doing all of that kind of stuff, and then coming to Canada and helping guys in the Panther Party get across the border, and underground, so that they could get to Algeria or they could get to Cuba or they could get wherever they needed to get, the women and the men. So Laurel and I's house was an underground house for most of the time that we were together. We were helping mostly African-American political activists get out of the country and live. So, you know, that was also different kind of mix, so it wasn't like we lived in a world of women and we didn't have anything to do with the political movements that were happening. We were part of a global movement that we considered ourselves a part of and within that there were women's organizations, and women's liberation, and blah blah blah and we attached ourselves to that to give ourselves credibility. You know, and so it was part of how we understood the work we were doing. But we also felt pretty clearly the ideology of Marxism did not explain in a total way the experience of being female.

ANDERSON: It doesn't sound as if you thought of your sexual relationship as political.

HOLLIBAUGH: No. We thought it was really a problem! I mean, we did, we thought it was too bad. That we'd fallen in love with each other and that we— that I wanted sex. I mean, Laurel, I think, would have been pretty happy to be in love and together and occasionally fuck men which I think was probably the way that she hoped it would get organized. I felt like men were really a waste of time, the least interesting thing, but I wanted sex, and I thought she was hot. I mean, she wasn't, it turns out, the person I would, the kind of woman that I would ultimately desire.

But I thought women were just fabulous-looking, and beautiful, and erotic, and a whole lot of things, and it was interesting to me, and I think in that sense, having been thinking as a sex worker for a long time, the move from one body to another body didn't seem so transgressive as I think it seemed to her. I had a sexual imagination that wasn't completely trapped in a heterosexual notion. And so, when she and I got together,



and it was a real relationship, it was like well we could try this and we could do that, and then there's this, you know, it wasn't like, and sex toys— you know, I mean, I was kind of open to where we wanted to go with it. What I wasn't willing to do was lose the possibility of desire in order to be with her. And that became a real problem.

ANDERSON: So that's the seed of the demise of Amber and Laurel?

HOLLIBAUGH: Two different pieces, one, a more political one, and one a more sexual one. The political one was that, a movement was now starting to happen after Stonewall. And I was reading everything I could read. And I wanted to be a part of that. And Laurel and I had then been together long enough that we would go to things like conferences or parties or whatever, and all these men would hit on her. They'd hit on both of us, but they'd hit on her, and I couldn't do a goddamn thing, and we'd get home and I'd be like beside myself. It was like, this is horseshit, I'm in a fucking political movement, I'm with you, you're in love with me, I'm in love with you, and I can't touch you in somebody's house. But any guy you've known for five minutes can put his hands on your hips?? I don't think so. And I don't want you to avoid men, I want you to be with me.

And so this was also happening at the time when the first gay movement was beginning to name itself, and we were reading it in all the underground papers and stuff like that, and I wanted her to be with me. And she was like no way, I am not a lesbian, and I am not going to do it. And we fought and fought and fought and fought about it, I mean, it was really ugly. It was the first time we'd had really terrible fights about this, with me saying, you're my lover and you're my partner, and she's saying, no, I'm not your lover, I'm not your partner, I'm in love with you, but I'm not! It's like blah blah, what a mess. And I began to reach out to other women that I suspected were also lesbians, and they were, and tried to talk to them about us coming out. And we decided—even though I thought Laurel was going to kill me—

ANDERSON: Yeah, it sounds like you were going to be dragging Laurel to this coming out.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, it was, it was the beginning of the end. I decided that because some of us were heavies in the women's movement, that we should come out. And that— and all of them agreed too, and we would come out. We would have a panel on lesbianism in the women's movement and blah blah. And I would open because I was the biggest person, besides Laurel, in that movement and I would come out and they would come out too, and then we would have a beginning discussion about desire between women, and blah blah blah. I don't even think that we were calling it lesbianism, but whatever. Laurel said, "If you do this, you and I are really in trouble, really in trouble. Because I'm not a

lesbian but everybody's going to think I'm a lesbian because you're going to come out, and so you know, you owe me to not do this, because I don't want it, and I am not a lesbian." And I said, "Then what are you, and what are we? How are we going to go through life, in love with each other, but unwilling to claim our relationship?" We've done it for three years or however long it's been, but enough of this, this is horseshit. And I don't want to be in the world this way — I just— the price is too high. And I'm in love with you! And you're in love with me. So this is just a — so how would you have us live? That we'd have male lovers and call each other and say I love you? I mean, what is this? And she didn't have an answer for it and I didn't have an answer for it. I mean, it was a mess, it wasn't ideological, it was like, a lot of nights crying and a lot of nights saying, if you fuck a guy I'm leaving. You know, horrible.

ANDERSON: The closet ruins so many of our relationships.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. And it's a terrible price to pay to come out is to lose the woman that you're in love with. And I said to her — and I'm going back and forth to the United States now, not to meet with the Black Panther Party, but to meet with people in the United States who are starting the lesbian movement and all of this. And reading everything I can read and trying to figure it out. And Laurel said, "You know I can't do it. You can't come out." And I said, "I'm not in the left movement and a women's movement to not come out. If you don't want to be a lesbian and you want to run around and tell everybody you were in love with me but we never slept together, I don't give a shit what you say, but I'm going to claim a word that actually looks to me like who I am. So you can do whatever you're going to do." We had the panel. It was huge. I mean, there were hundreds of people there.

ANDERSON: This was a Canadian conference? Or was it American?

HOLLIBAUGH: It wasn't a conference, it was a panel, a nighttime event that the fledgling women's organization sponsored. And it was me, and who was the woman that is a famous now, Canadian singer— Heather? I can't remember. She was an old dyke, and you know, there were five of us. I came out, I was the first speaker, and I came out. And none of the rest of them came out. Un-fucking-believable! I mean, they might say, oh, I slept with a girl in college, or I felt desire for women, but none of them! Meanwhile, they're all with women, oh god, and I'm like, by myself. Trying to answer all the "you people" questions and Laurel is in the back of the hall, crying. It was one of the worst nights of my life, really one of the worst nights of my life. And I finally came home very late, like three o'clock in the morning. And I hear this really weird noise.

ANDERSON: Oh no. It's not your dad, is it?

HOLLIBAUGH: No, it's not my dad. Thank god she didn't go that far. I hear some noise that sounds to me like sex, and I think hmm, well, hmm. And I tiptoe upstairs, and Laurel is fucking— being fucked by— this guy that's the head of the— what was it called? The Labor Party, the National Labor Party. Big lefty, Marxist-Leninist group. And he was this very handsome stud, and he was fucking her, and I—it had been an incredible snow storm, and I remember standing at the door looking at him fucking her, and she's looking at me, and I'm looking at her, and I went to the window—this guy is tuned out, in the way that only men can tune out when they're fucking—I go over to the window, I open the window in our bedroom—it's quite a nice-sized window, and I walk over to the bed, and I pull him out of her, and throw him out of the second story window, into like 12 foot of snow. And I throw his clothes after him and tell him never to come back.

And then I say to Laurel, "I am now leaving. I am going to pack and I am going to leave, because if I stay, I'm going to kill you, and I'll then kill myself. All of this seems like a really useless mess. I'm out of here. And I'm leaving, because I don't know what has happened to us, but it isn't going to work. And um, I can't live like this, with you claiming me but not claiming me, and me claiming you and wanting you, but you not being able to live out our life together as a couple." This is just horrendous. And her saying, "I was never a lesbian, I'm not a lesbian, you cannot make me a lesbian, even though I'm in love with you I'm not a lesbian, and uh, fine, you need to leave." And I packed, and I went to Boston, because it was the only place I could figure out, there was a gay movement there. There was a very beginning of a gay movement. I said, "Keep my stuff, when I have a place to live, you can send it."

I stayed in Boston for a few months. I hated it, I just hated it. But I got involved in a group of people called, the Gang, I think it was called the Gang. Which was Sue Katz. She had written an article on phallic imperialism. And it was this, working class crew of women from Boston. I stayed for a while, then moved back to California, moved to Berkeley. And Laurel sent all my stuff to Berkeley. And in that period of time we tried to negotiate something that we could be to each other. I mean, it was really a horrible time for me, I really did not want to leave Laurel, did not necessarily want to leave Canada, and certainly didn't want to be on my own. But I didn't want to not be a lesbian. And it was like 1970 and I was not prepared to be in the closet with her. And it was clear to me that she was never going to be a lesbian, that her history of being with women was so profoundly disturbing, that she couldn't claim it, and if she did, it would come in another way but it wouldn't be with me.

And that I needed to have my life be open, that I didn't want to live a political life and a hidden life at the same time, and that I now had an alternative that most gay people had not had if they were political. And that I was going to do that. And so I went to Berkeley and I moved into

a commune, a women's commune, and Laurel and I negotiated back and forth. I mean, I moved to Boston first and lived in Somerville and met a whole crowd of people that, ultimately, I had a long relationship with. But I went to Berkeley because I'd always been on the west coast and I'd always loved Berkeley, and I was kind of in and out of the Red Family, which was Tom Hayden's group, that had a house right next to the Black Panthers, so right next to Huey and Eldridge and Bobby Seale and people like that, all of whom I'd known.

And in this kind of grief of losing her it was also the best way to come home, in a way, to come home to that part of the political left that was so militant and stuff. It helped, it really did help, I wasn't like, laying around crying. I was engaged in very serious political work, in a women's commune, but in and out of the Red Family. So that, you know, that summer I fell in love with another straight woman and I was trying to figure out how to come out. Not to love women, which had already been now true for many years, but to live an open life and to live that life in a left movement that wasn't going to be anymore generous around it than it had ever been, and there was no more acceptance of it at that period of time than there had ever been. And the States was even worse in a way than Canada was, I think, because especially if you were identified with kind of anti-imperialist movements and Black Panther Party and kind of left movements that weren't white left movements it was very difficult to be a lesbian in those movements, it wasn't like, popular! So, you know, that then became the next piece that I had to figure out in order to come out. And that's enough for today!

ANDERSON: Wow, you wrapped it up really nicely.

END TAPE 5

TAPE 6

HOLLIBAUGH: I just hit a couple of buttons. Oh, it was off.

ANDERSON: Oh, it's on the box. Thank you.

HOLLIBAUGH: Now I don't know that I hit the right one.

ANDERSON: Yeah, so let's see.

HOLLIBAUGH: It was in off and I put it at the top and I don't know what the symbols mean.

ANDERSON: I don't know, either, but the top one I'm hearing you.

HOLLIBAUGH: And there's a middle one. See what happens there.

ANDERSON: But I'm hearing you on the top one.

HOLLIBAUGH: Is that all right?

ANDERSON: Yep. OK. Sorry with the technical stuff. It took a little bit longer today.

HOLLIBAUGH: Okay. Did you get your coffee?

ANDERSON: I did. I'm all set. So, let's brainstorm about some of that stuff later. That'd be great.

HOLLIBAUGH: And did you see the file?

ANDERSON: I did, and I'll look at that. Should I do that now? (two voices)

HOLLIBAUGH: It doesn't matter to me. I'm not in a rush. I don't have to work, so I don't, you know, I'm not worried about 15 minutes.

ANDERSON: I-um—I wonder why that beeped—I watched the tapes the other day. The transcript isn't done, but I watched the tapes. It was really enjoyable.

HOLLIBAUGH: Was the red OK?

ANDERSON: The red is great.

HOLLIBAUGH: Huh?

ANDERSON: Visually, it's really pleasing.

- HOLLIBAUGH: Really?
- ANDERSON: (two voices) The red is really –
- HOLLIBAUGH: Because the red's so vibrant?
- ANDERSON: It's real — and luscious, like, the lighting's nice and the red's nice, so I think that it's turned out — it looks really great.
- HOLLIBAUGH: You know, I just got a transcript which I will send to you of an interview I did with Ian Lexus. So you know who he is?
- ANDERSON: Uh-huh.
- HOLLIBAUGH: He's at Duke and he's doing a history of queer people in the left in the '60s.
- ANDERSON: Great.
- HOLLIBAUGH: And he's doing a book on it. It's becoming a book. And –
- ANDERSON: Is it — is he going to do a narrative or is he doing a collection of stories?
- HOLLIBAUGH: You know, I'm not quite sure how he's organizing it. I don't know whether he's using oral histories to tell a story or he's collecting them or editing them. It's not quite clear to me but there's — oh, actually, there's some interesting people I should hook you in with. There's a dyke who is in Bellingham who is now the editor of the *Peace and Freedom Journal* or *Peace and Something* journal. I'll look it up. And I went out and did a whole series when the book came out in Bellingham, which was really interesting because that's where kind of all these working-class anarchist kids are. It was very interesting around sexuality and anarchism and stuff. Um, and they're publishing it in the journal, um, unedited interview. I- kind of can't figure out, it's a really long interview and they're doing a two-part series. But I can send you the interview-
- ANDERSON: Oh, yeah.
- HOLLIBAUGH: -which is a lot more about the left but it really intertwines with exactly the stuff that we've been talking about.
- ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah.

HOLLIBAUGH: So I'll send it to you because it'll give you background.

ANDERSON: That'd be great. How long is the interview that you did?

HOLLIBAUGH: Oh, I don't know. It was hours.

ANDERSON: As long as this one?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. It was really, really long. Because he really — he was trying to find — he was trying to find, um, people that had stayed political but had been queer before the movements, and so he was very interested in where people had hidden their sexual identities, where people had found their sexual identities in movements but then rejected them. Those kind of histories. And it was complicated to try and go back that far, because it's an older group of radicals but it's not the commies and so, he was having trouble digging those people up. So, you know. But I'll send it to you.

ANDERSON: Great.

HOLLIBAUGH: I think I've got it as a file. I'll send it to you.

ANDERSON: Great. Just as an email attachment?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah.

ANDERSON: So where we left off...

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, where did we left off — where did we leave off? [laugh]

ANDERSON: We left off when you had just come back to Berkeley.

HOLLIBAUGH: After Laurel and I had broken up?

ANDERSON: Right, right. And so you stayed in Boston for a little while and then you decided that you really wanted to go back to your grassroots in Berkeley and so you said you were spending time between the Red family and the women's commune and trying to figure out a way to be out in the movement. That you had sort of recognized your love of women but weren't out in the movement and so, we had talked about sexuality a lot the last time, though we didn't talk about it in terms of the 1980s and 1990s stuff. We talked about you coming into your own sexually.

So, we'll talk a lot about sexuality today but I really want to start with politics because we didn't really spend too much time specifically on movement stuff. I think we should spend the most time talking about queer and feminist politics, though I don't want to leave out the other

pieces, particularly if you could spend a few moments talking about the Red family, because there's very little out there about that and a lot of hostility and a lot of, you know, maybe misperceptions. I don't know. I'd like to hear your side of it.

HOLLIBAUGH: Plus, I want to do more on sex work stuff.

ANDERSON: OK.

HOLLIBAUGH: I mean, you're right, that we didn't do politics in a very direct way, and so that's a real priority, but I think exactly because of what you're trying to look for, those tend to be hidden underneath stories to kind of politicalize and so it's just a different conversation and so we should figure out at some point to talk about them.

ANDERSON: Well, you can weave them all in whatever way you feel comfortable, but where I think where we should start in terms of chronology and whatever thread you want to pick up, is Berkeley in the 1960s.

HOLLIBAUGH: OK.

ANDERSON: Um, and you can even start by describing the Berkeley that you came home to, in terms of the places that you were living, who-

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, because I also — I'm trying to remember. Like, when Laurel and I broke up, I went back to Berkeley and I was living in one of the earliest women's communes that was happening in Berkeley. The women's movement was — the women's caucuses, because women's liberation was just beginning and it was when RAT was being taken over by women. It was when all that kind of activism, the explosive radical-left feminism — we didn't call it feminism, but women's liberation — was exploding, but it didn't — there was no women's movement exactly yet. But there were women's communes and things and Berkeley, for sure, had a huge number of different, kind of, cultural collectives, you know. There were mixed men and women, there were mixed racial collectives, there were leftie collectives, there were all these different kinds of variations, but collective living was the foundational way that you lived as a radical, and it was completely taken for granted that you lived that way.

And I went back and I was living in a women's commune but part of the Red family. And that came about because the Red — people in the Red family were lefties that I had worked with in the years I'd been in Canada doing underground work, because the Red family was the white-left group, the white radical group that was much more connected with the Black Panther Party than any other part. SDS never really flew in Berkeley. I mean, there was an SDS and — but for some

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reason, in Berkeley, the Red family was really the dominant ideological group. Some, because that was where Tom Hayden was and he was a huge figure, but it was also kind of the reference point for a lot of other politics. And it had been around for so long that it tended to have a kind of stature, and part of the reason it had that stature was that the Red family's house, the commune house, was right next door to the house that Huey lived in, Eldridge lived in, Bobby Seal lived in. It was right on the Oakland-Berkeley border. Um –

ANDERSON: What street was it on? Do you remember?

HOLLIBAUGH: No. I don't. I mean, I could actually drive there, I'm sure. I remember exactly where it was, but I don't remember what street it was. Um, and it was big old house owned by one of the people in the commune, the woman that was with Tom at that point, Ann — oh, god, I don't remember Ann's name. She was very beautiful, beautiful, blond, ruling-class, um, woman who was with Robert Sheer and then got with Tom and was dumped by Tom for Jane Fonda, who then became a commune member, and — but Ann, when — you know, this is my own kind of sexual history in the Red family part.

Bob Sheer, when he ran for congress in the '60s, was the first lefty that had really tried to enter the hated and despised establishment and still be a radical and Bob was — you know, came from a Communist Party family, he came out of Berkeley, and he almost won. That was also where Ron Dellums was. I mean, it was, that part of the United States was kind of a different country. And so, all of the politics of that was different.

I was very young. I was, you know, in much of my own history at different points in Berkeley, being courted by the Communist Party, being courted by different kind of political people. Bob and Ann, who I knew early, didn't — you know, they — I didn't know them well because they were illustrious lefty figures and I was, you know, a community organizer. When I needed an abortion, it was — you know, it was a time when there were no abortions and they weren't legal and they were hard to find. And I didn't know who to go to. This was before the women's movement, there was no talk about it, it was shameful to even — it just was horrendous, and I ended up pregnant and I didn't know what to do, and I went to Ann who was older than me, um, and I knew she'd been around. I mean, I didn't have any idea about her own sexual history but I knew she would know who I should talk to and ask. She and Bobbie — Bob Sheer- helped me find an abortion doctor in LA

ANDERSON: You talked about the LA story —

HOLLIBAUGH: That whole piece, (two voices) so that — I had that kind of very intimate connection to Ann. Although, again, I wasn't famous and I

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wasn't well known, so it was kind of an anomaly — it was kind of an audacious claiming of a movement that I wasn't yet fully a part of. But I wanted — that's the group I wanted to be recognized in, even though in truth, you know, there was an insider group and outsider group. There were lots of people who functioned kind of at the edges of the Red family and then there was a tight inner core and I was never part of the tight inner core. When I came back, and I had already been with a woman when I'd been with Laurel, I came back, went back to the women's commune but was still working with Red family people because I had been in Canada, going back and forth, getting draft dodgers across the border but also Panthers across the border.

And this was a very interesting class/race thing, although nobody ever talked about it. What white women could get black men across a border? It's a very interesting class question, because the dynamic of an interracial couple in the '60s anywhere was always fraught, and so to try to get a Black Panther or a black GI across a border if you were not a woman of color was a very complicated dynamic, and part of how I did it, and part of why I was good at it, was because the class assumptions about black people as working people, or poor people, and the class assumptions about poor white trash sleeping with black men meant that even though it was considered enormously provocative that you were a mixed-race couple, it wasn't considered unlikely.

ANDERSON: So you were more believable.

HOLLIBAUGH: Precisely. So I would dress up in, you know, provocative clothes. I had long blond hair. I was sexually audacious, and I would work to become the focus of border-crossing authorities so that they would pay less attention to who I was with, because I knew that I had the papers to get across, and it was — it was a very terrifying thing, because you really did do it alone and if you fucked it up, whatever might have happened to me was not going to anything like what was going to happen to the guys if you didn't pull it off. They had one shot to get across the border and if they didn't make it across the border, they weren't going to make it out to any kind of freedom at all, any kind of control over their own kind of circumstances, either to stay in Canada or to get to Algeria or get to wherever it was that they would go — Cuba.

So there were a core of us that did that underground work of getting guys across, and it was your ties to different movements, you know, so sometimes I would be doing it with draft-resisting GIs and sometimes I would be doing it with Black Panthers. But all of it —

ANDERSON: Your home base was always in Berkeley? (two voices)

HOLLIBAUGH: Berkeley, Oakland, but, you know — actually that's not true because what would happen is, you know, it was a small world in a certain way

and so somebody would call from North Carolina and say, you know, brother Fred is being, blah-blah. I mean, it was a network, and so sometimes I would just end up with guys that I — mostly, I'd end up with guys I'd never met and we'd have to work out a story and we'd have to figure out when we were going to do it and what the likely places were that we could do it and what our story was about where we were going. And it was scary. It was real scary stuff. So, that was something that I did with — through the Red family and through my connections to a lot of the different kind of radical underground movements. Where something like the Weather Underground and SDS and stuff that were not doing that, it was not — I mean, they were going underground, but they weren't helping other people go underground.

ANDERSON: Did it ever not work?

HOLLIBAUGH: Huh?

ANDERSON: Did it ever not work, trying to get somebody across? Did you have any experiences where you were caught or-?

HOLLIBAUGH: I did, actually, but I never — the only time that I actually got caught, I got caught, and the guy I was with got through. And so I ended up in jail for, I don't know, a week or something while — because my own papers had fallen through and it was a big mess. It was pretty awful. [laugh] and it was also a matter of trying to figure out, like, you had to not only figure out your border crossings, but you also had to figure out what cities were likely — Canada's a very white country, and especially then. It was particularly white. So if you were sending — if you were with a person of color, the amount of attention that they would, by their mere presence, um, generate, was really — you really had to pay attention to it. You couldn't just decide, oh, well, it's easier to go to Vancouver because I'm in Berkeley. I mean, we would almost invariably end up around Toronto, because Toronto was an immigrant city, as was Montreal. So they always had a lot of immigrants coming in. They had Jamaican communities. They had African — there had been a part of the Underground Railway in the Civil [War] — you know, in the kind of historical times had gone up into Canada and that was in the East where it had gone, so there were still some markers there. There were African-American families that had originally been slave families in the United States that had immigrated. So, the collection of black life, though still very small relative to the whole population, at least existed, as well as a youth culture and stuff like that. But you really, you know, you couldn't just decide, Oh, I'll go to Edmonton where there were lots of Native Americans, but there were no African Americans.

And so it was a very scary kind of thing where, you know, other — I mean, always that's the nature of border crossings, but I always thought

there was very intriguing, that the women like myself that did this were almost invariably working class, always. And really got along with the men that we were doing this with. They really — we really could pretend to be couples because we came culturally out of enough common experiences that we could make up the stories that really had run through our own families. I mean, that was really — including what our own families thought if we had dated people — you know, I mean all of that kind of racial stuff was really interesting, and the class stuff equally because it wasn't always African-American men. It was often working class GIs that you were trying to get across the border, and how could you present a picture when the border guards all knew that people were trying to get across the border. I mean, it wasn't like a secret. It wasn't. Everybody knew what the hell was going on.

Now, sometimes that worked to your advantage because the guards were actually — the border-crossing guards and stuff might be sympathetic, might be against the war. I mean, Canada didn't play the same role, so there was some sympathy there. But nevertheless, they worked for the government, for Christ's sake, and they weren't exactly wild-eyed radicals. So, you know, you didn't wink and they let your car go through.

Anyway, that was a long diversion from the Red family but in some ways, that's why, I think, the Red family — I stayed connected to the Red family because unlike a lot of friends that I had that were lesbians that had come out of somewhat similar left history is — I felt really strongly about class politics even then, and felt like — especially like around GI stuff and around working-class men that I felt really strongly, even in my own fury about sexism and you know, the explosions in the early women's liberation movement, that those were not the men that — I felt like they were vulnerable in the way that my own family had been vulnerable and it didn't in any way modify the kind of sexism that existed between men and women in working-class life, but I felt like those were always the men. If there was any decision that was going to get made of who got targeted and who didn't have a shot, those were going to be the men that went down first. And so, I didn't particularly want to participate in that, though I didn't particularly feel they were great guys. [laugh]

How many of these guys are like, I really don't want to end up with you, ever. You are really a piece of work. And they were, you know? I mean, the audaciousness to actually resist a government and resist racism, doesn't necessarily make you a kind and generous person [laugh] and if you had male attitude, which these guys really did, you know, like, all right. I'm going to have to chop your hands off when we get through this border crossing. [laugh] But that was part of it, too, because you actually had to be able hold your own in those kinds of situations.

And so, the Red family was a very important marker for me, even though I didn't live there most of the time. I would stay there, we would have kind of different political activities going on. Um,

ANDERSON: Can you speak to the allegations about the training with —

HOLLIBAUGH: Guns and things?

ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah.

HOLLIBAUGH: [laugh] Sure.

ANDERSON: I mean, there was just such a frenzy about that.

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, but there was a lot of training with — I mean, it went on. You know, I mean, it is complicated at different historical moments to go back to a completely different time and say what looked logical. It's one of the things I liked about the movie that came out a year ago about the Weather Underground, because I actually thought that because they were able to capture and frame a lot of the historical time that the movement was occurring in, you actually got some sympathetic sense of why people were doing what they were doing, whether you agreed with it or you didn't agree with it.

That time was a time when many of us believed that there was going to be a revolution in this country, um, and that we had to be able to fight in order to resist what many of us saw as an escalating level of violence that was unlikely to be, um — you know, I never thought about nonviolence. It never occurred to me. I know that there were people that were, you know, into Martin Luther King and Gandhi and so — I mean, it just never, ever —

ANDERSON: That's interesting.

HOLLIBAUGH: — occurred to me. I thought it was ridiculous. (two voices) and it didn't — I mean, that was a strategy to me. That wasn't a philosophy. So, and I have to say that my own anger made it unlikely that I was going to be nonviolent. I was furious about my own life. I was furious about what had not happened to me or happened to me. I was furious about in an inarticulate way about class and race, and so — you know, as a strategy, I could do pretty much anything. As an ideology, I was a Marxist. I believed in revolution. I believed in class struggle. You know, those were ideas that were — didn't feel outside of me. They felt like inside of me. But the other part of it was that the antiwar movement, the Civil Rights movement, whatever kind of nonviolent impulses any of us might have had when we joined those movements, the hope of a kind of moral high ground, um, and a just and peaceful world. Over the years,

after you've really been targeted over and over and over again, and it's not — you're not getting famous on that targeting. It is endless persecution, endless jailing, endless violence against you. At a certain point, you really do have to say to yourself, "I'm actually not prepared to always, in order to be political, not able to resist the violence that's directed at me."

This is a longer conversation and I won't go there now, I actually have come back around, I think, to a more complicated idea of what violence does or doesn't succeed at. But I was 20, you know, I was 19. I mean, I was young, I was angry, I loved street demonstrations. I found them completely thrilling, the idea that you could resist the state, that you could run through streets, that you could get over fences and get away, that you collectively, not only militantly kind of said what you believed to be true in the face of an enormous government cover-up, but when the government tried to stop you, instead of sitting down or going home, you exploded.

Some of it, I think, was understandable because of the politics that was going on and some of it I think was really because we were young and we were pissed. And I've always been, actually, frankly, pretty thankful that it's not clear to me, I would have ever been able to come to terms with my own life had I not had a time to be that angry.

ANDERSON: You say that the movement saved your life?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, and I think that — I know this is a complicated thing to say, but part of what I think eats up working-class and poor women's hearts is that your fury never, ever has the time to explode and then you're through with it.

ANDERSON: and then heal, yeah. (very soft)

HOLLIBAUGH: And then it's done. It's not like you're not angry and it's not like you may not, you know, scream at somebody or do something. But I had years to be mad. And I had a collective culture that was explosive, and it was really so deeply in line with how unjust I felt the country was and what had happened to me, what had happened to my family, and who I had never been allowed to become, that I think a lot of what I brought to those demonstrations, whatever I believed ideologically, I also brought my own class and race and gendered history to that that was burning angry. There was nothing that I was prepared to compromise around. And so, if you combine that with the idealism of a world based on completely different values and the hope that that allows you to entertain in yourself, of a world that never does to anybody what was done to you in your name.

That's an extraordinary moment in time, and it — you know, I just feel endlessly thankful that there was a long, sustained period of

revolutionary belief, whatever I now think of, you know, the ideological ins and outs of those different parts of the movement, because I was a revolutionary in the Civil Rights — you know, through the Civil Rights movement, I became much more radical. In the antiwar movement, I really became a Marxist and — I took that Marxism and that kind of class politics into the women's movement, into the queer movement, into the AIDS movement, you know, it has then been [with] me through my own time and — but I had a long period of time to think about it, to love it, to fight with people about what it meant, to think about the consequences of it and to be angry.

Now, I wasn't really — but I wasn't actually — how can I say this? I actually also understood anger in a different way, I think, than a lot of middle-class kids who were kind of rebelling against mom and dad, and being bad. If you've been bad all your life, being bad is, like, not a new thing and having a lousy reputation is what you started with and not what you think is going to change. You're not being rebellious in the way that thwarts your parents' ambition. So, part of what I think was really different for me is I never believed in the rhetoric in the left, especially of, like, say, hating your parents or hating your family, because, you know, unlike most of the people that I was in the movement with, my family was in Vietnam. I had lost my family because I'd been against the war. I stayed in dialogue with my family about my own radical politics and I never believed that working people were stupid and that kind of stuff, because I — it was like believing I was stupid, and frankly, I've often thought I was but that's not what I believed about my own culture. And that made a difference, I think, in the way that I struggled with by being a revolutionary.

So, in the Red family, and kind of in that there were a variety of different communes that I was in, we were all — we all believed there would be a revolution, we all thought that we had to train in order to be able to be a part of this revolutionary resistance, and then there were terrible fights about, you know, were you going underground or were you not going underground? Would you, you know, on whose terms would you have a gun? What did you do in your commune? But, I have to say in pretty much every commune I lived in, it was highly armed, probably fundamentally dangerous [laugh], now that I think about it.

ANDERSON: Even the women's commune?

HOLLIBAUGH: Absolutely. I was in the Elaine Brown commune, which was a women's commune that was an early commune, and Elaine Brown was very famous in the Black Panther party and Elaine and I just actually did a speaking gig a couple of years ago in Canada [laugh]. I said to her, "I was in the Elaine Brown commune." And we just cracked up and had this wonderful conversation about being fems in the revolutionary movement and putting on your makeup before you went, like, your

semi-automatics [laughs], which we did. So, the women's communes or mixed communes, they were always — and there's a, there's a pamphlet that was put out by the People's Liberation —

ANDERSON: Army?

HOLLIBAUGH: There was a Berkeley's People's Liberation Movement or something like that, and it was a book — it was a pretty thick pamphlet on a whole variety of things from, you know, what to do in a demonstration if people get hurt. Like, how to do medical first aid when people have head wounds, what to do for tear gas, what to do for burns, what to do for a whole variety of things like that. And then, there was another section on legal rights and what you could do in prison and there was a whole section on guns and training and learning how to handle a gun and what kind of guns and how to make those decisions. How to buy a gun. It actually is used, has been used over the years because there was a whole section in there about how to change your identity, how to buy guns and not — you know, I mean, things were a lot looser then so you actually could, you know, go a cemetery and get somebody's name and get a social security card. It wasn't exactly complicated. And, everybody was arming.

ANDERSON: Even women? There just was no-

HOLLIBAUGH: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: expectation that women would be protected or-

HOLLIBAUGH: No.

ANDERSON: No.

HOLLIBAUGH: Now, I mean, there was a real difference in who people thought were going to be the first line and who people really took seriously. And I don't think a lot of the men — although I have to say, the white guys in the left, once they went to Vietnam, especially if — or they'd fought in Vietnam and they had fought — the Vietnamese National Liberation Front had some pretty heavy duty gals in it, and in large numbers. I mean, they were part of the liberation army and they were fighters. And, I think, you know, they did what they needed to do. And so guys who had been GIs in Vietnam really remembered the women that had been fighters. And in the United States, whatever was happening to black women in the Black Panther Party, which wasn't pretty a lot of times, they were treated really badly, the public persona was that, you know, the black community was arming. Now, the big figures in that were black men but black women were not just running around, like, making



coffee for people. So, while there were terrible internal fights about — in all parts of the movement about women’s roles, for those of us that believed in revolutionary struggles, we were not, like, saying, “Okay, I’ll go buy the groceries and you buy the guns and we’ll, like, get together.” It was, “I will be a fighter and I will learn what I need to learn to take care of myself.”

Now, I already knew how to shoot because my family all had guns. Although I can’t say I knew very much about it, but I’d been around guns because in working-class homes, you tend to around guns, but I had never trained. And this was really serious training. I mean, serious. Meaning, you didn’t kind of start it on a Saturday and then decide you were too tired. It was — you know, you really considered yourself cadre and you were in a serious training program. And there were many components to what you were doing. You were figuring out how to shift identities, how to be — how to arm yourself, how to lead radical actions, how to steal a car, you know, I mean, you were learning all the things it actually takes to be in a revolutionary movement, which is a resistance movement that has to actually be able to merge with the culture that is around you, and use that as the venue that protects you while you resist. And the better you are at doing that, the less you’re going to stand out and the more you’re going to be able to do it.

And so, I was involved in, you know, endless kind of training programs and conversations about going underground and real revolution versus, you know, social democracy. And I was very afraid I wasn’t radical enough.

ANDERSON: You also were always afraid that you were never smart enough.

HOLLIBAUGH: Precisely.

ANDERSON: And you talked about exchanging sex for books and knowledge and language and — can you talk a little bit about the expectations of the women sexually then, within that culture?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, I don’t — you know, there were always a core of women in the left that even in the face of the profound sexism there, fought and became leaders. But they were a small number of women and tended to usually be connected to powerful men. But in the face of having been those men’s lovers, they then refused to just be somebody’s partner and they were leaders. If you were an independent woman, if you were a lesbian, if you — you were not probably going to do too well. And I felt, at least for many years, like I wanted what those men knew, and I was trying to learn everything. You know, it’s like — it wasn’t like you went to school to learn revolutionary theory. Reading a book by yourself doesn’t actually help you know what you think at the end of reading that book. It’s discussions, it’s debates, it’s fights, it’s trying to

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figure out how to get an issue and move it into a different position. It's strategy, it's what you believe about the world.

So, the people that were having the conversations that I wanted to be a part of were men. And the women — [there was] an occasional woman in that mix, but pretty much, it was guys. And, I wanted to be one of the women that was a powerful leader in that kind of circumstance. I did not want to be simply somebody's girlfriend and I knew that the way I was treated was that those men did not think of me as a significant intellectual. I didn't think of myself as an intellectual but I was hungry. And I knew that they had ideas and I knew in exchange for sex, I could get close to them and learn things from them even though they weren't going to try to — they were going to take me serious intellectually but they — you know, you were in a world surrounded by men. And they talked all the time and they didn't give a shit if you listened in. [laugh] I mean, they frankly never included you or you try and say something they would, you know, tell you to shut — I mean, it was not, like, pretty, but if you were absorbing the world of ideas and the ways of having to defend an idea that you believed in, it was a not nice but very rigorous kind of world because, you know, I've always said, "I don't think I ever could have done what I've done ultimately in my life had I not had to try and figure how to fight for the right to ideas in a world so controlled by really brilliant intellectual men who were profoundly sexist." If you have any tendency to give up, if you have any tendency to, like, let somebody else go in front of you, if you want to be nice before you're anything else, you haven't got a shot in hell.

And I'm not sorry, in my own intellectual life, that I had to fight so hard to have it, because what it did is — I wouldn't want other people to have to go through it. I don't think it's necessary. But I do think that for me, I had to decide that I wanted ideas more than I wanted anything else. And, whatever it took to have the world of ideas, I would do. And if that meant I had to fuck for them, that was what I had to do. It wasn't okay, but it was the terms. And if I had to not be liked in order to defend an idea, I had to learn how to not be liked. And those, I think, are profoundly difficult issues for any woman, regardless of her background, but particularly for when you know you are an outsider in the class of the movement that you're a part of, it's very hard to hold your own. It's very hard to hold out for what you think, and, the other part of it was that I was learning.

So it wasn't like I was articulate, it wasn't as though I knew how to defend an idea, it wasn't that I was very gifted in a certain sense. I mean, I really — I wish I could take people back to — when I watch people struggle in movements because they don't feel smart and they don't feel articulate — I remind myself consistently of myself, because I don't think anyone would have predicted my — the curve of my life as

an intellectual at the time in the '60s and '70s that I was coming to an intellectual world.

But like always, what I had that was better than anything else that I've ever had was that I was ferocious in my desire for ideas. And so I read everything I could read. I read 24 hours — really, I read 24 hours a day. I read going to a demonstration. I read coming home from one. I read in prison. I read — you know, I mean, I just — you just could — I read things that I had no idea of what I was reading and I didn't have anybody to ask. I didn't even know what the words were. You know, I read high theory. I read all of Marx and Lenin and I was in study groups. I had no idea of what I was doing, but I was filling myself up in a way that gave me, ultimately, a very different capacity. It was like the most extraordinary graduate school, where not only did you have an intellectual world but you were trying to change the world. So you were trying to take an idea of what you thought was going on around you and affect that idea to change it. That's an incredible intellectual question.

What idea — what do you see that's in the world around you? What do you use to sculpture the components of what shapes your life, and what do you then decide to do to change the shape of the world by your actions? Unfucking believable way to ask a question. I mean, it's just remarkable, and what a gift. Because if you, you know, if you started from nothing, the good part of that is you don't have a hell of a lot to lose. So, it allows you, I think, to ask — if you cut it loose, if you decide to take a path that's not traditional, you have a much better understanding of how low the bottom is, and you always know that it would be hard to get lower than where you started and you're likely to go up. And I've always said, you know, for me, the movement was upward mobility.

In these histories that I read in the women's movement, in the left, all this stuff, of downward mobility, I decided not to go to graduate school but instead...I was in a commune in Ohio, in a factory...I was in a women's commune blah, blah, blah. And, you know, my mother was really upset. My parents were really upset because I dropped out of graduate school, blah, blah, blah. It's like, I was supposed to — you know, I would have been lucky if I had four kids and worked in Woolworth's, married to a trucker or a dyke who was an alcoholic. I mean, you know, in a trailer park. So, you know, frankly, making no money in the left, or you know, working shitty jobs, doing sex work, whatever it was. I had another world. And that was unbelievable because I had had all those bad things, all those hard things before with no other world. I knew exactly what it was like to have no hope and no future.

And what the radical politics did is give me the hope, at least for a world that would be better for other people, that I would then be completely a part of creating. I didn't think in an individualistic way during that time, and I don't think most of us did. I mean, it wasn't —

the idea of careers, the idea of professions makes it a completely different set of assumptions. I was working to eradicate that whole kind of set of categories and create a world that valued human life, human possibility, and that I would help find myself in.

And, you know, the women's movement was just one more part of the explosive revolutionary impulse to discover your own life, and radical politics of, you know, arming, of being connected to third-world revolutionary movements of people whose lives actually really did give you a sense that resistance was possible across a country. You know, we weren't doing it in isolation. We were doing it in relationship to enormous revolutionary activities globally. And however kind of fraught with mistakes our understandings were, the world was alive around revolution, and it's easy to look back on it and say that it was foolish or it was youthful, or it was impossible. You know, all of those things are the easy thing to say after it.

But what I think is really interesting is how something that never had appeared possible or certainly in the last twenty or thirty years in America became the assumption, both of fear and of possibility, across the country and we're still actually in a conversation about that time because the collective power of all the different movements did shake to the roots, I think, this country's desire to determine, without having to say what they were doing, the contours of hope and possibility. Through capital, through race, through gender, through all of those kind of big, blurry ideological things. Suddenly, those worlds that didn't think they ever had to be accountable were confronted with huge numbers of people saying "not in my name. You cannot do this, and I will not accept it, and it doesn't — I will do anything to not accept it, and to hold out for a different kind of idea so different that I'll reshape my life now."

That's the other thing, I think, that was really remarkable in that time in the early women's liberation movement in the left. We weren't saying we wanted a different world some day. The other part of it that was the culturally profound part, I think, was that we were trying to live differently. That's what communes were about. That's what sexual experimentation was about. That's what, you know, desire outside of boundaries was about. That's what non-monogamy was about. That's what sharing your money (two voices), vegetarianism, you know, living — I mean, in every way, people were trying to not live in nuclear families, not assume that making money was the most important thing, not assume that the world was defined by men and not women or whites rather than people of color, not assume that you couldn't have and didn't have the right to all the sex you wanted whenever you wanted with anybody you fucking well wanted to sleep with. I mean, you know-

ANDERSON: An interesting thing is that those aren't new ideas in American history.

HOLLIBAUGH: That's right.

ANDERSON: Just a hundred years ago, people were saying the same thing.

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly. And I think they loop, because those impulses in human hope rest often on those same, similar places. So you hear it in a language that sounds different a hundred, from a hundred years, but if you look at what Emma Goldman was doing, if you look at what kind of radical revolutionary movements were doing in 1919, you're looking at a whole lot of the same kind of impulses and experimentations and those things were really serious. I've always said, you know, there's nothing that a commune ever did to me that is in any way as painful as what happened to me raised in a nuclear family. I mean, I don't care how bad your commune was. Learning how to live and have the values of living, to support other human beings, to communally share, to not have private space dominate communal connection, to have women able to do anything, you know? What an amazing thing to try for. And how much you find out about what your own socialization has prevented you from ever allowing yourself to think was possible. That's, to me, part of what was so radical about that time is, you know, you were learning what had been done to you because you saw the limitation of your own capacity to believe in yourself, to think that you were capable of doing this, being that, thinking this, acting in this way. You really were up against your own stuff, over and over and over again because the marker for what you believed should be possible for human life and where you saw yourself, gave you the geography of your own oppression. And the bitterness of the limits that you were never going to overcome in your own psyche, regardless of how much you believed in change, tried to change, that you were not going to be a completely different human being from where you had begun. And that's a remarkable trip in itself, and another one of those things that I think, when I look back on it, was an extraordinary gift, to have your life be so much in action as you tried to figure it out rather in containment. That instead you were exploding or trying to actually engage with all the boundaries that were inside you that stopped you from moving forward.

ANDERSON: It's so interesting when you look at the cultural moment that we're in now, where people feel that way. People are — the messages now are it's inaction, it's more quiet time, more solitude, more stillness, you're overextended, less activity in order for you to become more self-actualized or self-aware. It's really very interesting because you're saying just the opposite. We're going to have to take a break and change the tape.

END TAPE 6

## TAPE 7

HOLLIBAUGH: That's why I'm reluctant to do a memoir, because I think it's so complicated to try and write about the '60s and '70s. It just has no framework and, you know, that's why it was so interesting to me to see the Weather Underground film because I thought it was so unlikely that they were going to be able to create the historical context that would make it make sense. And I thought the fact that they used so much footage from Vietnam and so much of the Fred Hampton stuff out of the Panthers really did capture the emotional intensity and the kind of construction of that time, unlike Bill Ayres' book, which was one of the most horrifying books I've read in a long time. That was a perfect example of someone whose book was primarily based on the '60s and '70s who had just basically lied through his teeth, and anybody who was a part of the movement during that time that was anywhere near the Weather Underground knows that it was a complete lie and that he just completely refused to take responsibility for what he was a part of. And it's infuriating. So, it's really hard. I don't think anybody's really done it.

And the lesbian piece is completely invisible. Just give it up. And so then, I also go back and look at things like Liar's Club and some — where are there — where's there anything that kind of captures what was going on during that time period, wherever it starts? Is there any, like, in the histories, that Alice Echols stuff on Janis Joplin. You know, just trying to — where is it that we're trying to tell a different kind of story and I think Alice's stuff often does that. But it's still to be written, in my mind. You know, it really hasn't been told and I think Ruth is right, that what all of those — feminism doesn't have the respect that only the civil rights movement has. The antiwar movement doesn't either. All of those movements carry an impact that while it's disparaged now, I think rooted in how revolutionary it was because of how long it's been able to last, even in the face of complete denial, complete resistance, complete trivialization and the right kind of triumph of the media and control of the state, and still in awe.

This election looks like to me like it's going to be an explosion of baby boomers and Stonewallers and a lot of those radical forces, I think, are coming back around and kind of fueling this. There's just interesting things afoot, and I think that the — you know, if you look at queer studies and women's studies and ethnic studies and kind of all the things that came out of identity-based movements that are now based in the academy — those are still as sought after and vibrant and generating enormously interesting work and they are reflections of what's been able to survive.

So, you know, to me, you know, yeah, it didn't work, you know, the way we wanted it to. No revolution happened. But for those of us that

were a part of it, I think actually it revolutionized us and we've continued. Whether the movements that we were a part of have lasted or not, and whether we've really had to come to terms with the pain of having to reorganize your life because the thing you based it on isn't going to work anymore. I mean, for me, that was really horrifying. I probably stayed an organizer longer than almost anybody that I knew. You know, most people couldn't figure out how to make a living. You know, they just couldn't do it. There was no place that you could do it anymore, and I just kept doing it and doing it and doing it, and it was very shocking to me, for instance, to move in with a lover alone. I didn't do that until 1980. I'd lived in communes with almost every lover I'd been with, you know, and if we lived alone, we were immediately looking for other roommates because, you know, we didn't believe in living a bourgeois life by yourself, blah, blah, blah.

ANDERSON: All this electricity for just us?

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly. What is this? You know, I'm in a couple, and I come home to my girlfriend. You know, yech, just a horrifying, nauseating idea. When Esther and I got together, I remember early conversations about whether there was any possibility of communal living. I had moved to New York and we were living in a studio apartment and we were going to — we had to try and figure out whether we were going to buy something, and I was enormously torn. On the one hand, I had all my own class stuff about owning a home. Oh, God, every working-class girl's dream. But I was very conflicted about what it meant to be bourgeois which, as far as I could tell, was completely personified by you and your lover and your relationship identifying how you lived. Ugh, God, I just found it horrifying. Really terrifying.

And so, who knew? But it was a revolution that I think had different effects on people, because some people weren't directly involved in it for that many years. I mean, there were a much smaller core that kept at it. Those people kind of passed through, and I think they were affected by it but I don't think it had the same trajectory in their lives. It was something they look back as something they did, but it's not a reference point that still is fundamental to the way that they see the world. They grew up, you know. There's nothing more upsetting to me than to kind of re-meet women I knew in the early part of the women's liberation movement who are now in, kind of bourgeois legal jobs, they're lawyers for blah-blah firm and, you know, and have these belittling conversations about, you know, how they finally faced reality and took their own lives seriously and went back to school and —

ANDERSON: Well, to many, that is a branch of feminism.

HOLLIBAUGH: It is.

- ANDERSON: I mean, she could also quite easily claim that, you know...
- HOLLIBAUGH: It is.
- ANDERSON: Right. So, where do you want to start with the women's movement. Do you want to -?
- HOLLIBAUGH: Trying to think.
- ANDERSON: Do you want to talk about your first encounters with it? I mean, whether it's with action or activity or with feminism and sort of ideologically, what that meant?
- HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. Well, I think I talked about it a little bit before but I really did not — the early women's caucuses and stuff were not very appealing to me. I didn't go to them. And in some ways, I really resisted it precisely because I felt like I had fucked my way through the left and, you know, I had done that for a purpose, which was to be a leader in that movement and Goddamn if I was going to, like, join the girls. And it really was my mother who got involved in early women's stuff and said to me, you know, you really need to take a look at this, and me being, you know, sit around? I am a revolutionary. You know, I'm sitting around with a bunch of women complaining and crying, you know-
- ANDERSON: (two voices) so interesting as part of your story.
- HOLLIBAUGH: Heavy, heavy stuff, and what was really interesting in that is that finally, my mother convinced me that I had to go. I was really blown away by the first collective women's group I was ever a part of, that first meeting I ever went to which was a CR group. I was stunned. I mean, I really didn't know what to make of it. But part of what was really remarkable, and it was out of SDS –
- ANDERSON: That CR group was an offshoot of-?
- HOLLIBAUGH: The CR group was an offshoot of SDS.
- ANDERSON: SDS women, and your mom brought you to the first one?
- HOLLIBAUGH: And my mother brought me to the first one, and I continued to go with very ambivalent feelings. But a really, actually very transformative thing happened. Finally after I had gone for a few months, and it was really exploding in me and I was reading early women's liberation material and CR groups, which were just the most remarkable, oh, God, I mean, I never — I don't think I've ever told the truth in the way that

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those — there was no marker for how to figure out what it meant to be a woman except to try and talk. There was no literature that came from earlier movements. We went back and found some of that stuff much later, but in the beginning, you know, you could read Susan B. Anthony or something but it didn't — didn't exactly galvanize you, you know, you weren't exactly working for the votes, so — Emma Goldman, maybe. But unlike the left and even the Civil Rights movement where questions of liberation and justice had been really framed by earlier social movements, that wasn't true for women's liberation and so, there were a few things that you could kind of bring to the table but that wasn't what started the CR groups. And-

ANDERSON: Do you remember what you talked about in those first groups?

HOLLIBAUGH: I do. I mean, we really — we tried to talk about our — kind of how we understood the course of our lives. We didn't quite know what else to do but to try and talk about everything from what we remembered about being young, what we remembered about growing up girls, what it felt like to get tits, what we thought of our brothers, what we thought of our mothers, what we thought of our schoolteachers, what had happened to us taking the bus, how we'd been humiliated, kind of as a daily constant, you know, just — and where we'd resisted. And some of that was a class conversation. Some of that was a gender conversation, frankly, you know, it was tomboys talking about resisting, at least up to a certain age. Those of us that were fem, I think, were completely lost in that. Because, in fact, we hadn't had untraditional histories as girls. We'd been pretty traditional girls.

But that's what I remember in those early CR groups, is that somebody would say something that was very raw and it would prompt a set of memories that you could have never identified before the conversation began and things would just roll out of people, and there was an understanding that women were oppressed. I mean, that, you know, you didn't enter it unless you thought that. If you didn't think there was anything wrong with women's lives, obviously it wasn't going to have a cathartic effect.

But in that context and thinking about oppression, which is what we were doing, there was an unguarded directness that women had to reach other including, I remember, very early on, really deep and very painful conversations about how women betrayed each other. That was one of the most significant set of conversations that I had ever been a part of because I was really fighting to stay in. I mean, I really didn't want to be around women and I didn't like being a woman and I didn't want to claim it, in a certain sense. I couldn't kind of get out of it but I wasn't really happy with it either. And early on, in the first six months of the CR group that I was in, I was taught — we were having one of these conversations about women betraying each other — and there was this

really horrible — and I was talking about how I'd felt betrayed by women. I mean, everybody was going around-

ANDERSON: Was your mother still in the group at this point?

HOLLIBAUGH: My mother — no, was not in the group-

ANDERSON: OK.

HOLLIBAUGH: -at that point. And there was this terrible silence and I just thought we were thinking, and one of the women said, "You betray women now." She said to me, "You betray women now." And I was just shocked. And of course, this was time that we believed in criticism, self-criticism and stuff, so, you know, it wasn't like you sat around and people didn't say heavy duty things to you but, that was — she said that and then women began to talk about the difference between what I was like outside of a meeting of the left, and how I treated women kind of in the world, and how I treated women in SDS and in the new left, in that collection of activisms. And women started saying, "You are brutal in a meeting. You cut people off. You are, you know, you're really vicious." I mean, it was a really heavy confrontation. And the women were sitting there saying, "the thing that makes it so shocking is that that's not how you treat people, but it's how you treat other women. In other words, you don't appear to hate women when the world — when it's a lighter place. But when it's about leadership, and when the leadership is about men and being recognized by men, you're completely ruthless and you'll give a woman up in order to be recognized in that small group." And I was devastated.

I mean, I really was devastated and I knew they were right. I knew that they were right. I knew that that's how I treated women. I knew — I hated it, like, in a meeting, when a woman would start to cry. You know, a guy would be cruel to her and she would start to cry. If she couldn't make an argument and she'd get flustered and be a girl. Her voice would get higher and she'd get — you know, all the stuff about — about the way that women, when they're powerless, try to hold their own. And the humiliating way that that really looks on women. And the ways that I had tried to subvert that in myself. To learn not to cry, to be instrumental in a way that I actually, my personality wasn't particularly set up for, that I'd never been in my family. It's not like I'd — you know, not been a real girl in my family. I'd been, you know, running around trying to bring glasses of water to guys, you know, in my family.

So, I'd really tried to shift and be something I don't think I felt very confident about, which was smart, intellectual, like an East Coast, upper-class [laugh] boy Marxist. And what women were saying to me in this group was, you know, "It's ugly. And if what we're trying to talk about is how women treat each other, and why it is that women don't

trust each other, you're a perfect example of how women betray each other and also why it's so confusing, because we really like you when you're not in that situation and then you get in that situation where we wouldn't expect it from you because you're not like that in other situations and then you do that."

And I really was stunned and I — and horrified, and it really —

ANDERSON: (two voices) defensive? Do you remember? In the moment, did you deny-?

HOLLIBAUGH: I knew it was true.

ANDERSON: You were humbled and-

HOLLIBAUGH: I knew it was true. I was horrified. I was really horrified. I knew what had been done to me. I knew how stupid I felt. I knew how belittled I had felt often in the movements that I was a part. I couldn't believe that I had done that to other people and certainly to other women. But I also was in a real struggle because I didn't want to give up the role of trying to own power in those movements, and that's the other piece that was really difficult for me, because I thought, you know, Amber, this means you've got to do something different. You've really got to do something different, and it probably means you need to join this growing movement and make it the centerpiece of the way that you understand and act on all of the politics. You don't have to give it up, but there needs to be a movement of women and you need to actually take that on and it's not another woman's job. It's your job as well and it means you need to start looking at something really different about how you feel about yourself and how you feel about other women. Because your humiliation about other women is your humiliation about your own gender. It's not because they did something. It's because you do something.

Because when you're attacked in a meeting, you always want to cry. When you're belittled, you always feel stupid. Some of that's class, but much of that is gender and — you know, it's one of those things where I just — I remember going back to my commune and throwing up. I mean, I was really — I was really horrified, that I knew that I'd done it, knew that I continued to do it, knew that I was invested in it.

And that's what I mean about what movements did that were profound and illuminating. They did confront you with yourself. Sometimes they over-confronted you with yourself but, at their best, they really asked you to examine who you were as you were trying to do the change that you said you believed in, and certainly women's liberation really did do that and that started a real change in my own thinking and I paid much more attention. I tried to start acting differently although I was pretty awkward in it, and it was there, from

that kind of set of CR group meetings that I went to, the big left conference where I met Laurel. And there were only eight of us out of — I don't know, there were 300 people at the conference and probably 120 of us were women, and there were only 8 women that were willing to try and create a position paper on women's liberation.

Women really didn't want to be in the women's movement. I mean, it was not a — you know, you were not having a good time. You were completely belittled and humiliated in every way. You weren't taking the revolution seriously. You weren't taking race seriously. You weren't taking third world seriously. You weren't taking — ugh, God, it just went on and on and so — talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place.

But those early conversations were what meant that when it was decided, the first day of that conference in Toronto that there needed to be a position on women's liberation, I raised my hand to be a part of it. And because I did that, I met Laurel and some of the leaders of the early women's movement in Canada. And we spent a weekend, while going to everything else, spent a weekend talking about women's oppression. All of us were Marxists. But we really, all of us, individually, were women who were some of the leaders of the left, as much as women ever were and we were looking at each other, like, there's something really wrong here, really wrong, and we've actually got to — we've got to do what women did during every revolutionary movement [which] was really make an argument for women. And we've got to take it seriously. And so we spent — we stayed up every night. We were completely obsessed. We were writing. And at the end of it is, you know, Laurel and I fell in love. And it, you know, galvanized my entire life.

So, that conversation, that early conversation, being confronted by other women, being told that what I had done to them was what I said I'd never do to anybody, was really shocking and there were times that I remember those conversations in women's liberation. I really remember them between straight women and lesbians. And in fact, it wasn't — I mean, there were a lot of us — here's what I'm referring to. There were conversations about how women betrayed each other for men. Those were not just lesbian conversations by far. Those were really conversations between women in the left because one of the patterns of female betrayal is around sexuality, around wanting to fuck somebody, wanting to be in relation to a guy and being willing to give a woman up to get what you want, whatever that might be. It might be a one-night stand but it equally might be status of being girlfriend or wife.

And those conversations in the early women's movement, early women's liberation movement, included lesbians and continued when there was a lesbian movement. But they started in a much earlier period and I think they were some of the most profound conversations I'd ever had with other women about how I was willing to — if my life and my

position and my power finally always rested in my relationship to men, then, that was going to be the decisive factor in all the ways that I allowed myself to value women. And that might be sexual. That might be communal. That might be activist. But it was going to be in all of those places, and I had never had a conversation with other women about betraying each other. I'd felt endlessly betrayed by women.

I had been betrayed by my mother. You know, I mean, one of the things that I think never gets talked about in incest is — not what the impact of incest is on you in relation to men as a woman, but what your relationship to other women is because women don't defend you when you're facing it as a girl-child. It is your mother that — or your aunt or your cousin, girl-cousin — that have to step in because it's not probably going to be a guy. And if women don't defend each other, then what does that mean about betrayal? You know, I always think it's interesting, Bastard out of Carolina, that at least Dorothy's mother never said to her, "You're lying." She couldn't finally defend her. She couldn't protect her and stay with that man. But she never made Dorothy — she never betrayed Dorothy in the sense of making Dorothy be wrong in order to excuse herself for the inability she had to protect her daughter.

My mother exactly did one of those pieces that I think is extraordinarily horrifying, and that you don't really ever get over, which is that she said very clearly, "A man matters more than you and I will not risk my life for yours." And that has lots of implications parentally, but it has an equal set of meanings for gender. And so to sit in a room with women who shared my politics and begin to talk about trying to make a vow that we would not betray each other, that we would not give each other's lives up for any desire, be it sexual or ideological, was riveting. And it changed forever my relationship to other women, because it meant that — I still think of that and use that as a marker in the way that I try to live my life. To not ever be willing to give a woman up, even if she's willing to give herself up, and to always understand that women betray each other, and what that does to us in the ways that we never then value and trust each other and commit our lives to each other. Because committing your life to a woman whether you're a dyke or you're not a dyke is the hardest thing in this culture to do. To live your life for women rather than live your life for children or men, is to take a direction that's unheard of for women. And some of it's queer but some of it is gendered and I think, much bigger than whether you can come with a female lover.

ANDERSON: Did that commitment then open up or bring into a more acute focus, a sense of grief around your own mother?

HOLLIBAUGH: It —

ANDERSON: Were you able to make actual connections at the time about why it was that you felt betrayed?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, yeah. I mean, my mother and I were still not talking about it, really, you know, I had told her at 12 and she had said I was a liar. But it didn't actually — it didn't bring up the grief. The grief was really there and I, you know, I really knew it. What it did is bring up the sympathy that I felt for her that I had not felt for her before. I — you know, whatever I think about what she should have done, the overwhelming impulse to survive as a woman alone, resisting your own powerlessness, is so fraught with unlikely and difficult choices that, where I had just been bitter before, how could she have done that? And especially in the early part of the women's movement. How could she have done that? And we couldn't talk about it, so, you know, it's not like we exactly had a conversation. Although I did do once what I think many of us should have done but never dared to do, which is ask my mother directly if she had to choose my father or me, who would she choose? Now, this is a question that I think many of us have actually had in our minds [laugh]. I don't think that was just my own. But we never really dared to ask it, and I did. I was about 21, I guess. I asked my mother. She was, by that time, in women's cau[cus] — you know, it was the early part of the women's movement for both of us and I asked my mother-

ANDERSON: And you had a fair fight.

HOLLIBAUGH: Huh?

ANDERSON: When — at a moment when you had a fair fight, she could have actually said to you at that point (two voices)

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, you know, we -

ANDERSON: Yeah.

HOLLIBAUGH: And we were really, as women, trying to figure out our relationships to each other. And I — it was in the trailer in Vancouver and I remember, you know, and I was also trying to work all this stuff out with my dad because my dad was sleeping with all these women that were in the CR group that my mother and I were both in, you know, and Oh, God, what a mess, and I knew that my mother had to know my dad was sleeping with these women and she then had to be around them all the time. I just thought it was intolerable and so I was confronting him about that. And so I said that to her and — because we were having difficult and painful conversations about what I thought of my father, what I thought of her, what I thought of my life, what she thought of her life. And so I said, "I want to know. If you had to pick him or me, who would you pick?" And

she did not refuse to answer that question, and she said, “You really do want the truth?” and I said, “Yeah.” And she said, “I’d pick him.” And I said, “I know that.” And in a way, it actually, though it was one of the most painful times in my life, it was one of the most painful, kind of stark moments where I heard my mother say what I’d always both feared and lived through. But you know, as a child, you always want your mother to pick you. And you always want to believe that somehow, she meant to even if she didn’t. So to have her say, straight out, you know, “Uh-uh. I would have picked him and I do pick him.” It was really a stunning moment for me and I never forgot it. Ever. I don’t think she did, either, probably.

And it was another part of what, I think, that early part of the women’s movement really did generate, are those kind of raw conversations where you really — you take your gender in, you know, you’re not saying theoretically what do I believe about the nuclear family. You’re saying to your mother, would you pick daddy or would you pick me?

ANDERSON: Well, that kind of truth telling between the two of you, what kind of impact did that have then on your relationship from that point forward?

HOLLIBAUGH: I don’t actually think it had a lot of real impact on the way that we connected to each other, but it had a lot of effect on me and how I thought about women. Because what it — this is my interpretation of my mother, but the tragedy to me about my mother’s life was that there was a moment in the early part of women’s liberation when she almost chose to take her own life on, to leave my father, and to — and to try to define herself outside of being his wife. And she was really seriously discussing leaving him and she couldn’t do it. And something closed in her when she backed away from that life choice. And it never opened again for her, and it therefore never opened again between her and I, because once she had rechosen to stay his wife, however bitter she was, however direct she was, she had again been afraid to risk herself for herself, and over time, certainly not at that moment but over time, I feel like thinking about my mother has been one of the most important parts of my own thinking about women’s liberation.

If you can’t finally forgive your mother for what happened to her and what choices she made, if you can’t understand her life, you’re probably not going to have a real good shot of understanding your own. Especially in terms of class.

It’s not OK with me what the choices that my mother made, and it isn’t too — and sometimes I think a kind of feminism has wanted to forgive the mother and blame the father in ways that I thought were really not dealing with how complicated those relationships are and how difficult those choices are. But I also think if you can’t finally come back to seeing the choices and the compromises that your mother was

forced to make and chose to make — because I really don't think people are just victims in their own lives, and women are not victims in their own lives — you can't actually finally care for your own mistakes and your own compromises. It is not as though you get in the women's movement and then you change your life and then it's a straight line and you never, ever do anything dishonorable, you never, ever don't compromise, you never — you always speak your mind, you're always whatever you think you should be.

It is really painful to be in your own life, and you're constantly up against the things that terrify you, the things that paralyze you, the things that you can't think beyond because they're so overwhelming. I remember, for example, a fight that I used to have, early on, with Esther about class. She once tried to suggest to me that I could make more than \$20,000 a year, and I had — I mean, I was so angry at her for suggesting that, and I thought it was so classist that she could suggest that I —

ANDERSON: She meant that you should make a different choice about work?

HOLLIBAUGH: No. She was saying, "You think you can't. You think that there's structurally no possibility of you ever making more money. You can't imagine ever stepping out of, at best, selling books, and making different life choices and making more money. You can't imagine that it's possible to make more than minimum wage."

I — I mean, I ripped her from one side to the other and she ripped me back. But it really stunned me and, you know, afterwards, I thought, that's actually right. I can't imagine that. It took years of me being up against it to even conceive that I might be worth making more money, that I could do something economically in my life besides live out my class history, and that I wasn't constantly and always and ever bound to my own background. And you know, that's what the early part of trying to think about my mother, think about women, think about women's liberation really helped me at different points struggle with the way that we mark ourselves in what's been done to us, so that it doesn't have to happen from anybody else or anywhere else. We are already in front of a negative curve, willing to say that this isn't possible and that that can't be done.

Now it's one thing for people to have ridiculous ideological notions of anything being possible or pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, the implication being that it's just you and your own self — yeah, you and your own self-determination and that's all it takes. But it's another thing to actually try and figure out how it is that you're marked in a way that is so profound, you can't imagine that there is ever anything more possible for you, in the way that you love people — you know, any oppression, I think, structures numbness and an opaque wall that means you can't see through it to imagine something else. That's what I feel



about heterosexuality. You know, it wasn't, I think, in my own life, that I couldn't — that I wasn't attracted to women at various points in my life, it's that I couldn't imagine it.

I've always wanted to write a piece called "The Kiss I Could Never See." Especially if you're a fem. You know, I think if you're a butch, you can go to a movie and you can imagine Kim Novak or Julia Roberts, I don't know, whoever the fuck you are attracted to, kissing you. If you're a fem, who do you imagine kissing? If you want a masculine woman and that's exactly the kind of woman that's the least likely to ever be evident anywhere visually, you can't imagine anything other than men in that kiss.

And whether you like the idea of that kiss or not, it's the only thing that kind of matches with your own sense of desire and not just fem identity, I think, although that's problematic, but fem-bottom identity, because it's also about, you know, kind of your own instrumentality and how you see your sexuality and so, you know, the kiss I could never find, the kiss I never saw, I think, again, is one of those opaque places that keeps you unable to act, unable to imagine, unable to — to create in your own sense a way of knowing something that isn't offered and therefore acting.

And I think, often, in all revolutionary actions and movements, and that's what's so profound about them — they generate the possibility of taking chances. They generate in the people that are there the idea that even though you don't know what is going to happen, you're going to jump off that cliff because there's something so amazing, or so necessary, about what you have to do, that even though it appears to be a terrible or unbelievably risky decision, you will leap out into a place that doesn't have any markers for you, in order to do something that otherwise isn't possible.

Most people rarely take those chances on their own lives. At best, they take those chances for their kids or in the face of terrible oppression; they just refuse to allow it anymore. But the proactive sense of imagining something you cannot name and then trying the best way you can to head there is one of the gifts, I think, of revolutionary ideas, and especially if it's not just alone and by yourself, but it's collective and with other human beings.

And that's certainly what the civil rights movement was and the antiwar movement. But then, in early women's liberation, you weren't just trying to be a different kind of woman, you were with an army of women who themselves were as emphatic as you in saying that they were going to repossess their lives and head down a road that, whether women were allowed there or not, they were going Well, Jesus Christ. What an unbelievable thing to think!

ANDERSON: What were the conversations about regarding lesbianism in the early days? Were you talking about it? Were there lesbians in the CR groups?

HOLLIBAUGH: There were always women that people had suspicions about. There were kind of liberal, quasi-conversations suggesting that women could make any choice that they wanted to make and I don't care what other women do.

ANDERSON: That was the extent of the tolerance?

HOLLIBAUGH: That was the tolerance. And there were definite conversations, very homophobic conversations, about being considered a dyke and how you weren't a dyke to be a feminist or women's liberationist. And when Laurel and I got together, we were told — there were early women's liberation, like weekend conferences, and we were told we couldn't share a room, we couldn't in any way appear to be together. We were told by other women that it was bad for the women's movement if we did that. There was never — I mean, it was really ugly.

47:30

The homophobia was really profound, and I think a lot of it was also that, if you unanchored yourself from men, whatever that might do to oppress you, it made all women ask where they were going and who they were going with. And if you had said that who you were going with is women, well, then what did it mean about your sexual orientation? What did it mean about desire? If you didn't want your desire linked to men and to the control and power of men, did that mean you were going to become a lesbian? You know, so that there were just these weird, wild, I thought, unbelievably homophobic, terrified conversations.

And for those of us that were already lesbians, or already in love with women and knew it, it became pretty clear pretty quickly that you were not going to be popular in those movements that were already marginalized from the movements that you were leaving in order to be in women's liberation if you claimed a lesbian identity. I think what that really did is make it particularly hard for butch women in the movement who already, because they were gender different, were already targeted and already probably knew their desire, and had acted on it in a different kind of way. It kept fems in the closet-

ANDERSON: So you remained in the closet in the early years?

HOLLIBAUGH: And then, I mean, with Laurel and I, I finally, you know — the beginnings of the gay liberation movement was starting. I was hearing about Stonewall and I was reading about it. We both were. Laurel was not at all excited about it. I was really quite blown away and I was going back and forth through the United States a lot, so I would go to Boston, I would go to San Francisco, I would go to all these places it was happening, and I was just blown away, reading these early things, and thinking about, again, if I'd already joined the women's movement and cut my legitimacy to the left, which being in the women's movement

did, was I going to have to do it again? And I didn't know what the answer to that was but I thought that it was likely that it didn't look to me like women's liberation was going to exactly incorporate lesbian identity easily.

And so, it looked to me like another one of those times when, you know, I was going to have to make another one of those sets of choices and I decided that the homophobia was really profound in Toronto, which is where Laurel and I were and that I wanted to create a panel-

ANDERSON: Oh, yeah, you spoke about this last time about coming out on the panel and-

HOLLIBAUGH: Nobody else coming out.

ANDERSON: -and nobody else came out.

HOLLIBAUGH: And three weeks later, I left, and I went to Boston. And that's where — — Boston was where the earliest gay liberation movement was really happening, much more than New York or anyplace else. Lavender Menace, all of that, and I went to Boston because of that. I didn't know where to go and I knew I was going to go back to the United States. So I went to Berkeley, I lived there for the summer. I fell in love with a woman named Diane Balzer who was in Bread and Roses and was a big early women's liberationist and then I told her I was in love with her and she, you know, was horrified [laugh]. I still see Diane and she's still uncomfortable and (unclear) I am, too. And I actually fell in love with another woman named Naomi — oh, God, what was Naomi's last name who was a brilliant, brilliant woman in Berkeley who then committed suicide. I can't remember her last name now. But I fell in love with both of them during the summer and came out to them and they — neither one of them were interested. And I was still in love with Laurel, I mean, that was really the truth of it. I was trying to find my way.

So, out of that, out of this Berkeley mess and trying to be the lesbian in the Red family which was really not fun, and, you know, trying to talk to Huey Newton about lesbianism. You know, Huey did this whole tape from prison about lesbianism and stuff. It was weird to be in both the left and the women's movement at a time when lesbianism wasn't talked about.

ANDERSON: And this is really before lesbian feminism as a strain of the women's movement.

HOLLIBAUGH: Absolutely. No such thing.

ANDERSON: Yeah, you're totally unmoored here.

HOLLIBAUGH: This was — completely. And so I went to Boston, because it looked to me like there was a movement happening there and I couldn't imagine going to New York, so I went to Boston and I lived there for a year in Somerville. And that's where I met Sue Katz and the working-class gang. She had written *Phallic Imperialism*. She was part of the women's building there. You know, Diane Balzer was there. Bread and Roses, kind of the left, and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. I helped work on *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. We insisted — we had a huge fight with — *Our Bodies, Ourselves* about including lesbians and they finally did and we did the section, it was our collective and we were then very much involved with The Furies, because we were similar, I think, in a lot of ways. And again, everything was revolutionary. You know, all the movements that started, that generated out of the civil rights movement and the Black Panther movement and the antiwar movement and the early feminism were — considered themselves revolutionary. So did we.

And, it was out of that first year, and in Boston when I was kind of on my own — I had to go find relationships. I hadn't just stumbled into one, which is really what happened to Laurel and, you know, the whole — I always think that the real truth of whether you're queer or not isn't your first relationship, it's your second. Because your first one — it can come in all different kinds of ways. It — you don't have to think about it. You didn't have to make anything happen. It just occurs somehow. It's when it's over and you have to decide that you want to be with a woman and go find one, that you have to come to terms with whether that's how you're going to move your life forward or not. And so, whatever the conflict might have been the first time around, it's the second time, I think, that the real deal starts to come into play, because then you're choosing. It's not an accident that happened that you're struggling with. It's — I'm doing this and this is who I am, and this is what I believe is necessary in my life. And then you have to go find other women and you have to begin to figure out your desire.

Laurel was nothing like the women that I ended up sexually desiring. I fell in love with Laurel and it opened up for me the possibility of passionately desiring and loving women. But what I ended up realizing — you know, that's part of what's so confusing, I went into my first bar and it was like, how do I pick? I just didn't know, you know? How do you have a sexual identity? That's not like an obvious thing. And, you know, heterosexuality — you learn from the crib. So learning lesbianism is a very different kind of thing, and when, you know, I tried to go to the bars when Laurel and I were together and things weren't good. I would go, I didn't know how to act, I didn't — I didn't have a clue. I really just didn't have a clue. I just was in love with a woman. And since half the people that I knew were in the closet in relationships with other women, you know, we all looked alike to each other. Oh, well, I don't tell anybody. Oh, well, you know...

So, there I was in Boston, and I had to go to the Combat Zone, because the Combat Zone, what used to be called the Combat Zone, was the area where the gay bars were and all the bars where the hookers were, and the drag queens and stuff like that. So, Jacques, which was the first bar that I really spent any time in, was this working-class bar where you would walk in and there was a bar here and then a whole set of booths. And in the booths would be all the drag queens and the kind of trans-people. The bar would be kind of a mix of everybody, and then behind that — deeper in that first floor would be the lesbians. And then downstairs would be the gay men. And, you know, what a — and it was this complete working-class bar —

ANDERSON: We've got just about a minute to go. Finish about the bar and then maybe we'll take a break and continue on with the —

HOLLIBAUGH: OK. So, you know, but it was my first confrontation with lesbian culture. And I don't think that it's an accident that for me, whatever was happening in early women's liberation and lesbian feminism and any combination thereof, for me, finding lesbians was about finding bar life, and trying to come to terms with that, and in that, that was where I really began to understand it. One of the most important reasons why I had not been willing to be a lesbian was because of the kind of women I desired, but also what it meant to me about class, because my desire really forced me to confront who I wanted, and who I wanted were working-class butch women. And those women looked exactly like what I had fled in Oildale. And I thought, I have to go back?

END TAPE 7

## TAPE 8

ANDERSON: I was coughing through the last couple of sentences in the last tape and I think we should start with repeating those because I think that they're really important, because you were starting to talk about going into the bars, finding yourself attracted to the kinds of masculinity that you had left behind and how profound that was in trying to figure out your lesbian desire in that context. So, maybe if you could start with articulating that again and that means about finding your way to butch-fem and finding your way to butch women and understanding all of that, so...

HOLLIBAUGH: I really, you know, I went into bars because I had to come out, in a way. You know, when you live as somebody's half-sister, who's your girlfriend, when you live in the closet, it doesn't matter that you've lived that way for, you know, seven years or something. You don't have a community of women that have identified as queer and live openly that way, or live explicitly that way. The closet keeps you contained. That is what the closet does. And so, while Laurel and I knew tons of other couples like ourselves or women that were in and out of those kind of closeted relationships, we didn't know anybody that went to the bars. We didn't know anybody that cruised. We didn't know, you know, it was like it didn't happen. And so, when I went to Boston, and I went to Boston to be a lesbian, I then had to try and figure out what that meant.

So, I became a part of this collective, but — and the collective were all these working-class women, and they had lived in Boston for years, and they had been going to Jacques forever.

0:25

ANDERSON: They were all lesbians in the collective?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah.

ANDERSON: -or they were mixed?

HOLLIBAUGH: No, all lesbians. And so, so did I, you know. And I remember — there are two different stories that I really remember. One is, I had long — I had pretty long hair and, when I went to Boston and I walked into my first feminist party — women's liberation party-

ANDERSON: An oxymoron, but- [laugh]

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, really, but, you know, I was trying, because it was my world, you know. It was my community and I walked in and you know, when you have those horrifying moments where you know in every way you have not correctly anticipated the code of the world that you say you're a part of, and you are fucked, because you're standing there and I was

standing there and I had a pair of jeans and a pair of heels and a — you know, like a summer top that probably was fairly low cut although not particularly, long dangly earrings and long hair, and makeup. And I walked in and of course, every single woman in that room had work boots, jeans, flannel shirt. I mean, it absolutely was true and it was how everybody was dressed. Including all the fems, and nobody had makeup on. Nobody had lipstick on for sure, and I remember standing at the door of that party thinking, I can't go home and change clothes. Everybody's seen me now, it's like too late, and I'm screwed. I am so screwed. And what am I going to do? What am I going to do? I — just, oh, God, I'm just in so much trouble here and I — what did I move here for? Oh, God.

ANDERSON: Now, how is it that you were able to make that mistake? Is it because in Canada the style was different? The codes were different? Or is it because the working-class collective, you fit in there and this was a middle-class party?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, I hadn't really met the collective yet, so-

ANDERSON: OK, OK.

HOLLIBAUGH: It was like an early party.

ANDERSON: So this is a culture gap from Canada to the U.S.?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. Well, and it wasn't like that wasn't part of it in Canada, but there were women's liberation dress codes for sure that were quite similar to lesbian dress codes. I mean, it was like, you know, you wore jeans and you wore leather jackets and you wore, you know, tee-shirts with big statements on them and stuff like that, but I think maybe because the Canadian women's liberation movement always was more working class and always was more union based, there wasn't the complete morality of fem presentation as questionable and stupid and, you know, that you couldn't be smart if you had fingernails. There was still a lot of judgment around it. It's not like people didn't have feelings about that stuff and didn't have kind of a code, but they didn't have the same deep one. I had been a part of that movement for a long time, so I also had the privilege of having been a powerful person in it. So, if I wanted to wear a little bit of makeup to a party, I could do that.

And there was also a kind of code in Canada of, at least what I remember of, the difference between what you did as an activist and what you did at a party. So, you know, you never went on the streets, ever, in earrings, because the cops would grab your earrings and pull your earrings out of your ear and, you know, it didn't feel good. And,

you know, you wouldn't wear heels on a demonstration where you're going to be running.

But so, it was about the intelligence of knowing the difference between what you did if you were on a demonstration or at a picket line or something like that, and what you might do on your downtime if you were hanging out with people, listening to people and smoking dope. And in that sense, though it was pretty casual, you could be wild and hippy-dippy, and you know, alternative and expressive and stuff like that. And the other part of it is that, you know, the whole kind of hippy culture had a whole fem piece in it that was, you know, was decorative and back to the land and all that stuff. So, you know, there were always — you could kind of — all of us that are in movements where we're kind of inside and outside are quite smart at finessing what you can get away with.

But now I was in another city and I didn't quite have it down, nor did I have any reputation that preceded me, and I was just having to walk in a room with [laugh] you know, all these people in. Oh, God, I remember — and I'm so tall, you know — there was nowhere to hide. I stood out. Oh, God, and I'm on the east coast so being blond is really noticeable. I wasn't bleaching my hair, I don't think, but my hair was a lot blonder when I was younger. So, you know, oh, God. I just — oh, it was just a horrifying moment and I went back to my studio apartment and cried all night and thought, I can't do this.

I just — I can't start over here and so, you know, and I didn't actually dress like that for a long time except that was the beginning of where I then — so that coupled with then going to the bars where, in the bars, you dressed. Bar culture is a dress culture and however it was you wanted to present yourself, you didn't go in jeans. You might go in slacks but you didn't — you know, whatever it was that was your identity, your look, your sexual signals, it wasn't sloppy. And these were working-class, tough, queer bars with a lot of sexual outlaws of every kind. And you were expected to hold your own.

And so I went from that party to Jacques, and I remember walking to Jacques and again, I tried to kind of play it down. I mean, I knew bar culture enough to know that you had to dress up. But I kind of tried to, you know, do something that was very neutral. Neutral shoes, neutral pants, neutral top, no make — a tiny bit of makeup but no so much that it would be noticeable, and I walked in and I was completely terrified and shocked. You know, I had never seen women together as a group. And so to see women dancing with each other, to see women flirting with each other, to see women unambivalently being lesbians. Oh, God, I was just horrified and mesmerized at the same time. And I wanted to be a part of it and I, you know, and I didn't know who I was in it. And of course, I sat at the bar, nobody talked to me, nobody flirted with me. I didn't — you know, and I keep trying to figure out, like, who leads and who figures out who leads, and do they trade — do you trade every



dance so you lead one dance and then you don't lead the next — you know, just whatever all the cultural signs are.

I was really at a loss and I began to realize that the other thing was that in my neutrality, it looked to me that the most interesting women looked like butches. Though I found that kind of just — I just didn't even know what to do with the thought. I just — here I had, you know, at least I was going to be a lesbian feminist or a lesbian something that just wanted women, but now, it looked to me like I was attracted to women who looked like men. So did that mean I was straight? I mean, it just — in every way, I was bombarded with the relentlessness of sitting someplace where you don't know anybody for hours, trying to not appear completely self-conscious and not having any idea what you were doing.

I remember somebody asked me to dance, I said No. You know, just in every way, I just didn't have a fucking clue. I tried to ask somebody to dance but then I didn't know what to do when we started dancing. I didn't know, and I really didn't know who I was attracted to. I mean I had fallen in love with somebody but I didn't — it didn't tell me anything more than that.

So, I spent the first six months in Boston pretty much sitting on a barstool thinking about this, and thinking about class, because more than anything else, what working-class queer life reminded me of was what I tried to flee. That these were all the women that I had tried to not be and not be like, um, where I came from. They all were, you know, at best they were UPS drivers or they worked at the bar. They were hookers, they — you know, whatever. Or they were secretaries. They worked in a bank. They were a bank teller. All the class stuff that I most feared about where my life would end up was now back, and it was the basis of my desires. And I thought, I am just — I am so screwed. I am so screwed. [laugh] I worked so hard to get out of Bakersfield, to get out of the trailer court, to get out of picking fruit, to get out of factory life, and I am now back in a culture that's based on that, that I know completely-

ANDERSON: Except you don't even get the legitimacy of the heterosexuality. You get to add the lesbian on top of that.

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly. Now I'm going to be queer in it and — and on top of that, bad enough, I'm attracted to the most outrageously different women in this bar. And the more butch they are, the more trans they are, the more gender different they are, the more I like them. Well now, this really — I mean I actually, as a women's liberationist, I actually, you know, I've written about it. It was a crisis then and it was a crisis again after I broke up with my first butch lover. Because I — the accusations and implications that surround you as a fem is that the reason you like masculinity is because you're actually straight. And that the reason

you're not straight is because you don't want to deal with men or you had — you've had a horrible experience with men, you're an incest survivor [laugh]. Your father didn't treat you well. Oh, God. And so, you know, you're trying to work it out by being with butch women.

And I was really horrified that it looked to me like my desire for women and my particular kind of desire for butch women meant that I was betraying feminism. That I was betraying what I said I believed about power and powerlessness, about no roles about — I mean, those things that I've tried to actually write about in resistance flooded me in the beginning and really — I was really horrified at myself.

ANDERSON: So you had thought about butch-fem before you walked into this bar and had made a conscious decision about no roles. That it was something you'd thought through, you'd written about?

HOLLIBAUGH: I had thought about it. I hadn't — it didn't come to me as butch-fem. It just came to me as, you know, I believed in women and men being equal. I believed in something not being defined by the way that you lived in your body, that women's lives shouldn't be contained that way nor should the way they partner define what they were allowed to do. And, you know, when you're sitting there and you're looking at the culture that you're horrified by, even though you're actually quite happy there because it does remind you of home, and you're looking at your own desire and you're thinking about what you want.

My relationship with Laurel was never very successful sexually. So, in some ways, I was really also confronting my imagination, my fantasy of what I wanted a woman to do to me, and to even think like that when the way that I had tried to live as a heterosexual and the way I actually had been as a heterosexual. I was really ruthless as a heterosexual woman sexually. I got off. I had orgasms. I ran the fuck. If I wasn't the top, I wasn't exactly traditional bottom — certainly not in the emotional context of that. I was pretty ruthless about what I wanted. I was never monogamous, not one single time with any man I was ever with.

So, you know, I was confronted then with my vulnerability in a different way because I was now in a place where I had to feel desire, and need and possibility, and I found my own ideological life to be in complete contradiction to what I wanted. I don't think that there's ever a time that you're kind of more horrified at your sexuality than when it's up against the framework of your own beliefs. And that is what coming out is about, but it's again what butch-fem is about, especially if you're a lesbian and you're a women's liberationist.

And I couldn't figure it out. I mean, I really didn't know what to do and I was attracted to all these butch women but nothing happened because didn't know how to act. And I wasn't prepared to be a fem, exactly. I was not butch, but I wasn't — I was just not much of anything. And I decided that I didn't like Cambridge or Boston and

Somer[ville] — I didn't like it at all. Everybody had said to me that it was like San Francisco and it didn't seem like San Francisco at all to me, and I decided to go home.

And I was kind of — I wasn't sure I liked the group of lesbians that I was in this gang with and I just decided I was leaving and, you know, they could all decide whatever they [wanted] to do but I was going to go to San Francisco and it was where much more my political life had been led, is in the East Bay in San Francisco. I knew I could find work, and I — I just wanted to go home, and I knew that I was now a lesbian going home but I felt like I understand that — I understand the west coast, and I'm going to go now. I've sat for six months watching things, trying to figure things out. I think I'm going to go back to California and see what kind of life I can construct there.

So I went back. I moved, I went to San Francisco, I didn't go to Berkeley. I knew that Berkeley was not going to be the right place for me as a lesbian. And I knew there was a lot of working-class lesbian life in San Francisco and certainly in 1970, which is when I went, there was, you know, lesbian feminism hadn't really impacted working-class queer life. So, it wasn't hard to find, even if you were an outlaw as a feminist to go look for it, it still existed in a very pure form. Hadn't been kind of — it hadn't been compromised in a certain way by another ideology.

So, you know, I don't know what I was thinking when I did it, but I went back and I lived in a commune, and I was with a woman — how did I even fucking meet her? I have no idea how I met Kathy. She was kind of butch but not a lot, certainly not as an identity on her own. We were together, and we lived in the commune with — it was a big apartment, it was like a five- or six-bedroom apartment in San Francisco near the Castro, and we lived a block from Scott's, which was the big, one of the big working-class bars, and so we were down there every night. And, I don't know, I think I must have met her at the bar, but — and so I began to have a sexual relationship with her. She was very, really, I mean, this was a relationship that didn't have a lot of consequence but I think I was with her for seven months or something and then she decided she wasn't a lesbian, and blah-blah-blah.

So, then I was on my own, and I came — by that time, everybody from Boston that I had known had moved out to San Francisco. They also decided they didn't like it. They all moved to San Francisco. They were all living in variations of communes, though I wasn't living with them, and I was still hanging with them. I was doing a great deal of political work, and the woman that I ended up being with, was lovers with, the moment that I met her, was lovers with Sue Katz that I had talked about. And they were in this kind of weird S/M, leather, top-bottom relationship, slave-master relationship, and we were kind of talking about it. You know, at that point, I really didn't know how to construct a political identity, a sexual identity and a queer identity. I just was really at a loss.

And so, in a way, this group of women became the place where I tried to work all of that stuff out, and because it was a working-class collective of women, most of whom had been lesbians long before they became feminists, or women liberationists. They were very ferocious about their sexual rights and their sexual identities. And some of that was S/M, some of that was butch-fem, but they were, you know, fuck this women's movement that can't deal with blah-blah-blah. So it was very liberating in that sense, and when Paula broke up with Sue, or Sue broke with Paula, I don't remember who broke up with who — um, I had been attracted to Paula. She was this stone-butch girl and I just thought she was the hottest thing in the world and now she was available and I thought, I think I'll just see if I can make something happen here, because Sue broke it up with her so it — I'm not trespassing, and so, and she looks pretty lonely and I think I'll just try and make something happen.

ANDERSON: This passes the don't-betray-other-women litmus test.

HOLLIBAUGH: Exactly, exactly. So I didn't try anything while they were together. By that time, I actually was — knew that I was a fem, was dressing like a fem when I went to the bars, was trying to attract butch women. You know, the irony to me, and I don't know if I've ever said this in an interview or anything before, but the irony is that in the lesbian movement and the women's movement, I had been accused of being a fem and what I looked like and all the rest of it. What was ironic to me is that in the bars, I was not nearly fem enough for the kind of fems that were getting the kind of butches I wanted. There were high-fem, fuck-me pumps, you know, these were working-class girls who didn't have short hair, had nails out to here, you know, they were unambivalent about a fem identity and getting the kind of butches they wanted and they did whatever they had to do to do it and they were pretty clear about being girls while they were doing it and they did it, and I'm like, trying to be provocative enough to get their attention while careful enough to —

Like, for instance, I refused, until I was 50, to not have short hair, because I felt really strongly that even though all of that time I was fem-identified, wore makeup and all the rest, I felt like I wanted also to be identified as a dyke. I don't want to be able as a fem to completely pass. And I really did struggle and have struggled for many years, for most of my queer life, to try to figure out an uncompromising way to both be queer and to be a fem. And so, I wasn't comfortable with a completely unmarked identity as a lesbian. So, I never ever was willing to have anything but very short hair. I mean, that long. Punk stuff was very — you know, I really loved it, and I'd wear a lot of makeup. I was prepared to wear very provocative clothes but I struggled to try and figure out

how to represent a kind of being a girl in a way that I thought was powerful. And there was never a simple answer for that.

And so, here I was in the bars in the earlier years trying to figure out how to get these women to want me but not betray my own sense of what girlness does to make you ambivalent in your own presentation and your way you walk, the way that you live in the world, the way you pass.

ANDERSON: So, what you're doing that may be different from the other fems in the bar is bringing a feminist critique.

HOLLIBAUGH: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: And you were trying, and you wouldn't say that they were not. The ones with the nails out to here –

HOLLIBAUGH: They weren't.

ANDERSON: OK.

HOLLIBAUGH: They weren't. They weren't in the women's movement. They weren't — whatever it was called. They weren't in women's liberation. They weren't going to see our groups.

ANDERSON: So you were fairly alone in trying to integrate both of those things?

HOLLIBAUGH: So I'd go to the women's movement, you know, or even the lesbian women's movement and they are all — you know, we don't believe in roles, we don't believe in blah-blah-blah and they'd go to the bars, it's like who in the fuck are those women. They are so ugly. They are so — you know, like, making fun of women that were lesbian feminists. And I'm like going between those two worlds, thinking I really don't know what I'm going to do here, and finally trying to figure out how I'm going to get the women that I want and realizing that I had to have an unambivalent relationship to being a fem. However I constructed it, whether it was fem enough, if it was the most fem. Whatever the internal markings of that world were going to be, I had to live it that way and I had to want that way in order to attract the women that I wanted. And if they didn't want me because I didn't appear to be feminine in the way that they wanted, well, then that was going to be a bigger problem than how I looked anyway because I wasn't going to stop being political and I was going to have to manage this somehow and I didn't know how.

So when Paula and I got together, it really was the first butch-fem relationship, that unambivalent, explicit butch-fem relationship and I think for both of us, we just flowered in that relationship. I mean, this

was a working-class woman from nothing, from dirt, who had always — I mean, the pictures of her at 4 are just so painful because she was like a stone-butch 4-year-old with, you know, a duck-tail Elvis Presley haircut and big hand — she had huge hands. She was an Olympic ice skater, speed skater. And she ended up going on to roller derby and stuff. I mean, you know, she had thighs that were bigger than most people's [laugh] heads and arms. And she was — you know, she always rode a motorcycle, she always played baseball. She always was athletic. She always was butch, whether she had long hair or short hair. Ah! She was so fabulously stunning.

And we learned with each other. Because, in some defiant fuck-the-women's-movement kind of way and because we were in a working-class collective that was political but gave us permission to do this, and because we were then really a part of bar culture — I mean, we were in the bars every weekend and a lot of times otherwise — we grew up as a fem and a butch with each other in that world, allowing each other to transgress in ways that I don't know what we would have done. It would have been harder on us if we hadn't had each other to be beautiful for, to be desirable for, and to go with each other across the worlds that both of us — I mean, I was much more political than Paula was but Paula might have even been in — I don't know if there were women's studies then but she was — she was in junior college and she was trying to go to college, which was a big deal for her. She kind of believed in politics though she didn't like to read. You know, she'd come home every night and she'd go to school and then she'd go to her job and then she'd come home and play pinochle.

So I had my political life and then I had pinochle Fridays, you know, which was exactly how I'd grown up. Everybody played pinochle and stud poker and so, you know, I just finally realized I was going to have to go between both worlds, be who I was in both of those worlds, and try and live with the consequences of that. And that's when I first began to really understand — especially because Paula was political enough that she would, at least in the beginning, go to things with me — I began to see how despised we were and how, a butt of every — I mean, nobody was ideologically — it was such a joke that people didn't think they had to be ideologically offended by butch-fem, because it was such a caricature of heterosexuality that — ugh — you know, it could just be dismissed. This wasn't something you even had to think about because — ugh.

And so, that I was powerful and articulate and although, again, though I was very much a part of the movement and very much a part of the activism that was going on in San Francisco, the explosion of gay life, it was a time when I still wasn't a leader in the way that I subsequently became. I was somebody that had to be dealt with, but I was very much in the collective, kind of voice of this rebellious group that I was a part of. And then, Paula and I had a life. But I saw how

hated I was and how hated she was, and as a couple, what the movement that I cared about made fun of. And that was really terrible to live with.

It was really awful to live with, and so while I was going with Paula to the men's clothing store to buy her her first tuxedo, I was also trying to figure out what it meant to have her bind her breasts and drive a Harley, you know — some of it, I knew, was class and some I knew was sex — and to come to terms with what I wanted. Because there wasn't any question about her being a top. None. And because of that, there wasn't any question about me being a bottom. And, boy, talk about what nobody talked about. Even if people were willing to talk about being butch-fem, fems would rush to say they were instrumental, rush to say that their lover made love to them and then they made love to their lover and I'm thinking to myself, well, maybe you got a different category-

ANDERSON: The lady doth protest too much-

HOLLIBAUGH: of girl than I do but frankly, you ... and that's when I created, like, what I still think of as very smart, like, a set of rules for myself called the three-month rule, which was that in the butches that I — and I ended up doing this a lot after Paula and I broke up and I realized I was going to be with butches from then on, I created what I call the three-month rule, which was for three months with the butches I was with, I would not in any way initiate anything.

ANDERSON: For the first three months.

HOLLIBAUGH: For the first three months. I would do exactly what I wanted in terms of responding to desire but I would not in any way insist on or discuss anything else. At three months, if we hadn't broken up, it was clearly not a one-night stand, and it was at least going to be an affair and not a relationship, at which point we really did have to have a discussion. Not about whether I would always make love to them and they would always make love to me or something like that but how we would manage my own desire for them when they often felt very ambivalent about their bodies when being the recipient of desire. And so, I took it really seriously and I thought it was a completely fair thing to ask for women that had been gender — who hated the gender that they were while they lived it. So if you're touching their breasts and they have hated all their lives having breasts, you're probably bringing up at best ambivalent desires, if not self-hatred, etc. and coming, and all the meanings connected to submission and all those kinds of things which I'm playing with in my own identity to come as a bottom and then asking the lovers that I'm with to suspend those questions in order for me to touch them.

So, at three months, I began — I would begin to have that conversation, not with anything about a demand but more to say, we got

to talk about it, because the way that I am attracted to you is not totally expressed by the way we make love when you initiate it. There's also a need that I have that's an independent need of that to be with a woman, and I know it's complicated. I don't know what the answer is. I don't know how we'll figure this out. But I don't want to pretend that somehow every marker is the same for each of us when we're walking down this road. We're going to have to negotiate this. And so, now we're going to have a self-conscious conversation, set of conversations for however long. It may go on the entire life of our relationship. But my own — my own desire for a woman is not captured completely as a bottom and therefore, we've got to talk about it.

That is really heavy shit and it's not, I think, talked about enough in butch-fem writing and discussion precisely because it's so problematic to defend being a top or a bottom but for sure in being a bottom. So in any way to give credibility then to the people who criticize being a bottom as though it's not instrumental, and as though the only proof of instrumentality is initiation, is something that I think most of us haven't been willing to talk about as fems, because it'll get used against us.

And part of what's so difficult when your desires are outside your movement, is that you can't talk about the contradictions that exist there for you because it complicates what — how you'll be targeted by people who don't agree with you.

And so, you know, at this point in my life, you know, fuck this, I mean, I'm 57 and really say what you will. But I am careful about it because even in my writing and stuff, because I've been articulate about butch-fem and have become a representative of fem identity, I pay a lot of attention to what the impact of what I say is going to be that could make fems pay, not just give us tools to think about what's complex in that identity and because I think fem identity is not the same as bottom identity and for many years, I was never prepared to call myself a bottom. I would not do it, and in some ways I always think that part of the reason that I'm so expressive in "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With," the article that I did with Cherrie [Moraga], is that I didn't want to call myself a bottom.

And so because I wouldn't allow myself to shortcut into a word what I felt, I then described it because it did seem instrumental. It did seem profoundly complex in its — in the way that it — that it played with power. And I didn't want that left out of the conversation and I felt like it never got included if you said you were a fem and by implication a bottom.

But it also puts fems, I think, that are tops in really impossible positions, and butches who are then very humiliated about being bottoms. You know, it's not pretty and given that it's so hard to have desire, it's a particularly high price to then pay if you're trying to figure out how your identity is kind of embedded in the way that you feel desire and you can't talk about it. It's really problematic. And S/M has



all of that kind of stuff to it. All kinds of sexual marginalities bring that to it. Butch-fem right now isn't as provocative as it used to be, mostly because there's a world of bois and a world of transgender identity that are the new markers for gender difference.

But I don't think that — you know, whatever that ultimately results in, in the current movement, many of the same questions, I think, exist, of how your identities and your gender constructions do or don't cooperate with the way that you want to have sex. And I think it's really problematic, you know. A couple of friends of mine that are butch lesbians that have transitioned and are now transmen and identify as gay men have, you know, laughed and said to me, "You understand what it's like to try to be a gay man without a penis?"

ANDERSON: They're not a couple.

HOLLIBAUGH: Good question. Yeah, they are a couple. But they're in a world where I think that that's quite — [phone ringing] — is that going to fuck up the tape if the phone's ringing?

ANDERSON: You don't want to talk through it, I guess. I'll just pause it.

HOLLIBAUGH: So then these are men who have lived a life trying to figure out their gender identity through butch-ness and finally decided that it wasn't actually the definition that really expressed who they were and they transitioned and are now trying to figure who that makes them. Because they're transmen who are queer. And does that make them faggots, does that make them bois? What does that make them? And who wants them and who do they want?

Those kind of questions seem to me to be enormously complicated, not easily resolvable questions. Each generation and moment in different moments and movements express them differently but I think they often rest on some of the same contradictory issues, even though they're now being expressed and played out in a different milieu, a different kind of construction of what the contradictions are. And so I look at it and I think, you know, you can't reduce one to the other but they're often asking some of the same questions, even if they're finding a different resolution. And for anybody that's a fem, that's either tried to figure out who she is in bed and how she wants to be a sexual person, and loving butches who are caught in a never-never world of masculinity and femininity, an unresolvable contradiction. I think it's really difficult then to figure it out when you're with somebody, to figure it out in terms of who you're attracting and then figure it out in terms of a political movement. Oh, man.

ANDERSON: What were — the tools have changed so much in the last 25 years for figuring those things out. Feminism, it seems, offered a lot of them, to you? (throat clearing)

HOLLIBAUGH: I wouldn't say that.

ANDERSON: OK. Feminism maybe offered some tools for-

HOLLIBAUGH: Feminism did not.

ANDERSON: Feminism offered no tools.

HOLLIBAUGH: Feminism gave me a sense of my interior possibility in gender. It said that as a woman I did not have to live in or accept the world in the way that I had been meant to live in it, and that was profound and explosive. It answered none of the questions that brought to my desire for women and, in fact, it complicated and resulted in me trying to kill myself because I felt that the contradiction between what I wanted sexually and what I believed in politically was so un — there was no merging of those two things that — I mean, and I guess it, you know, I've said it in my writing, but I want to say it here again because it's really — that was such a marker for me, that that is this thing trivialized as though it's insignificant to the bigger issues ultimately, I think, is exactly the kind of thing that people decide to kill themselves over because they can't resolve. Whatever the marker is. It might not be butch-fem. It might be gender — all kinds of gender differences, sadomasochism, you know, loving younger people if you're older. I mean, the range of marginalities of sexuality or sexual practices is huge, but what I say it for is to remind myself that that trivialized as though it's not a significant thing can be, and often is, the trigger where you so despise and hate yourself that you decide it's impossible to live with that sexual desire in the world and be an accountable, decent human being.

And that is a horrifying place to find yourself, when you feel that your desire is so transgressive of your beliefs, that it is better actually to be dead than to live it, you are caught in the worst kind of crisis that — and there is no place to go with it. Your friends may or may not understand what it is that you're talking about but you probably don't have a voice left that doesn't seem like a set of excuses. And when you feel as though you're betraying your own movement in order to have desire, that is a terrible, terrible price to pay.

And, you know, I did feel that I was betraying the women's movement by wanting to be a fem and a bottom. I felt that the questions that were being asked of me were questions that the ideology I believed in supported. And I couldn't answer them — or when I answered them, I was lying on one side of my life or another.

ANDERSON: But you are able to answer them just a few short years later.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah.

ANDERSON: So where do you — how do you-?

HOLLIBAUGH: But is was only after I tried to kill myself (two voices)

ANDERSON: But how did you get there?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, you know, then I had to say, OK, if that's not the answer, if I'm going to actually — if I'm not prepared to give up my own understanding and world view and I am faced with this kind of sexuality which I am not prepared to despise and in fact, I'm going to act on explicitly and not just rebelliously, then I'm going to have to try to answer the questions that I've had no help in answering. And that was what put me in a world of people who were asking very similar questions from different kind of sexual positionings. That's where, you know, I found Gayle Rubin and that's where I found Dorothy and that's where I found Ann Snitow, so then it wasn't straight and gay. It was difference, profound sexual difference that nobody could explain.

And so then I had to start thinking about sex as a deeply theoretical area that I had to educate myself around and take on. And so, I went through a training that was done in San Francisco called — the San Francisco Human Sexuality Institute, I think? The big one. Gayle and I did it together [laugh]

ANDERSON: Training for what? I mean, what was the training around?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, the training was around, kind of, the impact of sexual morality on sexual understanding, and it was, you know, what you don't know about sex that you've never been able to get an answer around. What sexual biases you actually bring yourself, because one of the things that I realized, for example, is that where I was really sexually biased is I really didn't believe that women could authentically be heterosexual. That I had always thought it was false consciousness in some ways. You know, they had to be, they meant to be, they didn't know why they were, they — but I carried that bias pretty directly. That I really thought when women told me stories of good relationships with men, I thought that they were lying, either to themselves or to me, and that when they told me bad stories, that was the reality of heterosexuality because that was my reality. And that I had enormous hidden bias about believing that there was ever anything authentic in heterosexual desire.

ANDERSON: That was also supported by a lot of the ideology at the time.

HOLLIBAUGH: Absolutely.

ANDERSON: I mean, you were not alone in that.

HOLLIBAUGH: Man hating, you know, and it was not straight or gay, although it was a little easier if you were a lesbian, but frankly, all of that. So I realized that when I went out on the road to do the Briggs work, and I went back to all these working-class towns that I had been raised in, and I had to begin talking to women who were in those towns and never parts of the political movements that had sent me there, when I had to start talking to women about why they were living the lives they were living and why they were having the kind of sex they were having, and how they felt about queerness, it really humbled me.

I have to say, it really, you know, I realized I didn't have the tools to have the kind of sexual conversations that I thought were fundamentally important, both to the left and to the women's movement, and to queer life. And that I needed to go back and I needed to really not assume in a kind of smart-ass kind of way that because I was a lesbian and because I was outrageous and because I was a fem that I knew all about sex.

I really thought, you know, I actually need to learn about sexuality and not just the techniques of desire, but I need to be thinking about it in bigger ways than a fem identity. Because the questions that I have look to me like bigger questions than my particular desire, although they play out for me in these ways. And if I'm going to be a sex radical, which it looks to me like I'm going to be, or am, I need to actually do my homework and not assume that because I can say sexual words out loud in a way that often other people can't say them, that I know what I'm talking about. I think people are often not very humble about the way that they ideologically ram their ideas down other people's throats without having done their homework. So, I felt like I really needed to educate myself. And in the women's movement, there was no support for that kind of idea of-

ANDERSON: Or inquiry.

HOLLIBAUGH: None. Absolutely none. There was enormous amount of writing about, kind of, the limits of sexual possibility and sexual desire, both straight and gay. There was unbelievable fury about the things that are done to women sexually, and there was no place to actually talk about sexual hope and sexual intrigue and the erotic imagination and, you know, because all people were talking about was, you know, patriarchal images and — I mean, that wasn't like that was not true. It was true. But it just wasn't the whole deal. And so, I kept thinking, well, you know — you keep wanting to find the stuff that you can't find, maybe you better do the work. And so that's what I did, "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With."

Before that, I was doing a lot of work on sexuality with Gayle and with kind of a core of us that were part of the Lesbian-Gay History Project in San Francisco. That was Jeff Escoffier and John D'Emilio was a part of it for a while, and Estelle Freidman. I mean, there was a whole group of us, Alan Berube. And we were trying to talk about sex. And we were theoretically very demanding of each other. I mean, we were reading heavy-duty stuff and really fighting with each other and we were very uncomfortable with each other's desires. That was what was really illuminating to me is that, you know, Gayle was having fights with a history project about whether she can present S/M material under the rubric of the San Francisco Lesbian Gay History Project, even though we were doing all these presentations on butch-fem. You know, could Pat Califia come to the meetings? You know? Blah-blah-blah-blah. You know, it just went on and on and on. And we were often very fucked up to each other and confused ideologically.

The only thing we really had going for us was that we were smart and we knew how ideological sex was so when somebody would come and say, you know, it looks to me like another shade of ideology here, at least we would consider it, instead of being kind of self-righteous in a way that I think a lot of feminism became. At least we were willing to entertain the idea that we didn't know everything about desire.

And that turned out to be an incredible set of moments of sexual experimentation, too, because that was the other thing that was going on, is that Gayl and myself and Dorothy and a whole variety of others of us there in San Francisco, were trying out sex in our bodies. So, we were trying to figure out sex clubs and, you know, monogamy and non-monogamy and sexual practices and S/M and we weren't all divided in our identities exactly either. So the first, kind of, wave of us that were following gay men's open and explosive kind of sexual promiscuity and sexual adventurousness, that was the model for us, you know. Public cruising and non-monogamy and-

ANDERSON: Also making you unpopular with the feminists.

HOLLIBAUGH: Very. And that we loved gay male culture, and we all loved gay male culture. We all loved — even if we were treated badly by it, we all thought it was just an incredible — it was amazing to be in San Francisco in the '70s in a sexually outrageous community where everything was going on. Drag was going on and public sex and public sex of every kind and, you know, it's like, whoa. And that was how you went to get your laundry. You know, that was what you walked through to have dinner and to, well, you know, and we were also women that had relationships with men and that was also very different then, I think, for a lot of feminists at that point who really were separatists and who had very little, kind of, dialogue relationship with men.

So I guess the other piece in here that I think is important is gay men were important to me because while they had this extraordinarily explosive and interesting sexual culture, they were not judgmental about each other's sexual practices. You like to be a top, you like to be a bottom, you were into S/M, you were not into S/M, you liked to pee on people, you didn't like. People would go, yuck, if they liked it or they didn't like it, but it didn't make you not a gay boy. It didn't in any way disenfranchise you from gay male life or credibility. At most, the place where there was the most question was around man-boy love but even there, people were saying you were gay, as problematic as that was.

So, the other thing that I think was really important for me during that period of time was that I kept gay men in my life because they gave me buffer and they didn't judge me around my sexual desire when the world of women and the women's culture and the separatist culture was an impossible place to be who I wanted to be sexually. And gay men might not get it, but they didn't care. If I said I was a lesbian, I was a lesbian, and if I was a lesbian fem, so I was a lesbian fem, you know? I wasn't inauthentically queer because of my sexual choices. In separatist women's culture, I was always suspect and so, gay men ended up playing a fundamental role in keeping alive my options sexually, where separatism didn't. Do you need to change it?

ANDERSON: I do.

END TAPE 8

## TAPE 9

ANDERSON: And the reasons that you were attracted to that culture and that community and then, when I turned the camera off, I was asking about separatism, so maybe we could talk a little bit about lesbian separatism, lesbian feminism, and some of the labels and identities and categories that you moved in and out of.

Which names and labels, identities, did you attach yourself to at that time — and that obviously has evolved over time. Queer wasn't a word that was used in the 1970s, but butch-fem was and it was something that you attached to. But you maybe also called yourself a lesbian separatist or lesbian feminist? I don't know. So how did you negotiate those two?

0:20

HOLLIBAUGH: You know, I'm trying to think of how to explain it. For all my own crises in women's liberation, I also went through women's liberation as a participant and an actor in those places, not as a resister and, um, so separatism was very appealing. I mean — it wasn't even appealing. It was very — I think it's actually a part of the consciousness-raising process that in fact there isn't, as far as I can think of, anyway to go as deep as you need to go in what's happened to you because of, um, gender and sexuality oppression, and not despise what it is that's occurred and hate who it is that's primarily been responsible. And because power is divided around gender as much as anything else, you know, it's like — at a certain point, it's generic and like kind of the anger of all other movements that then create a kind of nationalism — separatism is kind of a feminist nationalism, you know. It is a separate state. You know, how to have a primary identity apart from the oppressor who you want to kill. It's a marker that is a challenge, and it reflects your own fury at — and your own kind of willingness to, you know, cut the rope with whatever tied you to the continent that that lived on.

And so, you know, you just — it's an ongoing kind of narrative in the anger and the fury of the political movements of the '60s and the '70s, and I definitely had it, but I was always a little ambivalent about it because I actually kind of liked men individually depending on what my relationship was to them, but I didn't like men in the way that they were in the world. I think the problem for me around separatism is that I didn't think all men were the same or equaled the same thing, and I think in separatism as in all nationalisms, finally the object has to be identical regardless of any mitigating factor, so class or race — that wasn't going to be the marker. And I wasn't prepared, I think, to undo my own politics around those issues.

So I went through a really furious time where I would have considered myself a separatist. I think I probably called myself a lesbian separatist, but it lasted, like, six months or a year so, you know, it wasn't long, and then, I felt like I was a fellow traveler to separatism.

Not that I was in it and I was clearly not any longer saying that that was my identity, but it was the world that I was a part of and a lot of the women who I was either — who I politically valued, like Judy Grahn, like Audre — you know, I mean, they were in that separatist world even though they functioned in odd relationships to it themselves, and so I always had a kind of sympathy and pleasure in the contentiousness of women who were brave enough to tell men that they wanted them dead. I thought that was quite an amazing thing for a woman to entertain and mean.

And while I didn't exactly like the way it came out, I understood the impulse and felt pretty tied to the anger that it represented, and actually for me, the contradictions were as much about women as they were about men because in that world, women are the heroes or the victims and men are the perpetrators and the targeters of all that's done to you in the world.

And if you come out of a background where as much was often done to you by the absence of women's willingness to take chances or the actual actions of women on you, as much as it ever was men — if the violence that happened in your life happened from a woman, you could blame what happened to her because of sexism and why she was violent, but you still have to say, you know, it wasn't a guy that hit me, it was a girl.

So I felt, like, uncomfortable with the characterization of women as always the ones having something done to them and never, ever the instruments of their own lives, and I felt it really offensive and it's really where Dorothy and I actually came together pretty early on where we just realized we couldn't talk about our own backgrounds because if we really described the lives we had, it so played out the class biases of the culture that we couldn't — then we would have to spend the entire time trying to take back what we had said because there wasn't any way to actually tell the truth and not have it read through the kind of hatred of poor white trash that exists and the particular hatred of working-class men, the particular way that construction workers and carpenters and truck drivers and motorcyclists, biker cultures are represented as vicious and violent and stupid and the epitome of the patriarchal image of sexism, where all the kind of nuanced elegant vicious terror that men of a different class and race often practice is, you know, is named as an end of a sentence and so, I just felt like I just can't cooperate in this. It just — I find it completely appalling and I just hate it.

So I then was looking for women who were as angry as I was about what had happened to us in our lives, but had a much more complicated and unresolvable relationship to what was done and who did it. And I found those relationships often — and it was kind of my luck in a way, or my seeking, and it did play in also to sexual politics because, like butch-fem, S/M was by implication a set of erotic desires that happened to you because of your early history. The assumption that you were



made to be a sadist or made to be a masochist, that there was nothing ever intriguing and illuminating about that set of desires, there was only something pathological, was by implication what feminism thought of heterosexual relationships, frankly, men to women, power to powerlessness, but was then if you were parodying heterosexuality, then you were constructing the same horrifying set of assumptions.

And so, if you come to your own sexual desire and it's pathologized by a movement — it's implied pathology is at the core of how people treat you — you pretty quickly, I think, pull back from automatic judgments about other people's desires, even if you're as confused by them as other people seem to be about yours.

So I had many girlfriends that were S/M people and butch-fem in butch-fem relationships. And we would often try and talk through what was both the same, what was different, what propelled us, what we understood about our own lives, and it's one of the tragedies to me of women's liberations, that the genius of CR groups, where, because people didn't have a standard, they just tried to talk about what occurred and why they understood for themselves what it was and they went through it again and again, while trying to make sense of it and it didn't happen overnight. Had we been able to do that around sex, had we really been able to talk to each other in contradictory complicated ways without having formed a sexual morality that framed those discussions that were so profound that we couldn't loosen it, if we'd been able to do to sex what we did to gender, I think the women's movement would have forever changed the terrain of sex and desire. It would have just been one of the most remarkable possibilities.

But we didn't know how to do it, and I think we didn't exactly know what to talk about, because, you know, you can only have so many conversations about orgasm. You can only have so many conversations about, you know, I opened my legs this way, you open your legs that way. It's hard to know what you're talking about and — and why you're doing it and where it's voyeuristic and where it is sliding into something that you're not really — it's a dangerous terrain and therefore consciousness-raising structures are dangerous terrains to practice it in.

Nevertheless, I think Cherrie and I tried to say it in "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With," that while we wanted class and race to be factored into the way that the conversations happened, we thought that that structure, if women could be brave enough to go into discussions without an agen[da], without an end that had to be served, either to prove that women were oppressed or prove that women weren't, something remarkable might happen. And I always wonder whether that would have been a form that would have allowed us to go much further in our understanding of desire.

Because one of the things that's so remarkable to me in queer theory, in even the sex radical theory, is how little understanding there really is of the kind of the — what forms us in terms of how we love,

and how we desire and how that changes over our lifetime or doesn't, and what we understand our own practice to be. If I lay on my back with my legs in one position, it doesn't necessarily mean the same thing to me as it does to the woman that's doing exactly the same thing next to me and we have no way of trying to talk through what our imaginations are doing while we're doing the same thing but fueling it from completely different sources.

Sex has never been given the right to that kind of serious problematic possibility. So some people do it, you know — I think people that go to the McKenzie Institute are people that do sex history or — I mean, there are people that even now, I think, are fairly — you know, Gayle, I think, has done it more directly than a lot of people.

But in general, there isn't — except for a tiny moment in the '70s, in certain places, there was almost no structure to talk sex and talk desire and talk, um, ideology. There was almost none. And the remarkable thing about the '70s in San Francisco for a set of us, that there was — we did figure out how to do that for each other and create not just good ideas and interesting possibilities but create — try to begin to create sexual cultures that we couldn't find.

So we weren't just going to meetings talking about being sex radicals, we were going to clubs on Thursday nights and sleeping with each other, and trying to figure out what we were doing and why we were doing it, and it was a messy world. But in some ways, that's where gay men were so important, because they had opened up all kinds of sexual venues of every sort. Queer pornography, queer clubs, queer, networks — it was just endless to me. I just couldn't believe the constantly revolving, evolving sex cultures that gay men were moving in and out of and learning from.

I mean, that was the other thing that was so infuriating and interesting to me and that I was always jealous of gay men about is that lesbians had to try and learn sex in secret, and these guys were going to these places and watching how people did things, you know. What did this thing mean and what did — you know? Whatever the sex was. I mean, and you also began to see what the range of things were that you could want. Well, you know, who knew if you were a dyke? I mean, there was just — maybe you had a girlfriend that you talked about things with but you certainly didn't have a culture that you went to.

And one of the things that was so interesting to me for — you know, I had been a sex worker but that was, to me, work. So I had learned a lot about sex and the possibilities of sex and negotiation and things that I think often women don't have any — they have no history with and no capacity to understand. I mean, they're just like — no wonder women are so attached to monogamy and marriage and things like that. You know, you kind of have to go by your partnering instead of by a sexual world you negotiate and where you set the terms and you leave the terms and set them again and you have to actually do something very

different. And S/M has always been interesting to me because I think of any sexual practice that's sexual theater that understands then sexual definition and explicit sexual agreement — that's been the baseline for everybody else, I think, in negotiating mobility and desire and saying that it has to be an explicit thing, not an implicit thing. Everybody else, I think, kind of mangles, you know, their love life and their sexual desires in some horrifying sense of constructions, which I feel like I've done myself. You know? Can I — oh, God, this is endless.

So S/M, I think, has really said to people, you get to have relationships and you get to have sex and they are not the same thing, though they may be. And however you negotiate relationships, it is not the same as sex and if sex is not managed through love, then it has to be managed through explicit understandings of what you are wanting and what you are bringing. And therefore, you have to be able to talk to fuck.

And it's been an amazing thing for me to watch, because the S/M world is as broad in terms of class and race as all the rest of the sexual world, so it's not as though it's just had highly articulate, ideologically driven folks like Gayle Rubin walking around and, you know, [laugh] it's interesting to watch Gayle Rubin negotiating sex with women who had a very different kind of history and language and all the rest, and it has to be negotiated across all those lines and in S/M, it has to happen, it often happens in a public world, and so a play world is a fundamentally important world. It's not superficial to the practice of your sexual desire.

So all of those things to me are completely interesting and in the '70s, all of those were coming together and they weren't bounded worlds in the same way, although people had very clear understandings of their own identities. People played together outside of it. So you'd go to, you know, it was a lesbian sex club night and it was a lesbian sex club night and you had to learn to negotiate whether you wanted to do certain behaviors and how your identity played a part of that. If you were a fem but you were not into S/M, what did that mean? Did it mean that you would do light B&D but you wouldn't do piercing? Well, you know, but you had to say it. It wasn't like — couldn't be assumed. You hated S/M but you loved whips.

You know, this stuff, the zigzags across the kind of sexual maps of our lives are really wild and inappropriate and contradictory, you know, and you have to still try and figure out how to get what you want, so that was completely intriguing to me and until AIDS hit, the world was opening up and we were using men to kind of be path-breakers for a sex — a wider sexual, queer sexual culture. And it was quite a remarkable, scary world.

ANDERSON: Well, you also tried to initiate a lot of dialogue amongst feminists.

HOLLIBAUGH: Uh-huh, we did.

ANDERSON: Beginning with — well, beginning with publicly the article you did with Cherríe in — what, '81?

HOLLIBAUGH: That was — actually, we wrote it in '79.

ANDERSON: And I think it was published in '81.

HOLLIBAUGH: And it was — in that *Heresies* sex issue.

ANDERSON: Right. So just talk a little bit about that article and the kind of reaction you got to it. I mean, it must have been as explosive as Barnard, though I don't know.

22:00
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HOLLIBAUGH: Oh, worse.

ANDERSON: Worse than Barnard. So why don't you talk a little bit about the kind of reaction that you got, publicly and in private from colleagues about that?

HOLLIBAUGH: You know, Cherríe and I became friends — here's how Cherríe and I became friends. This is a wonderful story. I worked at Modern Times Bookstore, which is a lefty bookstore, and I was part of the collective, you know. And I was there for ten years. And it was in the Castro and there was a vegetarian restaurant on the corner of — right by Dolores Park. There's a vegetarian restaurant right on the corner of, like, Dolores and 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup>, whatever. Is it 17<sup>th</sup> that runs right up into the Castro? Or 18<sup>th</sup>?

ANDERSON: I'm not sure.

HOLLIBAUGH: Whatever the bus goes from the Mission straight up.

ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah, because —

HOLLIBAUGH: Anyway, there was a vegetarian restaurant there, which I'm sure Cherríe would remember the name of, and she was a waitress there, and she was trying to decide whether she would take a class from Judy Grahn. She was a schoolteacher, she had been a schoolteacher and she was trying to decide to go back to school, and she was a waitress there. And I would go there every night from Modern Times, it was when Modern Times was still in the Castro, and I would be lugging these huge armloads of books because I — you know, if you like to read, there's nothing like owning a bookstore, right? It's the one thing — terrible salaries but, you know, all the books you want. So, I would have, you know, every kind of book. Books on Marxism and books on feminism and poetry books

and books on art and books on prison systems, you know. And Cherríe would watch me coming in and I would sit there because it was this hippy vegetarian restaurant and I order my brown rice and miso soup and you know, she would — she knew I was a dyke and I knew she was a dyke and so she would wait on me. And we started talking. And this was — you know, the world before people become well known, and she was trying to decide about taking Judy Grahn's class and she decided to do it and we started talking.

But meanwhile, I was doing an enormous amount of prison work and doing work in Pleasanton, which was a federal women's prison, and I was working with a butch lesbian who nobody in the political movement — I had done prison work for years, but this was a particularly interesting case because it was a butch woman who nobody in the political movements wanted to take her case on because she'd actually done what she was accused of doing. She wasn't a political prisoner. She was a working-class lesbian butch who with her much older lover had killed her lover's children.

ANDERSON: Kind of like an Eileen Wournos situation.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah. And she, the lover, had said, in their trial that she had been seduced by a lesbian and hypnotized to do what she had done, and she got off, even though she was the biological mother, and they agreed that they had done it together, and Jay, who was, like, when the crime happened, she was 16 and the woman that she was with was, like, 28. She ended up in prison, and she rotted in prison. She always said she had done it. I mean, there never was any question about it and she — but she would never get parole even though her lover never went to prison and many people get out after they've done horrendous things, because she was butch. Because she wouldn't cry. She wasn't female — she wasn't feminine. And she was not — and she would never say she wasn't a dyke.

I heard about her case and was working on it — and nobody would work on it and, at the same time as I had been approached to meet with her, I saw the movie with Ellen Berstein — that's the — was a mod — was Melena McCory and Ellen Berstein where Ellen Berstein plays — what is the really famous Greek tragedy where the woman kills her kids? Oedipus or Ophelia or — I cannot remember and I will call you and tell you what it is, but anyway, it's a very — it's one of those famous Greek tragedies and the story line is that Melena McCory was going to play this tragic Greek women who had killed her children to thwart her husband, and this case happened in Greece and she went back there to do it and so she began to meet with this American woman, Ellen Berstein, about why she'd killed her children, and then, the modern story of why women do horrendous things evolved.

And I saw the movie and I realized, you know, I don't know how other women feel about it but I realized that what I was seeing and why those Greek tragedies seem to me so profound is that what they recognize is the capacity for all of us to do truly terrifying, unjustifiable things for reasons that can never be explained. And I thought about Jay's case and I thought, you know, she actually paid the price. She's been refused parole over and over and over again. She was now — she went into prison when she was 17, she was now 44 or 45, and I just decided to work on her case.

And so I was thinking about it a lot when I was talking to Cherríe, and it was that conversation that prompted one of Cherríe's earliest poems about her own best friendship with a woman who fell off a cliff, killed herself, her mother tried to kill her, I don't remember what. So we began to have a very intense conversation about lesbianism that started someplace really different and we began to meet and have these really heavy conversations about class and violence and stuff. And she had really come out of feminism. And she was butch but pretty ambivalent about it, though it was clearly what was going on for her, and our friendship evolved from that and then she became relatively — and then she did during that — it was after we did "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With" — she did *This Bridge Called My Back*. But we were talking about the kind of stuff that she ended up doing in *This Bridge Called My Back*. And Gloria Anzaldúa was a friend and all the rest.

So, you know, it was a world where class actually made an incredible difference in the conversation about race and desire, and so Cherríe and I would have these unbelievably intense conversations about butch-fem. Now some of that was happening because we were unbelievably attracted to each other and she was with somebody and I, of course, didn't believe in sleeping — blah-blah-blah. But also because both of us were really trying to figure out what the hell — we both now had been around the block enough that we were not young lesbians, and we both felt really strongly about the women's movement, and we were both really disturbed at the way that it appeared to us that the women's movement was going around pornography and stuff. And Cherríe and I actually had differences there. It wasn't as though we had a complete agreement but what we shared an agreement about was that the kind of absence of class and race in the women's movement, the articulation of those differences between women, was also a similarly absence to the lack of understanding of kind of sex and desire, and that if you were working class, if you were of color, if you were poor, how you practiced desire and how you understood it and how you played it out might be very different than middle-class women, and so we were having all those discussions.

And we were also angry about how butch-fem was being described, and I was very militant because I had really been in strong long-term relationships with butch women. I was very — I had already tried to kill

myself. You know, that history had happened. I was really, boy, don't fuck with me, I am fem and I don't — you know, I am not apologetic. This is not I'm fem, but — and so you'd better, you know, I don't care what you think.

And I was doing this prison work with a butch woman who really reflected my own class background, and Cherríe and I realized we were having all these amazing conversations about butch-fem and Cherríe said, "Let's write something," because by then — she was a writer. She saw herself as a writer, she was a writer, and I said, "I can't write." And she said, "What do you mean, you can't write?" I said, "I can't write. I only went to high school and I've never written anything. I'm not an academic. I never went to college." Blah-blah-blah-blah. And instead of having long fights with me about whether I was smart or not, which was of course, part of at least what I was saying, Cherríe said to me, "Then we'll tape it. We'll tape our conversations and I'll transcribe them and we'll do this like a dialogue, and we'll try and write something."

Now, you know, I think both of us thought that this would be an important article to a very small number of people, but for that group of people — that we were looking for what we couldn't find and so we thought we would try and create it and that that would then be important for other people and we were trying to say something to the movements that we felt strongly about, even though we didn't think that those movements would pay any attention. I mean, I don't think we thought we were going to get trashed. We were already being trashed for being identified around this and for talking about class and race in the context of feminism and saying we were, like, the movement wasn't doing so well here. And so, you know, Cherríe said, "Let's do this. Let's see, what the fuck, let's try this."

So we sat down and started taping and Cherríe was really smart about getting in the mix with me about what I meant by the kind of desire I was naming. She was really, really good at doing that and I think because of it and because we were such close friends and we were doing it in private, and we'd already been — I mean, late every goddamn night in her car or my car, we're having these unbelievable conversations about butch-fem and class and race and the women's movement and you know, uh, we're just, like, riveted by how we're talking with each other, and I'm also, like, going to the San Francisco Lesbian Gay History Project which I'd helped start, and having these conversations with Gayle and with Honey Lee and, who I then started dating and — so we started taping it and we taped, just once. I think it was like an afternoon conversation, and then Cherríe wrote the introduction and wrote the conclusion, because I couldn't do it. We decided what we wanted in each other but I couldn't do it. And she did the transcription and we started doing editing on it, and we kind of put it together.

And then we heard that *Heresies* was doing a special issue on sexuality. Because we didn't think of publishing it because we couldn't imagine who would publish it. *Off Our Backs*? You know. It wasn't — we couldn't imagine where. Who would take on this? And then Cherríe came up with a great title, and we approached *Heresies* — I think we approached *Heresies* and they were very interested and that was a lot of the same people that would end up kind of helping feed the Barnard kind of train of people, and so we published the article in *Heresies*, and it just exploded. It just — I mean, I don't think either one of us, by the time it came out, had any idea what its impact would be or that it would be seen as so riveting, so sexually revealing.

I remember reading it when it came out in *Heresies* and thinking, I cannot believe that I have said this in public. I mean, I was really — I was really, really — I remember kind of blushing when I read it because I felt like I really had revealed something about myself that was not about a literal explanation of I do this or I do that but that really did capture how I felt about who I was and why I was sexually powerful. I mean, because that's the other piece of that, I think, for fems and why so many fems have liked that piece over time, is that the description of the kind of power — if that's how you feel about your desire, is that it illuminates and participates and inflames desire, and it isn't passive. And there's nothing about that that in any way talks about that as passive.

To be a responder and an interpreter of instrumentality is just, you know, it was a gift to myself, because I don't think I would have known myself what it was about my own desire that was so empowering to me, and the article — I had never — you know, I had never written anything. I wasn't a name. I mean, lots of people in lots of movements knew who I was because I'd been around for a long time but I wasn't famous, I wasn't — I worked in Modern Times Bookstore, so I knew lots of people. I'd been in the left and the women's movement for years. I'd been a lesbian, blah-blah-blah-blah. But I wasn't, in any way, well known. And I couldn't write.

And so, the article propelled me into a different relationship to sex politics. I'd also done the Briggs work and I was in the History project. And all of those things really came together. The Briggs work was so important because I had to debate fundamentalist right-wingers in small towns in circumstances where I was alone, and I had to learn how to make an argument. And there's nothing like evangelical religious — I mean, if you listen to the way that they move an audience, the way that they do their public speaking. You watch people get engulfed in the way that they can pull you into a different state of mind. They can really transform an audience in the way that they respond to an idea by creating a kind of intensity in the audience that's so riveting. And you can hear it in the way that they speak and you see it a lot in African-American churches and stuff. It's a very different way and it's a class



way of talking. And if you debate those people, you better, you better be able to step up to the plate.

And so it taught me to do public speaking. I'd always refused to do public speaking because the way I talk is so much — reveals so much about who I am as a person and what my background is, so I was always very embarrassed because I was in middle-class movements and I knew I didn't have the right vocabulary and that really, when I got going, I really sounded like the background that I came from and so then it was — and I cussed a lot, you know, blah-blah.

So, it forced me out of a middle-class movement, which is where I had seen public speaking, the women's movement was a middle-class movement even in the genesis. The antiwar movement, you know, were college grads, blah-blah-blah, and I had been the fellow traveler in those as a speaker and as a public figure, and all those different things came together and gave me a voice.

Working with Cherríe was another one of those pieces of trying to figure out how to get the ideas that I felt were important into a larger world. You can't do it just be giving talks, you know, so writing seemed to be fundamental but not something that I felt like I was capable of doing.

And I think Cherríe and I were both stunned at the response to it, both positive and with utter hatred. And by that time, I think Cherríe was pretty ambivalent about having written it, and not because she didn't feel any of the things that were being written but because I think she really didn't — she got very angry and even refused to kind of claim the article for a long time because after *This Bridge Called My Back* came out, people would — especially in the women's movement — would want to interview her about “What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With,” but wouldn't want to talk to her about race and the politics of race in feminism. They wanted to talk about sex in feminism. And she was just like, “Fuck you. You know, you people are voyeurs in my life but when the real shoe hits the road, you don't want to step up to the plate because you don't want to talk to me about race the way you want to talk to me about sex, and I'm not playing in your field here anymore so I'm not talking to you about it.”

So for a long time, I was kind of identified, I think, with the article in a different way because that wasn't my world and it wasn't what I was doing and it wasn't where I was going. And Cherríe became famous because of *This Bridge Called My Back* and our friendship, I think, then also moved that article into more prominence than it might have had because of Cherríe's prominence, and because sex was then exploding in the women's movement. And I think sex exploded in the women's movement as kind of the — I think sex was used — the explosion around sex, I think, in the women's movement was the cover for class. Because I think it was, in talking about sex, you had to talk about lived experience, you had to talk about background and history. It couldn't be

theoretical. It couldn't be only theoretical. And, I think that conversation made the divide between people from different kinds of histories and backgrounds very clear.

And so a profound fight then broke out about sex that was embedded in the kind of direction feminism had gone in but it also, I think, was profoundly impacted by the way that class and desire ran under those conversations in the women's movement. Of what pornography was and who read it. Of pedophilia and the kind of the assumptions of, you know, pedophilia being about scuzzy men who were poor and slimy. I mean, those were all class assumptions, you know? Pedophilia was never about Harvard professors and, you know, blah-blah-blah-blah. And so, the assumptions then about class and sex, I think, really were embedded in the way feminism reacted to the challenge that different parts of the women's movement were facing, both from class and from race.

And when that article — and so, I was just — I mean, I just couldn't believe what happened to me from that article and the way that people talked to me.

ANDERSON: How did they talk to you?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, in the women's movement, people would feel unbelievably confident to come up and say really unbelievable things to me about my sexuality.

ANDERSON: Like in the bookstore?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, I mean, I would be someplace and somebody hear my name and come up and say, you know, "I'm a feminist and I want to tell you that I think what you write about is sick and disgusting and is — you know, you may consider yourself a feminist but I don't consider yourself a feminist," and I mean, it would just go on and, "You're a deviant" and it was like — and people felt pretty free to-

ANDERSON: -(two voices, unclear) about-

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, and that you're, you know, "Do you know what you're doing to women? Do you understand that you're helping create the continuation of sexual violence and rape cultures" and, you know, I mean, kind of unbelievable things. I remember the afternoon of the day at the Barnard Sex Conference where I'd given a keynote, a woman came up to me at the party afterwards and said to me, "I want to talk to you. I want to ask you some questions." And I said, "OK." And she said, "I want to know — I've heard and I want to know whether you like ripping women's nipples off." And I remember standing there, just kind of, like, trying to wrap my head around that. Especially if you do a lot of sex talk, you get

used to people, both saying really odd things to you and you really have to try and figure out what they're trying to describe and whether they're setting you up or whether they're really asking a relatively interesting question but they don't have a language for it, or — you know, is it their stuff or yours, whatever. So you get used to — you know? And I remember looking at her and I said, “You know, I almost never tell people that they need to see a therapist, but I'm saying to you that your question is completely and totally about your interior life and your terror of your sexuality, because there's literally nothing in anything I've ever written that would in any way suggest to you that that's something I do. So there must be another place where that's happening, and that's in you, and so you need to leave and you need to never talk to me again, and you need to go to a therapist, because you really, really need to look inside and figure out what's going on.” And, you know, it's not something I would say to very many people but it was that kind of stuff — I mean, it was that kind of stuff and that raw?

And people would stand up in rooms and denounce you. If you look through around the sex — the Barnard Sex Conference, if you look at the running debate that happened in *Off Our Backs*

ANDERSON: Endless, too.

HOLLIBAUGH: It really is endless, and if you — you know, go back there and look at — there was an article written about why I shouldn't have been ever invited to be a keynote speaker, that I was a shame, a shameful person to be associated with feminism, that I had bad teeth, that — I mean, it was this class attack that was so devastating and by that time, I was with Esther and I remember her saying to me, “You know, I know you've always said to me how important you thought class politics were but I have to say to you that I never would have believed it as strongly as seeing this, because the way that you're being attacked as a feminist is completely about who you are as a working-class woman. The attack is completely happening in that way because you have no degrees and you have credibility that buffers you or at least ideologically separates you from the way that people feel that they can viscerally attack you.” And it was true.

And it was core of us, I think, that were like Dorothy, were much more vulnerable to the extraordinary direct and viscous, traumatic response of feminism to sex difference, and that we paid a terrible price for it. And it was so bad that Dorothy left the women's movement. I mean, after Barnard. I mean, she didn't even speak at Barnard but the night of Barnard, there was, the lesbian sex radicals had one of their opening events and she and Joan and Jewel and a whole variety of people read and did all this stuff and Dorothy was getting well known, and Dorothy did a whole series of articles on the Barnard conference and on the way that I was being attacked. And that's how Dorothy and I

became friends and *The Women Who Hate Me* is her book. *The Women Who Hate Me* is a direct response to the feminism that both of us, I think, hoped would allow us to leave the despair of our own backgrounds and give us an avenue into a new world, and the way that we watched that movement punish us for refusing to hide what our own backgrounds were, deny them, or characterize them as pathological.

And it was some of the worst attacks I've actually ever gone through as a public figure, and I think people pay a high price often for the power that they get, although you get power and it's a real thing, and it shouldn't be denied. But, especially when it's about sex, I think it has a particularly viscous kind of underbelly, and by that time I was with Esther. You know, whatever people knew of me as my — with my lovers in the past, Esther was a middle-class intellectual. She took unbelievable heat for being with a working-class woman. I mean, people would say to her, "How could you be with someone like her?" You know?

It was really interesting, and she, who often is with working-class women or likes that, really had to take terrible heat for both the butch identity and the class connection, and then all the stuff — I mean, Barnard was really — those fights were going on before Barnard ever happened, but Barnard made the movement ricochet around sex. And it also forced a coalition, a profound coalition of women who were not going to give up feminism to that set of ideologies that they had been a part of.

ANDERSON:

Yeah. I find that one of the most amazing pieces to your story is your unrelenting commitment to feminism despite your first experience with the panel in Canada that doesn't back you up and you decide to come out, to the ferocious homophobia in the CR groups and in the movement to escalating all the way up to Barnard and the article with Cherrie. It's really — it's phenomenal that you stay with it, that unlike Dorothy Alison, you don't walk away and say, these are not my people, this is not my political commitment, I'm not going to identify with you any longer. How do you — why? Why do you think your commitment to it is so ferocious?

54:35

HOLLIBAUGH:

Feminism — women's liberation. I mean, I do think of it always in my own mind — I never say that any longer because it's such an archaic term now, it totally dates you. It's like saying, Whoopee or something. I mean, you know, it just trivializes it. But I think of it there and I feel like women's liberation and feminism gave me, like I feel about most of my political life but certainly about feminism, it gave me my life back. It gave me the possibility of looking at the terrible things that were done in many different names and facing it and understanding it and addressing it, and moving it forward, so that I wasn't — you know, in individual therapy, I think people do remarkable work but they do it in

isolation. If you do your work and it's that deep a work, and you do it in a movement of people who are insisting on the valor of their own life and the power to take control of the things that have — that you're discovering have amputated parts of yourself, you have a debt to that movement that nobody else can take away, and you know what its power is.

You know that you would never be the person that you — I would never be the person I am today were it not for the women's movement. I would never, ever been able to own my life and to think in the way that I think and live in the way that I live were it not for the women's movement. I would never have had the courage to do the things I've done in my life if I hadn't had that profound set of journeys that gave me back unnamable parts of my own terrible history.

And I think that people are often — and so, it's very complicated when you feel that strongly about a movement, to figure out how to both be committed to its survival and not committed to having differences with the way that it's constructing itself. How is it that you don't use the mistakes that you perceive in a movement as a way to take that movement down, because you're angry at how it's treated you.

It's very tempting to walk away. It's very tempting to say, Fuck you. And to say that the price is too high. It is actually very tempting and in a way, I feel like I did finally leave feminism. Though I never was willing to give up the identity, but the way for me was really around doing AIDS work, that I could not stay in that movement any longer. I felt like in the most endless circular ways, the attacks were relentless and they didn't seem to ever cease. They just seemed to go on and on.

And so, like Esther and I were going to do a butch-fem book and you know, we would go out and do readings from the work that we were collecting. This was in the '80s, and people would attack both of us. Now, finally, we had to stop, because Esther would get so furious that she would like flip over a table or, you know, in places, like, this is not going to work.

ANDERSON: It's not going to sell books.

HOLLIBAUGH: We're not doing that [laugh] — nobody's even going to invite us to come and speak anymore. But there was a certain point when I thought, you know, I cannot have my life — all the skill that I bring to my own intellectual world is getting lost here because all I'm doing is both defending myself and begging to be allowed to participate in my own movement.

Now, you know, it wasn't just around sex. It was also that the women's movement was professionalizing. The women's movement was being captured in terms of women's studies and all of a sudden I was a visitor to my own movement. I was an archaic kind of dinosaur to what I'd helped create. You know, and now, there were specialists in,

you know, women's liberation. I mean, I just found it kind of horrifying to be a visitor to my own, you know, my own history. And other people, like running down the road claiming it, and I'm like thinking, Well, why am I, like, just getting invited back, you know? Why? Nobody's offering me — I mean, I helped start this fucking movement and nobody's offering me a professorship in women's studies and it's not like — there's more than four books.

So, I kept looking at it and thinking this is about what's happening to all the political movements. All the political movements are losing ground and having to kind of — you know, they're like these little islands of a defense of an ideology. They're having to find a place that's protected enough that they can continue to do what they need to do because there's no kind of activism that is capable of surviving. Activism is really failing now and it's not, you know, it's not the same world and I have to get out of this, because I can't spend my time defending myself in a movement that's less and less likely to be a place where I'm equal. And where I was always different than a lot of the people that I was around. When the ground was socialist. When the ground was collective. When the ground was anticapitalist, anticareer, antiprofessionalization, I had more legitimacy and kind of authentic rights, because then it was what I thought and what I did, and everybody's values were around the activism even if they didn't do it. They were kind of apologetic. Oh, well, I go to school but, you know, at night I organize my building. You know, I'm a tenant or whatever they were. And now that was no longer it. And people stopped saying, you know, What do you believe in? and started saying, What do you do? And the "do" wasn't about your activism, the "do" was about your career. And I thought, I'm really up shit creek here and I really —

END TAPE 9

## TAPE 10

ANDERSON: ...interrupted where you are, but we'll make sure that we cover those two things. OK. So, we're back on. Talk about your transition from leaving the feminist movement, women's liberation movement, to focus on your work on AIDS.

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HOLLIBAUGH: When I moved to New York, I was working in the women's bookstore that Carrie London owned on the upper west side.

ANDERSON: Oh, okay.

HOLLIBAUGH: I was working for a feminist organization that was part of Monthly Review Press that translated Latin-American feminist material and, you know, blah-blah-blah. So I was very much in the women's movement and Barnard and all of the rest of that was my world. And, especially moving to New York, I felt like — you know, I was with Esther, Esther was a feminist, she was an academic. We had kind of a queer feminist academic world, but once Barnard happened and the aftereffect of Barnard, and that was a couple years — Barnard was like, in '81 or '82?

ANDERSON: '82.

HOLLIBAUGH: 1982, and already I was dealing with having lived in San Francisco and now living in New York in terms of AIDS. So, you know, I had lived on the two coasts where the number of cases was just enormous and because I'd had ongoing close friendships with so many gay men, and sexually active gay men, the number of people that I knew right from the very beginning of the epidemic was really large, and so I was dealing with it in every part of my life, even though I wasn't doing any movement stuff about it, and Esther was dealing with it all the time because she'd had so many gay men friends, it was kind of a reality for both of us, and as the Barnard stuff continued and was relentless and after Barnard, then trying to figure out how to womp up the kind of collective power to stop Women Against Pornography, and kind of the whole trend of where that was going. Because it as huge. It wasn't just about pornography. It was in every dimension about feminism and about what feminism would represent and how it would represent women and women's oppression and kind of what happened to women and what we would say we understood about women's lives and experiences.

So, to me, the fight around pornography and around violence against women and all of those kind of things was — and where it had resulted, where it had ended by, kind of being siphoned into these identity-based movements, kind of violence — domestic violence, any pornography, rape crisis, blah-blah, you know, it's like, God, did I never mean this to happen. And

ANDERSON: Can I put a little parenthesis around one quick question here?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Does that mean that the incest-survivors movement along with domestic, rape survivors, etc.— was that a movement that resonated for you? That you felt identify with or connected to, or did you feel –

HOLLIBAUGH: Nope.

ANDERSON: -really disconnected from the politics that?

HOLLIBAUGH: Well, here's what I felt like — I mean, I had not started talking about incest until 1980 or '81 when I met Dorothy. I had quietly said to friends and lovers what had happened to me or some version of that although pretty cautiously. But again, in the women's movement when I would try to talk about my experience of incest, the class stuff was so sickening that I then ended up having to defend my father or my cousins or my uncle and say, or my mother, I — so, when Dorothy and I met, and Cherríe was doing antiviolence work then, she was in New York and she was doing domestic violence work, I'm sure. And that was her job. And so Dorothy and Cherríe and I would spend a lot of time talking about it.

But Dorothy's who I first told the truth to, because Dorothy's life around that and my life around that were really quite similar although in different places, but equal — not equally but in all the ways that people don't want to deal with the meaning of it, they were violent and transgressive and relentless and all of that stuff. And so it wasn't shameful to talk to her about my own history and so I could finally think about it and talk about it and we started doing a little bit of work around it with Cherríe.

We realized the class stuff was so bad that we couldn't figure out how to talk about without it instantly kind of sinking into a class discussion that we didn't have any tools for and that there was no markers around. So, people would — felt completely free to comment on what they thought of your family. And I think parallel to that at the same time was the — I don't even know how to say this, but the accelerating aspect of feminism that made your victim status the most relevant totality of your experience, that you never had a relationship to your own oppression, that you never had a complicated relationship to what was done to you, that you never participated in it in any way. In order to try to say that women had not been asking for rape or incest, we went to a place that was really dangerous. (cough) Do we need to stop?

Anyway, the tragedy of the attempt to reclaim women's lives by making us victims so that we could assign responsibility where we



thought we had been powerless, and so we could reclaim women's right to, you know, claim that they were raped even though they were married, or incested even though they had been provocative little girls, you know, all of that kind of stuff, I think, had a terrible ultimate impact on where feminism ended up. Kind of making its arguments for what happened to women and what you had to think about. And that became an impossible place for me.

I mean, I just felt like, you know, it doesn't make it OK to say what my father did to me. I'm not saying it's OK that my father raped me by also saying that I was attracted to his hands, but I don't want to leave one piece of it out in order to also talk about the other. And in incest stuff, for me, I found it really difficult precisely because my father was the person that I was the closest to in my family, and the violation was extraordinarily twisted precisely because I'm most like him and he most held out for me in my family and so what happens — what betrayal looks like when it also is connected to the very best that you — that somebody brought to you of love and hope is not either you were a victim and they were a monster or you deserved it and they didn't know what they were doing.

And I kept feeling like the world was now shrinking into a whole variety of ideological sides that flattened the power of feminism, to speak to and help women understand and move forward their own lives. It just isn't going anywhere, and, you know, it was before really gay studies had taken off, and sexuality studies, all that kind of stuff wasn't really — not in the '80s, certainly, it wasn't happening.

So I was losing all these people and I was also — I just felt like, all I'm going to do is get more and more bitter if I stay here and I really have to — for a variety of reasons, not just feminism, I have to rethink my life. The way that I've understood myself as a revolutionary — I can't even say that out loud anymore. People don't even know what I'm talking about and, you know, there's no movement to be a revolutionary in. So, are you a revolutionary by yourself reading a book? I don't think so. And I'm not making decisions like that anymore.

I'm now living with a partner, we're buying an apartment, she's upper middle-class, drives a nice car, I'm — I have to — and she's saying to me, You actually have to figure out how to support yourself at more than \$15,000 a year and I'm saying, How classist of you, but in fact, I'm thinking to myself, you know, it's a little late here but I'm going to have to actually figure out a career? What is a career for a high school girl that's a communist radical feminist? You know, this did not look pretty to me and I didn't know where to go.

And I started doing film by accident. Dorothy Alison's lover was a film person who was working at a local New York station and was trying to create a pilot for a neighborhood-based documentary series and she needed an assistant. I needed a job. I knew how to do that kind of

work and it turned out — and I loved it. I loved film and oh, I had these great dreams of becoming a filmmaker.

But at that time I was doing a lot more writing. That actually — if we could go back to that, I wouldn't mind talking about that because I think it's an interesting —

ANDERSON: The writing?

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, the writing piece. Of not being a writer and then finally becoming one, because I actually think that all the things that I've done in my life, in my career life since trying to get a profession in a certain sense, were really — would never have succeeded had I not been able to write. That it's one thing to not have a degree but if you cannot write, if you can't write a grant, if you can't write a proposal, if you can't write a report, if you can't do that, you can't move into a different class position. And so, it's a very interesting thing to me to think about.

So I didn't know really what to do. I was working on film. The series was very successful. The documentary series called *Neighborhood Voices* was very successful. Barbara decided to leave it. I was allowed to take it over. She had been the director and I was the assistant director. Even though I had done a lot of the shows actually on my own. We were having big fights. She decided to leave. And then, the show basically got undercut in one of those internal terrible fights in a world where there isn't enough money to go around and the series got canceled.

And all of a sudden, I was again without a job and without a degree and without a profession. And it was — and I tried to like, figure out how to become a filmmaker on my own and there was no way to get a salary. I mean, I had to pay rent, you know, I had to pay my mortgage. So, I was really stuck and I decided — I got it. I was already doing a lot of work around sexuality and I knew that there was a need to do sexual counseling around HIV. And I got hired to be a phone counselor for the City of New York on the first public city phone line when people called to find out about information about HIV. Now, the only people that called to find out information about HIV were people that were at risk. That was really the truth. Or people that were kind of phobic, so that they were terrified of mosquitoes and they were terrified of bathroom seats and stuff. So there were kind of two categories. And you had a third category of teenagers that would call and they wanted to talk about sex [laugh]. And so, but I got hired, you know. Nobody was asking, did you have credentials, you know?

ANDERSON: They'd say, Can you talk about sex?

HOLLIBAUGH: Can you talk about sex? I'd had all the training in San Francisco at the Sex Institute. I had written about sexuality, blah-blah-blah. And I could

talk about sex and I actually, though I hate talking on the phone, I must say, I loved doing sex phone counseling. I actually find it remarkable because it's — the person can't been seen and you can't be seen and so, it allows people to have a conversation that I think they could never do in person. Now, you never know whether somebody's telling you something that is literally true, but what I learned when I was doing sex counseling in San Francisco is, it doesn't really matter. If they're imagining it or they're doing it, you actually have to take it seriously, because you don't have any way to know that. So you just have to move along in the conversation and try and address it in a different kind of way, rather than interrogate people about whether they're telling you the truth or what they're doing. Are you freezing your sperm?

So, I got on the hotline and I was terrific at it, and I was — you know, in six months was made a supervisor and was very — you know, working in that world. Doing AIDS work was stigmatizing in the same way that the epidemic stigmatized people, when people found out you were HIV positive, so were you stigmatized by association, and so, really people didn't — nobody wanted those jobs. I mean, really, nobody wanted those jobs unless you felt pretty strongly about the epidemic. And so, it — they were not easy jobs to get in the sense that anybody walking in the door could have gotten them but on the other hand, there weren't — it wasn't a long line.

And so, early on in the epidemic, then, I started doing work and realized that, Oh, my God, this was really a place where in every way the skills that I had about sexuality, around gender, around class and race, in every way demanded it and that what you had to do when you were talking to people about sexual — about transmission of HIV was to talk about all the social issues that come up. It's always about that. It's never about transmission. It's always about, kind of, the meaning of transmission, the mode of transmission. Drug use is not about needle use, it's about a forbidden behavior. And as is sex and all the rest of it. So, sex work and all the rest. So, I thought, holy shit.

And I was dealing with AIDS, like, every minute in my life, in my personal life, and it occurred to me quite quickly that it made me feel more in control when before I was just feeling completely alone, kind of traipsing to hospital rooms by myself and then coming home again, night after night after night. And that I had a context and a collective again.

And so, I ended up loving the work, being very good at it, and in the midst of that, I'd become friends with a woman named Katie Taylor, who is a woman who I think you should really interview, who I had known for a long time, she'd been friends of mine, but she had begun — she had created at the New York City Commission on Human Rights, the first unit called the AIDS Discrimination Unit to do AIDS discrimination work in the early '80s, and it was unheard of. It was trying to take Jonathan Mann's kind of public health stuff and figure out

how to manage stigma. And using the Human Rights Commission and the powers of the Human Rights Commission to intervene, because the stigma was so overwhelming. I mean, people really — all the stories that people don't even remember anymore — the numbers, the lines of beds that would be out in hallways where people weren't washed, weren't fed, weren't treated. The refusal of ambulance drivers and firemen to go fight fires in an AIDS area. The number of babies being left places. Oh, God, the number of landlords in New York who realized that they were renting in buildings that had lots of gay men that were HIV positive that would turn off the heat so that the guys would get sick and die and then they would have those apartments again. I mean, it just — the stigma was so profound you couldn't believe it.

And Katie had started this AIDS Discrimination Unit and she said to me — we were somewhere at some conference or something — and she said to me, “If you could do anything you wanted in the world but anything, like, that's practical, not I want a million dollars, what would it be?” and I said it would be to create documentaries about AIDS and then take them back to the communities where the epidemic is the most virulent. And she said, “You'd be creating educational material, documentary educational material and then using it to teach in the communities that are most impacted by the epidemic?” I said, “Yeah.” She said, “OK. What we're going to do is write a job description for you that nobody else could exactly fit and then I'm going to try to get it funded in the City. Because we don't have any tools. We don't have any literature. We don't have any way to go back out into communities and talk about discrimination and stigma and we're going to have to create them. And I'm going to try to hire you as the educator in the Human Rights Commission.”

Now, Katie's this working-class girl, ex-sex worker who I knew around sex work, actually, because she's one of the few feminists that was willing to talk about having been a sex worker, and so we'd been friends for years, and suddenly she was doing this really interesting job and I said, “Katie, do you think it's possible I could get hired to do this?” She said, “Well, you've just been making documentaries. We need everything. You're a good public speaker. You could definitely do the work. You love going into working-class communities and that's where the epidemic is, so, let me see.” So we wrote the job description and we got it funded and we got me hired and I got hired at the Human Rights Commission as the Director of Education. And I made more than \$20,000 a year.

And so, you know, it completely then took my life. I mean, for many of us, our lives were already overwhelmed by the epidemic and we were living in the midst of an epidemic 24/7. There was no world that was separate from it and so we couldn't have escaped it. But working in it made me feel as though I was doing something to help. That it — if

anything was going to make a difference, I was going to be a part of trying to do that.

And so all the kind of political skills that I had I felt were really necessary, you know, it's hard to remember that there were really serious conversations about, you know, camps for gay men and branding and tattooing and imprisonment of sex workers. I mean, that you really were working with the most unbelievably deaf, publicly entertained ideas, because of the kind of terror that came from the fear of an epidemic which is just — an interesting phenomena on its own, when people don't quite understand and can't see an illness and have to protect themselves against it, and all the things that will protect them stop them from doing something that they want, it — combines things in a way that is so (phone ringing) I don't care — so provocative and so profound and so political, that, you know, it was like, Fuck the women's movement. I mean, what do I care? I don't care.

I am actually — let me go down this road because this is really — I can really get my teeth in this, and everything that I've done in my entire life equips me to be brilliant at this and therefore, what had begun to feel as though it weren't useful — why had I become a feminist? why had I become a radical? why had I become a sex blah-blah-blah — suddenly had life again and meaning and necessity. And I wasn't, like, defensive. I didn't have to be defensive. It's like, you girls don't want it? Then fine, you don't want it.

So, that gave me an incredible transition out of what was a narrowing women's movement into a world that was huge and necessary and fundamental and radical. And so, I feel like I was — you know, there's nothing lucky about an epidemic but my skills and those needs really linked and were useful, and so it also gave me a way to not become completely overwhelmed by the impact that that epidemic had for a lot of us. And our terror that it would completely decimate the movement that we had tried to create, that people would refuse to come out. I mean, in every way it was just — it's hard to remember now what it felt like. And the way that I was good at things was exactly what was needed.

So, I wasn't in Act Up, for example. I didn't particularly like Act Up. You know? It wasn't my expression of how I felt, because I felt like they didn't deal with class and race a lot and I was working in prisons and working in foster shelter systems and working in, you know, SROs [single-room occupancy hotels] and around drug abuse and blah-blah-blah. So, I wasn't close with them but again, there was a movement happening, so I felt like even if I wasn't going — those weren't my demonstrations exactly, it was my movement in that sense.

And then, I have to say the angriest I've ever been at the women's movement was it's complete and absolute refusal to deal with women and AIDS. I think that if you ever want to understand what not dealing with class and race has meant to feminism, look at western feminism's

refusal to be a leader in the fight against HIV infection in women and you will see what those absences translate to. Even in the places like the Ms. Foundation and so forth that said their agenda was class and race, you know, they would give \$50,000 a year to women's organi[zations] — to people doing work around women and HIV and then, like, write it off. Nobody on their goddamn board did any — I mean, it was just unbelievable to me that a movement that said that it believed in the necessity to, you know, defend women's lives and believed in — and wasn't racist and wasn't classist and, you know, blah-blah-blah and it's like —

ANDERSON: And wasn't homophobic at this point-

HOLLIBAUGH: And wasn't homophobic — really, now, where are you then? You know, because it doesn't look to me — I mean, no other movements rushing in either. It's not like the black liberation movement's rushing in here either but frankly, you should — they're not doing it for very different sets of reasons. That's not exactly acceptable to me but at least they're more understandable. What have you got to lose, except that you have to now begin to articulate the lives of a very different class and race of women, and you have never wanted to do that and that has never been the center of your movement and so, you're not talking. And — I was bitter. That really made me bitter in a way that I couldn't — I just found unaccountable. I mean, I just really couldn't believe that that was not going to happen.

And in the midst of that and in doing that AIDS work and trying more and more to talk to women and AIDS, what also began to happen is that I kept finding lesbians with HIV. You know, nobody would say that that had anything to do with the epidemic and nobody would say that lesbians were at risk, and blah-blah-blah. But meanwhile, I can't be the only one meeting lesbians with HIV. So what am I looking at? And all the other women I knew, most of whom were in Act Up, were finding the same thing — that they would be doing other kinds of AIDS work and all the cases that were in their agency would end up, if they were lesbian, would end up on their desk. Well, how could that have happened? But still it was happening and you know, but nobody's talking about it.

And so the fight happened with GHMC — Gay Men's Health Crisis — to create a Lesbian AIDS Project. And after a year's battle, they got it, and they were going to hire a director. And meanwhile, I had been at the Human Rights Commission, the AIDS Discrimination Unit was folding, and was just full of terrible, kind of, internal wars, and I saw this position, and I was just on fire. I knew that lesbians were at risk for HIV and I knew this was about class and race and I felt like all that I had believed in, and all I had been trying to say in the ways that I was a feminist would, kind of, be at its best use, because I would be creating a

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project that would be built on the class and race and gender of women around HIV who were queer, and it was, like — I was unstoppable. I mean, I went in [that] job interview, and I had, like, you know, five-page prototypes of, you know, how I was going to build a program and where I was going and who I was — I mean, people couldn't believe that I was coming in with this stuff.

And the other thing that was interesting was that while many lesbians had fought to get this project, very few people could figure how to do the organizing. It's like, Well, but these are the lesbians that you won't find in Greenwich Village and these are the lesbians that you won't find at Henrietta Hudson, so, how are you going to find them? What are you going to do? And, are they real?

ANDERSON: Yeah, they're the women that lesbians didn't want to claim in the movement.

HOLLIBAUGH: Precisely. For all of those reasons. And I also felt like being who I was would actually help me do that work and the butch-fem and all of those kind of questions, because they were class and race as much as they were anything else, would also help because I knew the kind of women I was looking for, and the kind of women I was likely to find.

And so I go the job and it was just some of the most extraordinary work I've ever done. I mean, it blew me away and it again allowed me to come back to feminism and come back to lesbian feminism from a class perspective. To say that class and race and sex and gender were completely woven together, could not be separated, had to be embedded in the way that you built your work, etc., and then to actually do the work.

So it wasn't ideological fights with the women's movement, it was this outpatient clinic and that welfare office and this HIV pharmacy and this grocery store and how do you find these women and where do they go? And would they identify with coming out to something that was called the Lesbian AIDS Project?

In every way, kind of, all the organizing work that I had been doing for twenty years was brought full circle and — and it was some of the most amazing work I think I've ever done in my life. I just —

ANDERSON: How did you do working at GMHC?

HOLLIBAUGH: That was really hard [laugh]. GMHC was really an impossible place to work and — but here was what was so problematic. Not only was it difficult because it was basically — both in terms of class and gender run by white gay men, and it's funding base was really centered there, but it also was very — it didn't want to deal with class and race. It did not want to deal with addiction. It did not want to deal with poverty. It did not want to deal with incarceration. And certainly didn't want to

deal with gender. So, on the other hand, it was the only place that had enough money to fund a lesbian AIDS project. You can't fund something that you can't prove. In the epidemic, there had never been any research that documented lesbian HIV risk of any sort. There had never been any cases that were considered lesbian cases. So, in every way, it wasn't going to fly unless it was at GMHC and as far as I could see, actually, GMHC didn't look any worse than most of the other agencies I was seeing, both in the AIDS world and the queer world.

You know, they all looked like — they wanted to deal with sex but they didn't want to deal with class. They wanted to deal with gay men who were HIV positive that went to the Ponds but not gay men that went to the Bronx, you know, and so it was a bitter, terrible fight through a lot of it. When Tim Sweeney was there in the early years, two years, it was not bad at all. Tim is a working-class gay man. He understood and sponsored it. He supported it. It had a lot of visibility and credibility. But once he and the kind of people he had brought in at the top were gone, it was an endless bitter terrible fight to keep the project there.

Ironically, it was a hard project to cut loose precisely because it was so successful. It had started with twelve women. By the second year it was 400 women. By the third year it was 1,200 women. And it brought together exactly the people that they — all their grants were centered around but that they didn't really know how to reach. So whenever they needed staff for, you know, former substance abusers or former hookers or former thises or thats, you know, it's like, Go to the Lesbian AIDS Project: they've got some. So then they needed it for the demographics but they didn't want it because they don't want girls.

And so, it was a bitter, difficult fight, but it — here was the other irony that I thought — that I really — I don't know what to do with what I learned from it. I thought the problem was that the women's movement hadn't dealt with class and race. But if you could get those people, if you could finally build a movement of those people, then you could bring — you could collectively come, it wouldn't be like me going to a meeting and saying, Oh, but what about all the other absent people in the room. There would be, like, all those absent people. So then, the women's movement would have to change.

And what I learned is that you can succeed but if you haven't been able to effect the movement that you want to join, your success can't go where it logically should. For example, these lesbian and gay organizations would want, would come to me and say, "I would like an HIV-positive lesbian of color, lesbian mom, to be on my board." I would send somebody. I would warn them and say, you know, "Do you know what you're going to?" and they would say, yes or no. And we would talk about it and they would go and then, when they would go and they would talk about their lives, as the common — the currency of feminism and lesbian feminism is coming-out stories, you know that



kind of, “Oh, how did you- blah-blah-blah?” So they would, you know, “Well, I came out and I was in a crack ring and then I was running a crack house and then I was, you know, I had a whole parlor of whores.” You know, then people didn’t want them on their board anymore.

And, it was tragic to me, because one of the most telling things — one of the most telling moments that I ever had about class was — GMHC at one point was on 20<sup>th</sup> Street and A Different Light bookstore was on 19<sup>th</sup>. Eight women in the Lesbian AIDS Project were working on creating a sex handbook for lesbians and HIV. And I said to them, “Well, why don’t you go to A Different Light bookstore and see what’s there, see what you can find?” They didn’t know there was such a thing as a gay and lesbian bookstore. They didn’t know — they said, “What would be in it?” They had never gone there. They had never heard of it, and they went there and they felt bad about themselves. And I thought, How can it be that one block away is a foundational institution in the queer movement that these people have never heard of, do not feel comfortable in, and yet are in love with. I mean, the women would go back again and again. They would just sit there for hours. They didn’t have enough money to buy the books, but they would sit there and read. They would ask me, “Can I go on my lunch hour? I didn’t know there were books on gayness and religion. I didn’t know there were lesbian wicca books. What’s wicca?” you know?

It was just — you know, the heartbreak and the beauty of the Lesbian AIDS Project for me was that I never met women that were more generous and more loving and more full of hope than HIV-positive lesbians of color. And I have been through all the different movements and so it was so stunning to me that these were women who in every way wanted everything that life could give because they didn’t know how much more life they had. And they had decided finally to come out. They had decided to deal with their addiction. They had decided to deal with their histories. And they wanted to join the movement. And they weren’t allowed to. They were humiliated, they were snubbed, they were made to feel stupid, they didn’t speak right.

And I thought, you know, I’m wrong. I thought the problem was finding enough of us that we could then come in numbers significant enough to collectively have a real say in that movement, and what I realized that is that I have to create a different movement. That you can’t adapt a movement based on a different set of histories and think that integration somehow is going to solve it. That in fact it’s a much more complicated issue and that if the women’s movement as it now exists had to join the movement, the feminist movement that was created in something like LAP, it would be a very different set of issues than it would be if we going to join somebody else’s movement as outsiders asking, petitioning, to be let in, and that you can’t — both class and race have petitioned to be let into feminism. And while I think a new generation of feminists have really articulated a very different

understanding of class and race and so really are taking on feminism in a different way, and so there might be real change there in a way that I couldn't do from the Lesbian AIDS Project. It had to happen from inside the movement and the new generation of feminists who didn't come from my history, but came from the history that I had created that allowed them to possess feminism and question feminism and begin to say, Yes, but why isn't this here? Why isn't that there? Rather than me coming back to my own generation saying, you know, Let me in.

And so, it was a very instructive, painful kind of moment. But it also allowed me to go to again, claim feminism when I went out into the world of working-class women, and you know, it's an interesting thing to try and claim, especially when there isn't any movement any longer for them to be a part of. So it's your telling of the story of feminism, the story of women's liberation that, you know, they're not sure how they feel about it and it's not their movement and they know it's not their movement and so, who are you?

So it really made me, for instance — I took a lot of feminist material and I had been doing this over the years, and literally rewriting it so I could use it in prisons. Because I couldn't take it in the way that it was, but the ideas were so fundamentally important that I wanted the ideas to be there. So I would literally translate —

ANDERSON: An article or something-

HOLLIBAUGH: Things that were considered feminist texts, so that they were-

ANDERSON: Accessible.

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, useful in a world that they were never meant to be read in. And, you know, I ended up doing that a lot in LAP. But, you know, that's the kind of legacy, I think, of movements that have lingered from the '60s and the '70s, is that there is no activism to generate anything but the most privileged kind of storytelling, because that's who can write and speak generally.

In the AIDS movement, it really generated a different set of voices and a different set of narrative touchstones. And so working-class women of color were the center of who was impacted, who was infected, and whose story got told, and so it allowed me to create a film that in my mind is absolutely a feminist film, whether anybody — I mean, I don't know what other people would think. And where the reference points — I mean, the film's called *The Heart of the Matter* and it basically says that there is no way that a woman, regardless of her status, her position, is safe from the possibility of HIV risk. Because if you're a good girl, then there's nothing in your life that you can think about that is assumed to be risky, including your husband or your

partner. If you're a bad girl, you're not worth saving. So there's kind of no place where safety is negotiable from gender.

And you know, then, the reference points that we used in telling that story were, like, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, the right, the way the right articulated gender because they were willing to be explicit about feminism.

So again, I feel that feminism has played an essential role in the work that I've done and what it's allowed me to do, but it's also limited its own possibility of generating what I think it intrinsically could have done because of who it was afraid of allowing to enter its centrality of voice. If feminism as well as lesbian feminism is fundamentally a narrative of women's stories that collectively generate ideology and theory and practice, then if [at] that center is absent women of color, working-class and poor women, women with an extraordinarily different set of sexual histories and class histories, then you don't — you don't have at the center the majority of women's lives.

And that's what feminism is missing, is the majority of women never joined that movement. And they didn't join it because feminism was wrong, but because feminism had a bias in it about class and race. And by implication, then, about sex and homophobia. And it's a tragedy to me that though there were many women like myself in that movement, including in places of relative power — you know, I wasn't a powerless foot soldier through that whole story, we were always marginal outsiders invited in, and then left out. Barbara Smith tells basically the same narrative. Cherrie tells the same narrative. Dorothy tells the same, Jewel tells the same. Because we were always both endlessly desired and profoundly worrisome voices to the way that the stories were being constructed and the way that the ideology flowed from the personal is political. Well, what personal?

If poverty is as essential to the way you understand violation as incest, then a very different story gets told. If incarceration and racism is as fundamental to the identity that you have as a lesbian woman as any other piece of it, if you're constantly having to pick, you know, Pat Parker really did say, you know, "Some day I want to go to a party and bring my entire self." And nobody did ever say it better than that. And the movement never allowed the totality of identities to merge in the way that the movement created its agenda and understood the world that it was functioning in. And therefore, it really limped, even though it was so powerful, even in spite of it, that it still had resonance for huge numbers of women.

ANDERSON: We have about ten minutes left. Do you want to go back to anything about the sex work? You said you wanted to come back to-

HOLLIBAUGH: Yeah, I did. I guess there are two different pieces in here to me about sex work. Because we didn't talk very much about it, but from the time

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I was about 16 to the time I was in my late twenties, it was basically how I supported myself. All different variations of sex work, from prostitution, stripping, dancing, phone sex, blah-blah-blah.

ANDERSON: We talked about it a fair amount the last time.

HOLLIBAUGH: A little bit. I don't know. As essential as I actually think it is to my own history, I'm not sure — but I guess what I was thinking of is one of the most — in feminism, you can find class and race as a minority but a fairly significant minority narrative. But sex work and sex workers and that history of, kind of, sex trades and sex lives, lives defined through the economics of sexual trade, is almost completely absent from any kind of feminist theory, any kind of feminist writing, even though if you actually look at the way that our lives are constructed globally, sex work is not only probably the most essential work that is done, if we're not married.

There's only two ways that women live. They live through marriage and they live through sex work. And the fact that the women's movement has not been able to then take on really the meaning of sex work and the role that it plays in the economic ways that we have limited choice, but often profound choice, is one of those absences I guess I just — I don't really have anything more than to say, that if you begin to actually do the important work of where the absences are in feminist ideas, by not taking on sex and not taking on sex as desire and sex as labor, and not being able to distinguish between those two things and then actually do the work of looking at those two things and where they overlap and where they're distinguishable, we've really also refused to look at the class, the way that class is lived in women's economic lives, that women either negotiate their power through a private relationship with a man or a public relationship with many.

And lesbians are trapped in exactly that same cycle, regardless of how they understand their own desire for other women, and so you look at a global world, you understand that 90 percent of it's poor and that half of that 90 percent is female and that it's negotiating between those two spheres and you haven't talked about it — well, excuse me. That looks to me like more than a small but maybe interesting part of women's lives. It actually is probably one of the most essential and absent definitions to why feminism, I think, cannot speak to women [in] as impactful a way, or in a global setting.

And where you see the most interesting feminist organizing going on is around sex work. Forty thousand women in Calcutta, 20,000 women forming a union in Mexico City. I mean, it's just — and it's all about sex and it's all about power. And in that then, queerness is beginning to flood up through it and conversations that had never been possible before begin to emerge because you're already so stigmatized because you're a sex worker. What the fuck? You can also say you sleep with

women. You know, it's like, Get this, girls. If you don't pay attention to this, you will never actually be able to create living ideas that reflect the truth of how most women negotiate whether they survive or whether they die, and on whose terms. And if feminism is actually about how women do and don't control their lives and in what modalities they do and don't control it, then to leave it out, to leave sex out, to leave out both the sex you never chose and the sex that in your deepest self of having dreamed, of having the right to want, seems to me an incredible tragedy. And that's to me what feminism lost by refusing to take on sexuality.

You know, it's not just about sex work but it's all those kind of things. If women's lives are so determined by the sets of choices that happen in their individual lives and their regions and their cultures and in their negotiation of possibility, and you don't look at it, then finally it can't grasp the stark necessity that desire and manipulation and power and capital and the body play, and to somehow imagine that because women are profoundly poverty stricken, that they don't have an imaginary life, that fantasy isn't a part of how people, even in despair, hold out for themselves, is to give up the vision that your own theory could offer.

And so, you know, I just — I'm saying it because this is an oral history of what I've done and who I've been in that, and it's part of what I feel like. I usually don't get to say about why it matters to me to work on issues of sex and sex radical and all those kind of questions. That it's not simply because of my own deviance, my own sexual choices or lack of them, but because of what I think is so common in my story versus the story that feminism often recounts about who women are and how women live, that I think is just unacceptable. And kind of unimaginable in a certain way, you know, just — we didn't know when we began the women's movement, what we would find.

What we had was the beginning of a willingness to look at what we had been given, what we'd been handed, and the damage done to us and where that had left us, and where that had hurt us, and where that had given us insight. Those were the only tools we had. And from those tools, we had to make choices. And I think there were — there was a number of years when feminism — when women's liberation held the potential of truly radical capability of bringing a different set of questions to what were the limits of the way political movements had organized and understood people's lives. That was its power, was that it said the person was political. It said that who you are in your life profoundly impacts what you believe, what you think you can do, what you will commit to, what you won't commit to. All of that kind of thing. How you live in your body. And that will be taken seriously. That that is political, and to not then take the next step and say that we will claim sex as our terrain. Not the damage of sex, but the power and the imagination and the explosive hope that actually can come and is

expressed often only there, when most people have almost nothing else that they can actually extract from life.

For us to have given that up, to have been afraid of it, to have not claimed it and named it and insisted on it, impacted not only the growth of our own movement but how an epidemic got dealt with, how a country understood reproductive health, how women in poverty and class were not able to free themselves because they could not control their own bodies. In every way it impacted everything we didn't do, and I think it really is essential to look at feminism for what it gave people but also for what it chose to not take a chance on. And by not choosing to take on sex, it chose to not allow the majority of women to step forward in their own histories and begin to understand how radically they needed to change the world.

And that, to me, is really a heartbreak, because it was a movement that really gave women voice when they had none. And so, that — you know, how could we have done that to each other?

So, I feel like I, you know, I'm always a feminist, because it gave me parts of my life that I could have never, ever come to terms with, and it gave me a set of sisters that saved me. But it also had the potential for something else that was bigger than that and might still be capable of doing it. But not in the direction it's heading at this point in time.

ANDERSON: We've got about a minute left. [laugh]

HOLLIBAUGH: -interesting thing I can say to wrap it up. I'd say, let's quit.

END TAPE 10

Transcribed by Lisa Miller and Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kelly Anderson and Revan Schendler.