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Lesbian Denial and Lesbian Leadership in the AIDS Epidemic: Bravery and Fear in the Construction of a Lesbian Geography of Risk

WANTED: ATTRACTIVE FEMININE WOMAN FOR ROMANCE, PLEASURE AND POSSIBLE LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP, NO HIV+'S NEED APPLY.

LOOKING FOR SERIOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH WOMYN-LOVING-WOMYN—NO BUTCHES, DRUGGIES, DRINKERS OR HIV+'S.

LESBIAN LOOKING FOR LESBIAN LOVE, HOT SEX, GOOD TIMES, GREAT PARTNER COULD BE PERMANENT! FEMMES, FATTIES, HIV+'S, DON'T BOTHER.

These are examples of personal ads running in lesbian newspapers around the country. I found them in lesbian papers published in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Illinois, and Michigan. These magazines ran the gamut from lesbian-separatist newspapers to sex-positive lesbian magazines like *On Our Backs*. And while they contain many descriptions that are awful, each contains one identical and terrifying disqualifier: no HIV-positive lesbians wanted here.

I spend an incredible amount of my time as the director of a lesbian AIDS project disagreeing with other lesbians who are still repeating the dyke mantra, "Real lesbians don't get AIDS," while listening to the numerically spiraling voices of lesbians who are HIV-positive or have AIDS, or while talking to their friends and lovers. Between these two groups of women is a third chorus of female voices full of panicky questions about risk, about whom to believe and how to think when they look at their own behaviors as lesbians. How can lesbians' risk for HIV/AIDS still be debatable 13 years into the epidemic? How can some lesbians still not know any lesbians with HIV?

MY OWN HISTORY, COMING HOME

I have been organizing and writing about sexuality for 15 or 20 years, and doing work around HIV for nearly 10. I have been part of the large contingent of lesbians who, from the earliest days of the epidemic, began to do AIDS work

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and became AIDS activists. And, through those years, I have talked to lesbians about what compelled us to get involved. For some of us, it was the shared *gay* identity we felt with gay men which brought us forward early in the epidemic; for some of us, it was the dramatic increase in the already-devastating daily occurrences of homophobia and gay bashing which occurred because of the government's misrepresentation of AIDS (or GRID—gay-related immune deficiency disease, as it was known then) as a gay disease. In that increased violence, "all gay people, both gay men and lesbian, looked alike." For many gay women and men of color, the devastation in their communities and the need for their engagement and activism was urgent and obvious to them. For many progressive lesbians, the communities most under siege were exactly the communities they were committed to working within (women in prisons, poor women, women of color, young women). And many of us were losing friends every week, every month, more each year. Our reasons as lesbians were numerous, varied, and passionate.

All these reasons applied to me—and one other I have only seen clearly in the last year or so, of which I speak much less openly. I was deeply disillusioned and bitter at the horrific fights about sex that erupted so viciously 12 years ago in the feminist, lesbian-feminist, and antipornography movements of the early eighties, the fights that have now been called "the sex wars" in the feminist movement. I come from a poor-white-trash, working-class background, and I am a high-femme dyke passionately committed to butch and femme lives. The sexualities that I defended in those bitter fights and the sexualities I wanted to continue to explore were drawn from all the ways women (and men) feel desire. But I was particularly driven to explore a woman-identified sexuality which was risky, smart, dangerous, often secretive, and capable of encompassing great variation of erotic need between women who sleep with women. And I wanted sex to have a right to its own history without forcing some women to hide or reinterpret their past (or ongoing) desires through a constantly shifting lesbian ideology. I was also tired of trying to say that the political lesbian community was only the smallest tip of the lesbian iceberg, with the vast majority of lesbians still an uncharted, vastly different set of groupings of desires, identities, contradictions and sexual dynamics. Many brave feminist women spoke against the right wing drift of the sex wars and the porn fights, but we were a minority in a feminist and lesbian movement already beleaguered by Reaganomics, Christian fundamentalism, and the fight to keep open women's ability to control our own reproduction. Times were hard.

THE WOMEN I COME FROM

Finally, I wanted to return, to go home again to the women I came from. I longed to build a *new* revolution, made up of lesbians who had mostly been left out of the current feminist explosion: working-class women; women in

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prisons, reform schools, and juvenile halls; women locked in mental institutions for being too queer; women of color; women in the military and in the bars; women surviving in “straight” marriages and dead-end jobs who longed each day to touch another woman; women who were peep show girls; sex workers; carnival strippers; women who shot drugs and women in recovery from those drugs and the streets; women in trailers, small towns, and cities across America, women who filled the floors of the factories, fast-food restaurants, and auto plants of this country; women whose lives were centered in PTAs, shopping malls, and teamster’s unions. These were the women I came from, and they were the women with whom I longed to build a movement. It was here, with these women, that I hoped for the possibility of a new political dialogue about sex and desire and power. They were also, I quickly realized, the women most immediately at risk for HIV.

The struggle against AIDS brought (and continues to bring) all my worlds together, instead of being barely tolerated because of my sex politics and my sense of urgency about the meaning and power of erotic desires. (Was that really political?) Here, in this movement, I was welcomed. In those early years, when the government refused to take on the leadership of this battle (we still have to wait and see about Clinton), it forced us to create a movement based on grassroots organizing, word of mouth, and long-range goals. Each day we had to bite back our urgency and despair at how to get the messages out quickly enough. It was a movement that understood the critical need to talk about the uncomfortable or ragged edges of our sexualities and desires and wasn’t fooled by what each of us called ourselves—as though those identity words would explain what we did in bed (or who we do it with), or who we were on the streets or in our jobs.

My first paid job doing AIDS work was with the AIDS Discrimination Division of the New York City Human Rights Committee. The work was to intercede against the fear and stigma that had arisen so violently around HIV. The work relied on and demanded a sharp understanding of class and race in this country, in order to know where to look for those most vulnerable to HIV. And, as an educator and filmmaker organizing at a community level, my passion was fed by the desire to bring forward the voices and stories of the women (and men) who lived in long-overlooked communities, letting them and their stories finally stand center stage where they belong. In spite of the struggles over sexism and racism, and a refusal to understand or support women and men whose risks were different than those generally understood as gay, it was still work where everything remained to be done and anyone willing to confront those obstacles could join. And my heart was breaking from the deaths of those I loved. Life and death among my friends and in my communities, the urgency of people struggling to live with HIV, the need to integrate sex issues through the grid of race, class, and gender, my love as a filmmaker for working-class peoples’ stories, each of these pieces added up in ways that compelled me forward.

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As I was doing the work, I began to confront my own history in a way I had never before seen it. At some time in my life (and into the present), I had engaged in every one of the behaviors that I knew put lesbians at risk. I heard my own personal and often secret, unspoken narrative in the stories and histories of the lesbians I met who had AIDS or were at risk for HIV. I was a lesbian and had been one for 27 years. Through those years, I had engaged in all the risky activities associated with AIDS, regardless of what I called myself at the time I was doing them. If that was true for me as a lesbian political organizer and activist, what was really happening for the vast majority of lesbians, bisexual women, young lesbians, transgendered lesbians, lesbians who were "coming out," passing women, and women-who-partnered-with-other-women? What about the hundreds and thousands of women who used none of these words as they loved and desired another woman? What was happening to them? And what about the huge unseen numbers who reside primarily outside the confines of our political networks; that vast geography of women building their lives against or with their desire for another woman, which runs like an underground river beneath the "straight" female landscape of America?

Creating the Lesbian AIDS Project at Gay Men's Health Crisis has been a major part of that answer for me; it is my own history coming home. And because I see the issues of HIV for lesbians totally intertwined with the issues of sexuality, class, race, gender, and erotic desires on which I have been working much of my political life, it has thrust me back into a level of organizing I haven't been involved in since the early civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s and 1970s. I went back to this work with my history and as an organizer committed to a politics of inclusion. Returning as a 46-year-old lesbian who has been doing this political work since she was 17 allows the richness of my own life history to illuminate the gigantic map of our actual lesbian world, a map that I see as needing to comprehend and chart the wildly disparate universes of queer female lives and communities in order to win our survival.

A PROJECT FOR WOMEN-WHO-PARTNER-WITH-WOMEN

The Lesbian AIDS Project at the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in New York is a year old and only one of two funded projects in the world. The other project is at Lyon-Martin Women's Health Clinic in San Francisco. The project has two major missions. The first is to break the silence and denial about HIV in lesbian communities. The other is to demand that lesbians be counted as an essential component in the larger HIV/AIDS communities, as well as in the health, youth, people-of-color, and women's organizations, where we are in danger of struggling to survive with HIV.

In fulfilling these tasks, our job is to specifically identify our vulnerability

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to HIV and to identify the lack of services, visibility, and inclusion for HIV-positive women-who-partner-with-women. The Lesbian AIDS Project is dedicated to enlarging our understanding of who is affected by the epidemic and to educating about our risk for HIV among the distinct and varied lesbian and female bisexual communities to which lesbians belong.

We have not been seen or counted. The Lesbian AIDS Project is dramatically changing that. In our first year, we conducted a sex survey of women-who-have-sex-with-women. We set up support groups for lesbians at GMHC and other sites, and beginning in the summer of 1993, internships for young lesbians at risk were available in our research and documentation project. Already, we have created an information packet and the first lesbian HIV newsletter, *LAP Notes*; we are working on a safer-sex brochure and kit. Plans in 1993 also included setting up a lesbian mothers' HIV group, a lesbian couples' group, and an HIV-positive lesbian substance users recovery group. We will begin to offer safer sex workshops for HIV-positive lesbians and their partners, led by HIV-positive lesbians and their partners.

We are talking with other concerned groups in various communities to lobby for a lesbian prison discharge planner who will work with women to support their lives outside prison as lesbians living with HIV. In the winter of 1994, LAP will begin an HIV lesbian leadership training group and will be working inside GMHC to guarantee that our own house (its organization and services) are lesbian-specific or lesbian-sensitive. In 1994, we will hire two more staff members to continue and deepen our community organizing and outreach efforts and to develop models and manuals that can be used to train the other communities about women-who-partner-with-women and HIV.

The Lesbian AIDS Project is about community, visibility, and resource sharing. We do a great deal of work around general sexuality and lesbian health issues and are committed to guaranteeing that no lesbian will have to hide her identity or have others automatically assume she is heterosexual.

Doing this work has been incredible and has called on all my experience and intelligence. It is a project about making visible hidden women and communities, while protecting any woman's right not to identify if she doesn't choose to. Because of the complexities of our communities and of HIV work itself, it remains constantly challenging and demanding.

LESBIANS' LEADERSHIP IN THE AIDS MOVEMENT

Lesbians have been leaders in the AIDS movement since its beginning. We have influenced and shaped the discussions, outreach programs, demonstrations, services, and prevention drives since the first moments of this crisis. Working early on with gay men, we were often the first women to see how broadly different communities were being affected by HIV and to use our political histories as organizers and health, feminist, civil rights, and

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left-wing activists to inform the creation and responses of this new movement. In the broad leadership by so many varied men and women fighting against HIV, lesbians' role has been consistent and powerful.

Many of us doing this work, together with the HIV-positive lesbians we are beginning to meet, first began to talk among ourselves about the risks lesbians were facing in the epidemic. But for many years it was a quiet discussion between lesbians doing AIDS work and HIV-positive lesbians, all of whom kept coming up against the growing numbers of HIV-positive dykes we were meeting every day. This was at the same time we were being told by the AIDS service organizations and by government agencies in charge of the epidemic that "lesbians are not at risk for HIV." We would meet in small groups together to repair ourselves from the sexism or racism of this new movement but quite quickly move into talking about how many lesbians, how many women-who-sleep-with-other-women, we were seeing who were HIV-positive. We would compare notes and shake our heads. It just didn't add up, and we would speak of it late into the night, trying to unravel the keys to our risk at the same time that we remained completely invisible as a community at risk for AIDS.

WHO IS THE "WE" IN OUR SISTERHOOD?

The lines on the map linking our communities of women-who-partner-with-women are very faint. The terrain through which most lesbians can openly travel is very restricted. It is a geography rigorously determined by our backgrounds, our class and color, by rural landscape or city street, by whether we are politically active or spiritually inclined, by the narrow confines of age and health and physical ability, by the marks on the map that identify us as lesbians from the bars, the trade unions, the military, from gay studies programs or as art history majors, by how we each came out and with whom, by the shape of our desires and our willingness (or ability) to risk it all on our love for a woman, by our status as mothers or our decision not to have kids, by the nature of our dreams and aspirations, by our very ability to nurture and sustain hope for our future.

As lesbians in this culture, we suffer from the same lack of power and resources common to all women. Within that oppression we must also navigate our health, sexuality, and social existence in an environment committed to imagining all women are heterosexual. In a universe without voice or presence, lesbians and our particular risks for HIV have remained submerged inside a "straight" female landscape, keeping us ignorant and uninformed about our own risks for HIV. We are a specific population of women with high numbers of HIV-positive members but no official recognition or accounting.

The "secret" of lesbian risk continues, and lesbian deaths increase. There is confusion among us, leading the entire community into doubt and anger.

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Some lesbians deny all vulnerability to HIV, making the question of risky behaviors, from shooting drugs and sex with men to safe sex between women appear negligible or unrealistic and unknowable. This guarantees that lesbians who are HIV-positive or have AIDS will come up against a wall of silence and denial and be marked outside the status of "real" lesbians. Our histories as women engaged in these activities and behaviors has worked to disown us as an integral part of the larger lesbian landscape.

And it is here that race and class background become particularly vicious components of our risks and our understanding about HIV. For middle-class lesbians, the margins from birth can slip quickly away when (or if) it becomes known that we are sleeping with other women. For working-class women without any buffers, the picture is immediately more fragile, yet our need for our communities of birth is accentuated if we are women of color, women whose first language is not English, or poor or working-class women who are responsible for and committed to the survival of our extended families. In this already contested setting, HIV/AIDS is often devastating, while our resources remain scarce. We are often forced to lie and hide our sexual desire for other women so that we can access the health care or social services we need. We also hide in order to guarantee the commitment and support of our biological families, our jobs, our neighborhoods, our children, our language, and our access to valued cultural institutions. Medically, socially, and economically, the less room we have to turn around, the more problematic our crisis becomes as we balance precariously between the women we desire and the help and support we need.

The process of "coming out," one of the most celebrated aspects of lesbian writing and storytelling, is often a high risk activity. Think of it. This is often the time when confusion and silence about desire for another woman is the most terrifying to come to terms with. It is often a time of lots of sexual experimentation, often combined with drug use and drinking. It is a period when we feel between communities and identities, and it can often be a time of isolation and shame from former friends, our families, and the authority figures in our lives. At whatever age, "coming out" is a highly charged and often dangerous path each of us walks. HIV magnifies that risk a thousand times over.

HIV makes a mockery of pretend unity and sisterhood. Though the women now affected cross all classes and races, they are predominantly lesbians of color or poor white women, usually struggling with long histories of shooting drugs or fucking men for the money to get those drugs. These are not the women usually identified as the women the feminist movement or the lesbian movement most value and try to organize to create a progressive political agenda. The HIV-positive lesbians who continue to come forward as leaders in the lesbian AIDS movement have histories and lives lived in neighborhoods most gay studies courses rarely describe, let alone use as the bases of understanding queer females' lives.

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The question of HIV, of race and class, becomes a question of whose lesbian movement and whose leadership. Will lesbians who shoot drugs or are in recovery be the women turned to to speak for our movement? Will categories that depend on the construction of a "real" lesbian disappear and reveal instead the incredible numbers of women who hold another woman in their arms, regardless of what each woman calls herself or who else she may be fucking? Will histories of low-paying jobs; the revolving door of prisons, the military, and bar life; the sounds of kids playing while the lesbian consciousness-raising group convenes begin to be common and ordinary? Will the power of being butch or femme, the stories of life as a lesbian mom or as a runaway teenage street dyke predominate? When will femmes with long nails and sharp-assed attitude be the voice heard leading gay pride day marches? Whose movement, whose voice, whose stories, whose hope for transformation and change? Whose? These are the questions I see in front of me every day.

SOME COMPLICATIONS ON THE WAY TO UNDERSTANDING LESBIAN HIV

The crisis for lesbians struggling to understand the impact of HIV in our communities is compounded by the general lack of decent, nonjudgmental information about lesbian sexuality. Because it remains unacceptable to love and desire other women sexually, we are also left with little substantial information about what we do in bed with each other, including what might put us at risk sexually. STD (sexually transmitted diseases) of all kinds are little understood or discussed between women partners, and the fear and ignorance surrounding HIV compounds the already existing blank space silencing this discussion in our communities. And, like all silences and prejudices, homophobia hurts us profoundly, leaving us unarmed and unprotected, as though forbidding the word *lesbian* in our existence can stop the act of our love. It doesn't of course, it just leaves us vulnerable and uninformed. Our confusion about whether AIDS is really a lesbian issue reflects this oppression.

The denial of our risk for HIV is often supported by a circumscribed lesbian sexual border that some lesbian-feminists have constructed, which refuses to acknowledge or accept that we sleep with each other in many, many different ways. We are butch/femme women, we are queer or androgynous, we are lesbian-feminist, we don't believe in labels; we practice s/m, we use our hands, our mouths, our bodies, sex toys, to pleasure and please each other; and we may also sleep with men, whether we call that "bisexuality," "coming out," "economic necessity," or we don't dare talk about it.

For a small, though growing number of HIV-positive lesbians, the only (or primary) risk for HIV is their sexual relationship with a female partner who

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was HIV-positive when they became lovers. When these lesbian couples looked for good information about female-to-female transmission, they were rarely successful. And when they went to other lesbians to try to discuss it (if they dared), few other lesbians could help. Like all the other risks in our communities, female-to-female sexual transmission remains scientifically undocumented and unreliably researched. This lack of knowledge combines dangerously with continuing drug and alcohol use throughout our communities which has always been an unrecognized crisis. This crisis is compounded by our invisibility and our lack of political clout. And suicide, especially among young lesbians, is another epidemic in a population of women who love each other.

These activities and identities are components of our communities' sexual and social lives. While women-who-partner-with-other-women have taken an extraordinary risk daring to love another woman, this has not guaranteed that our judgments against each other's erotic or drug choices won't be as cruel as the general culture's judgments against us. Our understanding of the reasons many of us shoot or snort drugs, drink till it harms us, experiment with substances that can kill us are stories that we have not let surface enough inside our community, hoping that, by not telling aloud those pieces of our lives, we will not be hit any harder by social condemnation than we already are. It's as though we think that, by disavowing a set of activities (and the women we stereotype as doing them), we can protect ourselves from even more homophobia.

We also carry those historical silences into our sexual judgments as well, thinking that, if we don't enjoy a particular sexual activity ourselves, no other lesbian could either. If another woman *wants* differently, she is in danger of having her credibility as a "real" lesbian questioned. Yet we are women who are sexual originators and social inventors, leaping across the sexual and emotional silences surrounding women's desires for other women, daring to touch and possess each other sexually, daring to claim our right to be sexual, to love and want another woman.

SO AMBER, WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM ANYWAY?

The Lesbian AIDS Project sex survey is very explicit and was done to try to determine how we are really having sex with each other, how often, in what combinations and with who else, and what we think of ourselves as we do it. This was not a survey primarily about relationships. It appeared in the 1992 *Lesbian and Gay Pride Guide*, of which 60,000 copies are printed for the June Gay/Lesbian March and which is picked up and used as a resource book by a wide variety of lesbians, including women who don't necessarily hook into the gay bookstores and lesbian political organizations in New York City. When the survey appeared, my answering machine was suddenly full of "anonymous" messages from "normal dykes" suggesting that what I really

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needed was to go “fuck a man.” Sometimes the messages were from “regular” lesbians telling me how sick they considered some of the categories and activities that I had included on the survey. Usually those messages ended with a free-wheeling interpretation of what they imagined “I was into.” These anonymous messages always hurt. It was clear to me how problematic the real world of female sexuality is for all of us and what an added minefield being a lesbian could be when it was thrown into the mix. Sex in our community remains our smoking gun, and the fight for whose hand is on the trigger counts.

Still, many women were thrilled by the survey; over 1,600 women filled them out and sent them back. The results of the survey were available from LAP in Fall 1993. Women wrote their opinions in the margins and on Post-its stuck over the sections they loved or despised. Lesbians said, “Congratulations. I’ve waited a long time for someone to care enough about our survival to finally ask us what we do sexually.” Women who answered used exclamation marks and red pens to write their ideas and express their opinions. “I didn’t even know lesbians could do this!” “I love these questions. My girlfriend and I are going to try them all before we finish this survey.” “Hot survey! Getting steamy just answering it.” But other women wrote, “I didn’t even know that lesbians could get AIDS.”

In one of the surveys, I found this note attached. It said, “I am glad you’re doing this survey for those lesbians that can use it, but my lover and I don’t really have any use for these questions. *We are both women and because of that we understand each other’s bodies and desires.* Maybe women that are more fucked up don’t understand this, but for us it’s really just natural. Thanks anyway.”

In anthropology, this is called magical thinking, and this magical thinking is rife throughout the communities I have to speak with every day. It is the most central idea I hear wherever I travel among lesbians. The notion that, because we are women touching women, we automatically understand and empathize so completely that we know intrinsically how to touch or caress each other, how much pressure to use when we suck or lick each other’s bodies, how to stroke or fuck each other to climax is very dangerous and very widespread. It is hard to imagine, then, how to begin discussing safer sex, negotiating with a lover, HIV and STD protection methods, talking openly about our drug or sex histories. In this context, magical thinking leads most women to assert that they don’t think we can transmit sexual diseases to each other. And it leads to dangerous and incorrect sexual notions that I also hear too often, like if STD are transmitted between women partners, it’s probably due to a “bisexual” woman. In this lesbian worldview, men are dirty, women who sleep with them are contaminated, only real lesbians remain pure. Yeast infections are spread between us sexually, and high rates of STD are increasingly prevalent among lesbians at risk of HIV infection,¹ and still this is rarely discussed. How can safer sex ever be a regular part of

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our lives, when we are literally forced to risk our right to community to tell the truth about what we do and who we do it with? The legacy of being women in this culture, of being denied decent nonjudgmental information about our bodies and our desires is multiplied for us as lesbian women.

HIV-POSITIVE LESBIANS AND YOUNG LESBIANS LEAD THE WAY

Still, in the face of this culturally imposed ignorance, I see women who love other women trying to carve out an erotic terrain of their own which claims and encourages all of us to explore and reckon with our desires for each other. It assumes that there are thousands of complex ways each of us feels desire and passion. Especially in younger lesbians I have seen a much more matter-of-fact acceptance of HIV risk for lesbians. These are women who have grown up sexually in the first decade of AIDS, and they are much less resistant to the idea of lesbian risk and HIV safety. And in lesbian communities already hard hit by HIV, the question of safer sex, regardless of presumed mode of transmission, is also different and more open. It is there, in working-class lesbian political and social organizations, that I see the most innovative and least judgmental struggle to integrate HIV knowledge into daily lesbian life. These are often communities of lesbians that have had the tragic example of numbers and the powerful voices of HIV-positive lesbians to reckon with and lead the discussion. For example, Bronx Lesbians United in Sisterhood (BLUeS), a membership group of 1,000 estimates that 10 percent of their members are HIV-positive. There, HIV is no stranger. In these communities, HIV-positive lesbians are lovers, mothers, sisters, best friends.

Growing numbers of HIV-positive lesbians are speaking out more and more often. More than anything else, it has been their bravery and their insistence to tell the truth of their own lives (and histories) that have cracked the silence and denial in the larger lesbian communities. Like the role that HIV has played in other settings, AIDS transmission always exposes the gap between who we want to believe ourselves to be and what we really do in our regular lives. The leadership of lesbians who are infected or affected by HIV is a powerful and original model for the building of a new, more inclusive movement of women-who-partner-with-other-women. It brings into one dialogue the lives of all of us throughout our evolution as lesbians. These are often lesbians who become activists and HIV workers when they are told their own antibody status. The work being done by these lesbians in AIDS organizations, women's outpatient health clinics, detox centers, youth programs for runaway lesbians, prisons, recovery programs, and neighborhood organizations is rarely documented, but it is some of the most powerful lesbian activism happening. And it is building a new foundation and a different class base for a larger lesbian political movement.

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CLAIMING THE POWER OF OUR LIVES

Our right to be sexual with each other and to struggle with the issues of our daily lives, like our drug use and the sex we have with men, are all pieces of the lesbian puzzle. Whether or not the larger culture acknowledges us, we must recognize each other and our different struggles. The lesbian map is very large, our numbers are significant, and we must pick up this fight to protect ourselves and each other while we fight to be seen and respected. We can't wait for other people to see what is right in front of our noses; that we are an integral part of this world, not outside it—and so is a potentially life-threatening virus, HIV. Our community is not immune, and lesbianism is not a condom for AIDS. Like everyone else, we are vulnerable and must take the steps necessary to learn how to protect each other's lives. No one else will do it for us, and no one will do it as well. For millennia, we have been taking risks to love each other. Now we need to expand our understanding of who we are and what we do in order to understand the many ways we need to go forward. Our communities are fabulously sexual and inventive, our lives and histories varied and full of meaning. We can support each other in taking the steps each of us needs to be safe, erotic, and powerful. And we can build a movement, starting here, which refuses to privilege rigid ideological categories over the truths of our lives and which bases its theories on a more complicated map of lesbian desire and lesbian voice.

NOTE

¹Surveillance Branch, AIDS Office, San Francisco Department of Public Health, "HIV Seroprevalence and Risk Behaviors Among Lesbians and Bisexual Women: The 1993 San Francisco/Berkeley Women's Survey," 19 October, 1993.

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