THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

PRIDE PIONEERS HOLLY HUGHES & ESTHER NEWTON: HOW QUEER KINSHIP TIES HELP US SURVIVE

LAURA FLANDERS: Esther Newton and Holly Hughes each have significant bios and achievements. They are cultural icons, dog agility enthusiasts, and without a doubt, makers of history. Esther Newton's 1972 book "Mother Camp" changed anthropology forever being the first major anthropological study of what would now perhaps be called an LGBT community in the U.S. Holly Hughes, a writer and performer started her career at the WOW Cafe in New York City where she became a core part of a place that calls itself the oldest continuously operating cultural institution for queer women and trans people in the universe. In 1990s, Hughes was one of a group of artists whose federal grants were revoked in a right wing backlash against queer art and self-expression. The debacle over the NEA Four, as they were known, led to the closing of the National Endowments Individual Artists Program and an anti-obscenity pledge that grant recipients were required to sign for years afterwards. They have both survived wave after wave of culture wars. And did I mention Holly and Esther, they're a long-time couple. Holly and Esther have gone on individually to publish books and teach at among other places, the University of Michigan and they have never stopped working. Holly's latest project is "Indelible" a forthcoming performance involving victim testimony in high profile sexual assault cases. Esther's the subject of an award-winning documentary. "ESTHER NEWTON MADE ME GAY" is the title. It's directed by Jean Carlomusto. It came out in 2022. And here is a taste in which you will hear from Esther herself as well as artist Louise Fishman and educators Jack Halberstam and Shaka McGlotten.

ESTHER NEWTON: So a standard kinship diagram, A man is a triangle, a circle as a woman. What if someone was trans or gender non-binary? Here's me and I'll make it a square, because I'm not exactly a man or a woman.

MARGARET MEAD: Human babies are born with the ability to grow up as members of any society.

ESTHER NEWTON: It was an emotional thing as much as an intellectual thing.

- She's writing an anthropological study of herself.

JACK: She brings you into an uncomfortable position with an other that's not so distant.

ESTHER NEWTON: And in anthropology these things were never talked about, ever.

- Esther was not playing the game. Esther was not doing anthropology in the way that she was supposed to. She was way ahead of the time. What can you say?

LAURA FLANDERS: That's just a taste of "ESTHER NEWTON MADE ME GAY." I can't quite say that that's true of me but I have known the two of you for a very long time and I wish you Happy Pride both. Welcome Holly and Esther to the program.

ESTHER NEWTON: Thank you.

HOLLY HUGHES: Delighted to be here.

ESTHER NEWTON: Yeah.

LAURA FLANDERS: Holly, starting with you, how did you two meet and fall in love in the first place?

HOLLY HUGHES: I met her at a benefit for CLAGs the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies. I was performing. And we had a little bit of a chat afterwards at the reception and then that led to a date at a coffee shop. And the rest is, and she showed, on the first date she showed me her truck.

LAURA FLANDERS: Oh, that's obviously what did it. What about you Esther? How did you fall in love with Holly?

ESTHER NEWTON: I had read about Holly, you know, in the New York Times the whole NEA Four thing, and I never thought I would meet her actually. And her performance that night just blew me away completely. It never, I never, never occurred to me that we would get together. But she was persistent and it didn't take long before we did get together and she passed the interview. She liked my truck.

LAURA FLANDERS: To go back a little bit tell us a bit about your history, where you came from.

ESTHER NEWTON: I was born in New York City and my family were all communists. And so those progressive values have always stayed with me. And then I have had an academic career. I was good at school and, you know, the few jobs that were open to women at that time, by that time, I mean the 1950s and 1960s, you know, were like secretary and a nurse, maybe a school teacher, and I didn't want to do any of those. And I loved to read, so I went on to graduate school. After the University of Michigan I went on to graduate school at the University of Chicago. And I almost had a more conventional career in anthropology. But as part of my struggle to come out, I went to a drag show with my then girlfriend and two gay men who were kind of our guides and

I was totally enthralled with it. And not just the performance, but the atmosphere, the sense of community and belonging and which at that time was really precious. And so I went on to write my dissertation about drag and the gay community.

LAURA FLANDERS: As you the attacks on drag queen story hours and drag society and trans culture today, how do you think about that?

ESTHER NEWTON: By attacking drag queens and trans people they think that that's the most vulnerable part of our very varied communities. And in a way it is, because it's the most scary to right wing people but it's also something that we're going to fight to defend.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Holly, tell us a little bit about your kind of origin story, the context of your coming up and coming out.

HOLLY HUGHES: Well, I wasn't raised by communists. I was raised by their opposite. I'm from Michigan originally. My parents were, I mean, I thought of them as right wing Republicans, but now I think things have, I think things have moved so that they might be Joe Manchin Democrats in certain ways, at least my father. They've believed in abortion and science. But at the same time, I think I'm glad my mother is no longer here because I think she'd really like Trump. I think she was kind of, she was kind of a repository of every kind of ethnic, racial, religious slur. She was kind of Archie Bunker except not funny. And and it was a conservative backwater in the sense that I grew up in with the expectation I was going to learn how to play golf and you know, get married and do something, but not much. And after college, I, you know, I have the career and I think the life that I have because of two experimental feminists pedagogical adventures. And one was New York Feminist Art Institute and there were lots of problems with it that we associate with cultural feminism of that time. But also really revolutionary aspects to it too of using consciousness raising, storytelling circles, and putting our stories in a larger political context. And then after that, I became involved at the WOW Cafe which was launched by a number of women but primarily I worked with Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw. And I went to, I didn't think of myself as a performer. I went to a party that they were throwing to pay the rent, a rent party, and I kind of like had this, I felt like this is my, this is my real family. These are my people, this is where I belong. And I would've done anything pretty much to be part of that. I was instantly part of a community doing something extraordinary. Not only did it launch my career, I think like it saved my life.

LAURA FLANDERS: Esther, your work in the early days in the '70s as an anthropologist studying queer society, what was so significant about bringing an anthropological lens to that community at that point?

ESTHER NEWTON: Well, at that point in time which was the mid-60s when I did this, homosexuals as we were then called, we were like a psychological problem to be fixed. And the starting point of anthropology is that human beings have culture, that this is our primary adaptation to the world. That we communicate with each other, that we speak the same language, so to speak, you know. And what was so striking about my perspective was that I was describing the culture that gay people had at that point. How the sense of belonging, which Holly's talking about, the sense of belonging, the artistic production which centered around drag, nobody had done that before, you know. And I really knew that we weren't a problem to be solved by shrinks or, you know. And doing the work also help me solidify my own sense of identity.

LAURA FLANDERS: I mean, when you put it that way it makes it so unsurprising in a way, Holly, that the right would come after this community. And its expression as in the late 1980s, early '90s sort of represented by you. Were you surprised at that moment, and did you understand immediately what was happening, what was at stake? Why what you were doing at WOW and theaters around, stages around the country was so dangerous, threatening?

HOLLY HUGHES: Well, I think so much of what happened at that time was a reaction, a hysterical unhelpful reaction to the AIDS epidemic and an exploitation of misunderstanding and fear over a disease that was fatal, 100% fatal, that was transmitted through stigmatized practices and very prevalent in the gay community. And also and I'm using that word, I'm, you know, it's archaic but it also sort of like is accurately describing that how people described themselves more at the time. And I think that that was something that really fed and enabled the religious right to get purchase with these attacks, and particularly going after art forms that are not very well known. No one like attacked me or any of the other artists, actually saw our work or including at the National Endowment for the Arts. They didn't look at it. I remember when I learned in the lawsuit that the entire discussion of my work is Holly Hughes is a lesbian and her work is very heavily of that genre. And I thought, I don't want to be a genre, a generic lesbian, I want to be a store brand lesbian. That's her label or something like that. But I think also the religious right, what we used to call the religious right, now it's just the Republican party, they used this wedge issue and, you know some of the arguments that they used 30 years ago, primarily about the fact that we were supposedly attacking children and we were, you know, a cabal of child pornographers and pedophiles, which is totally wrong, you know, they're concerned about a stigmatized group that begins to have the means to talk to a larger community. I think a certain kind of gender essentialism is part and parcel of Christian nationalism along with their racism. It's in there. And we represent something, a way of building relationships that aren't focused on necessarily on procreation and certainly not on rigid gender roles.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's probably very keenly felt by you right now, Esther, you're in Florida as we speak, the attacks on education, on young people, on consciousness.

ESTHER NEWTON: During this past legislative session, every week a new horrible law was coming out that you can't, basically, that you can't teach Black history, that you can't, you know, don't say gay, you can't mention and it was just so transparent because they started with, "we have to protect these children." You know, back to Anita Bryant and the 1970s, that was exactly her point of entry. Like save the children, it was the same words. And, but very quickly they made it go all the way up through the end of high school and getting rid of or at least they're trying to get rid of all gender studies programs in the state colleges. And it's just sickening to see what's happening under DeSantis's quote unquote leadership. It's a disaster for, not only LBGT people, but you know, in terms of racial equity and... Yeah, and it's scary to be here, actually. And I live in a lesbian community. So I mean, we're all old, so that's less threatening, I guess.

LAURA FLANDERS: Although if he thinks he can mess with a bunch of old lesbians, he's in big trouble.

ESTHER NEWTON: That could be.

LAURA FLANDERS: What is so powerful about what you've both just said is that the strength and also the threat when it comes to queer community is in the community piece. It's not just the individual, it's not the star, although the targets become individuals. Our society loves to individualize, but the targets today are actually the places of community building, whether it's education or performance or community. I mean, these drag queen story hours, they are visible magnets for queer community and for community of inclusion. That could be everybody. As you think about survival techniques of this particular culture, that is ours Esther, and the other cultures that you as an anthropologist have studied, how important are non-blood kinship connections to the survival of people, ideas, freedom aspiration, breath, name it, and how do we survive?

ESTHER NEWTON: It's critical because that's what culture is. It's ties between people and, you know traditionally everybody was supposed to be, their primary ties were supposed to be quote unquote blood family. And gay people have built structures outside of that which I think is partly what's so appealing to young people.

LAURA FLANDERS: What do they mean to you, Holly? How have you survived? It's not easy to be an artist, let alone an individual queer artist under attack from the right.

HOLLY HUGHES: No, it's not easy at all. And as I talked about, you know I was lucky to have, you know, different kinds of communities at different moments. I am very, very concerned and disheartened, the attacks on trans people. And it's disheartening to see some of it coming from feminists. Although I think a lot of the people who are described as TERFs, are not really Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists because they're not feminists. They're just exclusionary.

One of the fundamental prospects or ideas in women's liberation and in queer liberation is about dismantling biological determinism. You know, the idea that because you have a certain set of chromosomes and a certain set of genitals that here's your life script, and what you're going to do and what you're going to do with your body and all of that. And I think expanding and rethinking that is to everyone's benefit. And I'm just very worried. I have so many now trans and non-binary students and they're so vulnerable.

LAURA FLANDERS: We've always been in our lifetimes kind of juggling the pros and cons of identity politics. Sometimes super liberatory, sometimes kind of pigeonholing. One of the territories that's gotten contested is that word woman. Now the two of you each define yourselves identify still as woman and as lesbians and as feminists. Oh, you're going either or, maybe, maybe, maybe. How do you think about it, Holly?

HOLLY HUGHES: Well, I, you know, look at me. I'm like, you know, I'm very, you know I'm presenting myself in what would be seen as a feminine way. And I used to think of myself as a femme, I think of myself a little bit differently, partially because of the discourse that my relationship to that word woman, I think is a little bit different. I think of myself more as effeminate. But I think when people talk about sometimes I hear people talking, feminists, about, like they're worried about the disappearance of the word "woman". And I think what they're really worried about is, you know, sort of the lack of a mass feminist movement. You know, language is difficult. It's changing. I'm an older person, it's hard to adapt. But the biggest problem in my life is not whether I'm called a "woman" or hearing “pregnant people" you know, I like, you know, I, that is like a very, that's not a problem at all, or "menstruating people". I think that, I think what's behind it is more, it needs more articulation and I think it's really about feminist discourse.

LAURA FLANDERS: Esther, you want to weigh in on this?

ESTHER NEWTON: Until feminism, I always felt kind of like a female impersonator. Like, you know, it was just a role that I was forced into. And then feminism and lesbian feminism made me proud to be a woman in some sense. And, you know, because there was a shared, it was a very super exciting movement with all kinds of ideas and creativity and actions, you know and had lots of good results in the legal system, eventually. Now, I mean, and then I, in the '80s, I really began to identify as a butch lesbian. And now the way all that is changing as Holly has been talking about, you know, with new terms, new forms, new ideas.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you have an answer or advice for a young Esther coming up today? I was going to say a young lesbian, but maybe a young Esther?

ESTHER NEWTON: Well, find your people. Find your people and stick with 'em.

HOLLY HUGHES: That's just what I was going to say. You have to find your people and you know, and also find other people that could be your people, you know

LAURA FLANDERS: Hang out with them. Well, I appreciate that we got a chance to hang out a little bit. Is one heck of a way to catch up with your friends. Holly Hughes, Esther Newton, thank you so much for joining me on the "Laura Flanders Show." It's been a pleasure to have you.

ESTHER NEWTON: Thank you.

HOLLY HUGHES: Same here.

LAURA FLANDERS: Theater watchers out there may have noticed that the Tony Awards were swept by gay and non-binary performers this year and hosted for the second time in a row by the first out queer Afro-Latina woman to win an Academy Award for acting. Yay, change. It wasn't that way in Holly and Esther's day but they did their bit to feed into the river of history and culture that brought our imagination thus far. Still, the attacks keep on coming and they keep on targeting drag culture, for its punitive negative impacts on children. That requires us forgetting queer children, queer children like Holly and Esther and me, people who found ourselves in queer community and whose lives were literally saved, not to mention whose imaginations were released by the courage of our peers. For those who are out there defending drag culture in their community today, I say yay. And for everyone I say let's keep kind and curious in these times. If you want to check out my full uncut conversation with Holly and Esther, you can by subscribing to our podcast. Till the next time for the "Laura Flanders Show," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining me.

For more on this episode and other forward thinking content subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all lauraflanders.org.