

Impressions of the Lesbian Conference

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Impressions of the Lesbian Conference

[Added November 2003: This was published in *Lesbian Network*. I don't know which issue, but it is dated 18.9.1991. The conference referred to must have taken place before that date, but I don't remember exactly when. UTS is University of Technology Sydney.]

I hated the conference.

Not because of the organisation. That was superb—yet one more example of the power of women to do the impossible. I am overwhelmed with admiration at the organisers' abilities to juggle the enormous number of workshops, accommodate the needs and demands of the workshop givers, cope with the Students' Union's refusal to allow us to use their precious catering facilities, turn the alienating environment of the UTS tower block into lesbian space, *and* make a profit. My congratulations to the organisers.

Neither did I hate the conference because there wasn't anyone to talk to. I had a number of great conversations, met new friends and caught up with the old.

Nor was it because I couldn't get to most of the workshops. With over 100 workshops and only 7 sessions, that was only to be expected.

Nor was it because of anything that happened at my workshop, 'Theory and Sexuality'. I talked about my experiences in publishing my book, *Reading Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality*, and about some of the ideas in and behind the writing of the book. There were about 15 women there, and we had some marvelous discussions.

One of the discussions was about 'difficult' writing, writing that is difficult to read and understand (not writing that is difficult to do). It was suggested by Susan Hawthorne that there are two kinds of 'difficult' writing. One kind involves the writing of ideas which are really simple, even trite, but which are dressed up in difficult language in order to make them appear complex. It is this kind of writing which deserves to be called difficult and to be criticised for it. But there is another kind of writing, she said, that is difficult because the ideas in it are complex. This kind of writing is not immediately accessible, no matter how clearly the ideas are expressed, because the ideas are not ordinary.

I agreed with her because I was saying much the same thing. The reader has to do some work too, I said. She has to decide *which* kind of writing she is reading. She has to engage herself with the text, argue with it, and use her own experience and knowledge in the process of understanding rather than expecting to be spoonfed. Reading requires a certain amount of skill. There is no such thing as 'plain' language. While the writer has to work to say what she means as clearly as possible, not everything can be said all at once. Even the 'plainest' of language contains layers of meaning, only some of which are the writer's. Every reader brings her own meanings to the text, meanings which add to or detract from the writer's, which may help the reader interpret the writer's meaning or hinder her. Reading is not a passive activity. A reader is not an inert sponge merely soaking up what the writer presents, but an active participant in the process of understanding.

(Well, I don't know that I said all of that, but I would have if I had worked it out in time).

And we had other fine conversations too—one about the possibility of knowing other cultures, another about the usefulness or otherwise of postmodernism for feminist theory. So my negative reaction to the conference was not based on anything that happened at my workshop.

I hated the conference because, once again, what I am passionately interested in was almost entirely absent from the program. And what is it that is my passion, my need, my solace in a phallographic world, my work and my desire? It has no name. There are no words with which to convey its meaning directly. But I'll try.

The word which comes closest to identifying what I love doing and seeing done is 'theory', or, perhaps more accurately, 'theorising', since it is a never-ending process, not a thing in itself. To theorise is to attempt to explain the world truthfully at ever-increasing levels of generalisation, within the situational limits of the individual theoriser. Theory is always critical because it is only the problems which need to be explained. Comfort, peace, joy and contentment do not need to be explained—they only need to be lived. Theory clarifies, exposes what is hidden, unveils the mechanisms of power. And the best theory for doing that is feminist theory, preferable done by lesbians.

There was very little of that at the conference, with a couple of exceptions—my own workshop, Bronwyn Winter's workshop, 'Western Liberalism and Lesbian Politics' (which I did not attend at the conference because I had already attended it at an 'ovular' in Sydney), and Susan Hawthorn's workshop, 'What Do Lesbians Want?' (Both of these papers will be appearing in the next issue of *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies*).

But my hatred of the conference was not unproductive. It reached such a pitch of intensity that weekend that it finally pushed me over the edge into realising something more about myself. I learned why I had always reacted with such rage (although not always overtly) when lesbians said that they didn't understand what I was talking about. I don't react with rage when someone says she doesn't understand and means it. In fact, I have infinite patience in explaining what I mean. I react with rage when it is said in a sneering, aggressive, 'how dare you' kind of voice, a tone of voice which implies that I have no right to be saying what I am saying in the way I am saying it, and that I ought to stop saying it, now and forever, because it makes someone else feel inadequate. I feel enraged when the other's lack of comprehension is put in terms of 'class', when the one who does not understand defines me as her oppressor because I've got a tertiary education and she does not.

I realised that weekend that the rage was intimately connected with the suppressive voices of my childhood. Those voices were in my own head, but they came from the environment which constantly demanded that I not know what I knew, that I stop questioning the world-taken-for-granted, that I stop needing to know. I reacted with rage to the lesbian voices in the present, because I heard them demanding that I divest myself of my best defence against engulfment by the horrors of phallocratic reality. What that realisation leaves me with is an even stronger determination not to be silenced—hence this present piece.

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