

Anti-Intellectualism at the Lesbian Conference

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Publication details:

Lesbian Network

Publication Date:

1989

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/664>

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Anti-Intellectualism at the Lesbian Conference

(Adelaide, 12-15 January 1989)

[Added June 2003: The next two pieces were printed in *Lesbian Network* no. 19. They are followed by some correspondence with a lesbian group in the UK who asked if they could publish them in the *Lesbian Information Service Newsletter* [LISN]. The 'Anti-Intellectualism' paper was duly published, but it attracted so much criticism that the publishers regretted it, and said as much in the next issue, where they also published a rather silly criticism of my article along with their own criticism. They did give me a right of reply, which was also published. All of this is reproduced below.

The book mentioned is *Reading between the Lines*. The pamphlet about ex-lovers was *Freedom for What? Lesbian Relationships and Responsibility* (1984) (in UNSWorks).]

Having decided to attend the Lesbian Conference in Adelaide, I thought it would be a good opportunity to tell women about the book I have just finished writing. It is an investigation from a lesbian feminist perspective of what feminism has had to say about sexuality, so I thought that the conference would be an appropriate place to talk about it. I wrote to the conference organisers saying: 'I would like to talk about my book *Feminism and Sexuality*, and perhaps read parts of it at the conference'. They allotted me a space on Saturday afternoon, and included my request in the printed program as a description of that particular workshop.

Between 50 and 60 women turned up for the workshop. I spoke about the general outline of the book, and said that I wanted to read from chapter 2 for 20 minutes, and then we could discuss some of the issues I raised, or any others women wanted to talk about. While I was reading, it became obvious that some women had misunderstood the purpose of the workshop and that it wasn't to their liking, or so I assumed from the fact that many women walked out. Indeed, I had been feeling a certain edginess in the room, which I thought probably had to do with the fact that what I was reading was too theoretical for at least some of the women there. So when I reached a point in my reading which I knew was even more theoretical than

what had gone before, I stopped and said: 'The next bit is about "object relations" theory, so I'll just skip that and go on with something else'. But one woman said: 'Oh no, I want to hear about that', so I continued. At which point more women walked out.

Most of the discussion which followed my reading was excellent. I found it exciting, stimulating, and validating of the work I had been doing. There were a lot of women in the room who had been thinking along the same lines I had, who had perceived the same problems, and who were delighted that someone was devoting time and energy to clarifying them. We were all of the same mind on the issues, which is not to say that we were in complete agreement, and we had a lovely time batting them around and arguing them back and forth.

There were other women, however, who were not on the same wavelength at all. The complaint was raised by a number of women that they 'wanted to talk about sexuality', the implication being that we were not doing so. But, as one woman pointed out, 'I thought that was what we were doing'. When those who had thought we were not talking about sexuality were asked 'What do *you* mean by sexuality, then?' they didn't reply (although that may have been because of the hurly-burly of the debate, rather than because they didn't know the answer).

Right at the end of the discussion, 7 minutes from the end, as I remember, one woman got very angry, or at least one woman voiced her anger. There may have been other women who were just as angry but had remained silent. She said that she felt as though she had been 'sitting in a tutorial' (a criticism all in itself, I gathered), and that 'those women over there had monopolised the discussion'. The gist of her objection was that the material presented had been too difficult, and that she and others had not understood what was being said. The message I got from her anger was, either that such difficult material ought not to have been presented at all, or that it should have been made simple enough for every woman to understand. Her point was substantiated by other women who came up to me after the session and said that they too had not understood. One woman said that she and others had come along expecting 'a rave'.

Another woman said during the workshop that this kind of debate excluded those women who couldn't keep up. It was pointed out to her that to keep the debate on the simplest possible level also excluded women. It excluded those women who had moved beyond it and who were bored witless and infuriated, or at least irritated, at

having to go over and over things that either they had resolved years ago, or had never regarded as problems in the first place. But this conversation happened between two women only and did not become general.

Other women pointed out that perhaps the problem lay in the wording in the conference program, that it hadn't been sufficiently explicit, and that women had simply read the word 'sexuality' and assumed that everyone would be swapping sexual experiences. Other women disagreed, saying that it was perfectly clear that I would be talking about my book, and that they had come along specifically to hear me since they were already acquainted with the kind of work I was doing. However, I think there is some truth in the objection that what was written in the program wasn't detailed enough. I should have made it clear that my book was a theoretical work, and intellectual endeavour to devise a theory of sexuality, and not ... what? a series of vignettes from my own sex life? a program of research into other women's sex lives? Whatever. The important point is that my book is *theory* and *intellectual*, and that I should have made that clear, so that women who are not interested in theorising would have known not to come.

I would like at this point to look more closely at what might be involved in this claim on the part of some women that they 'didn't understand'. My instantaneous reaction to such complaints has always been, until recently, to take responsibility for this lack of comprehension. In other words, I have assumed automatically that women didn't understand what I said or wrote because it was not understandable. Indeed, I am quite sure that that is the message I am expected to receive—that *their* lack of understanding was *my* fault. To a certain extent, this automatic assumption on my part has had a good effect. It has forced me to greater and greater levels of clarity. It has also had a bad effect, however, in that it has intimidated me into years of silence.

Now I have had a complete about-face. I have decided to listen only to those women who *do* understand, who recognise the same problems I do whether we agree or not, who experience as much pleasure as I do in working those problems out, and who, many of them, have congratulated me on the clarity with which I write about difficult issues. There are enough of *those* women around whose ideas I want to hear and whom I want to hear my ideas. I have decided that I no longer need to reach all women, or all feminists, or even all lesbians. I need to reach only those women who reach me.

To those women who are angered or threatened by what they don't understand, I would suggest that you do your own work, that you seriously ask yourself whether or not your lack of understanding is a fault in *yourself* which *you* have to correct. I would suggest, too, that you resist the temptation to engage in the mindless knee-jerk reaction of blaming someone else for your own failure and of demanding that someone else make you feel better. I would also suggest that you read Joanna Russ' article, 'Power and Helplessness in the Women's Movement', which is included in her book, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans and Perverts*, and to keep what she says in mind next time you feel threatened by another woman's achievement, whether it's writing a book, giving a paper, solving a crucial problem, getting a good job, or organising a conference. You cannot be a powerful, capable woman unless you do it yourself. And you cannot do it by tearing other women down and demanding they stop doing what they can do and you cannot. If you find yourself in the company of women who are talking at a more skilled level than you are used to, there is no need to feel anxious and insecure. Those women are not your superiors, simply better at debate or more informed on that particular subject. There is nothing wring with sitting silently, listening. You may even learn something you didn't know before. Or you may not. But either way there is nothing to be gained by always assuming that you are the victim of a conspiracy to confuse. There are at least two courses of action which might follow on a feeling of confusion, and only one of them is to assert that someone is being deliberately confusing. The other course of action is to find the problem in oneself and set about rectifying it. Admittedly, that is not easy in the short term in a large group. But it is the only way to acquire some power and skill of one's own.

[Added June 2003: I think the problem here was that the discussion was too theoretical, not in the sense that it was difficult to understand, but in the sense that it looked at sex in a distanced and critical way, instead of simply reporting experience and desire without judgement. In other words, it wasn't titillating. What women didn't understand, I suspect, was not the ideas themselves, but why anyone would talk about sex in this detached way when the reality was so intense and exciting. I also think that some of the angrier women were wanting to talk about their sadomasochistic desires and practices in a permissive environment, and they were not being given permission to do so.

They didn't understand how sex could be discussed dispassionately when passion was its essence. They didn't understand why sex wasn't being celebrated when it felt so good. And they were angry because they wanted to get on with the business of revaluing sadomasochism from bad to good, or rather, as good because it was conventionally regarded as bad, and they weren't being allowed to do that.

I say this for a number of reasons. The first is the remark mentioned above, of the woman who said she had come to the workshop expecting 'a rave'. That in itself is no indication of sadomasochism. But when it is put together with the information given by the lesbian from LIS who said that Sheila Jeffreys had had a similar experience 'with the added dimension of pro s/m dykes', the anger becomes more explicable. (See the letter below).

Another reason concerns the workshop called 'Sex: Doing It' I gave at the Lesbian Conference in Melbourne the next year, in 1990, where the entire discussion was devoted to sadomasochistic sex, its (supposed) delights and its universality. Everyone's sexuality was sadomasochistic, was the dominant message, and anyone who thought theirs wasn't was simply in denial. When I said, 'Mine isn't', one woman said, 'Oh, but it is'. (She did look rather abashed at the roars of laughter that followed).

So my little homily about taking responsibility for one's own feelings of incomprehension probably missed the point.]

Review of Out the Other Side: Contemporary Lesbian Writing edited by Christine McEwen and Sue O'Sullivan, London: Virago Press, 1988

Lesbian Network's request that I review this book has put me in something of a quandary. While, on balance, I didn't like the book very much and parts of it irritated and sometimes infuriated me, I don't want to put anyone off buying and reading it, because there were other parts which I loved and think that we all should read, and because lesbian writings, and non-fiction anthologies of lesbian writings in

particular, are not so numerous that we can afford to be terribly choosy about what we will and will not read.

To deal with what I didn't like first (so that I can end on a more positive note):

I am heartily sick and tired of being browbeaten about feminism's supposed 'racism', 'classism', 'ableism', 'sizeism', 'ageism', 'elitism', etc. Not only is feminism none of those things, it is actively and explicitly against all invidious and hierarchical distinctions between categories of human beings, as witness the space feminism has opened up to allow these issues to be aired. While it is vitally important for all feminists to be constantly aware of the ways in which and the reasons why we continue to treat each other with less than full respect and dignity, the hectoring tone of much of the debate, together with the insistence that it is feminism which is at fault, does not get us very far. It may even be counter-productive, as the women who feel themselves accused react with more or less guilty breast-beating and paralysed confusion about what they are expected to do. While a certain degree of discomfort is probably necessary to shift old thoughtless patterns of attitude and behaviour, I can't help feeling that there must be another way to do it than boxing potential allies into a no-win corner.

I didn't like the sexual libertarian emphasis of some of the articles, the accusations of 'moralism' directed against feminist who oppose lesbian sadomasochism and pornography. In particular, I found the one article on pornography utterly offensive, because it placed anti-pornography feminists in the same camp as the political Right, and because it portrayed anti-pornography campaigners, and Andrea Dworkin in particular, as 'leaders' who manipulate and 'incite' women (who presumably can't think for themselves and merely follow along like sheep).

There is very little theory to be found among these non-fiction pieces, a scarcity which I regret. There are really only two articles which attempt to grapple with theoretical issues. The first is Sara Scott's article on feminism and AIDS. She argues for greater feminist clarity around sexuality in order to counter the sexism of mainstream campaigns against AIDS. The other article is 'Dyke-tactics for Difficult Times', by Sarah Franklin and Jackie Stacey. It is a report from the 'Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality' conference, held at the Free University of Amsterdam in December, 1987. The authors examine both 'essentialist' and 'social constructionist' arguments about sexual identity, and tentatively suggest that at least some form of 'essentialist' argument may have strategic value in opposition to such right-wing offensives as Clause 28 of the 1986 Local Government Bill in Britain (which prohibits

local councils from funding anything which could be interpreted as ‘promoting’ homosexuality).

And now for what I did like:

I was delighted to see Joanna Russ’ paper, ‘Power and Helplessness in the Women’s Movement’ reprinted ... It is one of the most insightful and witty accounts I have yet seen of how we use our own powerlessness to gain ascendancy over each other. I recommend it unreservedly.

I loved Chrystos’ account of a relationship break-up and her struggles to come to terms with her feelings about her ex-lover. Called ‘Perhaps’, it is both funny and sad, and above all honest. I read it with delighted recognition of some of my own experiences. And I loved Lorna Hardy’s story, ‘Exposure’, of what felt at the time to be an endless series of failed, transient relationships, and her attempts to understand the extent of her own responsibility in setting up situations which made her do unhappy. Again I recognised myself.

There were also other articles which I enjoyed, even if I had reservations about the overwhelming preponderance of personal herstory over analysis. There are thirty-two articles in all, and there is sufficient variety in content and ideological emphasis to make the book worth reading, or better still, buying, if you can afford it. We do want to encourage publishers to produce lesbian writings, and I suppose we really can’t expect to agree with everything printed.

A letter from the Lesbian Information Service, Leicester, UK

21st March 1989

Dear Denise,

We read with interest both your review of *Out the Other Side* and the article ‘Anti-Intellectualism at the Lesbian Conference’. I don’t know whether you know or not but something very similar (but with the added dimension of pro s/m dykes) happened to Sheila Jeffreys at the Lesbian Archive Summer School last year. Because of this, and because of the trashing of Sheila since, we would very much like to reproduce your article in LISN [Lesbian Information Service Newsletter] (and your review).

Sheila was telling me that you have written a pamphlet about ex-lovers ... We'd be very keen to see a copy for possible (probable) reproduction in LISN. What do you think?

We might be interested in reviewing your book—perhaps you could tell us something about it?

Lesbially,

A letter to the Lesbian Information Service

12 April, 1989

Dear [...],

Thank you for your letter and expression of interest. Of course you can reproduce my article and review. I am delighted that you should want to.

I have included with this note a copy of my pamphlet and of the table of contents and two chapters from my book, the title of which is *Feminism and Sexuality: A Lesbian Feminist View*. I have sent copies of the full manuscript to Virago and Women's Press, both of whom had expressed interest after seeing the first chapter. Virago has had the manuscript for six months now, and Women's Press for three months, but so far I have had no definite commitment from them. Does anyone at LIS know anyone at those publishers? If so, would it be possible for someone to jog their memories or elbows or something for me? I will keep writing to them from here, but if someone could approach them personally for me I would greatly appreciate it. [...]

When my book is published I intend to come to the UK and travel round publicising it. I have already started doing that here at conference in Canberra, Adelaide and Sydney, and have got some very positive responses, as well as the few negative ones. It would be lovely to meet you and the others at LIS.

Lots of love,

Denise

A letter from the Lesbian Information Service

20th June 1989

Dear Denise,

Many thanks for your letter, I am sorry it has taken so long to respond.

I am sending under separate cover—surface mail—a copy of the latest issue of ‘LISN’ which contains your article ‘Anti-Intellectualism’. I will also let you know if there is any response to it.

With regard to your book, we know a Lesbian at the Women’s Press and have been in contact with her about it. Unfortunately, her grandmother died recently so this has delayed things. Anyway, the news is good—they like your book very much and it is, at present, with an editor. They say they will be contacting you soon.

As for Virago, I don’t know of anyone there, but [...] our friend at the Women’s Press is supposed to be coming back with a name for us to contact. [...]

I look forward to seeing you if/when you come to England.

Best wishes,

Lesbianly,

A letter from the Lesbian Information Service

5th September

Dear Denise,

[...] A letter to you has been at the top of our work list since we published your article about the Lesbian Conference in the June/July issue. We had a number of complaints about your article as well as the letter we published in the enclosed issue. We agreed with [WH]’s criticisms—as you will read—although we now regret publishing her letter because of the way in which she criticises you, i.e. by ridiculing what you write. We will be making this clear in the next issue, newly named Lesbian International, and will request that in future

Lesbians make their criticisms in a serious manner with their objections clearly stated. You may wish to respond to both [WH]'s letter and our comments.

We hope you enjoy Lesbian International.

Lesbianly,

[This was signed by a different woman from the one who originally wrote to me.]

A letter

(LISN No. 23, Aug/Sep '89)

Dear Denise Thompson and friends, Darlings! I just HAD to rush to my word processor and congratulate you on your BRAVE attempts to provide a stimulating debating forum at Adelaide's Lesbian Conference (as reported in issue 22 of LISN).

I must say that I, too, feel one should only be *permitted* to enter such a HALLOWED environment if one has at least a first degree, from Oxford or Cambridge, of course. It is *so* frustrating when one is striving to educate the masses, only to be rejected by those who believe they have the right to an opinion, even though they haven't read the most *fundamental* of works! It is a deeply upsetting, and I *do* hope you are re-couperating [sic] in a nice health farm somewhere.

You mention, Denise, about how witlessly bored and frustrated we *academic* Lesbians become with being challenged. Especially by the riff-raff, who often call themselves 'Working-Class'. Goddess knows why, most of them seem to spend all their time sponging off the state, don't they?! I *do so* agree, *we* are the ones who are oppressed and now I, too, only mix in the *right* circles.

My new book, *How to Keep Good Women Down*, explores the genetic superiority of those of us with good breeding, who are white, able-bodied and slim. Particularly we academics, who have spent so long in the patriarchal education system we refuse to recognise how much shit we've swallowed. As you can imagine I've had several offers of publication, but why be accessible when one can be a snob about it? Anyone who can prove they have been to Cheltenham Ladies College is welcome to *apply* for a copy.

Here's to more articles in LISN which flagrantly ignore the policy statement! *Let's keep the low life OUT of the Ladies Movement!* Untruly yours, Lady Smythe (Ms), Henley-on-Thames. Alias [WH] with her tongue firmly in her cheek.

LIS replies:

We accept [WH]’s criticism of Denise Thompson’s article. We deliberated for some time before publishing it but decided that it raised some important issues for Lesbians:

1. That workshop literature must be clear about the content and format of the workshop, i.e. whether it will be participatory, ‘tutorial’ style, ‘lecture’ style or whatever then Lesbians can choose to attend or not on the basis of whether the particular style suits them.
2. The word ‘sexuality’ covers a multitude of sins! We need to make a distinction between *sex* and *sexuality*. It seems that in any reference to sexuality, facilitators need to spell out explicitly if it is *not* going to involve discussions about sexual practice, otherwise large numbers of Lesbians assume that it will.
3. The problem of anti-reading and anti-theory amongst some Lesbians. Most material about female/Lesbian oppression is written by academics, but if Lesbians don’t write, how else can we communicate (other than by talking to each other)?

We apologise for the offence this article caused Lesbians. We can identify the specific paragraphs (the last four) that reveal a class privileged arrogance when Denise Thompson attempts to ‘look more closely at what might be involved in this claim on the part of some women what they “didn’t understand”’.

Finally, we were also unhappy because throughout Denise Thompson refers to Lesbians as ‘women’ despite the fact that the conference was for Lesbians only. We believe it is important that all Lesbians are referred to as such and not as women because the term identifies us as/with heterosexual women.

A final letter

(*Lesbian International* No. 25, Dec/Jan ’89/’90)

Dear LIS Collective, I would like the opportunity to reply to the criticisms of me printed in the last issue (no.23) of the Newsletter.

The first point I would like to take up is the last one mentioned by the collective—my use of the word ‘women’ to refer to Lesbians.¹ I use the word ‘women’ quite deliberately, i.e. I do not use it thoughtlessly, and I use it for a number of reasons.

¹ I didn’t capitalise ‘lesbian’, the editors did.

The first reason is because I love it and refuse to give it up to the boys without a struggle. I use it to refer to women as I know us, and although I have no power to force the pushers of malestream thought to stop using the word in the insulting way they do, I refuse to submit meekly to their proprietorial claims over it (or, I might add, over language in general).

I use it to refer to Lesbians, while being mindful of the need to make it clear that the women I am referring to are Lesbians and hence not heterosexual handmaidens of men, because I do not regard Lesbians as ‘different from’ women, as something ‘other than’ women. Nor do I see Lesbianism as something of no relevance to women in general, but as living proof that women can love and live in the company of women, and not only lose nothing of human value by doing so, but gain access to a world of freedom, strength and knowledge undreamt of under the nightmare regime of phallogocentric reality.

I have some sympathy for Monique Wittig’s insistence in ‘The Straight Mind’ ... that ‘Lesbians are not women because “woman” has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems’, although I disagree with that ‘only’. To the extent that ‘woman’ is defined in terms of phallic interests, that fact must be challenged, not accepted. I cannot follow her in abandoning the word, but I respect her, and your, reasons for doing so.

The second point I would like to take up concerns what I perceive to be the distressing tendency displayed by both the collective and [WH] to define intellectual work as a private possession of the ruling class, and hence as something not available to or appropriate for Lesbians in general and ‘working class’ Lesbians in particular. Isn’t it falling into a white male supremacist trap to attack savagely any Lesbian who has managed to defy that elitist monopoly? What I find even more distressing is your opinion that I am a member of the ruling class. Do you really not know who the ruling class is? Or is he (and I include Margaret Thatcher in that pronoun) too powerful and too inaccessible, and so you trash your sisters instead? And what makes you think that a privileged Lesbian would deign to appear at something so threatening as a Lesbian conference?

I feel that some personal herstory is called for. In the first place, I do not work in any academic institution at all. It is surely obvious that there are no academic jobs available for a woman who specialises in Lesbian feminist theory and who names the enemy—male supremacy—so clearly.

Moreover, I decided at some point that I could not do what would be necessary to qualify myself for employment in an institution of 'higher learning', i.e. acquire post-graduate qualifications, because I couldn't bring myself to think and write in the way required to do it. Subsequently, I have done my own share of 'sponging off the state'—which is one reason why I find [W]'s ignorant assertion that I might subscribe to such attitudes myself so offensive—and a very dry, bitter 'sponge' I found it too.

I decided that I would use my freedom, exiguous [Small—added by the editors] though it might be, to write theory based in and constantly referred back to my own experience in a way the boys cannot do, and do it with no institutional backing. There are times, like yesterday when I received my copy of LISN containing the criticisms I am addressing here, when I have to cling very hard to my dream of the value and possibility of independent Lesbian feminist scholarship. That that dream is still possible is due to my own strength and courage, and to the unfailing support of my lover, Marg, and the marvelous women, friends, acquaintances and readers, who can hear what I'm saying.

In the second place, far from it being the case that I have had 'several offers of publication' (as [W] seems to be implying), I received yesterday, too, the third publisher's rejection of my book, 'Feminism and Sexuality: A Lesbian Feminist View'. This rejection was one of two from feminist publishers, and included a reader's report from someone (I assume it was a woman) who obviously didn't agree with what I was saying, an assumption I make because of her use of pejorative terminology and her misinterpretations, but who addressed none of my arguments. Her concern seemed to be that I rewrite it into a 'marketable textbook', chiefly by deleting what she called my 'unsubstantiated hunches' about Lesbianism. So what's new? Predictable but disheartening. There is much more that I could say, but I will stop there because I have already gone on at some length.

Denise Thompson, Australia

[Added June 2003: Needless to say, my book review and my pamphlet were never published in *Lesbian International*, although that may have been because they had to stop publishing altogether soon afterwards because they ran out of money.]