

**Key Words:** Lesbian Studies, discourse, program, deconstruction, queer, critiques, race, identity, essentialism, separatist

**Abstract:** While related areas such as Queer Studies and Sexuality Studies have become established as disciplinary formations in North American and British universities, Lesbian Studies has not. This article reports on an analysis of key publications by critics and advocates of Lesbian Studies to explore the possibility that Lesbian Studies was flawed in ways that account for its non-emergence. Charges against Lesbian Studies include naïve essentialism, white middle-classness, separatism, and paranoia. Discourse analysis of books by Lesbian Studies advocates examines evidence of each of these qualities and concludes that Lesbian Studies was above all too lesbian to be successfully integrated into the enduringly heteropatriarchal institution of universities.

When Lesbian feminists began creating cultural spaces in U.S. American and Canadian cities including San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, and Washington in earnest in the early 1970s, ‘lesbian’ was still a highly stigmatized term and living as a lesbian was dangerous. Their work resulted in such varied achievements as lesbian collectives, women’s music festivals, the Olivia record label, and the Naiad Press (Murray, 2007) and grassroots Lesbian Studies courses conducted outside academia (Cruikshank, 1982). When Lesbian Studies courses were first developed within universities, often within fledgling Women’s Studies programs, homophobia and sexism were still so strong in academic culture that the women involved have rightly been described as courageous (Gammon, 1992).

By 1990, related fields had achieved exciting institutional successes in the U.S., beginning with a Gay and Lesbian Studies Research Centre at Yale University in 1986, a Program at City University of New York in 1986, and a Department at City College of San Francisco in 1988. The developing field of queer theory was attracting graduate students and university faculty. The editor of a collection on Gay and Lesbian Studies confidently proclaimed that ‘Gay and Lesbian Studies is coming of age in the 1990s . . . we are witnessing the same kind

of enthusiasm that marked the establishment of black studies and women's studies in the 1970s' (Minton, 1992: 1).

Lesbian feminist scholars working in North American and British universities, seeing Gay and Lesbian Studies as male-dominated and unsuited to the project of critiquing the heteropatriarchy, hoped for separate departmental or program status for Lesbian Studies (Gammon, 1992). By 1993, for example, at least forty women were teaching Lesbian Studies courses in universities in the United Kingdom (Munt, 1996, p. 237) and a stream of Lesbian Studies courses had been launched under cover of "Special Topics" status at The Simone de Beauvoir Institute at Concordia University in Montreal (Gammon, 1992). Yet despite their considerable efforts, by 1995 the prospects were dimming and the *Lesbian Review of Books* asked, 'is queer theory preempting lesbian studies?' Fourteen years later, there is no Lesbian Studies department anywhere, and only one publication, the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, is devoted exclusively to lesbian-focused scholarship (the *Lesbian Review of Books* having ceased publication in 2002). The annual 'Lesbian Lives' conference is remarkable not only for its seventeen-year run in Dublin, but for the sheer tenacity of its organizers' commitment to the Lesbian Studies project, when Lesbian Studies has morphed beyond recognition elsewhere.

We might then wonder, why did Lesbian Studies never get off the ground as a disciplinary formation in universities? After all, Women's Studies did. Sexuality Studies did. Gay and Lesbian Studies did; so too, Gender Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and Sexual Diversity Studies. Was it never intellectually or institutionally feasible, as postmodernist critiques of identity politics would suggest? Was the combination of feminism and homosexuality too offensive in the patriarchal culture of universities? Was it too White and middle class? Were the numbers too small, the project too anti-academic? Were its advocates too rigid and unwilling to work with others? Could it be that it was never from its inception, and is not now, worth the effort?

## METHODOLOGY

To explore these questions, I used a triangulated method of data collection to develop a corpus of criticisms of Lesbian Studies. Data were collected in three different modes: Semi-structured interviews with five colleagues outside the field about their perceptions of Lesbian Studies; auto-ethnographic recollection (Reed-Danahay 1997) of criticisms of Lesbian Studies I had encountered in my capacity as a Lesbian Studies scholar; and a literature review of peer-reviewed and non-peer reviewed articles and books by scholars in other fields of inquiry that were critical of Lesbian Studies. Through content analysis of these data I developed four main categories of negative constructions of Lesbian Studies: 1) naïve essentialism, 2) white middle-classness, 3) separatism, and 4) paranoia about related disciplines.

I then looked for evidence of these qualities in the discursive patterns of books that advocated for Lesbian Studies (see Taylor, 2000, for a full analysis of these patterns). I focused on the mid

1990s, a period of intense activity in the Lesbian Studies movement which saw the publication of several edited collections (Garber, 1994; Wilton, 1995; Zimmerman & McNaron, 1996). I also examined Margaret Cruikshank's landmark *Lesbian Studies: Present and Future* (1982), along with many other book chapters and journal articles from the early 80s onwards. I hoped that the discursive regularities of these texts - in Foucault's (1982) sense of statements repeated so often in various forms that they constitute rules for speaking 'in the true' of the discourse – might illuminate the extent to which Lesbian Studies deserves its rather negative academic reputation, and in so doing offer some insight into its failure to thrive in institutional settings.

## FINDINGS

### *First Construction: Lesbian Studies as Naïve Essentialism*

Lesbian Studies has been lampooned as the essentialist branch of sexuality and gender studies that failed to grab the queer baton: the mulish, anti-intellectual branch, sort of like religious fundamentalism, that claimed direct descent from Sappho and refused to accept the scientific authority of queer deconstructive theory.

It is not uncommon to find statements such as the following from the editor of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* that gesture towards diversity but use language that seems to posit one unified lesbian experience to be excavated by scholars: 'Get a one-of-a-kind perspective on the lesbian experience . . . The journal gives the lesbian experience an international and multicultural voice' (Rothblum 2006). But lesbian identity is problematized and critiqued throughout the texts, making essentialist perspectives complicated at best. By the 90s, few advocates seriously argued for the existence of some pre-discursive inner lesbian that would emerge through consciousness-raising. Rather, lesbian identity was quite consistently produced as a political commitment to women arising from a shared oppressed social location that afforded an epistemological privileged vantage point from which to oppose heteropatriarchy. An obvious indication of non-essentialism is that many lesbian feminists experienced no contradiction in adopting queer conceptual frameworks: Garber's (1994) collection is subtitled 'Lesbians Teaching Queer Subjects'.

Nevertheless, even when queer in theoretical outlook, Lesbian Studies proponents fought for Lesbian Studies as the only disciplinary formation committed to studying the nexus of patriarchal sex, gender, and sexuality discourses where lesbian lives are lived. They were not opposed to queer theory on principle or intolerant of its challenges to essentialism, and frequently pointed out that, to the contrary, supposedly 'queer' deconstructive approaches to sexual identity originated with lesbian feminist theorizing (see 'Fourth Construction' below).

### *Second Construction: Lesbian Studies as White Middle Class*

Lesbian Studies advocates have tried hard not to reproduce the racism of dominant culture. In 1982 Cruikshank noted that Women's Studies was barely beginning to confront racism, and

hoped that Lesbian Studies could do better: ‘We do not want “Lesbian Studies” to mean studies by and about white, middle-class women, which unconsciously take them to be the norm’ (p. xiii). But as long as the bodies materialized in Lesbian Studies discourse through authorship and inter-textual citation remained mainly white, the discourse could not escape its own overwhelmingly white-normative history. White bodies kept getting materialized as the de facto spectacle of ‘the lesbian experience’. Thus, Sharon Holland argued that ‘lesbian feminists . . . have constructed a historical arena filled with the Steins and Woolfs of the world, a world where black lesbians don’t produce “literature” and “theory,” but they do produce “activism” and, therefore, “politics”’ (1996: 252).

The absence of lesbians of colour became a failure ritually confessed by the mid-90s; but the obvious critique - that it is racist to insist on the term “Lesbian” when mainly white women identify with it - was seldom undertaken, and could not be, without threatening the whole project. Instead, the Whiteness of Lesbian Studies scholars was acknowledged but attributed to systemic racism in academia rather than to a deficiency in Lesbian Studies itself. The explanation Garber offers for under-representing lesbians of colour reflects this tendency: ‘The scope of this collection is determined, first, by my own limitation as a white literary scholar; . . . and finally, overwhelmingly, by the institutionalized racism and classism of academia’ (1994: xii). Garber’s statement is but one instance of an ongoing agonistic struggle in the discourse of Lesbian Studies, where ‘lesbian’ is reproduced as White and ‘diversity’ is sought.

Class diversity was equally sought (and equally problematic). Lesbian Studies is represented in the key texts as having grassroots origins in the cultural work of lesbians outside academia, and as needing to convey this past into its present. The bind was that Lesbian Studies had to enter the academy on non-academic terms in order to ‘speak in the true’ of its grassroots discourse. Cruikshank’s 1982 collection included several lesbian studies scholars who were entirely opposed to entering the academic world, and her own position was conflicted:

[L]esbian studies is essentially a grassroots movement. . . . [A]s practitioners of lesbian studies we must remain apart; our scholarship cannot flourish in isolation from our communities. . . . At the same time, university is an important forum for us, especially now that our community exists partly within it. (p. xiv)

By the 1990s, Lesbian Studies scholars were more likely to see Queer theory as the problem than academia itself. Chinn (1996) asked “Queering the Profession, or Just Professionalizing Queers?” but her concern was the same one of losing touch with the grassroots spirit of Lesbian Studies. Like other emergent disciplines with roots in marginalized identities, Lesbian Studies scholars realized that they would need to exceed the conditions of academia, making visible a diversity of bodies that the academy does not contain.

While expressions of concern about diversity are frequent in the discourse, Lesbian Studies in the English-speaking world has therefore been open to the charge that it has mainly reflected the perspectives of White, middle-class women. This important failing gives fuel to a

related (but homophobic and sexist) view, that *any* focus on lesbians is excessive. Simply by focusing on lesbians, the proponents were constituted as white, middle-class women (whether they were or not) who don't have real problems, specifically life in a racist, classist culture, to worry about.

*Third Construction: Lesbian Studies as Separatist*

A strong ideological preference for separatism is apparent in the effort to pursue a 'Lesbian' Studies in the face of several coalitionary options that seem more viable. Lesbian Studies typically described itself as having 'no pre-existing academic base. Women's Studies is dogged by heterosexism, gay studies by sexism' (Wilton 1995: 16). Marilyn Frye (1982) goes further: 'Women's studies . . . actively and aggressively supports women in becoming and remaining heterosexual . . . lesbians should refrain from supporting women's studies' (p. 195/197). Wilton (1995) argues 'the inadequacy of both [feminism and queer theory] . . . as sites for lesbian speech' and claims we need Lesbian Studies because it alone mobilizes a thoroughgoing critique of heteronormativity: 'Ironically, both feminism and queer, albeit from very different positions, may be said to constitute reinscriptions of phallogentricity, and hence replicate that which they seek to displace' (pp. 6-7).

Lesbian Studies is grounded in a sense of noble mission: an unwavering and uniquely well-positioned attack on the heteropatriarchy. It is not just that only lesbians can do Lesbian Studies: ' . . . it is only within a lesbian-feminist paradigm that the political nature of sexuality and gender as constructs of the contemporary nation-state may be adequately comprehended, and the rights of all citizens guaranteed' (Wilton 1995: 203). Lesbian Studies is thus produced as the best place to do its own supremely important work, although there is ongoing reflection on how on earth, and with whom, to proceed in the meantime, and advocates have generally been pragmatically prepared to work in various disciplines. Lesbian Studies discourse was as separatist as it was said to be, and unapologetically so.

*Fourth Construction: Lesbian Studies as Paranoid*

A related construction of Lesbian Studies is that it is a paranoid, self-important group with outdated ideas who are stuck in the past and more devoted to their own aggrandizement than to political progress. Proponents of Lesbian Studies were aware of this construction. Zimmerman suspected in 1996 that the 'heroic pioneers of one era' were seen as 'the boring old fogies of the next' (Zimmerman and McNaron 1996: 271).

It is true that remembrance has always been valued in Lesbian Studies. The 1996 *New Lesbian Studies* begins with 60 pages reprinted from the 'pioneer researchers' who contributed to the 1982 volume, and several of them appear again in *Twenty-First Century Lesbian Studies* (O'Donnell and Giffney, 2007). Zimmerman warns against disrespecting the founders and losing 'a sense of continuity and tradition in our work':

The phenomenon of cultural amnesia is notoriously widespread in the United States; we seem to delight in lopping off old branches from the tree before young shoots have attained mature growth . . . if [writers] imply that gay and Lesbian Studies burst forth, oh, four or five years ago - well, those of us who have been plowing away these past two decades may shake our heads in amusement (or bemusement). (p. 268)

The discourse is freighted with such vivid expressions of resentment about being misrepresented and undervalued. Advocates complained that the contributions of lesbian feminist scholars were ignored and male theorists credited with their groundbreaking work:

Small, non-hierarchical lesbian groups like Radicalesbians, Gutter Dyke Collective, Lesbian Menace, Redstockings and the CLIT Collective . . . [developed] astute and sophisticated theories [that] predate by many years the deconstructionist imperative of postmodern queer and the Foucauldian insights of academic socio-historians. (Wilton 1995: 93)

. . . lesbian feminism is being silenced and lesbian-feminist ideas are selectively appropriated . . . the queer movement deliberately misrepresents the past and refuses even to read lesbian-feminist work. (Radford 1996: 194)

. . . once Lesbian Studies was firmly established . . . gay men's studies and queer politics - muscled in. (Auchmuty 1996: 208)

Zimmerman and McNaron closed their book with this scathing argument for continuing to work for 'our own separate Lesbian Studies programs and movement':

. . . the discourse of lesbianism - specifically, lesbian feminism - has been all but silenced. This leads to an appropriation of our work and ideas (including feminism itself) without any recognition or citation of sources, the vilification of our values and continued existence, and the appalling misrepresentation and ahistorical construction of the past twenty years. (1996: 274)

Such statements share some of the conservative elements of Liberal Arts discourse, that traditionalist discourse dominant until recently in the Humanities that traces its lineage to ancient Greece: a regard for the concept of 'classics,' claims of holding values superior to those of younger advocates, and the repetition of foundational stories in which the preservers of the original tradition are cast as defenders of the pure faith against plunderers and defilers.

However, in the case of Lesbian Studies, all of these elements are framed in a context of recent emergence from silence, secrecy and invisibility that were enforced by severe punishments including rape, shock treatment, murder, and other horrible consequences of being caught outside the system of compulsory heterosexuality (Faderman 1991). The historical context of courageous emergence from the closet has made lesbian visibility a key political aim and a steadfast retention of Lesbian Studies discourse. That is why, instead of seeing other LGBTQ studies as welcome allies in the struggle, Lesbian Studies proponents were threatened by them. Cruikshank (1996) fourteen years ago worried that 'Lesbian Studies . . . will get swallowed up in "gay and Lesbian

Studies” or “queer theory.” I have fought too hard for the psychic freedom to call myself a lesbian to disappear now under the queer rubric’ (p. xii). The topic is with us still. Arlene Stein’s (2009) inaugural lecture in the US’s only endowed lecture series in Lesbian Studies investigated the problem of the alleged “emptying out” of the lesbian category’ in her lecture, ‘the incredibly shrinking lesbian world and other queer conundra’.

As seen above, there is some slippage in the Lesbian Studies literature between the content of Queer Studies and the practitioners of it, with queer theory being depicted as the threat rather than the latter. Lesbian Studies scholars had been manifestly capable of living with deconstructive approaches to identity, but queer theory in the hands of a male-dominated Gay and Lesbian Studies, however, posed a double threat: the loss of hard-won space to be lesbian within academia, coupled with the deeper psychic loss posed by analytical practices which deconstruct lesbian identity. When Queer Studies and Gay and Lesbian Studies appeared on the scene of Lesbian Studies discourse, it was not as life-rafts or allies in the struggle, but as looming formations that threatened to preempt Lesbian Studies. Sheila Jeffreys (1997) warned that a ‘Queer Disappearance of Lesbians’ was occurring as the result of an academic shift which ‘disappears lesbians by subsuming them, at best, into a variety of gay men’ (p. 277).

The discourse of Lesbian Studies, it seems, has been just as hostile to its nearest allies as it is reputed to have been, though not from irrational paranoia about deconstructive theory, but from an historically-grounded fear of male dominance making the academic institutionalization of Lesbian Studies impossible.

## CONCLUSION

This examination of negative constructions of Lesbian Studies has indeed found evidence of qualities its critics have described as essentialism, white middle-classness, separatism, and paranoia. However, I would describe that evidence quite differently. Its essentialism about lesbian identity was complicated and strategic, not naïve. Its advocates were aware of its white middle-classness and made efforts to overcome it. Its separatism was sensible, given the lack of attention to lesbian life in alternative areas of study. And its paranoia was prophetic. It could be argued that, far from having been a dead end on the road to some more sophisticated disciplinary formation, Lesbian Studies has demonstrated a razor-sharp understanding of the forces ranged against lesbian existence inside and outside academia, in the face of which queer enthusiasm for jettisoning the category can seem like the more naïve stance.

The discourse of Lesbian Studies has been intense in all ways, including its fiery opposition to coalitionary work and its lofty sense of its own higher calling. But above all, Lesbian Studies has been intensely lesbian. It was and is ‘in your face’ about lesbians in a culture where ‘rubbing it in your face’ is still a common complaint in public discourse about any insistence on attention to same-sex or transgender rights. ‘Gender Studies’ and ‘Sexuality Studies’ and even ‘Women’s Studies’ do not question the legitimacy of the straight male culture

that is still indisputably dominant in academia the way that ‘Lesbian Studies’ does. The biggest problem for the institutional viability of Lesbian Studies may not have been that it was too essentialist, or too White middle-class, or too separatist, or too paranoid, but that it was simply too *lesbian*.

Lesbian Studies has been a separatist project aimed at installing itself in a heteropatriarchal institution to which it is explicitly opposed. However, that Lesbian Studies never emerged in the departmental or program form dreamed of by its advocates does not make it a failure. We might ask whether Lesbian Studies is an agonistic project which properly exists only in the struggle for existence: its proponents have known all along that it could only get safely installed in universities by fatal compromises to its cultural roots and political principles that they were never prepared to make. In my mind Lesbian Studies is less an institutional place we need to *get* to, than a conceptual space where we need to *remain*, alongside other identity-based disciplines. At the very least, it can continue to provide a strategic location for political struggle by opening space to critique the enduring homophobia and sexism of dominant culture . . . and their various manifestations in Gay and Lesbian Studies, Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, Sexuality Studies, and Queer Studies.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers who provided invaluable advice for revisions to the manuscript.

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