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Assume the Lesbian Position

The impetus for this special issue came from the British Sociological Association (BSA) Lesbian Studies Group. This group arose in part out of the relative isolation and dispersal of lesbian scholarship in the UK. This not only perpetuates the marginalization of lesbian studies, but also masks the challenge posed by a distinctively 'lesbian' critique. Yet the inter-sections among a politics of sexuality and sexual politics lend a peculiarly complex perspective to lesbian scholarship.

Although sexuality studies is now a rapidly expanding area, lesbian issues continue to be marginalized within it, even within the pages of this journal. At the time that this special issue was conceived, the first seven issues had not thrown up a single substantive article about lesbian sexualities,¹ a pattern happily interrupted by articles in Hemmings and Grace's special issue *Stretching Queer Boundaries* (2: 4).

This is not new. Lesbians, who experience dual oppression as women and as queer, have historically found our allegiance somewhat torn between gay studies and women's studies. Although current developments within queer communities and in the academy have left such problems behind, this does not mean that they have been resolved and lesbian scholarship continues to occupy a profoundly uneasy position in relation to the academic mainstream. This special issue therefore offers a public space within sexuality studies for lesbian scholarship, bringing it to the attention of readers who might feel (we believe, wrongly) that an excursion into lesbian studies per se is something of a detour.

There is intellectual, as well as political, value in speaking from a position, eccentric to the often-blinkered assumptions of the dominant sex/gender culture. Both feminist and queer theory have demonstrated the truth of this. As one of us has argued elsewhere (Wilton, 1993, 1995), the *positionality* of 'lesbian' offers a potent site from which to interrogate the social, cultural and political interlocutions of gender and sexuality.

This is, we believe, amply demonstrated within this special issue, which draws on the work of UK lesbian scholars to open up fundamental questions. For example: What factors hinder/support egalitarian relationships (*Dunne*)? Is service work constitutive of a 'lesbian postmodern' (*Adkins*)?

Can the postmodern dissolution of lesbian identities be read any differently from the erasure which preceded it (*Farquhar*)? Do medicalized male-to-female discourses expose a theoretical and political inadequacy in liberatory accounts of gender (*Wilton*)? And what is lost if we collapse theoretical analyses of, and demands for, political change in the social organization of gender and sexuality into those of claiming citizenship (*Richardson*)? Exploring these and other questions points up areas for future research focused on the sexuality/gender intersection.

Furthermore, we would argue that the accounts of lesbian experience presented here not only illuminate the present but also hold out radical possibilities for the future. First, they highlight the operation and effects of dominant heteropatriarchal discourse in the construction of sexual identities and subjective experience (for example, in the rules and rituals concerning our mouths and those of others: *Thorogood*; in the construction and experience of desire: *Ussher* and *Mooney-Somers*; and in the policing of identities, sex and image: *Farquhar*). Second, they destabilize heteronormative assumptions (about for example, committed workers: *Dunne*; parenting: *Donovan*; and sexual citizenship: *Richardson*). And thirdly, they open up possibilities for the radical renegotiation of social and intimate relationships (by for example, disconnecting gender from domestic divisions of labour: *Dunne*; and biological from social fatherhood: *Donovan*).

Overall, in this collection we hope to demonstrate that observing, analysing, critiquing and speaking from the position 'lesbian' brings a specific theoretical richness and dynamism to sexuality studies. This special issue is an opportunity for readers to explore and develop this.

Acknowledgements

Both of us would like to thank Ken Plummer for the enthusiasm with which he greeted the proposal for this special issue, and for the trust he put in us as guest editors. Thanks also to all our referees, to the contributors, and to those who submitted articles which we sadly simply did not have space for. T. W. would also like to thank C. F. for taking charge so efficiently and willingly when illness struck at the eleventh hour.

Note

1. Shrage's short piece debating what kind of sex male punters had with lesbian-identified prostitutes (2: 2), and Kulick's arguably offensive piece on the attitudes of Brazilian transsexual prostitutes towards lesbians (1: 3) may seem to contradict this. However, neither may be read as being 'about' lesbian sexuality. Crucially, both focus on lesbianism as mediated through the experiences of men.

References

- Wilton, T. (1993) 'Queer Subjects: Lesbians, Heterosexual Women and the Academy', in M. Kennedy, C. Lubelska and V. Walsh (eds) *Making Connections: Women's Studies, Women's Movements, Women's Lives*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Wilton, T. (1995) *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*. London: Routledge.