

Lesbian/Queer Activism vs. Academia

Interview of lisa j. lander

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ABSTRACT

Women who participate in both activism and academia have a special perspective of how these two practices contribute to feminist knowledge. This article is based on an interview with a woman whose participation in both activities has given her insights into the ways the knowledge they generate can diverge and, ideally, converge.

RÉSUMÉ

Les femmes qui sont à la fois des militantes et des universitaires ont une perspective privilégiée de la façon dont ces deux pratiques contribuent aux connaissances féministes. Cet article est basé sur une entrevue avec une femme qui est engagée dans ces deux voies; elle a donc une vision de la façon dont les connaissances acquises sont susceptibles de diverger, ou dans le meilleur cas, de converger.

As a prominent lesbian activist as well as an Honours student at University of Victoria, lisa j. lander finds herself at the nexus between queer cultural practice and theories of identity politics. From that juncture, she finds it a challenge to unify her experience in the separate spheres of activism and academia. At the Praxis♀Nexus conference, she facilitated a round table discussion titled "Queers and Allies Discuss Activism VS. Academia", where she hoped to discuss getting beyond "versus" and bringing the two into harmony. But the discussants had disparate ideas about the relationship - actual or ideal - between academia and activism. Questions about the problem of inaccessible language, while at the top of lisa's agenda, were not of similar concern to all present. "I came with the assumption that people knew what I was going

to talk about, and I also came with the assumption that they understood that there was this split. And who benefits from this split? It's not us. So how do we get back together? "

lisa's activism is directed at reclaiming social and political space for dykes and other queers. She is one of the key organizers for the Lesbian Avengers, the annual Pride Parade, the AIDS Walk, as well as the chair of the Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Alliance of UVic. (LGBA), lisa also sits on the board of the Victoria Pride Society. As such, she is not theorizing about identity politics - she's doing them.

Theories of identity politics are often generated in the name of social justice. Yet those oppressed social groups who stand to benefit from this theorizing are often barred

from the knowledge and concepts because of abstruse language. People who are systematically discriminated against due to heterosexism, racism, sexism, antisemitism, and/or classism could use these concepts in order to name to their experience, to fix a handle on it to wrest control of their lives from their oppressors. While these and other theoretical concepts provided by academia may be useful tools for marginalized people, it is crucial that academics acknowledge how empowering it is for marginalized people to negotiate their own process of building a social movement. Gaining recognition from academia for her experiential and practical knowledge is one way lisa hopes to mend the rift between academics and activists. Challenging academic conventions that run counter to her political experience is part of this.

"I think, for me, because I am so vocal, and I am so political, and I am so in-your-face that I can go to professors and say 'I want to write in the first person and use my experience as a knowledge base, and I believe the personal is political and so this is how I'm going to write and I would like you to try and grade me on that', and I've been really successful with that. But that's about my own personality, my own privilege that I will go and say, 'I need to do this'. And that's from my experience of being a direct-action activist. But what about the people in the class who maybe don't have that particular push, or people who don't want to push it for fear of discrimination, and so they drop out?"

On the front lines of the queer movement, lisa must balance the needs for consensus and solidarity while preserving room for individual difference. For example,

while she is out there making space for dykes, she tries not to create a normative dyke identity, or to presume to speak for all lesbians. "I have to be clear that I'm only speaking for me. There's a lot of lesbians in this community who don't want me speaking for them. Because I'm too out, too confrontational..." Similarly, in her coalition political strategizing, working with other queers and progressive allies, she seeks not to blur the boundaries, but rather to be firm in the need for lesbian-only space and organizing. In this work she moves beyond the academic dichotomies of lesbian separatism vs. queer to the world of actual political practice.

"I do queer movement stuff, which includes boys and girls, but my love is dykes. I also really believe that one of the ways we're going to get any stronger or gain any ground is through coalition politics. But I don't think that means making us all the same and throwing us in this melting pot. I think it means coming from a lesbian separatist stance a little bit and saying 'We're Lesbian Avengers and it's for lesbians only' and then joining with other groups to go and work on a common goal.

"...The Vancouver Lesbian Connection (VLC) is now open lesbians, bisexual women, heterosexual women... well, for me that's not a lesbian centre, and that's a really unpopular stance to take. But what I want to see is coalition politics, [with] lesbians working together, bisexual women working together...and then coming together. But often, it's been my experience that lesbian space is being taken away in the name of inclusivity, and that's not working for me...I understand that the term 'lesbian' is a social construct of western society, but as a political activist who focuses on identity politics, I think it's really

important to identify and organize as a dyke." Academics may theorize about the way sexual identities are socially constructed, but they must also recognize the political significance of such identities to political organizing among oppressed groups.

Other practical knowledge that lisa has gained through her activism has come through the challenge of being a co-ordinator of a group, and as such in a somewhat hierarchical position of power. "When I started as the co-ordinator of the LGBA, I said I wanted it to be a collective...But the reality is, I was the coordinator. So the hierarchy is there. And then there are the occasions when you get four or five powerful women in a room who all have their different visions. But I think we all work together really, really well, overall. I mean, I think we all can walk away from meetings going 'Oh god, that bitch!' but then we go back, and we work it out, and we process and we call people and we try and take responsibility for who we are and what we do."

Learning to delegate and support people in their ideas has also been a part of the knowledge lisa's gained through activism. "One of the mandates of the Lesbian Avengers is that if you come up with an idea, then you do it. It's not like you say, 'Why don't you go do this...'. It's like, 'What about this idea?' and you all go 'That's a great idea! What can I do to help you see that work?' And so it's an empowering experience."

Feminists such as Dorothy Smith have long been critical of the "bifurcated consciousness" that accompanies the separate spheres of institutional and actual everyday worlds women inhabit. lisa experiences a similar bifurcation, and it is frustrating. She

challenges academia to enter dialogue with activists as equals. For lisa, it is not enough for academics to work out the theory and the concepts; they need to bring the theory to the streets.



lisa j. (right) with Nicola Harwood, performance artist, at Pride Parade. Photo by Zeebo