

# On Prejudice and Possibility: Lesbians in Canadian Academe<sup>1</sup>

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The material presented in this paper is grounded in the experiences of lesbian instructors and students in Canadian academe. There has been some work exploring the experiences of lesbians in U.S. post-secondary institutions, most notably the stories of individual women, documented in Margaret Cruikshank's, *Lesbian Studies*, as well as individual women's experiences presented in other publications.<sup>2</sup> This work has described a variety of difficulties that lesbians face in the academic environment, difficulties resulting, sometimes, from outright homophobia as well as the omnipresent heterosexism of academe. Homophobia refers to irrational hatred and fear of gays/lesbians while heterosexism refers to the assumptions that heterosexuality is natural and universal and the resulting erasure of lesbian/gay existence. Some of these American lesbian academics have lost appointments or tenure or have been censured or ostracized by colleagues or administration as a result of their lesbian identities becoming known. Others have described liberating features of their experience as lesbians in academe, especially in the context of the woman-identification associated with lesbian identity providing impetus for feminist work and connection with other lesbian/feminists. Lesbian feminists in the States have been active in initiating work in lesbian studies; but to my knowledge, there have been no studies that have attempted to examine, in a somewhat systematic fashion, commonalities among lesbians' experiences in academe.

My first effort to develop some understanding of such commonalities was presented in an article in *The Lesbian Issue of Resources for Feminist Research*, published in March of 1983,<sup>3</sup> for which I interviewed six lesbian instructors in an effort to develop an understanding of my own terrifying, yet exhilarating experience of "coming out" in academe. Since publishing the article, I have become increasingly aware that the experience of lesbian students is a very important aspect of lesbian existence in

academe, partly as a result of the courage some lesbian students have shown in my classes in confronting heterosexism and homophobia, and partly because a number of students have sought me out as I have become more open about my own lesbian identity. I have since interviewed a few more lesbian instructors and a number of lesbian students. In total, I have talked with 21 women, three of whom fell into both the student and teacher categories, i.e., were graduate students with full responsibility for undergraduate courses, or in one case, was a professor who had returned to graduate school for another degree. In total, I have completed in-depth interviews with 13 university students and 11 teachers. Of the students, six are graduate and seven undergraduates, ranging in age from 21 to 41 years. The students' undergraduate and graduate majors are in 10 academic disciplines, primarily in the humanities, social sciences, fine arts, and education, with business and architecture also represented. They attend or have attended 10 universities in eight cities, mostly in Ontario, with Quebec and British Columbia also represented.

The 11 instructors are all in their 30s or 40s, with only two exceptions, all are academics in Ontario. Their academic appointments include sessional and part-time instructorships, senior tutor positions, and tenure-stream and tenured faculty positions. They teach in 10 disciplines, again primarily in the humanities, social sciences, and education, though law and journalism are also represented. With the exception of one young woman, who described herself as bisexual, the students have identified as lesbian for a period ranging from a few months to 20 years. Similarly, all but one of the instructors have identified as lesbian for a period ranging from one year to over 20 years. The instructor who did not describe herself as lesbian was involved in a long-term relationship with a woman, but felt strongly that sexual orientation classifica-

tions are derived from a norm of heterosexuality and she resisted such classification.

All but one of the women described themselves as feminist, though the level and nature of involvement in the feminist movement varied considerably. Most of the women are fairly comfortable with their lesbian identities and are "out" to at least a few friends and/or colleagues. "Closeted" lesbians, women who maintain a rigid separation between their private, intimate lives and their public, academic lives, are likely to be the largest proportion of lesbians in academe and are underrepresented. One of the instructors was quite concealed, two others were not "out" in their academic environments, and others to only a few colleagues. The "closet" experience was also addressed by women who had recently passed through such a phase in their coming out process.

I conducted open-ended in-depth interviews from one to two hours in length with each woman. I was particularly interested in their experience of being lesbian in an academic environment, though I was also interested in the experience as lesbian generally, in terms of how it articulated with their experience in academe. I wanted to explore, as far as possible, the full range of potential within the academic environment for lesbians, including its destructive and marginalizing potential as well as its positive, liberating potential. I was interested in their perceptions of their academic environments, and whether they had experienced any repercussions in that environment, because of their lesbianism. I wanted to know whether and to what extent they were public about their lesbian identity in their academic settings, their experiences during their lesbian identity process, and their support systems during that process, as well as presently. I was interested in how their lesbian identity and possibly feminism informed their academic work. I asked the instructors whether and how they dealt with lesbian and gay issues in their teaching and how that had changed over time. I asked the students about their exposure to lesbian and gay material, whether absent, negative or positive. Finally, visions of a utopian lesbian-positive academic environment were explored.

Though I occasionally use the terms "the coming-out process" or being "out" as shorthand for identifying oneself as lesbian to other people, I don't wish to reify the coming-out process as seems to be the case in much of the gay and lesbian literature, particularly that in the social sciences. This literature, though documenting the importance of features of the environment, seems to locate the coming out process as one that occurs essentially within the individual. However, I consider it important to see it as

an essentially dialectical process between the private and public, the personal and the political. In the context of this paper, the dialectic is between the individual and her academic environment. Also, the coming out process is an historically bounded and socially constructed experience. It has only been in recent years that a gay or lesbian identity has been accessible to people attracted to members of their own gender.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, were there no heterosexism, homophobia and the resulting societal disapprobation that is associated with accepting such an identity there would be no struggle involved in integrating one's private experience of a lesbian identity with one's public existence in the world, and, hence, no "coming-out process." In addition, as will be evident in the discussion of the interview material, the experiences of these women are so diverse in their development of a sense of themselves as lesbian and in revealing that identity to others that labeling these disparate experiences as "the coming-out process" does violence to the great differences among them.

It is also important to note that I do not consider the terms "lesbian" and "heterosexual" to be written in stone, or to be mutually exclusive, or to exhaust the possibilities by any means. If people were entirely free to love whomever they chose there would, most likely, be preferences but no such deeply separating categories. I feel certain, like Adrienne Rich,<sup>5</sup> that most women's deepest emotional connections are with other women rather than with men, and that heterosexual and lesbian women are much more alike in this regard than we are different. We do, however, live in a heterosexist society and in such a society the labels "heterosexual" and "lesbian" are used to maintain a separation between the women who carry them. Nor does the addition of the categories "bisexual" or "celibate" solve the problem, as these terms are also derived from a norm of heterosexuality, and are also rigid categories that are unlikely to do justice to the diversity of women's experience.

### The Women

I have attempted to supply the thread to weave a web through the words of these wonderfully articulate women in order to create a description of some aspects of their experience of becoming lesbian and of being lesbian in academe, though my own voice is clearly woven throughout. Their experiences are very different. These women came to see themselves as lesbian at ages ranging from 13 years to 38, and they arrived at their lesbian identities by very different pathways. They differ in terms of whether they had had a loving, sensual relationship with another woman before or after acceptance of their identity; several having had two or three such relationships before coming

to accept the label, others having come to the realization that seeing themselves as lesbian helped to make sense of their lives personally or politically prior to any sexually loving relationship with another woman. Almost all of them had felt deep attraction to women, sometimes for many years, before they identified as lesbian. Most have had considerable sexual experience with men, including marriage, which in some cases has reflected genuine heterosexual attraction. In other cases, it has been a desperate bid to cling to heterosexual privilege, to avoid self-labelling and societal (family, friends, school, work) disapprobation.

What is common to most of them is that this has been a very difficult, painful process; most of these women have gone through a private hell to some degree while coming to terms with their lesbian identity and with their existence as lesbians in the world. The sources of that pain and difficulty are heterosexist society's almost total silence around lesbian existence, and a complete lack of supports for women going through this difficult process. Paradoxically, as that identity is accepted, and women enter into the coming-out process by beginning to identify themselves to other people, a potential for integrating one's personal, intimate existence and one's public self becomes possible and that experience is simultaneously profoundly exciting, joyful and terrifying. It is a *continuous* process, one in which these women are engaged every day.

There are a variety of features of the world that bear on this process. Some of the negative ones are the seamless heterosexist assumptions which most people hold, and the almost total silence around lesbian existence. The insidious representative of heterosexist assumptions in academe is its liberalism which holds that people may do what they wish in their private lives as long as they don't talk about it. When the silence is lifted homophobia is often revealed, even in academe. Positive features are those that lift the veil of silence and do so in a supportive manner; in academe this occurs especially in the context of feminist studies. The women report that transformation of their sense of themselves has occurred through the supports provided by falling mutually in love with a woman who was positive about her own lesbian identity, by being exposed to lesbian-positive literature whether in or out of academic course content, by connecting with other lesbians as supports, especially other students grappling with the same issues, by exposure to feminist studies, especially with lesbian-positive feminist professors, whether they are lesbian or heterosexual.

### Lesbian Identity Formation

As they were growing up, most of these women can remember only silence around lesbianism; it was simply a non-existent option:

When I was growing up, lesbianism was a category that just did not exist. I had some sort of vague notion that there were men out there that gravitated sexually to each other, but it never occurred to me that there would be women.

For several women, the silencing of lesbian existence influenced their early perceptions of their sexual orientation as being essentially asexual:

It was more that I felt that I wasn't attracted to boys and yet there was no alternative so I would think, I'm not sexual or I'm asexual and I'm not attracted to boys.

Asexual self-definitions occurred in the context of intense attractions to and relationships with other females.

One of the women was eloquent about the erasure of lesbianism as an option in her life and its effects on perceptions of her own attractions to women as she was growing up:

It just wasn't really real, I mean it was so much my own thought, it really didn't exist anywhere. It was just one of my crazy things. If you have an idea and the idea seems removed from reality, until you either see it as a real option or that other people understand, it's just a fantasy.

In the absence of information, the early recognition that one might be attracted to women and therefore different than "everybody else" in the world can be quite terrifying. A participant who became aware of being attracted to women while still in high school said:

I was terrified I was a weirdo or something; I was very afraid to let on. I had one friend who was a teacher and I talked to her about it and it kept me from having a breakdown in high school. She was the one person I could talk to about this thing that was to me the most terrible thing.

Even when girls accepted their own attraction to women and felt positive about it there was fear of rejection by others:

I never felt any guilt or felt bad about it. I thought it was great, really great. I was afraid not of my feelings but of others' rejection, like for instance if I made advances to a woman that she would find it absolutely appalling.

Another woman who became aware in early adolescence of her attraction to girls and lack of interest in boys did manage to gain some information about the existence of lesbianism by secretly poring through her nursing student sister's medical dictionary:

This, of course was a gold mine of pejorative information with many useless synonyms for the word 'lesbian' and it filled my mind with fearsome thoughts.

She also picked up a copy of *The Well of Loneliness*<sup>6</sup> in a drug store which she secretly read. She was able to distance herself from the book to some extent because of its temporal and cultural separation from her own experience, but, "What I did pick up was that sort of sense of guilt and furtiveness, that this was a guilty secret kind of thing."

She read Mary McCarthy's *The Group*<sup>7</sup> as a teenager as well and found it much more positive:

For ages I had this wild delusion that Lakey Eastlake was the way one was supposed to be and therefore one didn't like to be touched.... It certainly was (important to my lesbian identity to read these books) in the sense that what you read being sort of ratified by the outside world. But it did give me a kind of cockeyed sense of what being a lesbian was.

She was certain, however, that some information, however distorted, was better than its absence. This woman, like others who were aware quite early on of their attraction to women, did not discuss this shameful secret with anyone, nor did she act on it for many years:

I thought that if I acted on it, it would be the end of the world. Truly something catastrophic would happen on the order of the skies parting and the world would be over.

Women who came to awareness of their sexual attraction to women at a later age may experience extreme self-rejection. One of the participants, who was married at the time, turned to a therapist for help and support when she fell in love with a close heterosexual friend who cared for her, but was not attracted to her sexually:

I used to say to my therapist, 'I really wish I could cut it out and put it in a box and throw it out of a train window.' ....I was just grieving about it so much and I was so much in shock.

For several of the women, falling *mutually* in love with another woman was self-affirming and allowed them to begin to accept a positive sense of themselves as lesbian:

We got to be really close friends and the closer we got the more I fell in love with her. Fortunately, it was reciprocal. It was a really happy sort of experience of everything falling into place very nicely. I think that most of the negative crap, the felling guilty, the feeling freakish, the feeling furtive essentially got taken care of....I suppose that really is the thing you find out, that you're not alone. You're not the crazy. There are others like you. There's hope of a social life.

For others, the first experience of sensual contact with another woman was the confirmation of their preference for loving women:

The first time I slept with a woman I knew then I was gay because I had such a feeling of incredible joy and freedom that I could finally express what I had been feeling for so long.

Yet dealing with contradictions between their own feelings of joy and excitement and their awareness of the disapproval of the world is very difficult. One woman described her feelings at the moment that she first held another woman close:

That moment was just such a contradiction—it was me knowing intellectually that other people would see this as awful, and at the same time, knowing that this feels really nice and I know this is really nice. You do a lot of that sort of pulling yourself out and trying to see how other people see it.

The extreme contradiction between deeply loving, sensual feelings for another woman and the societal rejection of lesbianism led several women to resist self-labelling even after one or more loving relationships with women. As a woman who had been deeply involved with two women said:

Despite the fact of this earlier involvement, I didn't label my sense of attachment to her, or my attraction to her, I just sort of went with it and knew her and

she was much the most intimate connection I had in life at that point. There was a profoundness in which I denied what was happening and wouldn't look at it and I just marvelled at it and regarded this as really thrilling for both of us with no expectations of anything long-term.

Though the relationship continued for several years and they lived together, much of that time she did not allow herself to consider the possibility that she might be lesbian until later.

For most of these women, discovering that lesbianism was a genuine option that particular, perfectly acceptable, and likeable women had taken for themselves allowed them to make that choice. As one young woman said of her first lover:

She was a lesbian and she liked it and she felt good about it...I really needed that. I really needed somebody who felt comfortable with themself.

It was extremely important for these women to find others to whom they might disclose their lesbian identities. One might wonder why women choose to disclose an identity that to many people is cause for rejection; yet the participants described the coming-out process with as much joy as fear. One of the women described her reaction to her first disclosure to an accepting heterosexual friend, whose conversation had provided:

...gentle, non-intrusive permission to say whatever I wanted and know it will be accepted...Afterwards when I sat and mulled it over (disclosing to my friend) and thought about it, it felt massive in its pleasure and release.

Another typical reaction to a disclosure early in the coming-out process was that of a woman who came out in the context of a seminar group, "It was like the most incredible weight was lifted."

It is an extremely heavy burden to be continuously on guard to prevent people gaining knowledge about one's intimate life; a very powerful separation between the public and the private must be maintained; every word and every action carefully monitored. A woman's lesbian identity permeates every aspect of her existence just as does being heterosexual. In order to live a life in which one's private and public selves are integrated it is essential to be able to reveal one's lesbian identity to at least some of the people in one's life.

## Academe

The academic environment itself presents a unique dialectic of problems and possibilities for lesbians. Certain features that are unique to the academic setting—e.g., commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, the implicit promise of integrating one's private experience of the world with one's academic knowledge—create potential for mediating the split between the intimate, private experience of lesbian existence and that which is public knowledge in the academic arena. A stigmatized outsider position can potentially be an excellent vantage point for stimulating creative re-vision of knowledge. Lesbians encounter, in the academic environment, a tension between instances of silencing and prejudice on the one hand and, on the other, positive possibilities offered by feminist and gay-positive professors, courses and by exposure to other lesbian students.

## Problems

Lesbians encounter a variety of problems in academe, perhaps the most pervasive and formidable being its intense heterosexism. For most of the students, academe has been almost entirely silent on lesbian and gay issues, just as has the rest of their worlds. With the exception of women's studies courses, none of the students could recall more than one or two instances of lesbian and/or gay topics being included in course content or class discussion. The omnipresence of the heterosexist assumptions that everyone is and should be heterosexual and the consequent erasure of lesbian and gay experience is evident in these statements:

I would say that the silence is really profound.

Nothing ever. Zero.

It wasn't an issue in any of the classes that I was in. It didn't come up.

Outright homophobia, or explicit and active prejudice against gays and lesbians, was infrequently experienced in the academic setting by these women, though there were some exceptions. For example, one student described the instructor of a course on sexuality, which she had taken prior to her perception of herself as lesbian:

He was very bad and he was a homophobic and he told us right at the beginning he couldn't deal with it, and that if we wanted to deal with it in the course then he would have to get somebody in to guest lecture.

More frequently than outright homophobia, the attitude students have encountered when gay and lesbian issues are discussed in classes is that of the apparently well-meaning, but ill-informed and heterosexist professor who mentions homosexuality, but negates any positive potential through heterosexist assumptions such as attempting to explain homosexuality in the absence of explanations for heterosexuality. For example, one of the students described an experience in a psychology class in which the instructor had described the decision of the American Psychiatric Association to delete homosexuality as a pathological diagnostic category from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual.<sup>8</sup> There ensued a prolonged discussion of the causes of homosexuality:

...so I pointed out that if it was perfectly okay what our sexual orientation was, why should there be all this hubbub? Why are people so concerned that if you do this you might turn out with someone who is homosexual? If we really thought it was a good thing, or at least as good a thing as being heterosexual, we wouldn't be so concerned about it. Why are we looking at it that way?

Other apparently well-meaning professors negate potentially gay or lesbian-positive statements by disassociating themselves from their content, e.g.:

...making sure that she's not personally identified as a lesbian. Don't you even *dare* think that!

Or by mentioning a gay/lesbian issue briefly and inappropriately, such as the professor who, in a lecture on sexuality, brought up male homosexuality in the last five minutes of the class, and lesbianism in the last two minutes, then in the context only of lesbian S & M.

Among the instructors, only one had concrete knowledge of an incident in which her lesbianism almost resulted in a negative consequence to her academic career. She had been out of the country on study leave when her dean:

...was told by someone who purported to have read my mail that I was lesbian...he called the recruitment committee and said, 'Professor X is a lesbian so we have to think about getting a replacement for her.'...The issue didn't really ripen because one of the members of the faculty took strong exception to this whole line and confronted the dean, told him that he thought it was an unacceptable reaction. So that by the time I got back there was nothing done and nothing said.

She would never have learned of the incident had the male colleague who defended her not chosen to tell her.

Though the other instructors did not have concrete knowledge of specific incidents in which their lesbianism had had negative repercussions on their careers several have failed to have contracts renewed or had not been granted tenure. As one of them stated:

If they think that 'we don't want her here because she's a queer,' they can think of other reasons. That's the level on which that kind of thing operates. If people don't want you they can get rid of you. They would never say that was the reason.

The four women who now have tenure are certain that they would not have gotten it had they been doing academic work at the time of their tenure applications that obviously reflected a lesbian and, in some cases, even feminist vision. To one of the part-time instructors who is completing her Ph.D. the prospects do not appear to be good:

We—as lesbians and feminists—more than other groups are in danger of losing or not getting jobs because of who we are. Being lesbian feminist is a double-barreled threat. So you ought to be prepared to dichotomize yourself and be something at work and something else at home, which isn't very satisfactory or you reconcile yourself, as I think I have, to either very low participation in the university system or none at all.

Several women pointed to the liberalism of the academic environment which provides partial protection, but they also noted problems inherent in academic liberalism. Though liberalism does not describe the politics of all members of the academic community, it is shared by enough faculty to provide some protection for differing "lifestyles" and freedom of expression:

People in academe tend to be of the sort of self-conscious liberal variety where they would rather die than actually admit that they were sexist or homophobic or anything like that. But they're being frightfully liberal through clenched teeth all the time.

The liberal attitude is "what you do in the privacy of your own bedroom is of no interest to me," an attitude resulting again in the silencing of lesbian experience. Lesbian experience is thus seen from the liberal viewpoint as entirely sexualized. It isn't recognized that being lesbian

permeates one's entire existence, as does being heterosexual. Several women pointed out that heterosexual liberals don't seem to realize how frequently they "come out" as heterosexual in their interactions with other people, from the most informal ones to the more public arena of the classroom.

Most of the instructors have, for at least a period of time, attempted to protect themselves and conceal their lesbian identities by maintaining a separation between their private intimate lives and their public academic lives. Most of them are aware of the immense personal toll taken by the secretiveness and deception involved in leading a closeted existence. One of the women who was not "out" in her academic position described her precarious existence as "one foot in the closet, the other on a banana peel." As well as involving a continuously high level of anxiety, and fracturing one's sense of self, leading such an existence grants a tremendous amount of power to anyone who might discover the truth as one of the instructors chillingly noted:

I feel that the more people are secretive, the more you seal you own self into those box cars for them to take you away.

Most of them feel that the liberalism of their academic settings will provide some protection for their "lifestyles" if they do not allow their lesbian experience to inform their teaching and productive work in obvious ways. Most of the instructors have occupied, at least for a time early in their academic careers, a position that might be called the "safe niche":

I am careful to be out but not out, do you know what I mean? There's a sort of little niche. You don't have to go around always protecting yourself because that's really uncomfortable, but you also aren't so visible that you rock any boats.

In the safe niche, one is "out" to a circle of friends, to a few trusted colleagues, perhaps involved in feminist political work outside the academic environment. One may even cautiously introduce lesbian/gay content in the classroom, for example:

I'd just do a sort of a balancing thing, like if you were talking about households, I'd point out that there were all kinds of households...it could be any kind of people living together, women and women, men and men, married and not married. That kind of thing.

When occupying the safe niche, one is not challenging the essential androcentrism and heterosexism of academe in a direct way. Simply introducing gay/lesbian content in the classroom in any fashion provides a chink in the heterosexist armour and may allow an opportunity to explore forbidden territory.

In the experience of some of the lesbian students with non-lesbian instructors, even the introduction of gay/lesbian material that is misguided and heterosexist or outright homophobic may provide some potential for such an opportunity. As is discussed below in the section on "possibilities," there were some student-initiated classroom confrontations that were reactions to homophobic or heterosexist lectures or class discussion. Such confrontations were rare, however, among these students; even among those who had shown some courage in initiating them. Most of them reacted to missing or negative information with silence. They sense that their experience is not legitimated in academe; they fear the possible consequences; and they are aware of the enormous power that professors exert in the classroom:

It's a very dangerous setup in the classroom; the professor has all the power. Even though they're only one person, they can lead the discussion any way they want.

Both students and instructors expressed fears that one of the consequences of appearing to be gay-positive was that others would be likely to view them as lesbian:

Any time that you deal with homosexuality in any way, especially in a positive way or take it into account as an example of prejudice or something like that, you're biasing people to wonder if you're gay because most people won't talk about it.

Once they were believed to be gay by other people there was a sense of loss of credibility. As one of the instructors stated:

They can just dismiss it. Oh well, what do you expect from a dyke? Of course you'd defend them, you're one of them.

Several students expressed fear that with such invalidation professors might view them differently and their academic marks and futures be negatively affected. Some of the instructors were concerned that they would be invalidated as sources of information about women, especially by heterosexual female students:

Once they categorize you they can say, 'oh, her problem is that she just never found a good man...or she's anti-male,' so that what it does is it sort of sets you up in a certain place as 'other' and let's them not really look at the issues in their own lives.

### Possibilities

It is a far easier task to delineate difficulties facing lesbians in academe than it is to describe its potential for mediating the personal and political, the private and public existences of lesbian students and instructors. Clearly, the almost unbroken heterosexism of academe, in addition to its well-documented androcentrism, provides much more potential for invalidation of the experience of women as lesbians than it does for mediating their private and public existences. In the experience of these women there are, however, circumstances in academe that have provided positive potential.

Breaking the silence by making reference to gay/lesbian issues in course content and in classroom discussion, even if misguided, may create some potential for mediation between the private and public existences of lesbian students, if the students are able to confront the material publicly. There are many good reasons for not doing so: characteristics of the instructor, the atmosphere of the class, the courage, self-confidence and current life circumstances of the lesbian student were all important features influencing the likelihood of confrontation.

Six of the 13 students had confronted gay/lesbian issues in the classroom in response to negative, inaccurate or limited information presented by professors. For example, the student I mentioned earlier, who described a homophobic professor of a sexuality course, engaged in verbal battle with him throughout the course and wrote her course papers on lesbian sexuality. This was an important set of events in her lesbian identity process:

It wasn't that I was defending anybody in the class, I was defending myself in some way. And then I started to think that that made sense of my life. It made sense of my experience. It made sense about my self, about people, about women. It made sense about feminist attitudes that I had, it just made sense. It was like the last piece of a jigsaw and all of a sudden it makes sense to you and there you are: of course, why didn't I think of this before?

The student who entered the psychology class discussion about the causes of homosexuality found that identification with an outsider position, especially in the conservative atmosphere of a typical psychology class,

strengthened her sense of self. The effect that these actions had on their self-perceptions were quite consistent. Taking a lesbian-positive stand was self-affirming, and helped the student to make sense of her own life. In the case of the two examples of student confrontations, that I have described, the gay-positive actions of these students in the classroom occurred *before* they had realized a lesbian identity, but were important events in that process.

I had hoped to find that courses with gay male professors would provide a supportive atmosphere, but of the three students who had taken courses with identified gay male professors, only one had had a positive experience. The other two felt that their professors had been quite male-centred and anti-woman:

He *does not* like women and this is a known fact...He wouldn't listen to us and he wouldn't recognize the women when they had their hands up.

The most consistently positive experiences were described in the context of women's studies courses and instructors. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the experience of most of these women, in the context of their course work in a variety of disciplines, is complete silence around gay/lesbian existence. It should be noted that, until the last four or five years, the students' experience in women's studies has also been characterized by the erasure of lesbian existence. One of the women, who had taken women's studies courses in the late 1970s, and struggled with wanting to know more about lesbianism prior to identifying herself as lesbian said:

I tentatively raised the topic of lesbianism at different points in one of the women's studies courses I took and I distinctly remember a very tense silence. I've come to associate a tense silence with bringing that up in the academic setting...It was disappointing because it's what I really needed at the time.

Their experience in the last few years has been that women's studies courses are more consistently offering at least some opportunity for discussion of lesbian content in courses taught by both lesbian and heterosexual feminists. Reading lesbian-positive material was important to several women in developing an understanding of lesbianism as an option for them, and in beginning to integrate their private with their academic experiences. The most frequently mentioned single piece of feminist lesbian-positive literature was Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."<sup>9</sup> The impact of such literature can be quite helpful, e.g., one student described being

assigned Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*<sup>10</sup> as a reading in a women's studies course:

...lesbian relationships were completely validated; in fact, the teacher would talk about it in class. She was straight, but she was really comfortable. Definitely that book and that class gave me a chance to even think of lesbianism as an option, as a real option in some way.

Six of the students had taken feminist courses taught by "out" lesbian professors (only two professors) and the experience had been a profoundly positive one for them. One of the lesbian students described her reaction to her first experience with an "out" lesbian instructor:

I'm so grateful for having a feminist professor and I'm quite amazed at having a lesbian professor...I identify myself not just as a feminist, but as a lesbian and that's another part of my identity that is added to it some way...Similarly, it's not until you see blacks in advertising that you realize that blacks have been omitted...It's the discrimination by omission that you don't understand until you start to have it and then—wow! Where have you been? I've been waiting for you!...One of the things that happens at university is...presenting things as though somehow white males are objective, they're a clean slate and it's real information. Somehow when you have feminists and lesbians come in and talk...you start to see the dynamic of who is telling you this and how that works into what's being said.

Most of the women, students and instructors alike, have revealed their lesbian identities to other individuals in the academic environment, and some of these individuals have become supports for them. Being able to develop such supportive contacts within academe has been very helpful to their comfort with their lesbian identities. With few exceptions, their support systems are comprised almost entirely of other women. The students' supports are most frequently other lesbian and heterosexual feminist students. Especially helpful was exposure to lesbians who were comfortable and positive about their own identity. This was important to women early in their own lesbian identity process:

We had one who was just very free and open and positive. She was wonderful about it in class, accepted it herself. There wasn't anger or sort of trauma for her. Oh, it was wonderful for me.

Heterosexual feminist students are also important supports, especially when they are willing to break the silence surrounding lesbian existence:

It seems important to a number of women I know who are straight, as well...that doesn't put the pressure on me to confront, to do it constantly, or struggle on whether to say anything or not because there are other women who are also doing that. And that feels good.

In some cases, especially among the graduate students, they have formed supportive connections with lesbian-positive professors, both female and male.

Most of the instructors have revealed their lesbian identities to a few trusted colleagues and those who are fortunate enough to teach in universities where there are women's studies programs usually have feminist colleagues as supports. Most of the women, both students and instructors, also have solid support systems in the community outside academe. For most of them their support systems are largely made up of women, both lesbian and heterosexual:

I live in largely a woman's world. It's not only a lesbian world. A lot of them are straight women. But they are women and basically women on their own that make up a large majority of them. So I live in a woman's world and part of that is lesbian women.

Most of these women, both students and instructors, have some commitment to the feminist movement; their work is most accurately described as identified with the general feminist movement rather than focused directly on lesbian feminism or gay liberation. For many of them academe has provided some opportunity to express their feminist commitment through their work. The graduate students were all doing research from a feminist perspective, though none were researching explicitly lesbian topics. One of the undergraduate students was completing an honours thesis on a lesbian topic. Some of the women believed that one's lesbian identity inevitably informs feminist work, one of them stating:

I think as a lesbian you are more clear about the implications of patriarchy and the radical feminist critique than you would have been otherwise. That informs your work—that insight informs your work even though it isn't focused squarely on the lesbian experience at all.

## Conclusion

The instructors are at various stages of the complex multi-layered process that is coming out in academe, involving as it does colleagues, students—lesbian, gay or heterosexual, singly or in groups, inside and outside the classroom, their publishing and other work. Most of them are beyond the completely closeted existence and its immense personal tolls. Though few are fully and publicly out in every aspect of their academic existence, all of them make some attempt to deal with lesbian and gay issues in their teaching. In general, their productive work and personal commitment is to the feminist movement and to the empowerment of all women, whether they are lesbian or heterosexual.

Most of the lesbian students have a positive lesbian identity and many of them are learning to break the silence, with some fear of loss of credibility, but a consequent strengthening of their sense of self. On the whole, they don't have much hope for academe in general to meet the needs of lesbian students, but as feminists they expect more from women's studies and they often get it. In recent years, the silence surrounding lesbian existence has been lifted in many women's studies courses by feminist scholars, whether heterosexual or lesbian; though there are still far too many exceptions. A number of the students recall that their most positive experiences were in courses with lesbian-positive heterosexual feminist professors.

The academic environment provides unique possibilities that most other settings in the public sphere do not provide. It is hardly a benign environment. Many feminist scholars have documented the androcentrism of academic knowledge; lesbian studies scholars have pointed to its heterosexism. However, perhaps more than any other setting, with the possible exception of some areas of the arts, academe holds the promise of opportunities to explore forbidden areas, to examine relationships between one's experience of the world and what is academically "known." Unfortunately, this potential is rarely realized in the experience of these women outside of women's studies. The growth of feminist studies has provided a site within the academic environment where work can flourish that reflects the lesbian identities and associated woman-identification of these women, whether they are students or teachers.

I asked the student participants to reflect on their visions of a lesbian-positive academe. It is unlikely, of course, that their visions will be realized in the foreseeable future, but there are certainly aspects of their visions that women's studies instructors can readily fulfill in the con-

text of the courses they teach and in women's studies programs as a whole. Their suggestions are reasonable, having the same ring of "sweet reason" that most feminist demands have, and like other feminist demands, would be quite possible to implement if there was a will to do so. Some representative changes ranging from ones that are in the power of individual instructors to effect, to those that are more general institutional, change recommendations are:

I think it's important that heterosexual professors take care to insure lesbian visibility in a course dealing with feminist theory.

I guess the ideal environment would be at least where they were aware that gay people exist and took it into account. It would certainly be nice to be in an atmosphere where I could always be out, where I didn't have to worry about my identity with a prof.

You can't put lesbians in the classroom on the spot to speak to their experience for the group. But at the same time, I think you need to make it clear that they'll be supported if they do that.

I would like to see gay and lesbian professors and teaching assistants and so on accessible particularly to gay and lesbian students. You can't say to somebody you must come out but I would like to see it as a viable option.

There would be women's studies programmes in all universities in the country, and within the women's studies program there would be a proportional representation of lesbian studies.

All universities, faculty associations and unions of teaching assistants and part-time students would have to have sexual orientation clauses. Not as part of their negotiated contract so that it could be negotiated out, but as part of the principles of functioning of the university.

Finally, and on a more general level, as one of the participants said wistfully:

I wish we lived in a world where all things were open and it could be really easy to say, 'Oh, I'm really in love with this person' and that could be really open and not affect how we're seen in the world and how our work gets treated and what we're about gets handled and how our families see us and everything else, but it does.

## NOTES

1. Some of the research reported in this paper was supported by small scale research grants from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. An earlier version of the paper was presented as an invited address to the women's studies program, University of Ottawa, November, 1986.
2. Margaret Cruikshank, ed., *Lesbian Studies. Present and Future*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982). Other publications that have included lesbians' accounts of their experiences in American academe are Margaret Cruikshank, ed., *The Lesbian Path*. (Tallahassee, Florida: The Naiad Press, 1981), Ginny Vida, ed., *Our Right to Love*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978) and *Radical Teacher* 24, 1980 (gay and Lesbian Studies).
3. Jeri Wine, "Lesbian Academics in Canada," *Lesbian Issue, Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la recherche feministe*, Volume XII, No.1, March, 1982, pp. 9-11.
4. Gay historian Jeffrey Weeks has examined the history of homosexuality and of homosexual/gay/lesbian identity formation using a Foucaultian analysis. The categories "homosexual" and, subsequently, "lesbian" did not exist until the writings of the sexologists around the turn of the century, while the more positive gay identity did not emerge until the late 1960s, post-Stonewall. More recently, lesbian identity has been reclaimed as positive through the lesbian/feminist movement. Jeffrey Weeks, "Discourse, Desire and Sexual Deviance: Some Problems in a History of Homosexuality," in Kenneth Plummer, ed., *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*. (London: Hutchinson, 1981), pp. 76-111. Weeks, "Movements of Affirmation: Sexual Meanings and Homosexual Identities," *Radical History Review* 20, Spring/Summer 1979, pp. 164-179. Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society. The Regulation of Society. The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*. (London: Longman, 1981). Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage, 1980).
5. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Volume 5, Summer, 1980, pp. 631-660.
6. Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*. (New York: Avon/Bard, 1981, first published, 1928. The book was banned when first published. Though the book is an autobiographical plea for acceptance of homosexuals it presents a rather negative view of lesbianism that accepts the early sexologists' views of inevitable biological bases for "inverted" personalities.
7. Mary McCarthy, *The Group*. (New York: Signet, 1964). Lakey Eastlake is a major—attractive, aloof and mysterious—character in this novel about the lives of a group of women who graduated from Vassar in the class of 1933. Towards the end of the novel it becomes apparent that Lakey is a lesbian who has led a glamorous, if clandestine, lifestyle.
8. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 2nd edition. (Washington, D.C.: APA, 1974). In this second edition of the DSM, homosexuality was removed as a pathological condition from the diagnoses used by psychiatrists, but only after massive, well-organized protests by the gay liberation movement.
9. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian existence."
10. Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*. (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1976).

## Leda's Swan

After he leaves,  
flames darting from his mouth,  
the long wing lifted free,

her bruised flesh throbs.  
She thinks of penny-royal,  
or shepherd's purse,  
abortants,

or the child will grow,  
she thinks,  
now frozen in my bone,  
will grow,  
needing lies of love  
and marriage,

she thinks,

until she hears a heartbeat  
split the cracking shell  
shatter her thoughts  
of dark night, blood heat,

continuous birthing  
through her thighs

and of the long, drooping wing.

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