

Revolting Bodies: Desiring Lesbians, an Introduction

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Abstract

This introduction gives the background to this special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* that has its origin in the 18th Annual Lesbian Lives Conference of 2011. It traces the theme of *Revolting Bodies: Desiring Lesbians* across the ten articles of this collection and gives a brief summary of each.

This special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* comprises a selection of articles that had their genesis in presentations given at the Annual Lesbian Lives Conference of 2011. This conference has been organised annually by the Women's Studies Centre at University College Dublin since 1994 and in 2011 it celebrated its 18th birthday as a co-hosted conference between UCD and the University of Brighton's LGBTQ Lives Research Hub. The conference is a mix of academics, activists, performers, artists and writers and is open to all genders and any political and sexual orientations. There is an ethos of welcome and accessibility.

The Lesbian Lives Conference is not just the world's only annual academic conference in Lesbian Studies, it is now a large international event that draws speakers and participants from all continents and hosts the best-known as well as emerging scholars in the field. The conference gathers together academics, activists, performers and writers who do not otherwise have the opportunity to address such large audiences or to network across international and professional

boundaries. It is also a forum for political organisation on the levels of both community activism and established international organisations. Many books (academic and literary) and films (documentaries and dramas) are launched at this event and it is continually referenced in lesbian work and events internationally.

The conference sets the parameters for debate in the manifold disciplines that now take 'Lesbian' or 'Lesbian Communities' as the object of enquiry or as a category for analysis.

One of the frequently asked questions posed to the organisers is why use the word 'lesbian'? The same question has a variety of motivations, but as it was so frequently asked Katherine O'Donnell, Director of the Women's Studies at UCD worked with the organisers at Brighton, Leela Bakshi, Kath Browne, Catherine Harper, Olu Jenzen and Irmi Karl to answer that question:

Why 'Lesbian' Lives?

We, the organisers, call the conference 'Lesbian Lives' because we believe that lesbians are a group worth investigating, celebrating and debating with and there are not nearly enough times or spaces where these things can happen.

However antique, ill-fitting, awkward, intimidating, haunted or comic the term 'lesbian' may be for some of us, a primary desire of the organisers is to create a conference where those of us who identify as lesbian can have the opportunity to meet other lesbians to agree and to argue, to dissent and to dream.

We use the word 'lesbian' as a noun and as an adjective but most particularly as an invitation to gather – regardless of whether or not it is a term you would personally use to describe yourself.

We do not use 'lesbian' as a term to exclude attendance or police participation at the conference.

The term 'lesbian' is always being contested, often under pressure from conceptual theorising, pragmatic politics, oppressive structures and the forces of fashion. There are many times and spaces at the conference where we continue to debate what 'lesbian' might mean and there are other times and spaces where we act as if we all share the same understanding.

The 2011 Lesbian Lives Conference was one of the very best of the conferences and the range and excellence of the articles published in this special issue attest not only to the vitality and diversity of the conference but to the current dynamism of Lesbian Studies more generally.

Revolting Bodies

For this special issue the editors invited authors to think about revolting bodies in the double sense of rebellious and abject bodies, and in particular how both these meanings coincide with notions of lesbian desire. Articles in this volume take in a broad historical scope and diversity of literary and cultural texts, from Anne Lister's life writing, 19th century government reports, via mid-20th century oral history to contemporary leisure cultures and popular fictions.

Joan Nestle's piece, rich in history and powerful in its act of remembrance, brings together a wealth of life narratives represented here as 'Five voices' and 'Tree images'. Weaving the personal and political, the embodied and recorded it concerns itself with the 'counter narratives to historical certainties' regardless of who might be proclaiming those certainties. Recognising the embodied acts of lesbian desire, including those of 'the turn of a head...the position of a collar...the captured touch' that all perform 'intimate moments of revolt' Nestle takes us through an 'archive of feelings', to use Ann Cvetkovich's term. Her focal point is the conversations that are 'The Lesbian Herstory Archives from within which importantly, she, defiant of our own longings for a history of univocal progress, brings to us 'the complexity and nuances of stances of resistance'.

In a fresh reading of the contemporary novel *Wetlands* (2009) by Charlotte Roche, Helen Hester takes the opportunity to reconsider the taken for granted notion of the revolting body as provocative because sexually subversive and suggests a shift in our thinking on disgust, transgression and sexuality. The author argues for the tiredness of the focus on sexual transgression of previous critiques of the novel, and focuses here instead on its 'hygienic transgressions'. The destabilizing nature of the novel, she argues, can be located in an affectual reaction of 'nausea rather than arousal' and goes on to demonstrate how it is the protagonist's unflinching enjoyment of bodily discharges, rather than the novel's pornographically titillating sexual explicitness, that transgresses the category of the proper in both its senses.

Aristea Fotopoulou's research on the meaning of porn consumption in digital cultures foregrounds how feminist, queer and other 'diversity discourses' form a central part of how sex blogger sites and networks are conceptualised. Here 'revolting' bodies are discursively produced in a digital environment to form particular structures of desire. Her analysis of two porn websites, *Nofauxxxx* and *Furry Girl*, reveals a discourse hinged on free market values and demonstrates how in online porn culture 'queer and feminist sexual politics and codes become themselves branded, commodified, material objects'.

Chris Roulston's article poignantly articulates the affective investments in our celebration of Anne Lister's life 'through the lens of modernity' in her enquiry into Lister's modern-day status as an icon of lesbian sexuality. Today Lister 'is an emblem of revolt in its most heroic sense; she is seen as a fighter for sexual freedom and autonomy during a time—the Regency period—when this was perceived to be a near impossibility' Roulston writes, and encourages us to think about why it is so important to us *now* that she was not bound by her time, *then* — suggesting that it is extensively 'because of her modernity that we *want* her to be the key to the past'. Roulston's research suggests however that Lister's story, as well as showing her 'resistance to the modern',

also involves a complex negotiation of belonging and departing; and indicates a vanguard sexuality that is produced through feelings of shame as well as resolution and elitist privilege.

Caroline Gonda's article, like Hester's, concerns itself with the body that is too much, and a woman who is 'all too thoroughly embodied', but this time in a much older text; Maria Edgeworth's *Angelina* (1801). In her article, Gonda attends specifically to the queer abjectness of the materiality of the body. Tracing the experience of a failed relation from the other, untold, side of the heroine's 'unknown friend', she engages with a text that historically has been overlooked as a lesbian narrative, raising questions about how the text represents a 'romantic friendship with a vengeance...yet...seems to be critically invisible, illegible'. In this respect the article, like Bláthnaid Nolan's, deals with formations of sexualities that jar with contemporary understandings of sexual identities.

Bláthnaid Nolan's research on early 19th century formations of lesbian subculture among convict women transported to the 'tainted island' of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) draws out not only how their bodies constituted the sexually dissident Other of idealised white, domesticated femininity but how they self-defined as having a specific sexual identity. The Government reports of the time, she demonstrates, not only recorded the attempts to control the convict women's bodies, but also provide evidence of the women's 'reverse discourse' and resistance written into the abundance of official documentations describing convict women's sexual behaviour. Commenting on ongoing debates about contemporary perceptions of early-modern sexual identities, arguably driven by our desires for historical lineage and investment in the notion of knowable sexual identities, this article connects to Roulston's problematisation of understanding Lister's sexuality through a contemporary lens, but furthermore offers a subtle counter narrative in itself by proposing that some of these women had in common, if not a

sexual identity that directly translates into the terminology of our (post-sexology) times, nevertheless a shared group identity formed through desire as well as through feelings of shame.

Rachel Wood's article takes us through the London of Sarah Waters' much celebrated novels *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *The Nightwatch* (2006), exploring how the cityscape both 'produces and limits the parameters of possible narratives for [the novels'] characters' as it provides a performative space but also exerts control through heightened surveillance. Debating how the desires of today's readers map onto lesbian historical fiction Wood draws out the performative nature of what Waters herself has termed a 'distinctly *lesbian*... historical fantasy and speculation' (1996: 177).

Looking at transnational sexualities in the film *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2006), Churnjeet Mahn reads the film against the grain of queer diaspora studies, yet retaining the scepticism towards neoliberal nationalisms of that critical vein. Focusing on 'identities which do not draw from the repository of "lesbian"' unequivocally, the article draws out the film's specific strategies for representing the 'realisation of same-sex desire in the Scottish South Asian diaspora'. Mahn demonstrates how the film opens up for conceptualisations outside this identitarian category yet shuts this down by subscribing to the paradigmatic coming out story.

'Revolting' lesbian bodies are also the focus of Georgina Roy's ethnographic study of 'women in wetsuits'. The article explores lesbian surf culture and discusses lesbian women's experience of the wetsuit as evoking both disgust and desire. Her study is situated in the wider context of sporting lesbian bodies which persistently receive negative attention in media and public debates. The wetsuit experience brings our attention to bodily discharges— a theme continued from Hester's article – held intimately 'inside the rubber, and next to the skin' and simultaneously abject and erotically charged. Raising the question of the desirability of women in wetsuits, Roy ends by sketching how the lesbian surfers' negotiations of desirability produce nodes of sexual

desire that resist gender normative principles and collide instead in the notion of the ‘body that surfs’ as desirable.

Finally, Olu Jenzen’s article serves as a bookend to this special issue and uses Joan Nestle’s thinking on ‘counter narratives to historical certainties, both in ... dominant national culture and in ... [our] own communities’ (Nestle 2011) alongside Heather Love’s (2011) incitement to engage also with popular culture texts that offend because of the shame, backwardness or homophobia they represent, to reframe thinking about the ubiquitous popular culture trope of the lesbian lovers as doubles, present in formats as different as Hollywood film, fashion photography, television and porn. The figure of the lesbian doppelganger, Jenzen argues, draws together the notion of sameness and likeness in a libidinal economy that disregards the paradigm of difference as the principal structuring tenet of desire, but also evokes the death drive as it threatens to annihilate the subject. The article is interested in articulating the qualities of radical or ‘absolute’ narcissism these representations hold in tension, and does so by reading the popular culture cliché of lesbians as doubles as existing on a continuum of visual representations that also includes feminist and queer art, rather than as the property of mainstream visual culture and its economy of the male gaze.

Throughout this volume of articles, authors show how it is important to attend to the *affective* production of lesbian bodies both historical and contemporary. As guest editors, we especially value such critical interventions and reflections in the face of increasingly rationalized progress narratives.