

Interview with Denise Thompson

(November 2003): This was published in Lesbian Network. I don't know which issue, but my copy is dated 8/92.

Lesbian Network interviewed Denise Thompson about her work as a lesbian feminist theorist and writer. Denise has been a Lesbian feminist since the early 70s. She is 52 years old, and first went to university at the age of 32 in 1972. She has an Honours degree in Sociology from the University of NSW. She sees herself as an academic, although she has not had a job in a university, apart from two years part-time teaching at Wollongong University. After years spent working independently, she is enrolling in a PhD at the University of NSW.

LN: What books have you written?

D: I was the principal author of the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board's report on *Discrimination and Homosexuality*, published in 1982. Allen & Unwin wanted to publish a version of the report plus a history of the gay movement, so I wrote that up into a book which was called *Flaws in the Social Fabric: Homosexuals and Society in Sydney*, published in 1985. Over the next few years I wrote a book which I've called *Reading Between the Lines: A Lesbian Feminist Critique of Feminist Accounts of Sexuality*, which I thought was rather good, an opinion which was obviously not shared by the various feminist publishers I sent it to, all of whom rejected it. So then I decided I'd better publish myself, which I did. The problem is distribution. Books don't sell themselves, they have to be sold, they have to be pushed, and I'm not very good at pushing.

LN: Can you say a bit about the *Journal of Australian Lesbian Feminist Studies*? What is the intention of JALFS as a journal?

D: To fill a gap. It's academic in the sense that it's concerned mainly with theory, but it's not academic in the sense of keeping up with the latest trendy fashion in intellectual malestream thought, which these days is postmodernism. None of us has much time for postmodernism. We think it's just the latest ploy on the part of the boys to co-opt feminism. The journal is intended to be as clear and as readable and as comprehensible to as many

lesbians as possible. But it's not a popular journal like *Lesbian Network*, and we do have criteria for accepting and rejecting papers, articles, etc. JALFS is intended to provide a place for radical Lesbian feminist theory and there is no place for that in academe.

LN: Why is theory important in Lesbian politics?

D: Because theory is an attempt to explain the world, or explain parts of the world, to explain specific problems. The journal is intended for lesbian feminists, so it's Lesbian theory, but it's also radical feminist theory.

LN: Would it be radical feminism without the Lesbianism?

D: The way I would define radical feminism is that it recognises male domination as the enemy, as the problem. The relevance of Lesbianism to that is that Lesbianism is a refusal to participate in heterosexuality which is the chief way women are subordinated to men. The point about JALFS is that we're not interested in directing it solely towards Lesbians without the feminism.

So if we got some article or a piece of work that was radical feminist because it criticised male domination, but didn't mention lesbianism or lesbians, we would probably publish it. Of course, Lesbianism has to be mentioned fairly frequently because JALFS is by, for and about Lesbians. But because Lesbianism is so central to radical feminism, often we can have a piece of radical feminist theory that doesn't explicitly mention Lesbians, but is nonetheless relevant for Lesbianism as a politics. So while we're oriented towards Lesbians, while we're concerned about Lesbians and Lesbianism, that's not our only concern. The other part of our concern is radical feminism. The Lesbianism without the radical feminism would probably be no good. But the feminism without the Lesbianism could also be a problem.

LN: Would you describe yourself as a Lesbian without the Lesbian feminist theory?

D: Probably, yes.

LN: Can you say what the weaknesses are in general in Lesbian feminism today for you?

D: I wouldn't talk about weaknesses in Lesbian feminism. But I think there are a couple of problems. One of the problems is defining Lesbians as just another category of women, so you get a whole list of categories of women, like Lesbians, and women of colour, and working-class women, and differently-abled women, etc. Lesbians are not just a category of women, not just one sort of women. Lesbianism has relevance to all women, because Lesbianism is about loving women, and all women can love women. It's also about resistance to phallic sexuality, and all women can do that, all women can step out of heterosexuality. They may not choose to, and they may not want to, but they can, whereas not all women can be women of colour or working-class women or middle-class women or white women.

LN: Where do women who define themselves only by their sexuality sit?

D: That was the next thing that I was going to say. At the beginning of second wave feminism, the fact that Lesbianism was sexual was a revolutionary thing, because it meant challenging the dominance of heterosexuality and putting women first. But now Lesbian sexuality seems to be something that is not political at all. It is excluded from political analysis and is nothing but pleasure and doing your own thing. It's become simply a matter of personal feelings and preference.

LN: Where do the women who have always perceived themselves as Lesbian sit within the above framework?

D: When I say that Lesbianism is political and relevant to all women, I don't mean that women or feminists should, or even can, make a deliberate choice to be Lesbians. Obviously, the feeling has to come first, otherwise it won't work. What I mean is that, given Lesbian existence, a feminist politics interprets it as the primary challenge to heterosexuality for women, and the putting of women first in women's lives.

I always hesitate when I say that at a certain point I realised that I was a Lesbian, because I am not entirely sure that was what happened. Did I choose to be? I think it was just that feminism gave me permission to love women sexually. I certainly had the feelings as far back as I can remember. But I didn't have the words and I didn't have external verification

of it. It wasn't a matter of suddenly switching. It's always been possible for women to love women despite the dominance of heterosexuality.

LN: What interests you in Lesbian feminist theory at the moment?

D: What I'm interested in is a feminist theory of male domination. In fact, that's what I think feminism is, a challenge to male domination. As well as that, it's also a creation of connections between women and of a human status for women that is not secondary to the male 'norm'. What I do is look at theories that call themselves feminist to see to what extent they name the enemy male domination, and to what extent they're concerned about connections between women. Postmodernism does not measure up on either of them. It doesn't name male domination. It sees 'gender relations' as the problem, whatever that might be, and it's not male domination. Postmodernists don't seem to be particularly concerned with connections between women either.

LN: So within your definition what is the intriguing thing at the moment?

D: The intriguing thing is why so much that's published that is supposedly feminist, is not. Sometimes it's even anti-feminist.

LN: What would you like to bring to Lesbian feminist theory?

D: Intelligence!

LN: Given that, who did you write your book for?

D: I wrote it for women who think for themselves. Some of them might be academics, some of them might have tertiary education, some of them don't, but they're women who can read. There are very few people who can read, and postmodernism doesn't help when it says that there is no one correct interpretation of a text. That might well be true, but there are certainly a lot of wrong ones. I wrote the book for women who want to hear the same things that I want to hear. I wrote what I want to hear. The truth.

LN: So in the writing of *Reading Between the Lines* you had a broader audience than academe?

D: It's not the sort of book that is welcome in academe. So it's not academic in that sense. But it is academic in the sense that's it full of argument. To give you one example of what I mean about truth—I kept coming across the accusation that radical feminism was 'essentialist'. Nobody said what 'essentialism' was, but it seemed to have something to do with appealing to biological explanations for women's oppression. Usually the accusation was just a throw away remark. They didn't say what radical feminism was, they didn't give you any references, they didn't say who they were talking about, so there was not much you could do to establish whether that statement was true or false. But there were a couple of books that named authors who were supposedly 'essentialist'. I went back and I read the authors named, e.g. Arieenne Rich, Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, and they didn't appeal to biology as the explanation for anything at all. Having established that the accusation was false, I then had to work out why was it being said if it wasn't true. Because this was a systematic mistake that was being made, or a systematic falsity that was occurring, there had to be an explanation for it. The explanation that I came up with was that the authors were being accused because they were naming male domination, and naming it in detail and naming it in all its horror, like Andrea Dworkin's work. The ones who were making the accusations of 'essentialism' were terrified of naming male domination, or reluctant to, if you like.

LN: Are you interested in why this occurs, why there is this reluctance?

D: It's because radical feminism, that names male domination, has never been allowed into academe, so there are no frameworks within the academy to identify what is going on, and too many academic feminists have got co-opted and seduced into boys' games. Boys' games can be very fascinating, just like chess and bridge are fascinating and distracting from life. That's what games are all about. They're not real life, they are something separate from life. They have rules and a framework, and you stop the game to get on with your life.

LN: If academe is a game, then why take it seriously?

D: Because it's so dominant, because it's presented as feminism. Feminist theory *is* this stuff, and it's so much this stuff that anyone who writes anything else can't be read, can't be heard, can't be seen.

LN: When you say 'can't', do you mean literally 'can't' because structures have been taken away, or do you mean the book won't be read because you won't be published?

D: Nothing is ever absolute or monolithic. That's why I say I've written a book for women who think for themselves, some of whom are academics. It is possible to think for yourself.

LN: Have you any positive vision?

D: Yes, of course, otherwise there's no reason for feminism, otherwise I wouldn't do anything, would I?