

# Pinking the Ivories

## Academic Outings in Social Work

by Barbara Isaac and  
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*Les auteures, des professeures à l'université, qui ne cachent pas leur*

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*orientation sexuelle, partagent comment cette décision affecte leurs rapports avec l'institution et les étudiant(e)s.*

It appears that although lesbian and gay concerns are receiving more media attention, and intellectual spaces are being carved out in some institutions, the daily experiences of lesbians and gays in the academic workplace for example, often go unnoticed. Our initial attraction to social work was in part because of its interdisciplinarity both in the community and the university. As well, it appeared to be a profession where lesbians might be welcome due to its apparent commitment to critique issues of power, and its alignment with the oppressed and/or marginalized in social justice issues. However, despite its current flirtation with critical perspectives, academic social work often tends to locate ongoing discussions of sexuality in the furthest corners of its curricula and administration. The notion of a "social" or radical agenda within the discipline, gives way in cycles of rising individualism and retrenchment. Nevertheless, sporadic outbursts of queer rage, creative student projects, and the commitment of a few to keep our issues visible within the realm of human experience may have begun to

"tilt the tower" (Garber) slightly as more of us attempt to name who we are publicly.

We want to examine how we know the world as lesbian academic social workers, versus how the world, the academic world at least, conceptualizes us. Roxanna Ng's research advocates the use of personal experience in explaining what she calls the "taken-for-granted features of everyday life" provided that "rather than dismissing them as anecdotal, they are treated as essential features of a larger social organization" (11).

Both of us have been involved within the feminist and lesbian movements for many years, and have taken separate, eclectic, and rather circuitous paths to academe. One of us was first appointed to a university position in 1989, the other in 1992. In each school, the hiring committees knew of our long-standing relationship. We are attempting to explore some of the dynamics we have encountered, and continue to encounter, using the concept of social organization of knowledge (Smith 1987, 1990a, 1990b) that allows us to examine our experiences as an entry point into the policies and practices of an institution and a department. We have found it personally helpful to see how being a couple "works" in this context, and to talk about our own standpoint from within these institutions. We intend to explore briefly our experiences in two schools of social work in which we have taught as an "out" lesbian couple. None of the anecdotes or interactions discussed below is dramatic, and deliberately so, but they illustrate underlying conceptual practices within academic institutions, and how each of us is instructed to behave according to

these arrangements. As Smith (1991) so eloquently suggests, "in the absence of any alternative, the only place to begin is with what we know directly in our lives" (156).

### Invisibility and silence

It is not news to anyone that lesbians do not officially exist except usually as deviants, even in an era of supposed sexual sophistication. We understand that same-sex couples do not fit the current acceptable image and concept of couple or family. If we are seen or imagined, our image is perceived as perverted or inverted. It is an image for example, that allows a waiter to ask friends of ours arriving for dinner, "Are you two ladies alone?" Warland reclaims the word "invert" by noting that she is "attracted to the way the very word itself indicates a radically different position from which we see, experience, and speak life—that it's not simply a matter of 'sexual preference'" (xi). Renaming or reclaiming words about our lives, enables us to begin to critique the practices of power within our institutions. We reproduce ourselves in the public spaces of the world and are in turn shaped and silenced by them.

Despite the numbers of women in social work, the profession has difficulty exchanging its image of women—there seems to be one image—a "helper," a carer, sometimes struggling for visibility in positions of management, administration, and education. Certainly the image is not lesbian. Lesbian is invisible or fractured—constructed from other deviant social, cultural, and religious fragments that tend, or intend, to silence. At best, we find images that construct or try to convince others of lesbian "disadvantage or oppression," someone worthy or deserving of assistance and care—in other words "client," ancillary, subordinate.

In one school of social work, for

example, a colleague, when asked if he incorporated lesbian and gay content in his course responded defensively with, "I include a reading on AIDS." His remark reveals our existence as an "add on" in an otherwise neutral course. That this neutrality is heterosexual is rarely noticed. There is little acknowledgement, or even the need to acknowledge relationship, sexuality, intimacy, and com-

plent rhetoric of social justice in our profession.

### Including the "Other"

The second of us to apply for a position in the same school did not have the option of whether or not to "come out." Clearly, the issue of our partnership had been discussed by the hiring committee after it was ap-

parent to whom they wanted to offer the job. There was some awkwardness in a subsequent interaction with one of the committee members, when Barbara was informed that, after

deliberations they had decided to "treat us as a couple." She responded that this sounded fair, while wondering how else they might treat us since we are a couple. He further elaborated that we must avoid conflict of interest situations such as not sitting on committees in which the other was being evaluated, and not re-reading papers appealed by students.

While the forgoing seemed reasonable and fair, we were left wondering why, in a school of social work, they felt obligated to discuss/decide to "treat us as a couple?" The need for this befuddled conclusion illustrates that we did not fit the common, everyday image of a couple to which we were being compared and contrasted. The committee's common-sense assumptions about "couples" did not include two women. At the same time, we felt surprised that they would actually hire both of us, revealing how we internalize the dominant norms and have learned that we do not expect to be fairly treated.

As an "entry point" illustrating the construction of our invisibility, the committee's remark makes it blindingly clear, more so than in any other positions we have held over the years, that the professional discourse regarding lesbianism as aberrant, is deeply entrenched within the acad-

emy. It is difficult to know on what fronts to engage it. We teach undergraduate social workers to "pick their battles" in the struggle against oppression and to try to do so with collective support behind them. Similarly, we are continually confronted with apparently benign and supportive statements that accept our construction as deviant/different, and must decide when and how to pick our own battles.

In some ways being a monogamous lesbian couple these days is almost construed as "straight" within lesbian and gay discourse and practice. It is not perceived that way in the straight world however. The fact that the University must *decide* to treat us as a couple, points to lesbian invisibility within the institution. Since we don't exist officially, no one knows quite how to deal with us. Our lives are absent in the papers that document benefits and pensions, and also absent in the reflection of ourselves in colleagues who, for whatever reason, cannot be as visible.

Our presence, our "coupled-ness" has been constructed through a variety of professional, legal, medical, and psychological texts written or researched in academic or administrative locations. Many social work professionals for example, continue to adhere to, and teach, particular concepts about families, in which the familial couple is heterosexual, and generally reproduces children. Even if this couple works together in an academic setting, their particular way of being in academia is seldom questioned at the level of their "coupled-ness" as is ours. The fact that in our situation "couple" is written in quotation marks, appears to obliterate our actual lives and re/places us with a deviant category that has emerged from family discourse.

This is not to say that there are not pockets of resistance to dominant practices by students or by heterosexual faculty and staff with whom we are aligned. In our current institution we are two of three "out" faculty; there is a small group of lesbian and gay students, and certainly within the

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plexity. We have to wonder whether having the two of us as colleagues has even touched his heterosexist view of the world. That he would be defensive demonstrates that some part of him is alerted to the fact that he must be more inclusive. This idea may be so new and/or threatening to him that he cannot comprehend lesbians as other than clients; or, as members of a stigmatized group. He did not ask us for articles, he did not ask about our lives, he apparently does not discern the diversity in lesbian lives. He wants to defend his curriculum at the expense of learning, but does not appear to be open enough to question whether he is teaching useful information to undergraduate, or even graduate, social workers. He seems unaware that an article on AIDS, albeit extremely relevant, does not answer our question.

In situations like these we are always faced with decisions that heterosexual people do not face. Do we push to educate, and at what cost? Responses have to be carefully crafted, especially since we have already encountered a defensive reaction. We are all too aware that efforts to make our lives, and those of other lesbians, visible can be a challenge that engenders strong opposition as well as defensiveness, regardless of the preva-

social services network in the small city in which the university is located, many professionals are lesbian and gay. In addition, there are progressive left and feminist individuals for whom varying degrees of our struggles are seen and acknowledged.

### Relationships with students

In the first term of teaching, and in response to the institutional silences, one of us decided to offer a lesbian/gay course in the department. It was planned during the first week of classes, and offered only to the lesbian and gay students enrolled in the school at that time. The choice to do this guaranteed that students who did not already know, now could not avoid the fact that two of the faculty were not only lesbians, but a couple. We wondered how we would be perceived. It was instructive to note that we actually had no idea what response this course would engender, even in a school in the process of transforming its curriculum to include an overt analysis of power.

It was a revelation that much of the response centred on heterosexual students who felt left out, marginalized and who perceived the lesbian and gay students as an "in" group. We were approached by many students, one at a time, with requests for readings. Several of them had the same criticisms we did about the lack of gay and lesbian content in their courses. As a further off-shoot of the course, the one gay man and the heterosexual men formed a group to talk about dominance and oppression. A young fundamentalist Christian woman who had been requesting assistance through a personal crisis, announced that knowing us had made her question many of the assumptions she had been taught.

At the same time, we remained careful in our dealings with students, always aware of the projections that can occur with those who may be less than comfortable with lesbians and gays. It was also interesting that several of the lesbian/gay students were very critical of us, and saw our at-

tempts to push the boundaries in this school as inadequate. At the same time, we received requests from other students wanting to do directed readings on a variety of so-called radical topics—to them we represented a shifting of the normal boundaries of acceptability and were perhaps, a visible reminder that they could do so as well. We were perceived as understanding struggles against oppression. In one family therapy class for example, the first two presentations were about lesbian families. Both students had personal reasons for choosing this topic, and it is difficult to guess whether they would have been so open had they passed through the school with little or no exposure to lesbian and gay issues.

Despite this experience, we never "came out" in other classes, until recently in a graduate seminar. In large part, this was/is a protective mechanism in large undergraduate classes. Nonetheless, our approach has been to be completely open with anyone about who we are to each other. Initial attempts at dialogue by some people within the school were interesting and warrant a closer look. One of us was approached by a co-worker at the photocopy machine who wanted to ask something that would have revealed that she knew about our relationship. She prefaced it with, "Is it okay to talk about this?"

ity of academia, and the practice of silencing other forms of relationship.

In our current department we have been fused, and considering we both have the same name and are the only women, this is not difficult. We have to work hard to keep a sense of separateness, and continually explain to support staff and colleagues alike that they must contact the "other Barbara" themselves. Even if we express a different point of view, it seems that some of our colleagues hear only one. On one hand, this is interesting and amusing—we often wonder what would happen if they could hear one of our arguments and begin to know how differently we view the world.

We lose enormous chunks of our identity in the construction of who we are as individual women in a lesbian relationship. It obscures the early religious career of one of us at the time that the other was joining radical groups in the late 1960s. It erases our class differences—one of us having parents with little or no education, the other having parents with university degrees. This erasure is a common theme for out lesbians. It also reveals our own skepticism of its pervasiveness when we experience our blending and negation by others as a surprise.

We present these examples not to implicate our colleagues as homophobic or heterosexist, but to

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While her question indicated sensitivity and kindness, there is an underlying assumption that there is something "forbidden," or outside the bounds of normal, friendly discourse. Even though her remark was taken as a request to shift from formal to informal mode, it also places our relationship outside a boundary which assumes the dominant heterosexual-

begin to illustrate how the particular configuration of policies and regulations both within the university setting, and in our case, the governing body of social work education in Canada, provide instructions for ways of being. It is difficult not to imagine the pervasiveness of the professional discourse against lesbianism particularly the practice of invisibility and

certainly the silence regarding sexuality. These anecdotes also reveal the depth to which colleagues are silent and often collude with a way of being, or with ideological practices they would adamantly deny both theoretically and politically.

The ways in which we are conceptualized within a traditional social work practice and/or education model, reveals not only ways of thinking about female sexuality and sexual regulation, but also about how that sexuality is allowed to be. O'Neill for example argues that while social work professors and students are relatively accepting of gay men and lesbians particularly in comparison to the larger university, schools of social work lack supportive policies and accurate curriculum content to support this acceptance. As a matter of fact, while the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work accreditation standards

prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation ... in contrast to other minority groups, there are no requirements that schools ensure equity in the treatment of gay and lesbian faculty and students. (11)

While these practices are contested by lesbian and gay social work practitioners, policy-makers, academics, and students, they point to the contradictions within the profession; for, if there are no administrative, or even social mechanisms in place to legitimize lesbian couples lives, then no one knows what to do.

When we first began thinking about this article we viewed it as a piece we could easily draft; however, throughout the writing and discussion we have had to question our own responses to often painful situations, and the times in which we silenced or made ourselves invisible because of fear, lack of support, and so on. It is apparent that we are only beginning to define our experiences to ourselves, and that our invisibility to ourselves parallels our invisibility in the university community. What it has re-

vealed is the need for a more in-depth examination of some of the issues touched on too briefly here. To paraphrase Nicole Brossard (1988), "lesbians who do not reinvent the world are lesbians in the process of disappearing."

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## KAUSHALYA BANNERJI

### Pachacutec

Ochun  
they tell me  
glances at you  
from a woman's  
eyes or hips or  
the faces of five o'clock

dreaming of the moon's  
hands in night's dark river  
curved  
around Earth  
where Ochun  
honours you  
or so  
they tell me  
by calling  
your secret name:  
the free one

*Kaushalya Bannerji's poetry  
appears earlier in this volume.*