

# CAROLYN D'CRUZ IN CONVERSATION

JACINTHE FLORE  
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

**D**ESIRES DRIVE US TOWARD, AND AWAY FROM, people, goals, projects, and objects. It is a desire for justice, space, and the sharing of subjugated forms of knowledges that compels us to produce, and participate in, platforms such as *Writing from Below*. When I was invited by the editors of the journal to undertake an interview of Carolyn D'Cruz, Convenor of Gender Sexuality and Diversity Studies (GSDS) at La Trobe University, I pictured a dialogue on important issues that preoccupy those of us working in academia. I aspired to transcribe this tête-à-tête while incorporating my own musings on teaching, theory, and research, and I wanted to do justice to both *Writing From Below* and GSDS. Space does not allow me to fully reproduce the rich conversation that occurred but the following is, hopefully, a faithful rendition of a provocative, lively and inspiring dialogue.

§

Jacinte Flore: I would like to begin by asking you to comment on your experience teaching in GSDS.

Carolyn D'Cruz: I was employed in this role at La Trobe in 2007, three years after Gender, Sexuality and Diversity Studies was renamed from its predecessor, which was Women's Studies. GSD reflects the heritage of women's studies that emerged in the 1970s, but here at La Trobe that actually happened in the late 1980s, and has become a lot broader than I would understand most gender studies courses to be. I think it is really significant that we have "sexuality" and "diversity" in our title



Above - Carolyn D'Cruz

because that allows us also to claim the heritage of cultural studies, gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, post-colonial theory, and allows us to move with the times.

This was the foresight of Kerreen Reiger, who was one of the directors of Women's Studies, and saw through the transition from Women's Studies to GSDS. She noticed that Women's Studies was becoming too narrow to be able to encompass all the different axes of oppression. So Kerreen had brought an intersectional approach to La Trobe to increase the sensitivity to all the different kinds of oppression that is related to knowledge in general. When I came here in 2007 it was to reorient that transition. So my experience was very exciting because I did not identify with women's studies. Feminism was too narrow for me. I was also interested in queer theory and post-colonial theory. And GSD allowed all of that. It goes with the heritage of "writing from below" as well, which is much broader than just women's studies and includes cultural studies. It pays homage to thinkers like E.P. Thompson and Collingwood in history.

In the general public, GSD still has this association with what people understand to be women's studies. However, people working in this field are interested in race politics, cultural studies and queer theory etc., but the name sometimes just does not convey that. Students that come in here, like yourself, who are doing archival work shows me that there is so much more to go, but that has not been read well by administrators, management and the general public.

JF: I agree, this misperception, or misrecognition, is really quite prevalent. Why do you think that is the case?

CD: There is some kind of public perception out there that equality has been

achieved. There is also the perception, and I am referring to the case of the University of Queensland, where they just discontinued their Gender Studies major—I am unsure whether it is still a minor—but their rationale was that feminism has been well integrated into other courses. I do not think that it is the case. I have not looked at all the courses of the University of Queensland but just judging from the way most disciplines approach areas like feminism, Marxism, post-colonial theory or queer theory, I feel like it is more of a footnote in a week that deals with it in a way suggesting, “We have dealt with this and now we can move on.”

I do not believe that is the case. And that misperception is feeding into a general attitude that has been with GSD, women’s studies, gender studies, and queer theory since their inception; “this is a bit of fluff subject.” “It is too political,” is the other thing that people say about what we teach. There is an attitude that we dismiss objectivity, value, and neutrality. Whereas I would think that we are far more concerned with objectivity, value and neutrality. Our work has to deal with a public that, on all sorts of levels, has actually not read our work. Mainstream “common sense” has naturalised inequality so much so as to appear as if everything is equal and this makes our work actually really hard.

On the other hand, we have all of these students who come in and they are amazingly vibrant. They have stories to tell, they have to mine the archives, and put information out there. I think that we have an amazing body of students, vibrant, healthy, smart, and savvy; they know what is going on in the public. They have the capacity to get knowledge out there.

And *Writing from Below* is one of those examples. We are a very small school but the postgraduates have gotten together, identified that they are scattered in different departments, but what they have in common is that interest for the field of gender, sexuality and diversity. This has allowed the blossoming of *Writing from Below*: a space to share the work they are doing.

JF: Definitely. The momentum for the creation of a journal began at *Desire Lines*, the 2012 symposium of GSDS. And from the start, we were very much aware that we all came from different disciplines—all of us on different but related research trajectories. However, I think that what we have in common is both the interest in avenues of research that deal with issues of gender, sexuality and diversity but also this shared desire for a space, a platform where we could distribute the amazing work that people are doing in those areas of study.

CD: Yes, and it was the good work of Wendy Mee, the postgraduate coordinator of GSDS, who was able to bring together all those different students. It was all the legwork from Wendy who is herself housed in Sociology and International

Development but also performs the role of postgraduate coordinator in GSDS. Bringing all those people together was, I think, the start you all realising that you have so much in common but administratively it has been really hard for you to find each other because only very few of you have the GSDS code listed as a postgraduate. But with that realisation, the *Desire Lines* symposium gave the opportunity for that amazing journal to kick-start.

JF: I think it proves that the enthusiasm and the interest of the students are very real!

CD: Yes. And it is a tribute to the roots and the heritage of GSDS. When people began teaching Women’s Studies, it was largely voluntarily. It was feminists realising that there were questions that needed to be asked about the supposed value-neutrality of the traditional disciplines. A lot of the early departments were just feminist scholars branching off and it followed the 1970s “do-it-yourself” attitude: we need a women’s shelter, let’s build one, we need a legal service, or we need a medical service. And in the academy, we needed knowledges to represent the diversity of the people who live in our supposed democracies. I think we are in a very similar place today, we do not have a lot of resources but we are extremely passionate about what we do. And on the basis of feeling this is the knowledge that is actually going to *transform* our world, I think people are just taking it upon themselves.

And there has been support for *Writing from Below*, like Sue Martin, the associate dean (research) of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHUSS), and the Library provided the open access. People know GSDS. They do know there are amazing students who do our courses and so it is important to recognise that level of support. There is a lot of voluntary labour going into this. And here now we have a journal up and running! It is the links, the connections between the committee, the volunteers who put the hours in. Unfortunately a lot of that has to be voluntary, but this too is part of our heritage. We do not get the big bucks that have the great corporate slogans. It may be possible, but I do not know what kind of compromise that might entail.

JF: Can I get you to talk about the state/status of the GSDS programme at La Trobe University, and Gender Studies more generally?

CD: Well, as most people probably know by now, last year when the FHUSS (Faculty of Humanities and social Sciences) underwent its massive restructure, the first draft of what was called the OCIS (Organisational Change Impact Statement) listed GSD as a major to be discontinued. Just *discontinued*. Neither as minor, nor major. I am the only dedicated staff member so that immediately meant my job because the

way we administratively operate is that most departments have very few dedicated positions. But the major is made up, on a multidisciplinary level, of borrowing units that explore gender, sexuality and diversity from, for example, literary studies, media, philosophy, and history etc. So, a lot of the cuts to the units meant that GSDS dual units would go as well.

There are many things on an administrative level that makes it hard for us to survive and show our strength. We have core units that are really healthy. We have core units that run from first to third year, and we have over 200 students every year doing first year each semester. Our second year core had 94 students in 2013. Not all of them are GSDS majors. Maybe there would be around 35 that are GSDS majors. The rest are from other fields. The third year level is around the same. We may have twenty-odd students that are GSDS majors but there are around fifty new students that enrol in that unit. So people who do the course have the interdisciplinary heritage, knowledge, and skills in which we excel. People that graduate with a GSDS major come out with the breadth and depth that I do not think many other disciplines produce. But because we are still going through what is called "curriculum renewal and restructure," it is very hard for our case to be heard. There is a very small investment in our programme but I believe the return is massive.

I do think that GSDS is sustainable if we have the right administrative and management support. I do not know how people are hearing us on the higher levels of decision-making. We have participated in every level of the consultation process of the OCIS. And it baffles me that it was not seen how successful we are as a very small programme – I believe that a lot of academics on the ground know that, and we received overwhelming support from academics and students. Students are walking advertisements for how strong our programme is and how much passion they have about the programme. Undergraduates and postgraduates wrote in, as did our massive alumni, those who graduated from Women's Studies and GSDS. They wrote from all their workplaces to tell the decision-makers how important GSDS is to their career today.

We had a letter that Clare Wright wrote on behalf of one hundred community members: people who are now authors, writers, academics, people in the public service, people working in community organisations, and lobby groups like the Victorian Women's Trust. All of these networks that have high respect for GSD wrote in asking, "This programme is so successful, why is it being discontinued?" At some point, I think, the higher decision-makers heard that. And the second draft of the OCIS process then flagged GSDS as a minor. That is our status now.

I was told via email that at some point GSDS would be re-launched as a University-

wide major. I still do not know what that means and nobody has contacted me to be involved in any process concerning the re-launch of a GSDS major. I am still of the view that we have enough points to present it as a major for students, and I also know that students come here because GSD has been discontinued in other universities. I hope that La Trobe has not missed its opportunity in supporting GSDS as an area study that I believe has so much more to offer. And I am not saying this just because I am in this role. It is because there are stories that are still to be told. There is history to be written.

JF: What do you think is the purpose of GSDS in the current social climate? And not just in terms of University but also society generally. This is an election year; the major parties have played the gender card – what responsibility do you think gender studies has, as an area study?

CD: Our brief, from its very beginnings, has been concerned with justice, transforming this world from the inequalities to a better, more just society. Our concern is that knowledge production plays a huge role in that. We want people to have access to a historical narrative that recognises that we do not all come onto the playing field of citizenship equally. And if this University is really concerned with what is called "global citizenship," I think the voices of those that have been deemed non-citizens, denizens, or those who historically have not qualified as citizens, are a crucial part of that narrative. *We will always have a role to play in the telling of history, in the make-up of politics, in the philosophical heritage of reason that has deemed some people in this world "unreasonable."*

In the demarcation of our population studies that normalise some categories of identities, and consider those falling on the edges of those normal distribution curves as deviant and abnormal, we still have a lot of work to do. And this is even before we get to debates about a female prime minister and the possible consequences of having a prime minister who has been known for supporting policies that historically in GSDS have undermined our values: the right to safe termination, the right to justice for people who are not heterosexual, and telling the story of Indigenous Australia. The ways in which people read things like the Northern Territory Intervention and the Stolen Generations – to assess it in a just way, these need a writing *from below*.

We have students that come from other disciplines who are interested in GSD because they want to answer these questions about the prime minister and what is getting called the "gender wars" at the moment. It is a very complicated thing to read and it is quite frustrating to see that the commentators in our public are mostly people who have no expertise in gender.

When GSD was under fire last year, I had a call from Neil Mitchell's people (from 3AW) to speak about "what the hell is Gender Studies?" Whenever I tell people I am a lecturer in gender studies, the response is laughter. I am very used to it. The idea that "Well, we all know what gender is" means we have to work against that mainstream and say, "Are you really that certain? From where do you get this certainty?" It is much harder for us to get our voices out in the media because they like to laugh at the debates around misogyny and gender wars etc.

I am not a big fan of our parliamentary climate, but I still notice how gender gets played and it is not Julia Gillard who played the gender card. That gender card has been played on her and she is responding to it. It is not her that is skewing it, it is the way in which people understand "common sense" and gender, and believe there is some kind of neutrality to our parliamentary politics. I would like to invite them to take just one unit of GSDS, just thirteen weeks. Perhaps then, they would not be so arrogant in their understanding of the people in the so-called "Australian democracy" who currently do not have a very loud voice.

GSDS is redressing that. Our job is far from over. We are only three or four decades old but we have been producing substantial work. And then we ask the question, "Why is it so hard for this to hit the mainstream? What is going on in our world that we continue being ridiculed?" Or if not ridiculed, there is a high level of hostility. To say that kind of thing requires journals like *Writing from Below* and there are so many more journals out there. At the end of the day, the academy is one place from which we want to transform the world. And it is just a very rewarding experience to have contact with students year after year.

Some students come here and have no interest in GSD but have a free slot in their timetable, or they think this will be easy. But they walk out as changed people. They walk out thinking they can change things, if not on a radical, international level at least in their personal lives, their jobs and communities. People change through exposure to this kind of work and we are proud of them. We are a bit sad that on an institutional level and on a mainstream level, our work does not get the respect and air play that it deserves. We have a lot of work to do.

JF: My last question is on teaching in gender, sexuality and diversity studies. In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes that she wants her students to be active participants in learning (hooks 1994, 11). She also writes, "In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share" (hooks 1994, 21).

CD: It is a very fine line in teaching and I think, early on, we have to make it quite clear that we are not doing group therapy here. I think it is a hazard.

JF: Do you think that hazard is specific to GSDS?

CD: I do, yes. I think this is because our material affects the way people view themselves personally. I think we have to draw the line of what is and is not appropriate in a classroom situation. The good thing about it is that they are then training themselves for when they are going out into the world and they have to manage diversity. And they have to draw personal, professional and political lines around how they manage difference and trauma in our worlds. I purposely do not share much at all about my own life with students because I hope it then sets some kind of sense of the boundaries for what students feel is okay to share. At the same time, students have to feel safe when discussing quite sensitive material. We have to remember we are doing this at a university and our prime imperative is to relate our material to how knowledge is being produced, constructed and used without negating the very real life, and sometimes traumatic, experiences of the social groups that we explore. I think it is a tough question and we are constantly re-negotiating the boundaries.

One of the things to teach our students from first year is the critical skills of stepping backwards and learning to differentiate what circulates in their mind as something they have picked up in the mainstream as their opinion, and learn to find an evidence-based way of dealing with those issues such that our role in the classroom is often to say, "Let's take a step back, let's look at what you've just said in a broader context." Hopefully that helps to manage the affective processes in the classroom.

A student once said in my class, "I often do not feel comfortable in GSDS because people are so passionate about what they believe. They have convictions and I do not have any convictions." And that question was put to the class: "How do we manage the needs and reactions of those with passion and conviction, and those without them, and what effect they might have on class discussion?" And the class got into this amazing conversation about feeling concerned that they might say something politically incorrect, or that they do not know enough to have an opinion about something. And then some are fearful that they might say something that upsets somebody else.

I do not want to have an environment where people censor themselves. And sometimes I do have my own levels of shock over what students say but my role in the classroom is to be professional and say, "Okay, let's have a think about what you have just said here." But this needs to be done in a way that does not frighten people off from genuinely thinking through a question.

Another admission we got from someone was that, before she enrolled in GSDS she

had no idea there were inequalities in the world. That flabbergasts me on the one hand but I am so glad that she brought it up. It fascinates me that this is actually one way of reading the world and it should not really shock me given what is written in our newspapers, given the way politicians debate one another in parliament, and given the way community organisations and NGOs have to write their demands for funding mostly in terms of economic rationality and growth.

It is great to hear that from students because I get an insight into how they hear me. I get a sense of how they hear the political motivations that we have always had. I just think we are upfront about it. *We put our biases on the table*. And I think that the level of work and stratification in terms of demarcating how we understand facts and values is far more nuanced than those working in the academy who believe that it is easy to tell the difference. That is where we are coming from; this is what we are obligated to do. But we are also obligated to do that in a way that is validating and legitimating the claims we are making on behalf of knowledge. And we have amazing postgraduate tutors, and amazing tutors who already have their PhDs, who excel in creating a safe environment for students to genuinely explore knowledge and politics and our personal life.

That is the knowledge we believe needs to be out there. That is the ethos of “writing from below”; we are trying to hear the things that have not gone through and need to get through.

§

Following our conversation, Carol asked me to reflect on how my research fits into “writing from below.” My doctoral thesis explores the numerous techniques of viewing, indexing and diagnosing the body that are central to the medicalisation of sexual appetite. In the discussion of each technique, I highlight their gendering and demonstrate how, in different periods in history, women were approached (and represented) as both lacking and excessive.

The idea of writing from below, from the margins, is especially relevant to the chapter on which I am working currently. This chapter considers how the patient case history emerged as a technique for the medicalisation of the body and its desire(s), and for the deployment of sexuality, in the nineteenth century. By giving an account of one’s family history, the patient’s confessional discourse contributed to the history of sexuality, not solely as an entity colonised by sexual medicine, but rather as an agent influencing the direction of clinical practice. While I agree that

the patient needs to be heard in order to explore the material, social and cultural conditions operating in different periods (Porter 1985), I approach the patient case history as a key technique in the practice of medicine. The discourse of the patient, along with the subsequent editorialising of the case history by the physician, constitutes a contentious space where theories of the body, medicine and sexuality are debated. I am interested in the patients’ role in the expansion of medicine, in terms of hearing their account of their ailments and to understand how these confessions have caused shifts and continuities in the history of sexuality and the body.

I remain inspired by the political potential of “writing from below.” Two years ago, my motivation for this thesis was a desire to historicise asexuality, to do the genealogical work that would shed light on the trajectory of an identity under which individuals are mobilising. My original proposal went through a thorough metamorphosis but the concern with history and subjectivity still permeates my work. Such historical research is necessary because we need a historical awareness of those categories of knowledge through which we articulate identity (Foucault 1982). In addition, a genealogy of the medicalisation of sexual appetites (sexual lack and sexual excess) will, I hope, enable us to recognise that the question of amounts and sexual dietetics has been a preoccupation that has accompanied discourses on sexual object-choice. I approach the history of the medicalisation of sexual appetites as a history of balance and moderation, that is, as an economics of sexual desire.

§

#### Coda: Final Thoughts

Months of research, teaching and reflecting separate the recording of this conversation and its publication. The appeal to “write from below” and this journal entail considerable affective labour. We are, I think, committed to the political and social demands and responsibility of doing such work, and we want to see this journal flourish. Reflecting on the positive reception that the journal has received, and the quality of articles that appear in this second issue, I can only echo Carol’s comments during *Desire Lines* in December 2012; many of us, within and outside academia, have found a “home”—a welcoming and rigorous space where our work is valued, challenged and respected.

(This conversation was recorded on June 13, 2013)

## Bibliography

Foucault, Michel. 1982. "Afterword: The Subject and Power". In *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Ed. Hubert L Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf. 208-226.

hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London and New York: Routledge.

Porter, Roy. 1985. "The Patient's View: Doing Medical History from Below". *Theory and Society*, 14(2): 175-198.

## Biographies

CAROLYN D'CRUZ is the Convenor of Gender Sexuality and Diversity Studies at La Trobe University. She is also author of *Identity Politics in Deconstruction: Calculating with the Incalculable* (Ashgate 2008) and co-editor of the anthology *After Homosexual: the Legacies of Gay Liberation*, coming out next month with UWA press.

JACINTHE FLORE is a PhD candidate in the department of Gender, Sexuality and Diversity Studies at La Trobe University. She has a BA (Hons.) from the University of Mauritius and a Master of Cultural Studies from the University of Sydney. Her doctoral thesis is broadly concerned with medicalisation of sexual appetite in the nineteenth and twentieth century, and explores how different apparatuses of medicalisation contribute to clinical practice. Her research interests include the history of science and medicine, criminal responsibility and psychiatry, a/sexuality, and the policing of sexualities in sub-Saharan Africa.