



# ***Lesbian Studies as a Way of Countering Non-Sexual Feminisms in Poland***

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## **Abstract**

This article offers a reflection on the current state of affairs regarding sexuality studies in general and the representation of non-heterosexual women in particular in contemporary academia and feminisms. As a lesbian scholar based in Poland, I am attempting to establish a separate lesbian-studies discourse in the Polish academia on the one hand, and encourage a great dose of interdisciplinarity in moving towards re-adjusted and re-defined lesbian feminisms on the other. Having defended my doctoral dissertation, I am going to re-visit and summarise one of its parts, namely the question of inadequacies of contemporary gender studies. Although the overall character of my activity can be situated within the sociology of sexuality, I tend to conceptualise the problems in question through the prism of sociology of knowledge and human geography, and especially the branches of feminist geography and geographies of sexualities. Altogether, I am going to briefly look into several contemporary gender and/or women's studies programmes in Poland in order to show both their incapacity to deal with female sexuality and, as a consequence, their erasure of lesbianity. Needless to say, the brief analysis herein is merely the start of the discussion as it offers only a sample of exploratory efforts with regard to the question of academic feminisms, but it is one that reveals some alarming tendencies.

## **Keywords:**

lesbian studies, sociology of knowledge, gender studies, geographies of sexualities, lesbian feminism.

## Introduction

This article can be considered a brief summation of the purposes and conceptual problems that my academic activity has been revolving around to date, namely the dimensions and spaces of lesbian subjectivities in society and in the academia. As a sociologist of knowledge and a “sexual geographer” (Browne, Lim and Brown, 2007, p. 5), I tend to explore the question of female sexuality through **engaged critique** and language that can be described as interventionist. With this in mind, I am going to focus on the matter that I have been concerned with most recently, i.e. the **discursive lacks within feminist languages and events** – both academic and social – with regard to a plethora of non-heterosexual subjectivities<sup>1</sup>. More specifically, I wish to scrutinise the overall construction and framework of women’s and gender studies programmes. Although my actual doctoral dissertation analysed many a university programme from around the globe, this article will be of more local character, offering an engaged critique of the state of affairs regarding the Polish dimension of social and academic feminism exclusively. To my mind, the contents of many of the present-day gender studies programmes are rather inadequate when it comes to dealing with the question of sexuality in general and representing non-heterosexual women in particular. Therefore, this article contains **a very preliminary and descriptive semantic**

**field analysis** with regard to four gender studies programmes available in Poland. Its role is, for now, to merely **highlight some worrying tendencies towards one-dimensionality and the reinforcement of the exclusion of sexuality**. Before I develop this theme, however, an introduction to my motives and the character of my work seems to be in order.

Although this is somewhat less relevant to the purposes of the contents herein, I have been known to merge the lesbian with a properly adjusted queer perspective. This, as I have come to recognise, is one aspect of my activity that has drawn much controversy<sup>2</sup>; the notion of queer has usually been put in opposition to the efforts to reclaim lesbian identities rather than in line with them. Mine is a different approach. I tend to criticise the ‘mainstream’ queer, pointing out that the term ‘queer theory’ is, in fact, an incorrect phrase, for ‘queer’ and ‘theory’ are contradictory notions. In the humanities, ‘theory’ has always been – one way or another – linked with universal laws and grand explanations; ‘queer’, on the other hand, was always supposed to counter these<sup>3</sup>. As much as the concept of queer should remain undefined, then, it seems permissible to appreciate what it should **not** be associated with. Observing these tendencies within social sciences and sexuality studies made me re-focus and re-interpret queer as a perspective, a disposition, a standpoint, and – more importantly – a **method**<sup>4</sup>. Seen this way, queer becomes a tool, **through which**

the lesbian can be recovered and developed. Although the implications of this are numerous, it is language where the queer approach of mine is the most visible; queer will have to remain an operation on the patriarchal language of ‘Western’<sup>5</sup> societies. The simplest way of showing this comes with my subversion of, and objection to, the overtly popular term ‘lesbianism’; pathologising and diminishing, it is a good reminder of discriminatory mechanisms that are hidden in the ‘Western’ culture circle. While Michel Foucault (1998 [1976]) demonstrated how the ‘-ism’ had been created within psychiatric and sexological circles, indicating a problem or a disorder, the term in question has never been rethought and re-adjusted even though a similar process has already happened to ‘homosexuality’, ‘heterosexuality’, and, albeit to a lesser extent, ‘transsexualism’ – these have mostly been referred to as ‘homosexuality’, ‘heterosexuality’, and ‘transsexuality’, and the ‘-ism’ ending, both in English and Polish, continues to be used pejoratively only in political and medical contexts. Taking this into account, in both languages I have been promoting the respectful **‘lesbianity’** (lesbijskość) in place of that only available dictionary form; linguistically, the ‘-ity’ (-ość) ending conveys positivity or, in the worst case, neutrality. An important caveat is in order, though – one of my overall objectives has been to reclaim the concept and praxis of lesbian feminisms, modifying them in the ‘Western’ reality and encouraging their emergence for the local needs of the Polish

context<sup>6</sup>. One of the features of the classic lesbian feminism in the ‘West’ was the clinging to, and pride in, the very idea of lesbianism, as well as the identity that comes with this term. The alteration of mine is merely a discursive tool and as such should not be considered an attack on those women’s experiences; I have met many of the outstanding figures and activists of that time, and have nothing but sheer respect for their preferences in this regard. The approach and changes that I am suggesting are an attempt at an even bigger inclusiveness rather than the erasure of those times and experiences. Lesbian feminisms continue to be a crucial site of individual, social, political, and academic struggles for gendered, sexual, and emotional equity.

With all this as a starting point, I am set to draw the attention to non-heterosexual women’s subjectivities, self-identifications, and actual sexual and emotional experiences as opposed to identities that are fixed and defined externally in the one-dimensionality of so-called ‘heterosexuality’, ‘homosexuality’, or ‘bisexuality’. In the move away from identity towards subjectivity, women in general and lesbians in particular cease to be either objects or abjects<sup>7</sup>, but become actual **subjects**. Although my activity revolving around this theme has many facets, this article focuses on the discursive side of things as observed within academia, particularly feminist practice in Poland. This is where the aforementioned women’s and gender studies programmes should come under scrutiny. As I see it, academic feminisms ought to be the site of

1 At which point I should mention that although it is lesbian studies specifically that I represent and am interested in, I have developed the concept of lesbianity and lesbian subjectivity that is symbolic, open, and inclusive of a plethora of emotional and sexual self-identifications that women can develop. Though a full explanation of this sociological and philosophical matter would go beyond the scope of this article, it is vital to understand that this approach is not tantamount to equating lesbians with bisexual women. For more details see e.g. Olasik, 2017.

2 Another one is my objecting to the social implementation of the concept of the ‘lesbian community’. This, however, I shall skip now as irrelevant for the analysis herein. For more details on this theme see Olasik, 2015a or Olasik, 2015b.

3 For a fuller explanation see e.g. Olasik, 2014 or Olasik, 2018b.

4 In particular, see Heather Love’s activity; the lesbian feminist scholar and activist has been considering queerness in terms of sociological methodologies. See: Love and Peltonen, 2017.

5 I always explain how I make it a point to subvert the contingent power relations and categories by exposing their actual roots and character. At the same time, however, I would be unable to communicate intelligibly without these notions. Thus, placing terms such as ‘East’ or ‘West’ in single quotation marks is my way of undermining these and as such is should be considered part of the queer operation I have mentioned. See: Olasik, 2015b and 2018b for fuller elaborations.

6 See my co-operation in this regard with Kath Browne and Julie Podmore, and – most recently – also with Niharika Banerjea and Eduarda Ferreira. See: Browne, Olasik and Podmore, 2016. The other project is underway; our co-edited book will be published in mid 2019 with Zed Books.

7 Julia Kristeva’s term (1982). See also: Olasik, 2015b for a fuller elaboration on these dependencies.

changes towards personal and political inclusivity. However, for the time being they seem to fail in this task, which is why this article offers a somewhat provocative and destabilising insight.

### The Discursive Lacks<sup>8</sup>

There seems to be a major misunderstanding regarding the themes of genders and sexualities. Mythically and stereotypically, gender is perceived to be 'that thing' that feminists talk about, while sexuality is known to be gay people's agenda or psychologists' area of expertise. While in some social and political realities – and Poland is an example – gender is said to be connected with the so-called 'homosexual propaganda', which resembles the 19th-century-like logics of inversion (Foucault, 1998 [1976]), the themes of sexuality and gender as notions are still separated and misunderstood in terms of what they really are and represent. This is a huge misunderstanding and as such it should be consistently countered – gender and sexuality are inextricably linked and can never be separated, for their role in the 'Western' culture circle is **to justify and complement each other**; sexual desire has been **superimposed on** what had been conceived of as gender. **By definition, then, gender will be sexual as much as the sexual will be gendered.** In consequence, it does not really make sense to analyse, debate, defend – or speak of – one without the other. Sadly, this is exactly what has been happening in the Polish social and academic arenas.

While it is easier to understand common people's lack of knowledge in societies where no sexual education programmes exist, it is quite disturbing when genders and sexualities

are investigated separately on more specialised levels, i.e. in activism and academia. As it is now, the majority of feminist environments and figures fail to address the question of sexuality at all, generating a vicious circle whereby women's equity is misinterpreted and, thus, restricted. Although I always make it a point to recognise differences in the development of feminist discourses across localities – and thus to have reasonable expectations – I do not think that it matters a great deal with regard to lines of thinking and approaches. Prior to the social and political events of the year 2016 – and contrary to what some tend to say (Lis, 2013) – Poland had not seen a proper feminist movement (Majewska, 2017; Środa, 2009); it is also a discursive and substantial mistake to speak of 'waves' of the Polish feminism<sup>9</sup>. Since womanhood in public and political spheres has been the constant and main theme, with the notion of femininity not even questioned or discussed – and it does resemble what the 'West' knows as the first-wave feminism – sexuality has obviously not had a chance to develop into a theme, too. Therefore, with **heterosexuality** not being mentioned or scrutinised over several decades at all, it is hardly surprising that **no separate lesbian component has ever existed in the Polish social and academic spaces.** As I see it, however, this should be an opportunity for present-day efforts and contributions to think creatively rather than take the current state of affairs for granted and repeat someone else's history by following in the 'Western' footsteps, where 'waves' or divisions had formed one by one before intersectionality in general, and sexuality in particular, was taken into account. Indeed, being in the geographical, political, and social Margin as conceptualised by bell hooks (1989), Poland has an opportunity to

<sup>9</sup> For my more detailed elaborations on this see: Olasik, 2015a and 2018b.

see through the Centre and re-adjust other realities' experiences, not allowing for old mistakes to occur locally and making use of them instead, leading to a more rapid progress. Feminism is where this capacity for the local dimension and reflexivity should be the greatest and most powerful. This, however, is not the case at all, with gender still being the overwhelmingly dominant and exclusive area of interest of Polish activists and academics.

### A Sample of Academic Discourse Analysis

With all that has been said in mind, I would like to further support my case by presenting four of gender studies programmes available in Poland, offering a brief commentary on each of them and proving their inadequacies in providing a truly feminist platform for progress, both socially and academically. The exploration in question is going to be a rudimentary sample, but it is one that reveals problems that led me to pursue more serious semantic field analyses with regard to feminist academic events. It is significant to understand why I purposefully chose to focus on **the list of subjects available**, ignoring some of other variables on the one hand and institutional and political circumstances on the other; these I comment on somewhere else, pointing to what kind of research and quantitative data is needed for a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the problem. Since a list of subjects provides **the framework** for the whole programme, it seems entirely justified to assess the contents with the use of this information alone. Internal university documentation that features lengthy descriptions and exact contents of the programmes is valuable, but not relevant when it comes to evaluating the overall structure and descriptions that comprise the official programme and that are available to candidates when they choose to

enrol. Another caveat to bear in mind is that even though this particular article describes four programmes only, which may seem insufficient and presumptuous, I had previously explored this theme in depth and the problem in question remains the same even with the number of almost twenty<sup>10</sup>. Here and now, however, my purpose is merely **to signal a particular alarming tendency and a repetitive pattern** within the local feminism; it is in this context that a simple list of subjects is revealing and makes it possible to call for caution and reflexivity in building new layers of social struggles in contemporary Poland. On a side note, the programmes I am about to mention here come from the academic year 2017/2018 and the data was gathered at the very beginning of that year<sup>11</sup>. All the translations of the subjects are mine.

I should start with presenting the programme of the supposedly most professional and popular gender studies in Poland. Run mostly by recognisable and experienced feminists and educators, it has no mention of sexuality-related issues whatsoever; the only subject of interest from the point of view of a lesbian scholar seeking any link to sexuality is the mysteriously protrusive 'introduction to

<sup>10</sup> All this I tried to explore more thoroughly in my doctoral dissertation when devoting many pages to the question of women's and gender studies programmes from almost all over the world.

<sup>11</sup> Almost all gender studies programmes in Poland are post-graduate, i.e. one can enrol in them when holding a B.A. or M.A. in any discipline; usually there are no requirements. Post-graduate studies here usually last one year or two years at maximum, and they tend to be treated as a mere addition to a CV or a development of a hobby; in the humanities they rarely give actual qualifications or translate into future possibilities (the case might be slightly different with more technical studies or exact sciences). The GEMMA programme I will next refer to is one exception; it is part of an international Master's programme and as such results in the students obtaining the M.A. degree.

<sup>8</sup> This section was more fully developed in my doctoral dissertation exclusively. What I offer here is merely a brief glimpse into this subject; hopefully it provides enough encouragement to further attention to the academic state of affairs in this regard.

masculinity studies' (see the list below). While I fully support its existence as the debate on men's experiences of privilege and oppression are invaluable in discussing gendered power relations, I have also learnt that the recent choice to introduce this theme was made at the cost of a 'female sexuality' subject – or at least its elements – which was also under consideration<sup>12</sup>. Although this event and its political and institutional circumstances require further investigation, it is regrettable – and ironically symbolic – that a truly progressive move towards the acknowledgment of female sexuality has been hindered by a masculinity-profiled choice. This sort of political and institutional secondary discrimination seems unacceptable. Moreover, it is unclear to me why the programme got deprived of the 'sexuality and gender: biology and culture' subject, which had been part of the studies in the previous academic year. Even though it was only one in almost twenty subjects on the list, it nonetheless offered a link between sexuality and gender, provoking a very basic debate on the implications of this juxtaposition. As it is now, the framework of the allegedly most recognisable gender studies programme in Poland is very one-dimensional and, discursively, not sexual at all, which is questionable due to the reasons described earlier.

Anti-discrimination workshops
Feminist urban studies
Feminist philosophy
Gender theory – main terms and concepts
Psychoanalysis
Law, gender, and discrimination
Economics
Equality politics
The history of women's movements and feminisms in Poland, in Europe, and in the world
Literature and gender
Feminist film criticism
Introduction to masculinity studies

The next programme comes from the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw. Its structure is not entirely clear and transparent, which has left me with the timetable of only three subjects; the other three come from the previous academic year and as such offer only a glimpse into what can be expected. The available fact is that the programme enjoys the fame of interdisciplinarity, but this seems to be more theoretical than practical. It is, however, a curious example. The programme features a whole separate subject on the sex work industry; run by Agata Dziuban, PhD, who is an outstanding sociologist and an internationally-acclaimed activist, it will most certainly offer an in-depth professional analysis of female sex workers' status. This, however, stands in stark contrast to the other subjects, which offer no basics regarding the notion of sexuality in contemporary cultures. I fear that the awkwardly professional sex-work-profiled debate will not be fully taken advantage of, since this would require a prior understanding of the inextricability and emergence of gender and sexuality in the first place. This said, I am nonetheless happy that Dziuban was given this chance to introduce the subject and I remain hopeful that the

students will recognise the utmost significance of this theme in spite of its being taken out of the context of more basic social and cultural mechanisms. Other than this, the programme used to offer a historical perspective featuring the motif of queer theory; it is not clear to me how effective this can be provided that no other subjects covered the implications of sexuality a such. While I fully support any chance to introduce this concept to students, it is vital to remember that queer is more of a **consequence** of the construct of sexuality rather than its clarification; therefore, it should not serve as a cultural preface, so to say.

<b>Gender Studies – Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw</b>
Introduction to the question of women's herstories and histories
Gender and crime. Legal, criminological and social analysis
Sex work from the feminist perspective
Culture wars and gender [2016/2017]
The history of gender: Gender/Queer in the history of 20th century [2016/2017]
Gender and new social movements [2016/2017]

Another programme available in Poland, and an important one, is the Erasmus GEMMA programme, offered by the Women's Studies Centre at the University of Lodz – the oldest women's and gender studies centre in Poland. The full name of this rather successful M.A. programme is 'GEMMA Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies in Europe'. Its first semesters offer subjects that are the same for all the centres in Europe and beyond that are part of the programme, while the last semester is adjusted more individually and locally. Although masculinity studies are included as well as it is the only programme in Poland that introduces and addresses the question of intersectionality and race in a more direct manner, sexuality *per se*

still missing and I can only remain hopeful that it is somehow squeezed in the intersectional debates in the class. Altogether, the Centre and its programme stands out as the only one of a truly international and somewhat diverse character, but this is exactly why the lack of an openly sexuality-profiled subject can be disappointing. However, I also believe that the programme's uniqueness (international audience, students with diverse backgrounds and axes of identification, and classes conducted in the English language) makes it possible for the lecturers to adjust the contents of their subjects accordingly, which is, perhaps, a liberty that the other programmes do not enjoy.

<b>Gender Studies – GEMMA programme, University of Lodz</b>
The history of feminism
Feminist theories
Feminist methodologies
Human rights and gender
Introduction to gender in postmodern visual culture
Men and masculinities
Intersectionality and audience analysis in feminist classroom – part 1
Gender and welfare state
Feminist literature and philosophy
Gender representations in advertising
War and imperialism: Postcolonial and feminist perspectives on nationalism
Gender & academic and creative writing
Intersectionality and audience analysis in feminist classroom – part 2
La Frontera and the New Mestiza consciousness: Race, ethnicity and gender at the US-Mexican border
The body in feminist theory and practice

<b>Gender Studies – Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw</b>
<i>Performance studies of word and image in the context of gender studies</i>
Gender politics: history of the term and contemporary strategies of emancipatory movements
Militarism, political violence, and gender. Key debates
Feminist oral history

<sup>12</sup> I highly appreciate Kamila Żukowska's information and comments on this important issue.

The last programme I want to refer to comes from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and is relatively young; the first edition took place in the academic year 2011/2012. This one, to my mind, is the best and most thorough and multi-faceted gender studies programme currently available in Poland. First, it features a separate subject on “the core of femininity”, actually considering and questioning the very category of womanhood; this, as I have shown, is already extraordinary. Second, and along the same lines, the sociology of gender is actually made into a separate subject. Run by Beata Bielska, PhD, it is more likely than not to include the questions of the construction of sex and sexuality in general and female sexuality in particular. Other than this, the programme does introduce masculinity studies, too. I am, however, disappointed that the institution got rid of two indispensable and truly professional subjects that had been part of the programme in the previous academic year, namely ‘the ethics of sexuality’ and ‘the social and cultural conditionings of womanhood throughout history’. Impressive as they were, for some reasons they were not selected for the continuation of the programme. This said, I nevertheless believe that this particular programme is the ‘safest’ and best choice for present-day students in Poland, especially since the many subjects available cover various disciplines and seem to be fairly multi-faceted, approaching the matters under scrutiny from a variety of angles and providing more natural intertextual and intersectional grounds for sexuality than the other programmes do. Sadly, this unique post-graduate programme did not run in the academic year 2018/2019, which, as I have been told by the people involved, is hopefully a one-year gap only.

Gender Studies – 2017/2018, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń
Feminism. Main concepts, theories, and controversies
Feminist cultural studies
The core of femininity. Problems and controversies about the notion of ‘woman’
Interpersonal dialogue – psychological and hermeneutical aspects
Universal and European standards of women’s rights protection
Gender in popular culture
Women in public space
Psychology of gender and power
Ethical basics of respect and tolerance
Literary phantasms of gender
Women, Art, Revolution
Masculinities studies
Feminism and social participation. Project-writing workshops
Anti-discrimination workshop 1. Identity, prejudice, discrimination
Anti-discrimination workshop 2. Anti-discrimination activities, gender, and media
Sociology of gender
Women’s movements and feminism in Poland
Gender equality politics in practice

Again, the commentaries I have just offered are too brief for me to be able to cover the problem in depth; instead, I have conceived of this article as an encouragement to reflection and further research into this theme, for even this basic discourse-analysis research shows serious inadequacies with regard to how gender and sexuality are imagined and investigated. I would like to reiterate, then, that, bluntly speaking, **gender must not be introduced and explained without a reference to, and clarification of, the phenomenon of sexuality**. This said, I shall once again emphasise that there are certain limitations to this

sort of a quick analysis, the main one being my exclusive focus on the list of subjects. I agree that, generally speaking, these can frequently be misleading and hide the true essence or objectives of a course, as well as the number of hours per a meeting is ignored this way. I can easily imagine that some of the lecturers do refer to sexuality while covering their otherwise non-sexual subjects. However, this does not solve the dilemma and cannot serve as a justification; if the question of sexuality is hidden and not expressed through the name of a subject, what does it say about its social and academic status and significance? Therefore, I still defend my selection of the simple method; **it is the availability of themes that points to the character of a whole programme and determines one’s decision to enrol**. It is the names of the subjects above all that are available to candidates and prospective students, guiding them when they seek an attractive programme to enrol in, which is why, as I have already pointed out, they were more relevant to this analysis than the internal university documentation would have been. Of course, this theme and research should be continued and supplied with data about the number of hours per subject, the syllabi, literature covered, or the number of students attending these programmes across larger cities in Poland. Interviews with lecturers might also be considered with regard to the actual contents and coverage of particular themes, but all of this would lead to a research project with completely different purposes; it would not cancel the significance of the observations herein as well as the insufficiencies visible in the construction and framework of the programmes, which is what I wished to focus on. Also, a regular update is needed with regard to how the programmes continue to change on a year-to-year basis.

With all these commentaries and caveats in mind, the bottom line is that – at least for

the time being – **gender as represented and discussed in the Polish academic feminism does not seem to be sexual at all** and I believe that I have already explained how and why this tendency points to a major substantial mistake and a discursive misunderstanding. To be fair, the situation is not much different in other localities; I have analysed almost thirty women’s and gender studies programmes from all over the world<sup>13</sup> and have found only few that can be considered truly emancipatory with regard to several axes of women’s identifications, and that seem to treat gender and sexuality in the same way. On a side note, there are instances of the so-called ‘gender and sexuality studies’, which makes it easier to justify the inclusion of sexuality-related themes, since they emphasise the significance and equality of both components. As I have already clarified, **gender is already sexual by definition**, which is why ‘gender studies’ should not be about gender exclusively. However, I could agree that in the Polish institutional reality putting ‘sexuality’ in a name of a whole programme would be a progressive step, i.e. one that would, perhaps, encourage feminists’ interest in sexuality, translating into the necessity to include it in programmes’ contents in a more open and systematic way.

All in all, it should be clear by now that women’s and gender studies<sup>14</sup> cannot afford to be non-sexual, and yet this is precisely what happens. That said, I strongly emphasise my careful selection of words here – it would be inappropriate to use the word ‘asexual’

<sup>13</sup> With the exception of South America; the University of Buenos Aires failed to respond to my enquiries. Again, the analysis in question was part of my doctoral dissertation.

<sup>14</sup> Also on a side note, the relationship between women’s studies and gender studies – and its historical character – is irrelevant for the purposes herein.

to describe the contemporary Polish feminism<sup>15</sup>, for asexuality is a perfectly legitimate preference and choice, and as such it implies reflexivity and should not be used in a pejorative context. The way that the present-day programmes and activist initiatives and discourses<sup>16</sup> are constructed offers no auto-reflexivity in this regard, which is why I choose to call this feminism non-sexual instead. This is even more disturbing when considering the dynamic character of contemporary changes and recent political events both in 'Western' societies and in Poland; feminist activists have to be present and outspoken, so it should be a great opportunity for the question of sexuality in general, and female sexuality in particular, to emerge. The same is true for debates around race, but, first, this does happen with feminisms in the 'West', while Poland as a monocultural society – and one known for the right-wing overtly national and hostile attitude to non-whiteness – does not seem to develop interest in this theme and opportunity to discuss it (with a notable exception of the aforementioned GEMMA programme). Second, though, the question of race – and the resultant axes of privileges and oppressions – is where a certain extension of gender-

15 Having worked on this subject area with colleagues from other localities, I usually speak of a plurality or multiplicity of feminisms. This, however, is not an adequate phrasing to describe the Polish context, where the one-dimensionality of feminist debates is striking. On a side note, recent abortion debates and Black Protests in Poland are extremely important and valuable, as well as they did fulfil their political role, but so far they have failed to address the question of sexuality itself.

16 Obviously, this article focuses on the academic discourse, but the situation in activism is equally unsatisfactory, with no interest in female sexuality whatsoever. Both in literature and on the grassroots street level, and despite many an opportunity, the question of sexuality – and even the very term – continues to be a taboo. As mentioned above, the Black Protests of 2016 and 2017 provide one example of this phenomenon.

related dynamics emerges. Sexuality, however, is an **ingrained** part of gender, so it does not need an extension. As it is now, however, both feminist activism and academia seem to be involved in a vicious circle, where neither dares to speak the sexual, **depriving the notion of gender of its culturally-designed meanings and potentials**.

With all this in mind, I suggest that what I have recently conceived of as the politics of **sexuality mainstreaming** should be considered as a valid framework across feminisms and academic gender studies programmes. An indirect and somewhat provocative reference to the common and official gender mainstreaming guidelines, the role of sexuality mainstreaming would not be to cancel the importance of the former policy, but, rather, to extend its scope and shift its focus by ensuring that what we came to know as gender does begin to involve the sexuality component for a change, which – as I have shown – should have never been doubted and erased in the first place. With gender remaining the keyword of feminist environments and European policies alike, it is now time to emphasise the proper places and spaces of sexuality within the discourses in question.

### Towards Interdisciplinary Lesbian Studies

I have devoted much space to the engaged critique of the current state of affairs regarding the one-dimensionality of Polish feminisms, although once again I acknowledge that it can only be treated as an introduction, an encouragement, and a certain indication of a problem rather than a full analysis, especially since this all needs to be put into the context of other women's and gender studies centres across localities. It is only fair that I should offer a solution or an alternative to the problem I identified. This is where my project of academic

lesbian studies comes, one that would inevitably start with three notions: interdisciplinarity, difference, and geography.

Significantly, Polish academia seems to be rather sceptical as to the idea of transdisciplinary investigations, with the status of mono-disciplinary education being high, as opposed to multi-disciplinary efforts and research. While the 'Western' academia has gained years of experience in bridging gaps, carrying out multi-faceted analyses, and relying on interdisciplinary faculties and projects of a diverse character, Poland does not seem to trust such tendencies. Many scholars trained in a given discipline still cling to the ideal of clear and not blurred lines when it comes to science and research; since this is how they had been trained years ago, it seems that interdisciplinary has not been understood properly and does not have good conditions to develop<sup>17</sup>. This is readily visible in sociology<sup>18</sup>. Importantly, feminism is a site that should always work across disciplinary divisions, and yet its Polish version rarely goes beyond sociology or philosophy. That being said, lesbian studies are inherently multi-disciplinary, for both womanhood and sexuality permeate – and are the focus of – numerous disciplines, sub-disciplines, fields, and spheres of social and individual life. This, in turn, translates into how

17 Which is likely to deepen in the light of the new national policy, known as 'Ustawa 2.0', that the Ministry of Science and Higher Education implemented in 2018; the sudden and damaging revolution in the whole system precludes the idea of lecturers and researchers working within more than two precisely specified sub-disciplines.

18 See: Kurczewska and Lejzerowicz, 2014 for a single example of a whole volume devoted to the theme of interdisciplinarity; the book offers a collection of articles, some of which question the 'fad', while others dare to accept its potential, but the overall tone points to cautiousness and mistrust. If interdisciplinarity in Poland is considered, it is usually in a rather limited manner, i.e. mainly in terms of a bridge between sociology and philosophy specifically.

multi-dimensional the task of such a university programme or faculty needs to be. Indeed, I have devised of a whole separate programme that will hopefully be considered as an actual university module as soon as possible. Since I am unable to share it here<sup>19</sup>, I intend to present it conceptually and rather generally; this should be interpreted as both the conclusion of this paper and the invitation to a more inclusive approach and reflexivity on the part of feminist agendas in Poland. Above all, the interdisciplinarity of the programme I have in mind involves its covering a wide variety of areas, such as knowledge production, reflection on the role of language, cross-cultural analyses of genders and sexualities, feminist epistemologies, human geography, post-colonial experiences, rural studies, the role of social movements, story-telling as opposed to truth-telling, the question of Anglo-American hegemony, art, literary studies<sup>20</sup>, or women in physics and other exact sciences. These, of course, are to be explored through proper reading materials<sup>21</sup> as well as distinct and more spontaneous discussions. Intertextual (and intersectional) as any project of lesbian studies should undoubtedly be, the emphasis will be placed on difference, with the concept of a 'lesbian community' being adequately addressed, challenged, subverted, and replaced

19 Being the actual objective and conclusion of my doctoral dissertation, it has been endorsed in professional reviews and as such awaits the official publication and institutional initiative.

20 See: Wilton, 1995 for a brilliant and inspiring analysis in this regard. One outstanding example of possible interventions into the *status quo* of literary interpretations is when the author asks, "[I]s the dyke's *Orlando* a different book from the homophobe's *Orlando*, and how is that difference significant?" (Wilton, 1995, p. 118.)

21 Sadly, many of them are available in the English language only, which begs for rapid professional translations that would counter the Anglophone hegemony in science in general and sexuality studies in particular.

with a proposition of a multiplicity of dialogic lesbian movements and initiatives<sup>22</sup>.

What all this comes down to is the emergence of a multiplicity of lesbian feminisms, which, again, is no clear-cut issue. In more 'Western' activist and academic realities, the emphasis should be placed on the significance of plurality, which, as I have already mentioned, is what my international cooperation involves. Locally, however, what Poland needs is **any** lesbian feminist awareness to develop<sup>23</sup>. This has recently begun to take place with the boldness and multi-facetedness of the 'Creative Feminine Tandem' as well as the newly established SISTRUM Association, both based in Warsaw<sup>24</sup>. It is regrettable, however, that no example to follow comes from the academia, where recognisable feminist figures are active, inviting the chance for the translation of professional knowledges of sexuality into the public life and awareness. Sadly, at least for now **no interest in female sexual subjectivities is visible**, let alone a special focus. The lesbian studies programme that I have conceived of is to be a highly specialised and academically scrutinised platform for research and educational purposes above all. It would hopefully encourage a difference-profiled lesbian-feminist line of thinking, offering protection from the more unacceptable mistakes of the 'Western' past, i.e. clinging to the idea of the almost mystical 'lesbian identity' to such an extent that transphobia and bi-phobia were common among the communities. A new approach will require a change of perspec-

tives, too. This is where I promote the field of human geography, with feminist geographies, geographies of sexualities, and also lesbian geographies as its substantial parts. The major discipline of human geography is non-existent in the Polish academic and institutional realities; it is, thus, hardly surprising that the latter sub-fields have not been taken up by Polish geographers either. Though the spatial and structural constraints of this article do not allow me to describe all the intricacies and dependencies behind these areas of expertise – all of which emerged in the UK – I shall refer to key authors and representatives, namely Kath Browne<sup>25</sup>, Jon Binnie<sup>26</sup>, David Bell<sup>27</sup>, Gill Valentine (2001), David T. Evans (1993), or Diane Richardson (2000 and 2017). Curiously, they seem to have bridged the gap between geography and sociology, leading to interdisciplinarity in the most natural way. Occupying the role of, among others, a geographer of sexuality, I have been involved with the above-mentioned fields for several years now<sup>28</sup>; I cannot stress enough how crucial it is to incorporate these perspectives into gender-and-sexuality studies in general, and the reflection on female sexualities in particular. As I see it, mature and properly adjusted gender studies is a site where it could eventually happen.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this short article was to point to a dangerous tendency within present-day academic feminist theory and practice in Poland, where modifications and alterations are urgently needed for the role of sexuality to be acknowledged and visibilised (Olasik, 2018a). Of course, the question of gender

25 See: Browne, Lim and Brown, 2007; Browne and Nash, 2009.

26 See: Bell and Binnie, 2000.

27 See: Bell and Valentine, 1995.

28 See: Olasik, 2017 and 2018b for most accurate descriptions.

studies is just one of the sites to be scrutinised, but it is the major one; these programmes **represent and embody** academic feminism and as such have the most profound effect on its whole profile, which is why they require a discursive and practical intervention. This aside, the praxis of lesbian studies can additionally aid the task of 'sexualising' contemporary gender debates by encouraging personal, social, and academic reflexivity on a plethora of sexual and emotional auto-creations with regard to femininity. It is only then that a sort of lesbian-feminist awareness can emerge on the institutional level and be developed into so much more than several people's interest in American manifestoes from the 1980s<sup>29</sup>. Although I tend to repeat that the classic lesbian feminism was **the** greatest era of lesbian visibility and creativity due to the proliferation and omnipresence of various forms of the written word<sup>30</sup>, I also make it a point to promote a reasonable continuation of that social agenda, i.e. one that would be based on respectful accommodation of differences on the one hand and enquiries into the many dimensions of lesbian **citizenships** on the other. Pursuing the question of who a Polish lesbian citizen is has been a theme that I came to recognise through the geographical dimension of my sociological activity, and one that I will be developing in the most foreseeable future. However, addressing this matter requires substantive and thematic changes within the structure and environment of gender and women's studies, for without their support non-heterosexual women continue to be sidelined, while feminism remains one-dimensional, heteronormative, and divisive. While similar interventions are necessary

29 A direct reference to niche attempts at translating and discussing classic lesbian-feminist texts in the 1990s.

30 For elaboration see: Olasik, 2015a and 2017.

when it comes to the activist side, I believe in the power of feminist academia to encourage and drive grass-roots initiatives and, above all, knowledge production<sup>31</sup>. It is, therefore, only through a complete and thorough revision of Polish feminist tools and agendas that a full extent of sexual and emotional subjectivities can finally be included in what is now a socially dynamic and politically hectic locality. It will also be the moment when, both discursively and socially, lesbian women<sup>32</sup> can become actual **subjects**. ☺

**Marta Olasik's** area of expertise is lesbian studies, which she reflects on from the perspectives of the sociology of knowledge and geographies of sexualities primarily. Her efforts concentrate on re-introducing the component of sexuality into feminism in general and academic analyses of gender in particular. Her PhD dissertation is a pioneering interdisciplinary conceptualisation of lesbian subjectivities (due to be published in both languages) and aims at introducing a proper separate lesbian-studies discourse into the Polish academia as well as promoting the branch of human geography. The next step for Dr Olasik will be to conduct proper empirical research into the question of lesbian subjectivities in Poland. Her international academic activity is extensive and includes the cooperation with prominent geographers of sexualities

31 The activism-academia binary divide is an artificial one and I tend to challenge and subvert it. This, however, goes beyond the scope of this article, which is why I am using these terms only conventionally and in their simplest meanings.

32 See Zita 1992 for a glimpse into this theme. Although I have also spoken of male lesbians, too, as my initial plan for PhD research was to conduct semi-structured interviews with 'biological men' who self-identify as lesbians. My encounter with geographers of sexualities made me realise how futile this sort of work would be in a social and academic space that has never seen a distinct lesbian component in the first place; this is where I decided to create conceptual bases for academic lesbian studies in the first place.

22 This, obviously, requires a proper explanation. See: Olasik, 2015a and 2018b. Also, Judith Butler's "coalitional politics" (1990, pp. 19–20) is a helpful concept here.

23 See: Browne and Olasik, 2016 for an introduction to the idea of the classic mainstream lesbian feminism.

24 The full Polish names are, respectively, 'Damski Tandem Twórczy' and 'Stowarzyszenie Sistrum – Przestrzeń Kultury Lesbijkiej'.

in the attempt to generate a plurality of lesbian feminisms; she has also given a seminar for post-docs and senior academics in the International Gender Studies Centre at the University of Oxford. Her general objective is to promote an intertextual attitude, where lesbianity (sic!) is an open field of possibilities for emotional and sexual self-creation.

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## Studia nad podmiotowością lesbijską jako sposób przeciwdziałania nieseksualnym feminizmom w Polsce

### Abstrakt

Artykuł ten jest refleksją nad obecną sytuacją studiów nad seksualnością, a szczególnie stanem rzeczy dotyczącym reprezentacji kobiet nieheteroseksualnych we współczesnym świecie akademii i w feminizmach. Specjalizując się w studiach nad podmiotowością lesbijską, z jednej strony staram się ustanowić odrębny dyskurs *lesbian studies* w polskiej nauce, a z drugiej chcę rozpowszechnić metodę interdyscyplinarną jako środek do zaszczepienia lesbijskich feminizmów, które byłyby odpowiednio zmodyfikowane i dostosowane do lokalnych potrzeb. Obroniwszy poświęconą temu rozprawę doktorską, w niniejszym artykule skoncentruję się na jednej z jej części, mianowicie na tej dotyczącej problemu nieadekwatności współczesnych studiów *gender*. Choć ogólnie moja działalność plasuje się w obrębie socjologii seksualności, zazwyczaj konceptualizuję zagadnienia mnie interesujące przez pryzmat socjologii wiedzy i geografii człowieka, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem geografii feministycznych i geografii seksualności. Mając to na uwadze, zamierzam dokonać pobieżnego przeglądu kilku współczesnych programów studiów kobiecych i/lub *gender* w Polsce po to, by wykazać zarówno ich niezdolność do radzenia sobie z kobiecą seksualnością, jak i, w konsekwencji, ich symboliczne i dosłowne wymazywanie lesbijskości. Niniejsza pobieżna analiza stanowi oczywiście jedynie początek dyskusji, ponieważ prezentuje tylko próbkę wysiłków eksploracyjnych w temacie feminizmów akademickich, lecz jest to analiza, która ujawnia pewne niepokojące tendencje.

**Słowa kluczowe:** studia lesbijskie, socjologia wiedzy, studia gender, geografie seksualności, lesbijski feminizm.