

# Essay review: Me/no lesbian: the trouble with “troubling lesbian identities”

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*Subject to identity: Knowledge, sexuality, and academic practices in higher education.*

By SUSAN TALBURT (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 285 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 0 7914 4572 0 (paper).

Meno. And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know? (Plato, *Meno*)

As one civilized person to another: Matthew Shepard shouldn't have died. We should all burn with shame. (Tony Kushner, author of *Angels in America*, from *The Nation*, 11 November 1998)

It has taken me just over a year to write this review. The length of time this has taken me is, in some significant measure, related directly to the challenges of doing justice to an intellectually substantial book that is, in my view, deeply problematic both politically and ethically. I have struggled with Susan Talburt's exemplary ethnographic study of three lesbian faculty members, not because of any specific intellectual or technical limitations of her research but because of *the tensions between its theoretical commitments to postmodernism and what I construe as its practical and concomitant commitments to political ambivalence*. I have endeavored to read between Talburt's sentences and to ask what kind of story is *Subject to identity*, and in particular, what are its ethical dimensions with respect to ending homophobia and disrupting heteronormativity within the relentlessly heterosexist and homophobic hallways, playgrounds, staff-rooms, and classrooms of North America's public educational institutions. I begin with an autobiographical preamble as a way of locating myself as a particular kind of reader of Talburt's significant, and, at times, brilliant text.

As a public and professional “homosexual,” I know what it is to experience systemic discrimination. In my first year (1989) as a faculty member at a major, publicly funded Canadian university, I asked the Faculty Association to challenge the institution's lack of access to spousal benefits for gay and lesbian employees. Overnight I was publicly identified as a “lesbian,” despite never having made that claim myself, and was presumed and constructed as “other” and as “deviant.” Overnight I went from “young and promising new kid on the block” to, in the words of perhaps the most prominent feminist academic on campus, a “political ass who wouldn't get tenure anywhere in North America.” I was marginalized in my department, I got hate mail, students confronted me in classes and were sometimes

downright hostile, and I got death threats on my answering machine. When I asked my Dean to deal with the fact that homophobia was profoundly affecting the quality of my work environment, she angrily retorted by saying that since I couldn't prove it, she was under no obligation to deal with it. After all, she said, there are other gay and lesbian faculty who don't seem to experience any of these problems.

The "don't ask don't tell" policy was working well here. I was the only "out" lesbian faculty member – I was out on a limb and they were sawing it off. When my tenure review rolled around, I began a year-long bloody battle for my professional life. Twice I was formally denied tenure. Formal accounts written about my professional accomplishments characterized my work as insubstantial and included disparaging accusations about a lack of professionalism and unethical conduct on my part. Resigned, I resigned. The university quickly accepted my resignation. My career as an academic was, effectively, over. I wrote an impassioned letter to the university president outlining the errors, omissions, and just plain lies that littered my tenure file. A month later, I received a phone call from the president's office asking me to please pick up the letter containing his recommendation. A few weeks after delivering what I had thought then was my final lecture – a paper (Bryson & de Castell, 1993) about how being a lesbian in a faculty of education constituted, to paraphrase Nicole Brossard, an unten(ur)able discursive posture, I was awarded tenure.

A decade later, the same university approved an undergraduate minor in "Lesbian and Gay Studies." The steering committee, made up of queer faculty, which I had founded to consider curricular issues following the spousal benefits victory, met at the last minute to discuss a proposed program name change to "Critical Studies in Sexuality." The discussions that took place around the name change were highly charged, emotionally explosive, and tense. An odd bifurcation emerged in the arguments of the group in favor of the name change. Intellectually sophisticated expositions of postmodern "identity as performance" and "identity as discourse," which I want to argue are actually anti-identity theories, were juxtaposed with seemingly pragmatic concerns that potential donors to this program as well as prospective students might be put off by a necessary association with the words "Lesbian" and "Gay". In a moment that, several years later, still makes me nauseous, I found myself locked in a losing battle where the most sophisticated theoretical constructs of the day were being used to shore up what looked to me like a homophobic and discriminatory name change – a change that put "lesbian" and "gay" back in the closet, cloaked in shame, ridiculed as "essentialist" and "old school" and disposable, because identity politics was bad for business. "Lesbian and Gay" – never for a minute did I somehow fail to understand the intellectual significance of theoretical anti-essentialist arguments against a simple representationalist ontology. Rather, it seemed that if simply being identified "as one" could still, like Matthew Shepard, get you killed, then institutionalized ambivalence about laying claim to this label was a choice with ethical consequences that I simply could not accept.

Emancipatory ideals have been a critical part of the liberal social justice project of public education in North America for more than a century. A late arrival on the institutional antidiscrimination agenda has been *homophobia*, and the implementation of proactive equity policies to address the specific needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) members of educational institutions. At school (as elsewhere), few LGBT persons, whether teachers or students, find themselves in environments where it is either safe, or considered appropriate, to identify publicly as such (Khayatt, 1994; Smith & Smith, 1998). And publicly funded schools, whether ele-

mentary or postsecondary, have dragged their feet and given voice to a significant chorus of nay-sayers dead set against addressing the equity needs of LGBT community members, let alone undertaking as a serious intellectual project the goal of considering the epistemological, curricular, and pedagogical consequences of the systemic exclusion of LGBT topics, themes, and contributions from the canon.

*Subject to identity: Knowledge, sexuality, and academic practices in higher education* by Susan Talburt engages the reader critically with the difference *being* a lesbian faculty member might make to business-as-usual at Liberal U, described as a North American research university. Reciprocally, this research also tackles the ways in which, as a significant “modifier,” *academic* might distinctively inflect the meanings of *lesbian* when juxtaposed in the realm of higher education. Talburt’s research consists of ethnographic case studies of three women: Olivia, a white associate professor of English; Julie, a white full professor of religious studies; and Carol, an African-American assistant professor of journalism. And there is more to this project than a carefully crafted ethnographic account of academic culture and the lives of three lesbian faculty members.

*Subject to identity* does a lot of its best work on the theoretical plane, engaging with great scholarly rigor (a) contemporary debates about the increasingly corporate state of higher education as read through the lens of the late Bill Readings’s (1996) *The university in ruins*; (b) performative models of identity, agency, and difference that challenge the monologic character of identity politics and enrich and expand profitably on de Certeau’s (1984) *Practice of everyday life*; and (c) complex and shifting relationships between alterity and pedagogical authority by means of fine-grained fieldwork that exposes what Talburt refers to as the “local renegotiations of the social and academic in the professional lives of Carol, Olivia, and Julie” (p. 74).

As a way of getting into Talburt’s story about *lesbian* academics, let’s start by taking a close look at the teller of this tale, how Talburt constitutes her authorial identity vis-à-vis her subject(s), and, equally as crucial, to consider the significance of the make-up of her research sample – who are her main characters, and just what kind of lesbian academics are they? Threaded through both Talburt’s own identity-disclosure statements and her description of the three women chosen for this project is an overarching ambivalence concerning the significance of *being* lesbian to one’s various engagements with/in higher education. In the introduction to the book, Talburt distances herself from the subject/s of her inquiry, referring to lesbians as “they,” and makes the following enigmatic claim: “I began with *lesbian* at the center of my inquiry. To invoke the category locates me, I suspect, as a person who has benefited from participation in social, political and intellectual projects undertaken by lesbians, despite my ambivalences” (p. 4).

Since, up to this point in the text, lesbians have been invoked as a category of persons who actually exist in the world (as opposed to a convenient discursive fiction), and have been Othered pronominally by being referred to as *they* (e.g., “Implicit in my thinking were beliefs that there may be something ‘different’ in the work of lesbian-identified academics, that *their* ‘voices’ are not canonized, and that *they* may have identifiably different relations to students or knowledges *because they* are lesbian” [emphasis added] (p. 3), the reader is left not knowing what, other than a kind of detached scholarly interest, would motivate an *apparently* nonlesbian academic to, as Talburt puts it, “disturb habits of thinking about the points of intersection of *lesbian* and *academic*” (p. 1). This research asks, “What if ‘lesbian’ isn’t a salient lens? Or a personal identity?” (p. 23). Talburt asks, pointedly, “What does it mean to conduct

an empirical study of lesbian academics if *lesbian* does not carry stable meanings?" (p. 14).

Much like the Socratic conundrum that philosophers refer to as "Meno's Paradox" or the "Paradox of Inquiry" (Cohen, 2000), an important question for researchers, and one that is raised by *Subject to identity*, is: How can you inquire into something about which you know nothing that is empirically verifiable, objective, or finite? This is also a paradigmatic puzzle for researchers working "with/in the post-modern" (Lather, 1991).

In Plato's (1953) Meno dialogue, Socrates shows Meno through an elaborate, and, Higgins (1994) argues, arrogant and arbitrary language game, that nothing Meno thought he knew about *virtue* (arete) holds. Truth dissolves into language, or discourse, we might say, today (see Butler, 1997; Derrida, 1978; and for incisive critiques see also Brodrigg, 1992; Smith, 1999).

Critical motivational and concomitant ethical and political questions must be asked concerning the *destabilizing inquirer* role played by Socrates in the *Meno*, and Talburt in *Subject to identity*. It is commonly assumed that relentless inquiry is motivated by a desire for knowledge and insight, and that its purported educative effects are either benign, or positive. However, as Jackson (2001) notes, "After all his attempts at defining 'arete' have been dismissed, an exasperated Meno claims that Socrates' interrogation has 'stunned' him as would the shock of the torpedo fish. The effect of the interrogation has not illuminated Meno's knowledge of what 'arete' is but robbed him of that knowledge."

A persistent question that haunted my reading of *Subject to identity* was: What are the ethical implications of conducting research that aims to destabilize *lesbian* identity? What does it mean to carry out a deconstructive ontological project within a realm that looks, to me, like a battlefield littered with wounded bodies and peopled with proud men and women who have put their lives, careers, family affiliations and the like on the line just for the right to lay claim, and proudly, to lesbian or gay identity? As Braidotti (1987) argues: "In order to announce the death of the subject, one must first have gained the right to speak as one."

If Talburt's research focus is *lesbian* academics, why choose Julie, Olivia, and Carol as case-study subjects? What salient characteristics inflect and skew this tiny sample? Well, it is probably of greatest salience to this reader that, like Talburt, all three women are, paradoxically, given the project's ostensive goal, deeply ambivalent about *being* lesbians. As Talburt notes, "Lesbian identity" was not central to the women's understanding of self or the constitution of their department positionings" (p. 139). She affirms, in even more unambiguous terms, that, "Julie, Olivia, and Carol do not seek agency through voice and visibility as lesbians but in the domain of their intellectual lives" (p. 220).

In fact, Talburt's interviews, and fieldnotes from classroom observations, indicate that all three have intentionally shaped their pedagogical and other professional practices in relation to the topic of (homo)sexuality so as to assure for themselves classroom and departmental spaces of nondisclosure and nonidentification as "lesbian." As Julie puts it, "All it [self-disclosure as a lesbian] would do to those poor little freshmen sitting in my Introduction to Christianity class would just make them all upset" (p. 103). Olivia is described as "an academic 'star' whose intellectual project is to debunk the category lesbian . . ." (p. 27). Drawing on an interview with Olivia, Talburt reports on "her rejection of self-announcing her sexual orientation, and her dissatisfaction with lesbian communities and political activism" (p. 28).

Carol, Talburt writes, “defines her roles as faculty member . . . primarily in relation to her race and gender . . . . Her race obscures her lesbianism . . . ” (p. 29). On the topic of self-disclosure, Carol argues:

I don’t have to reveal my sexuality to teach about it any more than a straight person. . . . I want my sexuality to be ambiguous. . . . Even better if they think I am a straight black woman who raises the subject because it is crucial to our understanding of whatever we’re talking about. (p. 96)

And I must add, here, that Talburt’s description of Carol, gleaned from her fieldnotes written just after their first meeting, seems bizarre, redolent with practices of stigmatization, and racist, despite the author’s weak rhetorical strategy of distancing herself from the account by framing it as “imagining colleagues’ responses to her:” “She strikes me as an ‘acceptable black.’ She is well-spoken, articulate, uses ‘standard English’ and doesn’t slip into jargon or threatening dialects. . . . She’s not scary in appearance, either as black or as lesbian – autonomous body movement but not dykey” (p. 31).

One of the strengths of Talburt’s research as it is reported in *Subject to identity* consists in its careful attention via extensive microgenetic fieldwork, including multiple in-depth interviews and classroom observations, to the ways in which particular actions undertaken by Carol, Olivia, and Julie are both constitutive of their identities in practice, and constituted by what Dorothy Smith (1999) refers to as the “ruling relations” that give shape to power as it operates in institutional contexts. Talburt describes this as “Julie’s, Olivia’s, and Carol’s enactments of intellectual in academic practice” (p. 67) and as “the construction of Olivia’s, Carol’s, and Julie’s pedagogical uses of existing norms relating to knowledge and identity as articulations of their intellectual lives, yet mediated by institutional and social structures” (p. 74).

The most trenchant questions I am left with after my multiple readings of *Subject to identity* are as follows. First, what is the role of data collection when the research sample so clearly is skewed in the direction of creating apparently authoritative empirical support for Talburt’s theoretical bent – that “lesbian isn’t a salient lens?” How might Talburt’s story have changed had she included in her sample (a) successful lesbian academics who, unlike Carol, Julie, and Olivia, are unabashedly “queer, out, and proud” in their various roles as university-based intellectuals; (b) lesbian academics whose careers have been threaded through with institutionally and personally mediated gay-bashing; and (c) women who have been fired from their academic jobs because of homophobic responses to their determination to be unambiguously and publicly “lesbian?” And by this, I most emphatically do not mean academics who are partial to a simple, identity politics notion of “lesbian” as constitutive of some kind of unproblematic ontological category.

In a discussion of the complexities involved in teaching a lesbian studies course with Suzanne de Castell (Bryson & de Castell, 1993), we argued that the tensions between postmodern challenges to identity politics and the material struggles of people identified as gay or lesbian constitute a starting-point for inquiry, and not an argument for dispensing with identity, as follows:

Invariably, speaking as a lesbian, one is the discursive outsider – firmly entrenched in a marginal essentialized identity that, ironically, we have to participate in by naming our difference – this is rather like having to dig one’s own ontological grave . . . . Reading the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*

one dis/covers:

*Queer: verb- to spoil, put out of order, to put into an embarrassing or disadvantageous situation.*

It seems that a worthwhile avenue for the elucidation of a queer praxis might be explored here by considering the value of an actively que(e)rying pedagogy – of queering its technics and scribbling graffiti over its texts, of coloring outside of the lines so as to deliberately take the wrong route on the way to school – going in an altogether different direction than that specified by a monologic destination. This seems a promising approach indeed for refashioning pedagogy in the face of the myriad institutionally sanctioned “diversity management” (Mohanty, 1990) programs that, today, threaten to crowd out and silence most opportunities for radical emancipatory praxis.

Second, what benefits are likely accrued, and for whom, from making one’s lesbianism ambiguous and a site of performed ambivalence? A fundamental question not addressed in Talburt’s work is whether it is the same thing to be ambivalent about lesbianism as it is about heterosexuality. Or to put it another way: is ambivalence about one’s heterosexual identity simply the status quo (which has its own politics) and self-admitted and self-conscious ambivalence about one’s lesbian identity a form of political quietism?

One might reasonably conclude that Talburt enlisted the voices of these three women in particular so as to recount, and lend authority to, a very specific kind of tale about how to be a *successful* lesbian academic – a “good” lesbian whose ambivalent performance of her lesbianism ensures continuity for the predominantly heterosexist discursive economy of Liberal U. As Talburt notes, Liberal U is not a safe haven for gays and lesbians: “While some undergraduate and graduate students are ‘out’ on campus, few gay and lesbian faculty are open about their sexuality” (p. 52). And Talburt explains further that the active construction of silences concerning homosexuality, otherwise referred to as “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” is connected to tacit expectations of who faculty are and what they do, playing itself out in definitions of acceptable or unacceptable behavior (p. 70). And so, it seems to this reader, unacceptable that a very important question raised in *Subject to identity* remains fundamentally unexamined and unanswered, concerning the validity of Talburt’s argument that “Ambiguity as well can combat heterosexism and homophobia” (p. 96).

My third and final question is related to the first two, and gestures both to the difficulties, and the ethical implications for researchers of, as Talburt puts it, “invoking a category whose meanings at once seem overdetermined and at other moments elusive” (p. 34). Talburt concludes, “By centering much of my inquiry on intellectual, personal, and professional meanings of ‘lesbian’ . . . I have invoked a category that can obscure more than it reveals” (p. 191). I disagree vehemently with this conclusion and want to suggest, in its place, that it is only by conducting research that initially sought out a totalizing answer to the question “What/Who is a lesbian academic?” that one could then conclude that an invocation of the category produces obscurity and overdetermined meanings.

In essence, what seems most productive about *Subject to identity* is that, by means of elegantly executed fieldwork, Talburt has produced a compelling portrait of the practices that both constitute, and are constituted by, successful female academics who are ambivalent about taking up lesbian identity in their professional culture. A conclusion inspired by Goffman’s (1963) work on the “identity management strate-

gies” of the stigmatized might be to say that successful lesbian academics work diligently and intentionally to reduce the impact of homophobia. To put forward “lesbian” as an ontological category – a category of *being* – whose meaning(s) are amenable to elucidation and explication by means of empirical research methods, and are then systematically destabilized by deconstructive inquiry, is, like Socrates in the *Meno*, to be implicated in a “language game” inevitably doomed to produce *aporia* – the limits of what can be known, and doubt concerning what once seemed like commonsensical constructs.

We don’t and can’t know *what* “lesbian” means, where *lesbian* refers to an ontological category that is always already overdetermined by culturally and historically specific discursive formations. We do, however, know about the practices of the ideology of homophobia – including its insistence on lesbian silence and ambivalence – and therefore we have to pay very close critical attention to any project that prioritizes and appears to give value to – normativizes – ambivalence about lesbian identity, especially as it really does nothing to deal with what we do know about, which is systemic discrimination against those identified as lesbian or gay. As Monique Wittig (1995, personal communication) argued during a discussion about the ethical implications of postmodernism(s) for lesbian and gay studies: “The real question about lesbians is not, ‘Who are we?’ but, ‘How have we survived?’.”

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### Note

1. *Subject to identity* is based on Talburt’s (1996) dissertation research, entitled, *Troubling lesbian identities: intellectual voice and visibility in academia*.

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