

## *Sue Lees: An Appreciation*

Professor Sue Lees will have been very familiar to readers of *Gender & Education* for her quiet brilliance in innovative feminist scholarship, theory and practice across a wealth of issues from education, to sex education to rape and sexual violence. She was a passionate feminist and the pun in the title of one of her more recent books *Ruling Passions* (1997) seems to exemplify her perspective on her life as a feminist activist and scholar. In fact, as the sub-title suggests, it was about her analysis of sexual violence, reputation and the law. She will be very sadly missed by feminist activists, theorists (and colleagues turned close friends) not only in the academic and educational community but also for her policy, legal and media work for which she had become extremely well known in the last decade of her life. Perhaps she became best known publicly because of her cameo appearance on the Channel 4 11 o'clock show with Ali G, immortalised on the Ali G video for her mocking defence of feminism as being more serious than an evening event.

She died of ovarian cancer on September 16<sup>th</sup> 2002 after a long and strong struggle in which she put up enormous resistance to what was in the end the inevitable. Through her fortitude and resilience she survived for over a year longer than had been anticipated by the doctors and from her own family history of cancer. Her illness was diagnosed early in 2001. I remember it well as it was just after she became involved in putting together the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) submission for women's studies from the University of North London (UNL) to HEFCE. Sue had asked me to comment upon the quality of the submission and to advise on improvements. It seemed to me that the quality of the work in her unit at UNL was excellent, especially her own breadth of writing, publication and media involvement. She was a wonderful flowing writer and superb communicator of ideas to both popular and academic audiences. I wrote to her in this vein and did not hear back for a few weeks, which was unusual. When she eventually contacted me it was to tell me of the diagnosis of cancer. She would have to take time off work for her treatment and but she was clear that she would continue to work from home until able to return to her office. And she did.

This kind of commitment in the teeth of what seemed like insuperable odds also was the hallmark of her life. She came from a relatively privileged middle class family, born in India on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1941 but sent to boarding school in England at the age of 6, an experience that was to leave an indelible mark on an otherwise calm and modest appearance. After school in London she went to Edinburgh University to do a social work diploma, followed by degrees in psychology and social studies at Birkbeck College and the London School of Economics.

She became a feminist in the early formative years of the women's movement and began to take her politics extremely seriously. She was appointed a lecturer in social work at the University of York in the 1960s and it was here that her involvement in feminist activities was first forged. She was appalled by the behaviour of some of her male colleagues, as she recounted to me a few months ago at her hospital bedside. She moved to London to lecture in social work at Middlesex Polytechnic and from there, in 1976,

went to the then Polytechnic (then University) of North London where she remained until her death.

It was at North London that she embarked upon a most valuable and rich seam of inter-disciplinary scholarship and activism. She started in the Department of Applied Social Studies and was involved in running the applied social studies course for some years. Diana Leonard who was the external examiner for this course told me that during this time Sue supported students through a truly dreadful HMI inspection. The Report described many of the students as ‘a long tail of low achievers’, which cast down particularly Black women who had really struggled to get to university. Sue took on both the inspectors, supported by then Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and the examiners, and more importantly held meetings with us for the students to tell them this was an attack on radical education and NOT a reflection of the students’ own abilities and potential.

Sue also bore the brunt—but supported students and other staff—through the events around the British National Party (BNP) student Patrick Harrington. He had been recruited as a social studies student in the late 1970s and this led to the dramatic treatment by the then Polytechnic’s administration in trying to discipline academic staff for their actions against Harrington.

During this time she was also involved in setting up the Women’s Studies Network (UK) Association and the first undergraduate degree in women’s studies in the country, and later setting up the women’s studies unit. She also protected women’s studies and Equal Opportunities particularly when Equal Opportunities officers were appointed at UNL who undermined a lot of the work of their predecessors and juniors.

It was this kind of activism and involvement that marked her out as an exceptional academic and may have also limited her promotion prospects at UNL. Although she was made a professor in one of the first rounds at UNL this was only a titular title and she remained paid on the senior lecturer scale for most of her time at UNL. A grave injustice and an indictment of the system of rewards and honours in the former polytechnics and new universities, given her outstanding intellectual and academic reputation.

Her scholarly work first focussed on educational matters and especially young girls and their mis/treatment in and out of school. She produced *Losing Out: Slags or Drags?* (1986) which became an almost instant classic using discourse analysis about young girls and the education system. She followed this up with her study entitled *Sugar and Spice: Sexuality and Adolescent Girls* (1993) also about young women and their emergent sexual relations. This led her into issues about sex education and then into issues about women, violence, rape and their treatment in law. Despite her modest and gentle appearance she was willing to take on, tackle and research very difficult topics.

Indeed she became the leading expert on rape trials through her work for *Carnal Knowledge* (1996) and she later became an influence on New Labour for transforming women’s treatment in rape trials. However, the work on rape cost her a great deal in terms of stress. She had said that she could only do it for five years and would then have to stop. But of course she did not, and she was in the process of finalising a new edition of her book when she died.

For a woman of her towering intellectual stature she was exceptionally modest, always professional, committed and, as Madeleine Arnot put it to me, ‘a gentle soul with a strong and passionate belief in feminism and her work and a lovely sense of humour’. She is sorely missed and her loss as an innovative thinker will be keenly felt to the academic and intellectual community.

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