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The Life of a Lesbian Feminist Activist and Professor. Trigger Warning: My Lesbian Feminist Life by Sheila Jeffreys

R. Amy Elman

Kalamazoo College, Amy.Elman@kzoo.edu

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude to three feminist friends who read this review with an eye for historical accuracy because they organized several conferences and events where radical feminists like Sheila Jeffreys and many others spoke. They are: Eve Goodman of the Cambridge (Massachusetts) Women's Alliance Against Pornography (WAAP); Renee Mittler of Women Against Pornography (WAP) in New York City; and Katinka Ström in Stockholm, Sweden. My appreciation extends as well to my straight-shooting colleagues Sarah Westfall (of Kalamazoo College) and Jessica Emami (of the Academic Engagement Network) for their critical comments. Not least, I thank Dawn Rush for nearly four decades of friendship and insights about this shared past. It was Florence Rush (may her memory be a blessing) who brought the two of us and countless others together. Florence's *Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (1980) provided the first feminist analysis of child sexual abuse.

THE LIFE OF A LESBIAN FEMINIST ACTIVIST AND PROFESSOR

TRIGGER WARNING: MY LESBIAN FEMINIST LIFE BY SHEILA JEFFREYS (SPINIFEX, 2020)

R. Amy Elman

Kalamazoo College, USA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9548-0366>

KEYWORDS

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I FIRST MET SHEILA JEFFREYS IN 1985, when she bounded into the Women Against Pornography (WAP) office in New York City to meet Dorchen Leidholdt, a founder of the US feminist anti-pornography movement and later a Director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW). I was then one of countless women who staffed WAP's office. It was an exciting place for a young feminist. It was there that many of us forged life-long friendships, up-dated anti-pornography slideshow scripts, took turns public speaking, staged protests, organized legislative efforts, planned conferences, and raised funds. We provided some of the organizational and ideological scaffolding for a radical feminist movement that, by the end of the 20th century, gasped its last breath. We were also supportive readers and grateful listeners for those who claimed to lead us.

While many prominent feminists were lesbian at that time, few identified publicly as such. It was challenging enough being radically feminist, without facing further death threats, sexual harassment, custody battles and lost jobs. There was no legal protection from heterosexism, not even for men. I do not know whether some feminist leaders disparaged the *identity politics* associated with lesbianism because they also craved respectability, feared feminism's balkanization, or felt challenged by others who, after struggling to have their voices heard, accessed the mainstage through the backdoor of "as a (insert another identity) woman." What I do know is that there was a dearth of radical feminists able or willing to come out *as lesbian* and still fewer who had survived the pornography industry and were willing to speak out against it. It was *as a lesbian* that the very British Sheila Jeffreys began to fill the US feminist movement's partial void.

Sheila Jeffreys was refreshing because, in addition to being charismatic, she was a proud lesbian who offered an unexpurgated account of the sexual expectations an increasing number of men favored, and few women would admit they had experienced (at least to her). Jeffreys was, in several ways, patriarchy's cutting-edge critic at a time when many lesbians preferred to focus their attention more on women than on the men who abused them. And, for those of us who had already memorized the lectures

of our favorite US speakers whose books on male violence we had read and cadence we imitated, Sheila Jeffreys offered something almost entirely new—she was out and delightfully funny.

Trigger Warning: My Lesbian Feminist Life (2020) is an autobiography that marks Sheila Jeffreys twelfth single-authored book. In it she acknowledges that the radical lesbian feminism she spent decades promoting has been recast beyond recognition as “unsafe,” less by the “moral majority” than by “progressives” who claimed the mantle of feminism for themselves. As an unabashed feminist who exposed this identity theft and the eroticization of women’s inequality, her political opponents demand she be denounced as a risk to their safety. They clamor for her cancelation. Spoiler alert—Jeffreys is more Sapphic than Socratic and thus has no intention of drinking from their poisoned chalice. Resilient, she forecasts a renewed feminist struggle against the enemies of women’s freedom. Yet, in *Trigger Warning*, Jeffreys makes clear that she has written elsewhere about movements (Jeffreys, 2018). Her focus now is so firmly on herself and, in particular, her written work that *Trigger Warning* sometimes reads more like an annotated bibliography than an autobiography. Those initial stages of her life, before she began writing, prove the exception to this emphasis.

Trigger Warning opens with Jeffreys’ origins. Her father served in the British military and was posted to Germany as part of the allied occupational forces immediately following the Second World War. Born in a German military hospital in 1948, just three years after Nazism had been defeated militarily, it is unlikely that Jeffreys’ British parents were immune to the *casual antisemitism* of that time. According to Jeffreys, her mother’s antisemitism proved so repulsive, that she claims to have been *inoculated* against this form of racism (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 10, emphasis added). It helped too that Jeffreys came of political age in the 1960s, when antisemitism was briefly out of vogue. Unfortunately, however, it returned with a vengeance soon after many had wrongly assumed it had passed.

Like sexism, the hatred of Jews is both persistent and pervasive. While the cruelties associated with both scourges made a lasting impression on young Jeffreys, she enjoyed her girlhood despite being subjected to them. For example, she recounts men who flashed their penises and sexually harassing boys who lifted girls’ skirts. Like other women and girls, Jeffreys did not take those abuses personally. Indeed, she repeatedly rebuffs the suggestion that these experiences made her lesbian and regards her lesbianism as a choice over which she exercises control. This position is in keeping with feminist interrogations of *compulsory heterosexuality* and the insistence that sexuality is socially constructed and not something over which none of us has any control. She writes “It was my *choice* to be a lesbian that set up the template for the rest of my personal and political life” (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 4 emphasis added).

Long before Jeffreys chose feminism and later lesbianism, she was an atheist and fervent socialist. Her expected forays into heterosexuality were trying. Decades later, she would author *Beauty and Misogyny* (2015), an uncompromising critique of the harmful beauty practices (e.g., makeup and high heeled shoes), industries and ideology associated with female heterosexuality. *Trigger Warning* interestingly contains photos of Jeffreys that mirror her political evolution from infancy to elderhood.

In 1975, after a brief stint at university up north, Jeffreys arrived in London as a socialist feminist. It was an exciting time and the world she describes was not unlike the Boston area of my youth some years later. She writes of a women’s and lesbian culture that was so “strong and all-encompassing” that women could attend women-only conferences, groups, cafes, discos, and women’s centers such that nearly all their

“non-work life” could be spent in women’s company (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 76). The feminist analysis and intense activism of this period was unmatched.

Jeffreys’ first political activity in London was with Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW). In England alone there were approximately forty WAVAW groups that endeavored to “expose and challenge *all forms of male violence against women*” and, as Jeffreys explains, WAVAW’s recognition of what constitutes that violence was vastly more extensive than it is today (Jeffreys, 2020, pp. 98–99 emphasis added). WAVAW organized crucial conferences (e.g., the Leeds 1981 Sexual Violence Against Women conference), published feminist anthologies (e.g., Rhodes & McNeill, 1985) and implemented public campaigns that ended sexually violent adverts on the London Underground and marital rape exemptions. Gone are these heady days of women-only conferences, feminist bookstores, newspapers, presses, plays, and concerts. They’ve been replaced by *progressive* and *virtual* spaces that affirm and reenforce the queer disappearance of lesbians and radical feminists. Having been deeply engaged in countless feminist groups for years, Jeffreys saw the end coming.

Not one to discount the profits to be gained from women’s vulnerabilities, Jeffreys observes that within a year of working with others to establish the West London Women and Mental Health Group (in 1975) as a place where women could turn to one another, women therapists trolled for clients there. By the 1980s, *feminist therapists* had turned “women’s distress” into “the raw material for a profitmaking industry” (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 50).¹ While Jeffreys retained her sensitivity to class inequities, her dedication to a socialist analysis that instrumentalized women and ignored their sexual exploitation was understandably short-lived.

Entrepreneurial women like those just mentioned were not the only ones eager to burnish their credentials from the increased appeal of feminism to women worldwide, governments, and international institutions like United Nations (UN) did the same. In 1975, the UN held its first International Women’s Conference in Mexico. Under the leadership of UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, an unrepentant Nazi, and in close collaboration with the Soviet Union (former Nazi allies), the official UN women’s conference denounced Zionism (the movement for Jewish self-determination) as a form of racism and discrimination. The *women’s decade* that followed descended into a morass of anti-Zionist diatribes in which women were scarcely mentioned. Although the UN revoked its libelous assertion in 1991 that Zionism is racism, the significant reputational damage to Jews and Israel continues to this day, particularly under the auspices of women’s human rights.

Jeffreys describes herself as “primed to recognise” antisemitism (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 113) and she understood that the virus of her girlhood had mutated. No longer expressed in opposition to Judaism or Jews as a race, she saw firsthand how contemporary antisemitism operates under the cloak of anti-Zionism to deny Jews the right to exist collectively as Jews (in Israel), with the same rights extended to all other (Muslim, Buddhist, Christian and secular) states. This animus proved especially virulent in women’s movements. In an effort to expose this, she writes, Israel’s governments are “usually not more brutal than Myanmar,” a country that has engaged in “forms of ethnic cleansing” (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 113). Thus, she issued, however inadvertently, a

¹ While the members of the London Lesbian Anti-Psychology Group, *Psyching Us Out*, were far from successful in turning the tide, Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins issued an important book, *Changing Our Minds* (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). It testifies to the ways in which British feminists challenged therapy’s relegation of political experiences to the private sphere.

misleading comparison consistent with the very tropes she wished to counter. To say that Israel is no more brutal than a state whose human rights record is reprehensible is to suggest that Israel shares Myanmar's record of *ethnic cleansing*—a euphemism for genocide popularized by its Serbian perpetrators in the former Yugoslavia. Jeffreys' analogy is similar to insisting that a woman acting in self-defense against a man intending to murder her is “not more brutal” than he is and certainly “not more brutal” than, say, a serial murderer like Ted Bundy. Despite her lapsed analogy, Jeffreys' consistent opposition to antisemitism cannot not be discounted; few have worked as hard to expose the eroticization of Nazi role-playing that has been central to sadomasochism.

Sadomasochism's increased popularity in the 1980s helped foster antisemitism's resurgence and the eventual closure of London's Lesbian and Gay Centre. The Centre, which officially opened in 1985, closed six years later following the internal conflicts that raged over sadomasochism (SM). As SM's popularity surged among many gays and lesbians, its Nazi clad practitioners became indistinguishable from the white nationalists who similarly wreaked havoc on gay and lesbian lives and spaces. Jeffreys' essay, “Sadomasochism: the erotic cult of fascism,” with its detailed depiction of fascism's ascent and the British gays and lesbians who delight in its cruelties was published in the US journal, *Lesbian Ethics* in 1986 (Jeffreys, 1994, p. 171). It was Leidholdt's groundbreaking article, “Where Pornography Meets Fascism” (Leidholdt, 1983) which explained sadomasochism's centrality to fascist ideology that first brought Jeffreys to WAP's office in 1985.

In revealing the susceptibility of gay men and lesbians to self-loathing, racism, antisemitism, and eroticized inequality, Jeffrey's work helped account for the increased visibility of jackbooted men and women in confederate caps and Nazi regalia in London, New York, and other major cities. Throughout the 1980s, sadomasochists were an ominous presence at feminist events, particularly involving efforts against the sex industry which they enthusiastically defended and supported. That the academy proved especially receptive to their claims is worthy of careful study. Yet, as Jeffreys noted, even her best research and most considered arguments (Jeffreys, 1994, 2003) could not stem the tide of sadomasochism and pornography that swiftly overwhelmed the movement. The consequences proved dire for feminists.

As the 1980s were coming to an end, the UK and US feminists who had steered their communities through the then recently recognized epidemic of male violence faced unrelenting harassment, dwindling resources, and political battles that left them exhausted and unemployed. Jeffreys was no exception. Having been awarded a prestigious Fulbright to the US in 1985-1986, Jeffreys thought she might be advantaged in the academic market. Instead, after returning to London, even the Open University's summer school refused to renew her appointment. She believes the rejection stemmed from her having shown the WAP slideshow there the summer before, in 1986. She was specifically told that both students and tutors complained that the presentation engendered “a good deal of stress” (Jeffreys, 2020, pp. 133–134).

How Jeffreys survived and continued to write remains a mystery; but write she did and *Trigger Warning* details the resulting publications. The 1991 release of her aptly titled *Anti-Climax: A Feminist Analysis on the Sexual Revolution* (Jeffreys, 1991) may have rendered her an academic pariah in Britain, but it helped her secure a position in Australia in the Political Science Department at the University of Melbourne. It was a position she had long desired; she was able to teach and continue her writing. Moreover, Australia had just adopted a reform that allowed lesbians and gay men to

bring their partners into the country (just as heterosexuals). This meant that Jeffreys was accompanied by Ann Rowett, her partner of many years. And, she explains, “the early 1990s were a time when feminism and lesbian and gay politics were seen as necessary to a politics department” (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 155).

While Jeffreys acknowledges that the abeyance of academic feminism that hit first in the US took longer to reach Melbourne, Australian feminist Renate Klein saw the “thick cloud on the horizon” when women’s studies programs there and across the globe were renamed gender studies (Klein, 1991, p. 129). She worried that men might eclipse women under the auspices of a seemingly neutral term. Klein’s concerns were not misplaced.

In 1991, the American radical feminist Kathleen Barry despaired that women’s studies programs across the US had been so robbed of feminism that radical feminists had already “turned to the global community to build connections, while academic feminism continued to fragment” (Barry, 1991, p. 83). What followed was the emergence of an international network against male sexualized violence and the further deterioration of the academy. Campuses had become so inhospitable to feminism that even itinerant feminist guest speakers who doggedly opposed pornography and prostitution faced hostile students armed with opposition tracts devoid of unpleasant and inconvenient facts. This meant there was no room for the kind of reasoned and constructive debate that was once associated with higher education. By the decade’s end, the academic feminism that was once closely allied with practical struggles to achieve justice and equality for women in the US was no more. While this feminism continued elsewhere in the world, in the US it had been replaced by those who took pleasure in making the ambitions of the movement impossible to fulfill (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 43).

The academy was not only becoming less feminist, it was becoming more corporate. Jeffreys details Australia’s corporatization of higher education, which meant administrative staff threatened to outnumber faculty who, in turn, competed for limited state funding that sustained male dominated subjects and a *word factory* that churned out substandard work. If Jeffreys was somewhat insulated from these struggles for research support, it is because she contends, she had little need of funding for world travel and research assistants to duck into archives and libraries on her behalf. She explains, “Everything I needed I could find myself in books or articles and *I was the only one who could usefully read them because I knew exactly what I was looking for*” (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 196 emphasis added). Yet, in reading her autobiography, one might reason that it was precisely through embedding herself in a different political culture (in Australia) and working with the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (an NGO begun years earlier by Barry), that Jeffreys could tour internationally, engage with inspiring feminists, and launch her book, *The Idea of Prostitution* (1997). Few feminist writers, without institutional and state support, have enjoyed the same opportunities.

As with many who engaged with feminists internationally and far from home, Jeffreys returned to Melbourne to find that the movement that had initially drawn her there no longer existed. Feminism had “entered the doldrums” and was nearly invisible. She describes a city in which women “dropped away to immerse themselves in their non-political lives” (Jeffreys, 2020, pp. 182–183). She attributes this to several factors including, but not limited to, the commodification of the university, the emphasis on opaque male thinkers (like Michel Foucault), and the adoption of masculine rules by academic women attempting to survive. Her focus on the academic world, while understandable, neglects the larger economic forces that impinge on women’s lives outside of it.

The world has changed dramatically since Jeffreys' youth, Thatcher's reign and the ascent of her ideological heirs. Wages have plummeted, the cost of living has skyrocketed and so too have working hours. Women have been disproportionately hit and there is little time to read, much less attend numerous lectures by authors and others eager for an audience. The essential working women who staffed those bookshops, concerts, and centers of yesteryear have aged and may well be without the relatively more generous pensions of their academic working peers. Hence, many are shut in and unable or unwilling to turn out.

Trigger Warning concludes with a Jeffreys, now in her 70s, back with Ann in England—a very different country. In what may be the book's best chapter, "Back in the Struggle" offers hope. Previously the harbinger of distressing news, Sheila Jeffreys suggests that the egregious reign of the phallus may have reached its peak. She reports that an increasing number of women are enraged by men and that, because of this, a new Women's Liberation Movement is emerging. It is one in which women refuse to be silent about the countless manifestations of male violence and identity theft. Jeffreys is in her element. She has, after all, tirelessly documented these conditions for decades and her biography is a testament to that labor which fosters movement.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

R. Amy Elman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9548-0366> is a Professor of Political Science and the William Weber Chair of Social Science at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, USA. She has received numerous awards for her scholarship, including two Fulbright grants, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a grant from the Sassoon International Center for the Study of Anti-Semitism at Hebrew University. She has worked on behalf of women's rights and against antisemitism domestically and within Europe for over three decades. She has lectured and published widely on the response of states and the European Union to issues of citizenship, migration, violence against women, sex discrimination, and antisemitism. She has published four books: *Sexual Subordination and State Intervention: Comparing Sweden and the United States* (Berghahn Books, 1996), *Sexual Politics and the European Union* (Berghahn Books, 1996), *Sexual Equality in an Integrated Europe* (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2007), and *The European Union, Antisemitism, and the Politics of Denial* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

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