



# “Moving from the Periphery” Elsa Leo-Rhynie’s Contribution to Gender Studies and Beyond

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## Introduction

It is an honour to have been asked to deliver this address in celebration of my "sister-friend" and colleague of more years than either of us would wish to acknowledge – Professor Emerita Elsa Ann Leo-Rhynie. I also wish to congratulate the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, especially the organizers of this Symposium, for choosing to celebrate your 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in such a meaningful manner. A special word of thanks to Shakira Maxwell for her assistance with the logistics of my presentation, the outcome of which you shall see presently.

As an aside, I checked the etiquette books to get some information on 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversaries – you know, the first is Paper, the 25<sup>th</sup>, Silver, and so on. What I discovered is that the 15<sup>th</sup> is Crystal, which to me conjures up images of a "Crystal Ball" (to look into the future), "Healing Crystals" (for their curative properties) and "Crystal Skulls" – yes, Skulls – which, according to Mayan traditions, are said to contain crucial information about humanity's true purpose and destiny.

So, Professor Bailey, if I were to give you an anniversary gift it would be a Crystal Skull, but this seemed unnecessary to me for you and your team are already working to fulfill its prophesy. Instead, I offer my good wishes to the CGDS and wish for this body continued success in its important endeavours.

Let me pause to recognize two others who have recently taken over responsibility for their respective campuses – Dr. Grace Sirju-Charran and Ms June Cuffie and thank them for their continued work with the Centre.

Let me now return to the main focus of my presentation – Elsa Leo-Rhynie. Ours has been an enduring friendship from high school, through university as students and then as staff of the institution, and more recently, into our retirement years. It

is not an easy task, however, to try to capture in a limited period of time, the essence of the person whose many talents have been devoted to the enhancement of The University of the West Indies' reputation, both at home and abroad, over an extended period of time. Like so many others, I have great respect not only for Leo-Rhynie's intellect, but too, for the ethics and values she has always espoused: and it therefore gives me much pleasure to participate in this seminar and to "big up" someone whose work has indeed demonstrated both "Caribbean Impact (and) Global Reach."

I have entitled my address, "Moving from the Periphery", which mirrors Leo-Rhynie's inaugural address upon her appointment as Professor and Regional Coordinator of Women and Development Studies (later to become Gender and Development Studies). Let me say up front, that I shall concentrate on those aspects of her achievements in this position (and my interpretation thereof) which I feel most confident to address, and leave it to those better informed to deal with other issues.

### **Setting the Stage**

First, some background information. Leo-Rhynie was appointed Professor of Women and Development Studies in 1992 but her formal link with The UWI was forged in 1977 when she was offered an appointment as Research Fellow (and later promoted to Senior Lecturer) in what was then the Faculty of Education. We both learnt so much in those early days about what seemed to be the weirdest of topics such as factor analysis and multiple regression, and endeavoured to attend as many seminars as were available to enable us to understand the strange world of research methods which was, and still is, an important subject for all programmes offered by the Faculty.

Leo-Rhynie was awarded her PhD in Educational Psychology a year after joining the staff, and (as a result of the high standard of her dissertation) was one of the first (if not, the first) candidate of that period to be permitted to proceed straight to a PhD without having to complete a Master's degree. I want to add that she is "home grown" in the true sense of the word, having completed a BSc (Honours) degree in 1964 and the Diploma in Education (with a mark of distinction in the Theory of Education) in 1975, before the award of her doctorate in 1978, all from The UWI.

It was during this early period that an interest in women's studies began to surface in a recognizable manner. Leo-Rhynie is quick to remind that one Joycelin Massiah (a good friend of us both) who was then head of ISER at Cave Hill dragged us "kicking and screaming" (Leo-Rhynie's words) into the activities of the women's groups newly formed on each campus. These groups, spearheaded by Massiah for ISER and Peggy Antrobus for WAND, were intended to start the process of sensitizing UWI staff to women's issues and to lead to the introduction of a formal programme in due course.

The impetus came from the earlier "Women in the Caribbean" project which generated a great deal of vital information to be shared with the wider university community, and so the establishment of the Women's Groups was conceived for this purpose. As Leo-Rhynie puts it, Massiah was very much on the "academic" side, and Antrobus, the "activist" side, and together they provided the stimulus for this new endeavour. The fledgling operation largely confined its activities to Friday afternoons, but even these limited activities served to whet the appetites of the Mona women and, as I recall, one Mona man (Mark Figueroa) for greater dialogue about issues of consequence to women. The group also began to highlight and celebrate distinguished female academics and to bring them to the attention of the university community.

As the movement gained a footing within the institution, assistance was sought from universities which had already succeeded in implementing relevant programmes. Leo-Rhynie was a member of a UWI team which went to Halifax in 1982 to gather information for launching a similar initiative back home.

One of the outcomes of this exposure was a growing interest (within the context of the Faculty of Education) in researching gender differences, initially in terms of academic achievement and related issues such as subject choice and orientation, but over time, including various other dimensions such as teachers' responses to girls and boys in the classroom, students' own perceptions of each other, creativity among the sexes, and, on the broader front, the likely effects of school type.

These concerns began to filter into lectures delivered and post-graduate theses supervised. I want to draw your attention to the fact that Leo-Rhynie, beginning at this exciting period of research and discovery in the Faculty of Education and continuing even after she left the Faculty, is credited with supervising some ten Master of Arts (Education) theses which demonstrated a concern for gender differences, as well as four PhDs. She also critiqued and advised on many, many more.

Around this time we collaborated to write and subsequently teach, the first postgraduate course dealing with gender issues (*Gender Roles in Education*) - a course which, regrettably, is no longer on Education's books, but which, for a decade or so, was one of the best subscribed offerings in the Master's programme. While it attracted mainly women, there was each year, a smattering of men, including men of the cloth. They had to be very careful with any comments they made in class, for there were always a few female activists ready and able to "mash them up" if they were perceived to be unduly challenging of feminist doctrine. I recall, there was one occasion when, having heard Leo-Rhynie lecturing on some aspect of differences in self concept

between the sexes, a certain Reverend gentlemen (who I suspect, is well known to many of you here this morning) being unable to contain himself, jumped up and proclaimed in a loud voice, "That's exactly what St. Paul said"!

So, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues all, I suggest to you that these activities were the factors motivating what became for Leo-Rhynie, an over-riding interest in, and concern for, gender issues, and subsequently laid a foundation on which she would build in the years to follow.

Let us fast-forward from the '70s and '80s to the decade of the 1990s. There are two matters which I want to mention here: firstly, after a short period away from The UWI (during which time she experienced the positives and negatives of the corporate world) it became evident that Leo-Rhynie was ready to return home to The UWI. Secondly, the new and very limited operation of the Women and Development Studies Unit established with funding from the Ford Foundation (for proposal preparation) and subsequently, the Dutch Government (for the project itself, awarded with the proviso that the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) should work jointly with The UWI) was beginning to make its mark. While the "kick off" took place under Vice Chancellor Preston, it fell to his successor, Sir Alister McIntyre, to honour the commitment made to the Dutch to "institutionalize" the programme. This meant providing university funding, and putting in place core staffing, including someone at professorial level.

It was purely coincidental that I had, shortly before, been made Pro-Vice Chancellor with responsibilities which included gender concerns. It gave me tremendous pleasure and satisfaction to chair the Advisory Committee which, having interviewed a number of eminently qualified applicants, offered the recommendation to the University Appointments Committee that Leo-Rhynie should be appointed Professor of Women and Development Studies. Let me pause to recognize the significant ground-breaking role played by others such as Lucille Mathurin-Mair, Dorianne Wilson-Smillie and Hermione McKenzie, in

addition to Joycelin Massiah and Peggy Antrobus, whose contributions led the Centre to that point, and whose impact is felt even today.

### **The Inaugural Dream**

Leo-Rhynie's appointment in 1992 was well received by the Academy, although there were serious doubts about the viability of the programme, as well as some resistance (both covert and overt) to any attempts at mainstreaming. Leo-Rhynie's immediate charge was to put in place a regional structure, and, at an early stage, she was drawn into the controversy about whether this new Centre should be named, **Women** and Development Studies or **Gender** and Development Studies. A cogent argument in favour of the latter - based on the impossibility of focusing only on women in any credible teaching and research agenda - carried sway, but not without there being reservations expressed at the highest levels.

In December of that same year, Leo-Rhynie delivered her inaugural professorial lecture to a packed audience intent on learning what her vision for the new Centre would be. The title, which included the term, "*Moving from the periphery*", captured in a sentence the direction to be charted, and was elaborated on in an intense, well conceptualized presentation which gave the audience much food for thought. Although I was very much present on that occasion - I believe I chaired the function - I have since re-read Leo-Rhynie's paper (in both the original form and the published version appearing in Pat Mohammed's *Gendered realities*) several times to mentally compare my reaction to the visionary note of the lecture with the more recent actualities. One conclusion I have arrived at is that Leo-Rhynie's vision for the CGDS has, to a great extent, been achieved, despite expected (and unexpected) pitfalls along the way. I have distilled out three issues for consideration this morning,

issues which I believe, present as important concerns defining the Centre's first 15 years and have sought Leo-Rhynie's assessment of each.

The first of these is, not unexpectedly, the process of *institutionalizing* (or, put another way) of *legitimizing* gender concerns in the Academy. The outcome of the battle to pursue the fledgling programme under the mantle of "Women and Development Studies" or "Gender and Development Studies" had already been determined, but not without a fight. Leo-Rhynie's recognition of the growing trend, internationally, toward the latter option was not without its critics, but, as she argued convincingly:

If (the) objective is to establish curricula to address issues of gender and analysis based on gender; if these issues are discrimination, domination, subordination, exploitation, oppression of one gender by another; if these situations could come about because of the nature of roles assumed and the interactions between the genders in specific cultures, races and classes, then the study of one group with the objective of changing these relationships and situations, seems impossible without reference to and comparisons with the other. (In Mohammed, ed. 156-157)

This argument was further strengthened by way of addressing other differentials such as power relationships, human worth, and levels of responsibilities between men and women: if we consider the view of some writers that "reconstruction and transformation of behaviours of masculinity is a necessary and essential part of the feminist revolution", then we are prompted to agree with Leo-Rhynie's original conclusion, that the radical feminist view of male exclusion must be rejected in favour of one which actively involved men in the process. In her words:

Gender Studies' seems to better describe the concerns of The UWI's WDS groups which include and emphasize, but are not exclusively, women's studies. (Mohammed, 157)

Another early decision was that autonomy of the Centre had to be maintained (sometimes, against all odds) so the requirement for a formal reporting mechanism was achieved by the formation of Boards of Studies on each campus. Each Board included representatives from different disciplinary areas, the library, and the student body, reflecting (in Leo-Rhynie's words) the Centre's concern "with cross-border knowledge in its broadest form".

Yet another positive was the Centre's success in securing funding from a variety of sources. In a recent interview with June Castello, Leo-Rhynie stated:

the fact that the Centre has been able to obtain significant external grant funding to support some of its activities, the innovative and highly visible scholarship in this area.... have been factors overcoming the conservatism and skepticism of some sectors in the university, and have helped to establish the legitimacy of the Centre's work. (Interview with June Castello, 2008)

Leo-Rhynie has, in fact, listed her role in successfully negotiating a project with the Netherlands Government for US\$2.8 million as one of the highlights of her tenure as Regional Coordinator, even though the project (which had teaching, research and outreach components, as well as a capacity building intent) was implemented after she had left the Centre (2007-2010).

Let me end this section by proposing another benchmark. To my mind, an important development has been the impact of the Centre in contributing directly and indirectly, to the formulation of strategies related to gender and

development. Locally, this has impacted the work of governmental and non-governmental policy makers, and abundant evidence of this is also to be found at the regional and international levels, through bodies such as CARICOM and the United Nations.

The next issue arising from Leo-Rhynie's inaugural address is that of the *interdisciplinary* nature of any gender-based programme. As Chhachhi pointed out and Leo-Rhynie reminded us, "Women's Studies does not mean 'add women and stir', but rather, requires a reformulation of disciplinary concepts and a new approach to social reality" (1988:79). Advised by the outcomes of the *Women in the Caribbean* project, Leo-Rhynie spoke at that time of the "Multi-faceted nature of WDS" and made the case for inter-disciplinarity being the best vehicle through which to pursue work in this area, despite underlying problems such as staffing, funding and basically, "fitting into the university's academic structure". The argument made is captured in the following statement:

Interdisciplinarity becomes a process of clearing hurdles of disciplinary language, disciplinary methods, disciplinary content, of effecting 'translation' of these disciplinary concepts into interdisciplinary discourse, and through a process of 'dialogue' across disciplines achieving a broader, more comprehensive and more complete view of specific problems, promoting an integration and a synthesis, which provide a comprehensive base for the search for solutions.  
(Leo-Rhynie, 1998 – 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary address)

The programmes to be developed would "assess, analyze and challenge existing disciplines and traditional methods of acquiring and disseminating, knowledge", and at the same time that such work would be undertaken intramurally, "a strong link would be forged with the community and

organizations addressing women's concerns." (Mohammed, 157). The overarching concern was that the programme should be so structured as to integrate research, teaching and action, for basic to this debate was her recognition that the new Centre would be called upon to answer the question, "is Women's Studies a discipline?", whether articulated in this rather crude fashion or more subtly put.

Time has provided an unequivocal response, for the academic quality and significance of the Centre's work speaks for itself. To quote Leo-Rhynie (1998) at the CGDS 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary lecture held at the St. Augustine campus:

"Team-teaching, cross-listing of courses, cross-campus teaching, seeking and obtaining agreement for joint appointments to the CGDS as well as to a disciplinary area, and the designation and listing of lecturers who work in gender from a disciplinary perspective as 'Associate Lecturers' are all strategies which have been employed to ensure the interdisciplinary thrust, but also the maintenance of autonomy. The further education of lecturers through staff fellowships, of graduate students through study grants and the contributions of visiting lecturers, initially from the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague and also from each campus..... (have) enhanced understanding of the scope of the concerns which are part of the gender and development initiative."

Leo-Rhynie has chosen to lead by example in these endeavours, and her contributions have been many. In preparation for this address, I asked her to identify areas in which she felt she had made a particularly significant contribution. She spoke to:

Developing and offering a Master's programme in Gender and Development Studies as well as a concentration in (this area) in association with the (relevant) Master's programme offered by the Consortium Graduate School (now incorporated into SALCC) (Personal communication, 2008)

I submit, Ladies and Gentlemen, that this does not represent the totality of Leo-Rhynie's outstanding leadership as Professor and Regional Coordinator of the Centre!

The third and final area I wish to speak to, that of *scholarship*, has, to some extent, been embraced in the earlier discussion, following as it does on a number of the issues already raised. In her inaugural professorial address Leo-Rhynie reminded the audience that Women's Studies was committed to the objectives of feminist scholarship (and I pause to remind you that there has been a re-formulation of this descriptor over time), and embraces a programme of research and teaching whose intended outcome is the production of new and credible knowledge in this area. In a 1998 lecture, Massiah expressed the view that the quantum and quality of the work being generated represented the maturing of a discipline which, at that time, was a "work in progress". Ten years later, Massiah would probably arrive at the same conclusion, which, in my opinion is desirable, given that every dynamic operation should be governed by the continuous setting of new goals once the initial targets have been met.

In her more recent reflections, Leo-Rhynie has regretted what appears to be a diminishing in the level of motivation of young scholars to that demonstrated in the early days. That this may have come about as a result of the institutionalization of Gender and Development Studies is at least part of the explanation. But perhaps, this should be regarded as the sounding of a warning bell against complacency, especially when one is reminded that Gender and Development Studies is still a "work in progress".

Yet, there is an impressive menu of teaching and research activities, both intra- and extra-mural, developed over the years; for, as Leo-Rhynie points out:

Over the past fifteen years, the Centre for Gender and Development Studies has been engaged in raising searching theoretical and methodological questions, generating and documenting new and important information....developing new courses and teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels....The Centre has had a strong impact on the rethinking and transformation of disciplinary discourse - in science, in sociology, in education, in literature, law and history, as well as research methodology. (Leo-Rhynie, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary address, 1998)

It follows, then, that the CGDS has to be regarded as the “Caribbean hub of scholarship in this area”, committed as it is to “preserving the tradition of crossing boundaries and charting new directions” (*Ibid*).

I concluded this aspect of my informal interview with Leo-Rhynie by posing two questions:

“During your tenure as Professor and Regional Coordinator of the CGDS, did you experience any disappointments?” and  
“What has provided you with the greatest satisfaction in this position?”

Her response to the first question was, perhaps, to be expected - “resistance at The UWI to accepting GDS as a legitimate discipline” The second question was answered in a typically Elsa fashion:

"A special satisfaction I have experienced came long after I left the Centre. All three Unit Heads on the campuses, as well as the Regional Coordinator who replaced me achieved professorial status and the reviews of the external assessors in all cases were highly complimentary. Two of the three Heads are now deputy principals on their campuses".

'Nuf said!

### **Life After the CGDS**

One of the consequences of outstanding leadership in a particular area is that the individual is targeted by others who may wish to benefit from that individual's expertise. Consequent on the appointment of Professor Kenneth Hall as Principal of the Mona campus in 1996, Leo-Rhynie was invited to assume the post of Deputy Principal.

She fulfilled her new responsibilities creditably, especially since she was given specific duties in areas near and dear to her - student matters and quality. Despite limited funds she was able to put in place many improvements and innovations, certainly not the least of these being the new 800-room Rex Nettleford Hall of Residence, with its Multi-Purpose Block. As I mentioned to Leo-Rhynie on several occasions, the skills she honed during this taxing exercise would look very impressive on her resume, should she ever decide to apply for a Project Manager's position, post-retirement!

Another noteworthy achievement during this phase was the establishment of the Academic Quality Assurance Committee (AQAC – for some reason, this always reminds me of a duck!) which was to become a model for similar initiatives set up at a later date on the other campuses. This particular activity

held her in good stead in 1998, when she was appointed PVC and Chair of the Board for Undergraduate Studies.

Leo-Rhynie brought to her new responsibilities as PVC the same intellectual acumen that had become her trademark. Her achievements during this period - when she had to again divorce herself from campus-bound activities and assume a regional perspective - were many. To mention a few: she was chair of the University Task Force on Examinations Reform and subsequently, on the Implementation Committee established to follow-up on the recommendations made; she implemented Exit Surveys to capture graduating students' opinions of the strengths and weaknesses of their UWI experience; she staged (with limited funding) an impressive conference on Quality Enhancement; she expanded the guidelines for making professorial appointments; and significantly, she prepared a paper on "The UWI Graduate" (which speaks for itself and which has been incorporated in the 2007-2012 Strategic Plan of the institution.)

I personally believe Leo-Rhynie's "comfort zone" was shaken somewhat in 2006, one year away from retirement, when, on the elevation of Professor Kenneth Hall to the lofty position of Governor General of Jamaica, she was asked to don the heavy mantle of principalship at Mona. However, whatever qualms Leo-Rhynie might have had were not evident to the university community as she rose to the challenges of this most involved, far-reaching and taxing position with her usual aplomb.

Her tenure as Principal spanned just over one year (no powers could persuade her to remain in the post), but even in this limited time there were many accomplishments to be placed on record. While some might not recognize the salience of what I am about to mention, the majority will, I believe, appreciate its significance: Leo-Rhynie organized the first ever full staff meeting for Mona, to secure employees' (all levels) input in the preparation of the new Campus Strategic Plan!

I will mention only one other noteworthy contribution, for this represents in a way, a new development for The UWI – certainly the Mona campus. The on-going discussions regarding institutional accreditation, confounded by the issue that The UWI is a regional, and not a national institution (and therefore, not answerable to national accreditation agencies) were circumvented by Leo-Rhynie's decision to seek registration, the first stage in the process, through the national body charged with responsibility for both registration and accreditation. I suspect that this provided the impetus for the other campuses to do likewise in due course.

Leo-Rhynie managed to maintain her research and outreach activities despite these heavy administrative duties. She is credited with some 48 publications in refereed journals, at least 13 significant reports arising from consultancies for bodies such as UNIFEM, the Jamaica Employers' Federation, and the Commonwealth Secretariat, several book reports and numerous unpublished papers, many of which have dealt with some aspect of gender and development. She has been awarded several fellowships (for example, through the ISS, USIS, IIEP and the British Council), and has been the recipient of various special honours, not the least of which has been the Government of Jamaica's Order of Distinction (Commander Class) and The UWI's Pelican Award given annually to a truly outstanding graduate of the institution. Her concern for, and interest in, students continued, and indeed, became even more apparent as Principal, and led to her being regarded as one of the Student Guild's strongest advocates.

Her outreach activities have been equally remarkable: while time does not permit me to cover the full spread, I want to make special mention of Leo-Rhynie's chairmanship of the Dudley Grant Memorial Trust, and of her work as a Privy Counselor for Jamaica. She has also served on the Boards of the Environment Foundation of Jamaica, the Grace Kennedy Foundation, and, not to overlook her roots in education, the Caribbean Examinations Council.

In bringing this address to its logical conclusion, there are two final aspects which I wish to mention. The first you may think delayed, for I want to make a few comments about women in more general terms and not in respect of the CGDS specifically. (Indeed, there are a number of highly placed women in the Academy who operate outside of the Centre's umbrella). Ten years ago I had the honour of presenting the Dame Nita Barrow lecture, one in a series staged by the Cave Hill Gender and Development Unit under the leadership of Professor Eudine Barriteau. I entitled my paper, "UWI – A Progressive University for Women?" ending the title with a question mark, rather than a full stop or exclamation mark. "Progressive", to me represented opportunities within the institutional context that provide for the advancement of women achieved as a result of demonstrable merit, and recognized and rewarded in an appropriate manner. I will not detain you with details of the paper, but I want to mention three clusters which I considered important within the context of The UWI at that time:

1. **Attitudinal Barriers** - Legislation of university policy does not necessarily mean that the policy will be internalized. It cannot ensure that there will not be a negative response to women on the staff, including the few in senior positions within the institution. Indeed, it is often said in university circles (not necessarily at **OUR** university) that "a man is preferred because he is a man"; also, that women who have made it to the top are thought of as "honorary men".
2. **Institutional Responsibilities** - That space is now being provided for more women does not mean that it is accompanied by any yielding of male power or privilege. Leo-Rhynie was of the opinion then that men, having given women more space, were now trying to use that space for their own concerns; in her words, "to divert

women's energies into men's anxieties". Research on male underachievement is a case in point.

3. **Role Modeling/Mentorship/Networking** - This, to my mind, is one of the most important strategies, although I note that it has "largely been discounted by feminist theorists as a useful means of effecting change" And yet, "their importance to the careers of men has to be acknowledged". We also observe that "more and more, it seems, women are seeking the guidance of their more senior female colleagues, looking to chart a career path on their advice." What also has to be recognized, however, is the limited number of women in this category (Hamilton, 1998).

In the university, legitimacy with regard to women facing these issues is granted to those possessing "cultural capital - having recognized resources and values **and** power. Perhaps the very essence of Leo-Rhynie is her "cultural capital" and the fact that she has always endeavoured to use this to the advantage of both women and men in the Academy.

She has managed to accomplish a feat which has eluded many a woman - to achieve a balance between her profession and familial responsibilities. For Leo-Rhynie, this duality has not led to internal conflict and self-guilt, nor have her domestic responsibilities impinged on her professional performance or *vice versa* (after all, she has always recognized and addressed her priorities as they arise). And there are not too many of us who can claim to have been able to achieve this level of consonance within ourselves.

The Irvine Report (1945), charged with providing directionality for the establishment of the UWI (as UCWI initially), offered its strong support for the

particular benefit which women were expected to derive from higher education (obtained locally, and at a more affordable cost), since, in the Committee's words, this would enable an increasing number of women to "play their part fully in the life of their community."

Ladies and gentlemen, I submit that Elsa Leo-Rhynie epitomizes to the fullest extent, the intentions of the Irvine Committee and, on behalf of us all, I salute her accordingly.

## Reference

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