

Making Space: Identity and Place in Western Australian 'Lesbian/Gay' Writing

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To talk about concepts of lesbian/gay writing and space in Australia strikes me as loaded with absurdities. Western Australian homosexual writing is, in itself, absurd, invisible, impossible. Western Australia as place and space in this country is also impossible. They are both unnatural, without foundation. However, both are made possible by constructing a (perceived) canon of lesbian/gay writing written from, or within, or about, a (perceived) 'place'. In this paper I'd like to begin with the construction of a fragile lesbian and gay fiction genre and explore the role of Western Australian geographic place before doing a sudden turn, swish or distantly exotic manoeuvre of the hips and kick a theory of queer upon that construction, thereby exploring the meanings of lesbian and gay writing with and 'as' space in Australian contemporary fiction.

In an important essay critic Michael Hurley discussed the concept of marginalisation of writing and writers with non-heterosexual identities (Hurley 1993). In the same way the experience of a Western Australian individual, in practice as much as in writing, in theory and theories as much as in spatial concept, is the experience of marginalisation and otherness. From the work of Drake-Brockman to my own, Western Australia is conceived frequently as 'not' the 'East'. These two marginalisations are defined on the basis of 'that which it is not'. However they are not compatible or comparable othernesses—they travel along different axes of marginalisation, they travel along different dimensions of space, right to space, and frequently require case-by-case analysis. That, however, is what we will *not* do here.

A severe deficit in intelligent analysis on non-heterosexual themes in Australian criticism of contemporary literature has been apparent for some time (Hurley 1996, viii). It is not my intention here to fill that empty chasm of criticism of non-heterosexually themed writings. It is not my intention to posit a thematic approach to the criticism of lesbian/gay writing. What I prefer to do here is explore a few of my vague theories-in-progress as applied to two areas which have kept my interest over the years: lesbian/gay writing and Western Australianness.

Let us begin by creating the 'canon' in the oppositions of Otherness. A point that must be made invokes a couple of decades of postmodern theory on our bereavement of the 'author': to label writing as lesbian/gay—or West Australian—is no longer a naturally simplistic task. In categorising work as Western Australian I relied on Bruce Bennett's useful bibliography of Western Australian Writing (Bennett 1990) in which the parameters for inclusion were any work *by* a Western Australian writer or work *about* Western Australia. I update this by including in my categorisation more recent works, works with passing or slight references to Western Australia and works which have come my way but have not yet been published.

Labelling work 'lesbian/gay' writing here required *not* the peeping into authorial bedrooms or discussions of writers' emotional lives. Here I do *not* wish to know a thing about their sexualities; that is irrelevant. To label work as lesbian/gay requires less of

the writing and far more of the reading. In reading with this task in mind I read as lesbian/gay, as a non-heterosexual male. The point here is that the 'act' of labelling lesbian/gay writing, as Michael Hurley recently pointed out, is through the act of reading, potentially against the grain of how individual writers see their own work. Thereby it must be borne in mind that this constructed canon of Western Australian lesbian/gay writing is deduced from *my* readings.

The works in this canon have been dealt into two sections, before and after the year 1969. I arbitrarily chose this date: it is the date of the lesbian/gay uprising in New York known as Stonewall and a frequently used marker of convenience in perceptions of lesbian/gay issues. Stonewall 1969 is used here as a short-hand for labelling work in this canon as either historically influential or contemporary.

The earliest work in our canon is Seaforth Mackenzie's *The Young Desire It* (1937). An account of Charles Fox's first year in a Perth boarding school, it explores his reactions to the interests of a young English schoolteacher, Penworth. The male attraction to another male provides the necessary impetus for a lesbian/gay categorisation, the work has been included in Robert Dessaix's anthology *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing* (1993) for the same reason. In looking at the role of 'place' here we find themes which could be regarded as inversions of certain Australian literary clichés: Penworth as homosexual is a representative of England teaching in a land where the boys are connected, in several literal ways, with the land of Australia, with the order of 'nature'. Penworth as homosexual, as *not*-Australian, as Other is outcast back to England, England as a fringe from the heterosexist Western Australian point of view.

In 1962 Shelley Garner's *The Flame and the Vision* was published by Frederick Muller in London. Garner gave us a book highly charged with homo-eroticism and homosexual love set in ancient Greece. As clichéd as it is to surround a male-male love relationship by a perfect Parthenon, Pythagoras and the Olympic Games, the Western Australian background of the author would be an interesting point for exploration. Can we make assumptions that the non-heterosexual writer-reader of the early 1960s 'desired' a non-Western Australian landscape, a non-Western Australian setting where, in myth at least, non-heterosexual relationships were 'easier', 'acceptable' or 'probable' or even 'noble'?

In 1965, G.M. Glaskin's *No End to the Way* was published internationally under the pseudonym Neville Jackson and was touted, correctly, as the first Australian work written from a homosexual point of view. Set in and around Perth, it tells of the homosexual figure, Ray, and the difficulties of his relationship with the Dutch immigrant Cor. The role of place in this work is an interesting twist on that which I found in Seaforth Mackenzie's book: while we again have a European visitor perceived as a fully-rooted part or inhabitant of Western Australia, this time the Australian is the sexual 'teacher'. The interfering Dutch wife is returned to her beloved homeland. Although the relationship turns sour as Ray and Cor watch their careers destroyed by institutional homophobia, it is the relationship that had the qualities of purity, a purity which could exist only momentarily in Western Australia but which managed to defy a European oppressive and compulsory heterosexism.

Released at around the same time was Randolph Stow's *The Merry Go Round in the Sea*—again set in WA, again carrying perceivable, readable non-heterosexual themes. As Rob Corram's crisis over his (family, national) identities develops from an early age, his hero-worship of older cousin Rick is readable not just as homo-erotic or homo-social, but can be perceived as early-age sexual within a non-heteronormative sense. And again there is an involved counterpoint of Western Australia and non-Australia,

of home and security and secure identities versus war and change. As with Glaskin's *No End to the Way*, it is the Western Australian setting that allows, temporarily, the near-expression and near-reception of non-heterosexual desire—and it is the foreign world which changes Rick enough that we can read his returned personality as one which rejects Rob and rejects any possibility of an intimacy that is non-hetero-normative.

Also present in the 'older' section of this canon is a short story from a 1968 *Westerly* by Irene Summy. A woman meets a girl called Chris who, invited into the woman's home, makes a pass at her, one to which, on reflection, the woman would have responded positively had she been a different woman. In this clever piece which questions the central character's identity contrasted with the fixed lesbian identity of Chris, it is in the realm of a certain space that non-heterosexual possibility comes about, in the safety of home as opposed to the public realm, it is away from the land and nature and rain and weather, in an environment in which the woman is in *her* perceived and ordered space that she is in a position to lose control.

The later works in my constructed canon turn strongly from the place and setting conceptions of foreign versus Australian country, with the non-heterosexual as Other which may or may not be 'part' of the Western Australian landscape. The concept of lesbian/gay Mecca is the dominant one when it comes to issues of place in WA's contemporary lesbian/gay writing. A large majority of unpublished manuscripts I was privileged to read involved Perth characters travelling to the Eastern cities (most frequently Darlinghurst, Sydney or Prahran, Melbourne) or making a decision to leave Western Australia. Go East, young man. The unpublished work of the talented Ryan Scott frequently explores issues of Perth versus non-Perth in which the non-Perth equates quite simply and easily with the gay 'Mecca' that is Sydney. This continued theme perhaps says less about the peculiarities of Western Australian writers than it does of writers of lesbian/gay readable work: it allows a reading of a lesbian/gay 'community' which exists in large urban centres, in the 'Meccas', an international community which retains a focus within and upon those Meccas.

Frequently there are lesbian/gay themed works by writers from other cities with stories of travel to Western Australia. Tim Connigrave's *Holding the Man* (1995) and Ben Ciantar's *Distractions* (1991) both make fleeting references to Perth city and the so-called lesbian/gay 'scene'—that is, the venues and institutions that make a lesbian/gay community 'visible' and urban-ly or sometimes urbanely centralised. As far as both works are concerned, Perth's 'scene' appears to be no different from the scenes in other cities in this country. The emphasis on place in these works is merely comparative. Perth figures as a place of happiness and contentment, it is both the same as the eastern states cities but different, better. The tans are better, the beaches are better, the sex and love and romance are better. Perth here is a fantasy, where one is apart from the characters' respective gay identities that are rooted in their home cities.

Fitting in as almost absurdist in its continuation of the small-city-gay-surprise-paradise-syndrome, John Hyde's 'Unravelling North' (1992) creates the lesbian/gay paradise in small WA town Derby. To Hyde's central character, the discovery of a lesbian/gay community in the outback is a shock. What is shocking is that this community and its institutions are the same as in any other city. In this and all the other works of the contemporary grouping in the gay-WA canon is the point that place is both highly important in terms of lesbian/gay expression and culture, and at the same time highly irrelevant. It is irrelevant because, as far as lesbian/gay ideas go, sexualised space(s) exist in an enclave *within* the city or town or state or area or setting.

What I'd like to do now is apply a strand of what is known as queer theory to the conceptual arguments about sexuality and place in Western Australian writing and explore the possibilities of 'queering' place in fiction. Queer Theory takes its influences from the poststructuralist ideas of Michel Foucault and of feminist questionings of the relations between gender and sex and sexuality, most often identified with the writings of Judith Butler. Queer theory is manifested through debates around sexuality, sexual identity and the *fixity* of both. From Butler we learn that queer theory questions the foundationalist views of a fixed lesbian/gay sexuality, and from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick the various boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual identities. Queer is a lesbian/gay theoretical tool, because it questions the hetero/homo binary from an anti-homophobic and anti-heterosexist stance. But it is a non-lesbian/gay theory as well: it disrupts the lesbian/gay communities' structures by querying that 'community' acceptance of the hegemonic mainstream's ordering of sexuality into *mainstream* and *minority*. And through this questioning it brings to light the point that the 'other', the 'minority', the embodiment of non-heterosexuality is generally represented, in the literature and media and popular beliefs in this country at least, as a white middle-classed male, thus causing further internalised marginalisations along axes of ethnicity, class, gender, age and disability. What we can do is work backwards with queer theory, explore the issues of Western Australian sexuality from a queer theoretical perspective; make an application of queer theory to the concept of 'place' and then re-explore that contentious issue of the 'canon'.

While non-heterosexual identities are constituted in a seemingly cohesive community, it is necessary to question how that community is used in the cultural expression that I refer to as readably lesbian/gay literature. As far as the earlier, pre-1969 grouping in the canon goes, there is no apparent sense of community in terms of readable non-heterosexuality. Stow's Rob Corram does not belong to an identifiable community based on sexuality and sexual similarity any more than Mackenzie's Penworth or Irene Summy's Chris. The post-1969 expressions all use characters who identify with a community of similar sexuality, with a lesbian/gay community: regardless of whether they feel they belong within it or not they're aware of the similarity, aware that they 'should' be a part of it. And throughout all of these works the representations of 'community' are as something that transcends most sense of place. The smatterings of 'enclaves' throughout the country, their similarities, are accorded differences only in terms of a quality of life that is provided by the 'surrounding' environment of the town or city and in which, as we stated earlier, the quality is greater in the 'great west' unless a work is centralised around a character of the great west who will see the east as a 'place' of greater quality of sexualised lifestyle. The grass is always greener or the boys are always blonder, perhaps.

The community and sense of sexual identity which transcend the deeper sense of place is a new phenomenon within the writings we're discussing—it is in the later works that we must ask why this sense of sexual connectedness that defies regional place. From where does this idea of shared sexuality come? Why do these characters, writers, readers see a world in which the sexual identity is not only fixed but repetitive throughout all non-heterosexual persons, not only shared as a resonant element between all these people across countries and even internationally, universally, but surpassing the identities that are drawn from environments and surrounds and settings? It can easily be posited that the influence of a lesbian/gay minority rights agenda, a lesbian/gay visible community which is rooted in its institutions and bounded by its symbols of shared sexuality and shared minoritisation, informs writers and

readers of a fixity in sexual identity, a fixity that queer theory rejects as an essentialist notion in favour of socially constructed identity, a fixity that I reject when speaking from a queer, which is not a lesbian or gay, point of view. And a fixity that is nowhere rejected in these later works, as if the story of a questioned sexual identity is only a story of the past, of the earlier works, as if we are all now completely understanding of the new rules of sexual minority and sexual identity.

Joan London's 'The Girls Love Each Other' intimates the lesbianism shared by several girls boarding with an older woman. Their sexual identity is not a discussed issue. As far as we can read in the older woman's point of view, it is she who avoids the topic of shared sexualities—the lesbianism is there but secret.

There is an exception to this statement, Western Australia's Elizabeth Jolley, and by that I mean not just the writer, or the work of the writer, but Jolley as phenomenon (Kiley 1995). Jolley writes about lesbianism. It has been described as one of the handful of recurrent themes in her work (Bettle 121), and the fact that Jolley, of a presumed heteronormative sexuality, makes use of these themes has been known to confuse critics writing from a lesbian/gay perspective (Hurley 1996, 151). As phenomenon, as industry, Jolley's work on lesbianism has been more frequently closeted than expounded. Back covers and straight reviewers have ignored her lesbian themes (Bettle 121) or constructed complicated metaphors to explain it away (Hurley 1996, 151). But it is the fact that Jolley has continued to concentrate on this theme that makes us aware something queer is going on. She does the unexpected, she 'challenges' (Gray 29) heteronormativity and, by implication, the relationship between the sexuality of writer (fixed or not) and the sexualities that are perceivable in writing.

For Jolley's characters, it is circumstance and opportunity that drive their sexual needs and desires (Bettle 122). Miss Peabody, of Jolley's best-known lesbian-referential work, creates an identity through the writings of Diana Hopewell. By showing us Miss Peabody's desire to 'become', Jolley questions the fixity of sexual identity.

However Jolley has never taken her work on sexuality far enough. As Maureen Bettle points out, for Jolley the sexuality is frequently an either/or scenario (Bettle 127)—in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* one is heterosexual and therefore prone to be mother and wife, or is non-heterosexual and practises a non-heterosexual existence. Are Miss Thorne and Edgely sexual outlaws because they exist outside the heteronormative structures or, by the end of the novel are we to be aware that they are happily fixed in their sexualities, particularly in light of Miss Thorne's failures to practise a sexual life away from an involvement with perceived lover Edgely? By this I mean to ask why the necessity in Jolley's work of the need for heterosexual or 'Other'—a queer critique rejects this as possibility.

To look at place with a queer theoretical perspective allows us not just to question the failure of writers and readers in this selection adequately to question the fixity of sexual identity, but opens a new challenge for queer theory: can we question place as influential on a characters' sexuality? Using the early part of the canon of works to begin with, it is the 'place' (Perth, Western Australia) that has informed non-heteronormative sexualities. For Mackenzie, Summy, Glaskin, Garner and Stow, the sexualities that we find readable are always indelibly connected with a sense of place. Penworth's sexuality is an extension of England, Cor's sexuality could only have occurred away from the elements and remnants of his Netherlands home.

What a queer theoretical approach does is question how and why Western Australia 'allows' a sexuality, 'creates' a reason for sexuality. Is it Other as non-European, as non-Eastern States, as non-big and sexualised city? Clearly not, given firstly the sense of

connectedness between cities granted by the later writings with lesbian/gay 'community' references, and secondly, though more importantly, the post-structuralist rejection of Other—Perth and Western Australia can no more play the role of Other than can non-heteronormative sexualities. From this we can merely conclude that, if there could be a rate of 'queerness' (as opposed to a lesbian-ness or gay-ness), the earlier works are more significantly queer than later writings in this canon: they are the works that don't Other sexualities but integrate them into the identities of the highly individualistic characters. However, again this is never taken far enough, because 'place' as concept fails always to be questioned and continues throughout all the selections to be part of an 'identity'—the identity that as queer critic we are rejecting.

Looking once more at the canon I originally constructed, is it possible that it was a mistake to create that list? Yes the canon was constructed on empirical evidence of a fixed sense of place. I saw Western Australia as place. By queer processes Western Australia as 'part' of Australia, as category, as 'something' must be rejected. Further, I took non-heteronormativity as part of a binary: my lesbian/gay reading of these texts was made because I found them to be non-heteronormative or non-appealing to a heterosexual reading. Again that is a binary which, in using a queer theoretical stance, it is important to smash.

Hence the construction of a canon of Western Australian lesbian/gay writing is impossible, it is founded on falsity and wishful thinking, on premises that are neither 'natural' nor part of a pre-given 'culture', nor part of some in-between. A queer theory rejects heterosexuality as much as it rejects homosexuality; a queer theory destabilises *all* sexual categories, and hence all sexually-categorised readings; it rejects and destabilises place, it does not allow Western Australia to influence or *not influence* a sexual identity because it questions the *a priori* foundation of these identities, thus these readings, thus this canon. Queer, as I've used it for this work, questions how and why and what is meant by giving even *this* paper, from any categorical sexualised perspective in *any* place here, now, today.

The canon

Works up to 1969, ordered by date of publication

- Seaforth MacKenzie, *The Young Desire It*, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1937.
 Shelley Garner, *The Flame and the Vision*, Frederick Muller Ltd., London, 1962.
 Randolph Stow, *The Meny go round in the Sea*, MacDonald & Co., 1965.
 Neville Jackson (pseud. for G.M. Glaskin), *No End to the Way*, Barrie and Rockliff Ltd., London, 1965.
 G.M. Glaskin, 'The Asking Price', *Westerley*, March, 1968.
 Irene M. Summy, 'A Girl Named Chris', *Westerley*, March, 1968.

Recent writing, ordered alphabetically

- Stephen J Carter, 'Fleas and Hash', *Divertika*, CMS, 1995.
 Ben Ciantar, *Distractions*, BlackWattle Press, Sydney, 1991.
 Timothy Conigrave, *Holding the Man*, McPhee Gribble, 1995.
 Rob Cover, 'Dana' *Westerly*, Spring 1996.
 ———, 'Little Journey' *Fruit* (ed. G. Dunne), Sydney: BlackWattle Press 1995.
 ———, 'Watch' *Ready or Not* (ed. M. Macleod) Sydney: Random House 1996.
 ———, 'Tower' *Wild Fictions* Fremantle: Cliff Street Publishing, forthcoming.
 Peter Edwards, *Gems*, Literary Mouse Press, Lesmurdie, 1994.
 Michael Hayes, 'I Alone, am the Frontier', *Naked Eye*, Curtin University, Perth, 1990.
 John Hyde, 'Unravelling North', *OutRage 1993 Anthology*, Fitzroy, 1992.

- Alex Kendrew, 'Jellyfish at my Feet', unpublished MS.
 Andrew Lansdown, *Blatant and Proud*, Perceptive Publications, Cloverdale (W.A.), 1984.
 James Legasse, 'Faces', *The Same Old Story*, FAP, 1982.
 Joan London, 'The Girls Love Each Other', *Sister Ships*, FAP, 1986.
 Lance Price, 'Conjugal Rights', *Divertika*, Sydney, 1995.
 Dean Raven, 'When Ryan Came Home', *OutRage 1993 Anthology*, Fitzroy, 1992.
 Ryan Scott, unpublished mss.

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