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Abstract

Between the inclusion of works with a lesbian presence in the 1982 anthology *Frictions* and the publication of two specifically lesbian anthologies a decade later- *The Explodittg Frangipani* in 1990 and *Falling For Grace* in 1993 - several writers have emerged in Australia who have produced lesbian texts. While these writers should not be restricted by categorisation as 'lesbian writers', the collection *Surly Girls* by Susan Hampton (which won the Steele Rudd award for short fiction in 1990) and the novels *Remember the Tarantella* by Finola Moorhead and *Working Hot* by Mary Fallon (awarded the 1989 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for New Writing) are notable because they centre on the figure of the lesbian while experimenting with conventions of realist narrative.¹ In her collection of short stories and prose poems, *Surly Girls*, Hampton extends, and questions the nature of, boundaries around gender and sexuality by crossing genre boundaries. *Back Cover Blurb* plays with both genre and techniques of compression to establish a text which interrogates the construction of homosexual subjectivity as well as the packaging of the book trade: *Back Cover Blurb*.

MELISSA BOYDE and AMANDA LAWSON

Diving for the Red Pearl: Surfacing and Setting the Centre in *Working Hot*.

Between the inclusion of works with a lesbian presence in the 1982 anthology *Frictions* and the publication of two specifically lesbian anthologies a decade later – *The Exploding Frangipani* in 1990 and *Falling For Grace* in 1993 – several writers have emerged in Australia who have produced lesbian texts. While these writers should not be restricted by categorisation as 'lesbian writers', the collection *Surly Girls* by Susan Hampton (which won the Steele Rudd award for short fiction in 1990) and the novels *Remember the Tarantella* by Finola Moorhead and *Working Hot* by Mary Fallon (awarded the 1989 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for New Writing) are notable because they centre on the figure of the lesbian while experimenting with conventions of realist narrative.¹

In her collection of short stories and prose poems, *Surly Girls*, Hampton extends, and questions the nature of, boundaries around gender and sexuality by crossing genre boundaries. *Back Cover Blurb* plays with both genre and techniques of compression to establish a text which interrogates the construction of homosexual subjectivity as well as the packaging of the book trade: *Back Cover Blurb*.

What is heterosexuality? Why does a certain percentage of the population feel attracted to the opposite sex? Is it curable? Experts in the field file their reports.
(p. 61)

In writing *Remember the Tarantella* Moorhead takes up a challenge from Christina Stead: 'its very difficult to make an interesting novel with no men in it at all' (p. ix). She develops an 'Alphabet of Characters' from Arachne to Zorro to explore the ways in which female myth is created and transmitted between various groups of women. Strategies such as dispensing with the patronymic and a mathematically formulaic plot structure reveal and experiment with how both masculinist narrative and female and lesbian subjectivities are constructed.

In discussion of 'lesbian' writing it is important to recognize that the use of the term lesbian is not intended to locate the lesbian outside societal

negotiations of power and gender but rather attempts to take into account historical and cultural specificities. When no qualifier is attached to a term such as text or novel it is most likely to be assumed that it is heterocentric. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* points out that the development at the turn of the nineteenth century of a homosexual/heterosexual binarized identity has 'left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherences of homo/heterosexual definition'.² The relationship between gender and literary experimentation and innovation has been mapped to some extent, from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to more recent critical work such as *Breaking the Sequence*, edited by Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs. Constructing readings of experimental texts, and specifically naming them as lesbian, attempts to instate an anti-homophobic analysis which raises the possibility of undoing the determinacy of the homo/hetero polarization. It also raises the possibility that inscriptions of what has hitherto been determined non-normative sexuality expose and disrupt textual conventions and destabilise the hegemonic investment in those conventions. In a conference paper entitled 'Experimental Desire: Bodies and Pleasures in Queer Theory' Elizabeth Grosz proposes a link between innovation and queer sexuality.

In each of us there are elements and impulses that strive for conformity and elements which seek instability and change: this is as possible for heterosexuals as it is for queers of whatever type, although it may well be less enacted, it may well be that there is less impetus for expansion, development and change for those who reap the rewards and benefits of functioning according to social norms ... certain types of queer theory end up outlining and analyzing the paradoxical strangeness of heterosexuality and its norms.³

Queer as a discourse of radicalism raises some interesting issues for the critiquing and contextualising of lesbian texts, which, in Sydney in 1993 and 1994 at least, seem to be inescapably near to, if not elided with, queer writing.⁴ Despite or indeed because of its subversive or avant-gardist stance, queer provides a space for interrogating hitherto assumed centres.

It is interesting to note in this connection that the title of Fallon's novel *Working Hot* is contextualized in the under(Other)world of the sex worker:

'when I worked at the Pink Pussycat they'd let the guys touch you were always out of it and the guys could touch you or lick you or whatever you know it's called working hot that's how I like to work I like to work hot' that's Kinky Trinkets. (p. 7)

Fallon disrupts and disturbs notions of the normal when she exhibits a line-up of sexual deviants and deviations: sex workers, johns, pimps, and sadomasochistic practice. The interactions of Kinky Trinkets, her clients and Gizmo the Pimp; the voyeuristic presences of men who fantasise about sleeping with lesbians; and the textually fleeting appearances in the

novel's opening pages of characters such as a 'Greek or Italian' man who picks up a hitchhiker outside Cairns who reports he was 'wearing a skirt I thought was his national costume until I noticed the frilly undies and the machete on the floor' or 'a fourteen-year-old girl who had had an abnormally large clitoris removed' in a Sydney hospital formulate a collage of deviance which locates the novel in the interrogatory discourse of queer.

Set within this milieu, yet distant from it, is Toto Caelo's emotional and erotic journeying through her intense relationships with her lovers, Freda Peach, Top Value, and Evie. At times streetwise, comic speech like 'I don't want to get into any ashram honey except the one between your legs' is used, simultaneously satirising a specific (Sydney) lesbian fad for Eastern religions and exposing Toto's sexualized obsession with Freda. The erotic exploration described in part two of the novel entitled 'Sextec', gives lesbian sexuality a central place in the text, signalled by the metaphor of diving for the red pearl:

'I am anxious for the red pearl' said the ABALONE DIVER
fishing around in the aquarium of her mind
with a pretty finger (p. 37)

The metaphor suggests entry into a fluid realm, the symbolic feminine associated in literary myth with monstrous females like Grendel's sea-cave dwelling mother in *Beowulf*. Instead of the female figuring as an eruptive, extraneous monster to be destroyed, the lesbian body in *Working Hot* is metaphorised into an underwater seascape:

...your hands I
tell you are waves of water my cells I tell you are
barnacles they open with tide-and-wave action...
inside you (as far as I went that is) was that wet cave
was that grotto and there was moisture running down
the walls - rising damp (pp. 44/45)

At the centre of *Working Hot* is a process of both locating and bringing to the surface a reimagined lesbian sexuality, one in which the phallus is displaced by the pearl at the heart of the oyster.

This reimagining is intimately linked both to the form as well as the content of the novel. Strategies of appropriation and allusion combine with a fragmented structure in layers of self-reflexivity which accumulate to undo the authority of the singular narrative voice often found in the realist novel. Point of view shifts between many exotic characters, Toto Caelo, Freda Peach, One Iota and Kinky Trinkets. Lists of quotations from literary texts and popular culture appear throughout, interspersed with quotations attributed to characters in the novel, or to the author herself

under one of her other names, Kathleen Denman. The final lines of the novel –

and I walked for days until I reached that plateau of
thwarted desires and dead dreams called Maturity (p. 289)

satirise the narrative culmination as a process of linear development so familiar from *Bildungsroman* and *Kunstlerroman*.

Narrative in *Working Hot* is interspersed with performative episodes. Genres such as song, radio play, film script and opera libretto are used, for example: 'To Resort to the Sandy-Beached Tourist Resort of the Body: An Opera for Three Voices and a Choir of Five Hundred'; 'Honeymoon in Crazy Springs: A Radio Play'; and the 'cashchorus' which repeatedly parodies suburban normalcy:

...where there's life there's hope with a TV and a heater
and a couple of catcatcats
we'll have to get out of these pyjamas first
and where can we borrow oh where can we borrow oh
where can we borrow the cashcashcash
the cashchorus (p. 236)

In *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan examines the relationship between visibility and representation, arguing that:

Representation reproduces the Other as the Same. Performance, insofar as it can be defined as representation without reproduction, can be seen as a model for another representational economy, one in which the reproduction of the Other as the Same is not assured.⁵

In its performative aspect, *Working Hot* gestures towards a representation which is not easily assimilable within realist concepts of mimesis. It makes the sexuality 'constituted as secrecy'⁶ visible, but within endlessly varied performances. Sedgwick discusses how the secrecy around homosexuality brings about a continual negotiation of the closet, rather than a singular 'coming out'. *Working Hot* reflects this process, which is never fixed.

Fallon's novel discloses its debt to modernist experimental writing, particularly by writers who explore transgressive or lesbian sexuality, such as Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes. Stein's codification of lesbian eroticism where words such as butter and 'lifting belly' stand for a range of sexual activities is played on by Fallon in the following sequence:

TOTO: ya wannabit a the old mons venis hey
abituvataste uv the old monso veneseo she's a nice
drop hey wanme ta go fa a bit uv a tit a tit wiv ya
clit hey a bit atheoldbluetongue between the
leggings lass want a bituv a tonguin where it counts

do ya sheila
 aw playin possum are we...
 TOP VALUE: you turn me to butter
 TOTO: well Gertie did maintain that the fact that butter
 melts is one of the important facts
 here I'll whip that cream for you

Any idea of secrecy around sex collapses in *Working Hot*.

Two of Fallon's narrators, Inside Information and E.C.R. Saidthandone provide an ironic commentary on the sidelines, reminiscent of the Doctor in *Nightwood* by Barnes while Archangel Mademoiselle Montgolfier in *Working Hot* recalls Dame Evangeline Mousset in Barnes' *Ladies' Almanack*. Fallon uses the experimental device noted by Friedman and Fuchs in which 'the reader is invited into the frame of the narrative to participate in its complexities'.⁷ In the passage in *Working Hot* 'Close Enough to the Heart of the Matter' – typeset to resemble the design of *Ladies' Almanack* (which in turn resembles a sixteenth century book of days) – Montgolfier is engaged in the excavatory process that the reader encounters in *Working Hot*:

Of course, she knew that the transcription of this palimpsest was a massive and quite mad undertaking (perhaps even dangerous) and yet Montgolfier worked obsessively and eventually began to make headway in the translation and comprehension of this mass of often contradictory and always paradoxical material (p. 97)

The reading process is signified in terms of dissecting the human body to extract 'a heart mass', an 'accumulation' likened to 'the development of the pearl'. The doubling of the image of the pearl, as the 'red pearl' of the clitoris and as the pearl of wisdom, sets lesbian sexuality at the discursive centre of Fallon's experimental text. Like the gritty, irritant process of developing a pearl, the reader engages simultaneously in uncovering the text and lesbian sexuality. When Fallon invites the reader to:

lingalunga over lingua
 you leave me reader working on the body of my new
 lover Trixi oh sorry what was it again Lexi yes Lexi Con
 holding her spine in the palm of my hand
 ah and ohyes the body of language (p. 32)

the relation of language to knowledge, and sexuality to both, is inextricably asserted.

In tracing developments in lesbian experimental writing in Australia, Fallon's novel *Working Hot* is a pivotal text. The breadth of experimentation, the complex, uncompromising eroticism of the language and the novel's lesbian textuality and intertextuality place it in an international tradition and context of lesbian experimental writing. *Working Hot*

traverses various sites, including contemporary Australia and the modernist centre of lesbian textual production, Paris. Like *Ladies Almanack*, Fallon's text centres on lesbian lives but in *Working Hot* the location is inner-city Sydney, the idiom Australian 'queer' and the imagery aquatic and fluid, anchoring the text offshore in the clear waters which surround the mainland. As a 'coral bowl with all kinds of juicy fruits in it' and a 'sandy-beached tourist resort', the lesbian body is undeniably posited as both a site of desire and a desirable site.

Notes

1. Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson (eds.), *Frictions: An Anthology of Fiction by Women* (Melbourne: Sybylla, 1982); Cathie Dunsford and Susan Hawthorne (eds.), *The Exploding Frangipani* (Auckland: New Women's Press, 1990); Roberta Snow and Jill Taylor (eds.), *Falling For Grace: An Anthology of Australian Lesbian Fiction* (Sydney: Blackwattle Press, 1993); Susan Hampton, *Surly Girls* (Sydney: William Collins Press, 1989); Finola Moorhead, *Remember the Tarantella* (Sydney: Primavera Press, 1987); Mary Fallon, *Working Hot* (Fitzroy, Vic: Sybylla Press, 1989). All subsequent references are to these editions.
2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester & Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 2.
3. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Experimental Desire: Bodies and Pleasures in Queer Theory', Forces of Desire Conference, Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, August 1993.
4. *Falling For Grace* was launched at the inaugural QueerLit conference in Sydney, July 1993; the gay and lesbian coalitionist movement which led to the inclusion of Lesbian in the Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras has had the effect of making the Mardi Gras Festival a major cultural event, which features lesbian writing groups such as the Bluetongues in its calendar; publishing opportunities offered by magazines such as *Burn* (now defunct) and *Cargo* also resulted from this move.
5. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.
6. Sedgwick, p. 73.
7. Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 39.