Republics of Letters
Literary Communities in Australia

Edited by Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon

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Anthologies function as cultural cabinets in transforming poetry into muséal objects that indicate a particular set of values. Typically, such mapping has strongly marked and impermeable borders; anthologies become separate ‘republics of letters’ wherein each poem has democratic equivalency. At the same time, Andrew Michael Roberts suggests that anthology editors may seek to disrupt prevailing values by bringing attention to new groups in the poetic field.¹ Marjorie Perloff notes that in the United States a wave of minority communities began being anthologised in the 1980s, although poetry anthologies featuring women and African-American writers started being produced even earlier in the 1970s.² Underscored by the ideology that the personal was political, the focus of such anthologies was on claiming a voice for those marginalised or excluded in poetic formations.

This chapter examines how the unavowed nature of gay, lesbian, and queer communities finds expression in the genre of poetry, but also how it problematises the legislative role of anthologies. Indeed, editorial approaches towards the anthologisation of gay and lesbian poetry in Australia highlight a continuing resistance to representativeness and institutionalisation. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to undertake a detailed comparative analysis, an investigation into the anthology history of Australian gay and lesbian poetries begins to reveal not only shared needs and attitudes between Australian and New Zealand gay and lesbian writers, and between gay and lesbian writers globally, but also quite culturally specific relations of sexuality to sociality and literary form.

With its focus on ‘woman-identified’ cultural production, the burgeoning feminist movement supported and was supported by lesbian poets. Yet there was still a struggle to vocalise both solidarity and difference. Eileen Myles has commented on her sense of invisibility as a lesbian poet when she arrived in New York in the 1970s:

> There wasn’t a woman in that circle of poets, either, who could receive me and let me know I was heard. Alice Notley, who was married to Ted Berrigan, was there, and we were, and are, great friends, but she was a married woman and a mother and she was going to have a different life … I made the model of what I needed

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there to be. I put lesbian content in the New York School poem because I wanted the poem to be there to receive me.³

A similar lack of identity could be found in Australia and New Zealand. Jill Jones notes that,

Public lesbian and gay voices in poetry are a relatively new thing, so far as Australian poetry history goes. You would be looking hard to find anything other than the repressed, the presumed, the pronounless, the masked before the mid-1960s.⁴

And before editing the first anthology of gay New Zealand poetry, Jonathan Fisher recalls feeling

as if I was working with a void. Certainly I knew many other poets, but as far as I could tell I seemed to be the only gay poet that was writing and being published in this country. I thought how wonderful it would be if there was a collection of New Zealand gay poetry that I could feel kinship to, but there was no such book and no major publisher had seemed interested in this as an idea.⁵

Gay and lesbian writing was largely undifferentiated from other writing of the sexual liberation movement. It would be featured predominantly in Australia in the 1970s in little magazines and independent presses, and most overtly in presses like InVersions, Nosukumo, and Wild and Woolley.⁶ The first Australian anthology of gay and lesbian writing, Edge City on Two Different Plans, was published in 1983. It was followed by anthologies such as The Exploding Frangipani: Lesbian Writing from Australia and New Zealand (1990) and Pink Ink (1991). 2001 saw the first anthology of exclusively Australian lesbian poetry, Sappho’s Dreams and Delights.⁷ Only in 2009 would the first anthology specifically of both gay and lesbian Australian poetry appear with Out of the Box: Contemporary Australian Gay and Lesbian Poets.

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³ Eileen Myles, quoted in Maggie Nelson, Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p. 173.


⁶ Little magazines included Compass and Imprint. Wild and Woolley would publish titles such as Fallen Angels and Invitation to a Marxist Lesbian Party. Michael Hurley suggests that the dominant genres of lesbian and gay writing in the 1970s were ‘nonfiction, coming-out stories, especially in student newspapers and university student orientation magazines; ephemeral, political leaflets; manifestoes; papers for the early national homosexual conferences; submissions to government departments by groups such as CAMP and Gay Task Force; and major educational material.’ See Introduction, Kerry Bashford et al., Pink Ink: An Anthology of Australian Lesbian and Gay Writers (Redfern: Wicked Women Publications, 1991), p. 20. Subsequent page references are given in-text.

In contrast, *When Two Men Embrace: The New Zealand Anthology of Gay and Lesbian Poetry* and *Eat These Sweet Words: The New Zealand Anthology of Lesbian and Gay Poetry* were published a whole decade earlier in 1999. Jonathan Fisher and a lesbian collective of poets – Sue Fitchett, Marewa Glover, Cary McDermott and Rhonda Vickoce – separately edited their own volumes and the two volumes were then cling-wrapped and sold together in a pocket. As Sally McIntyre points out, the separate editing was a result of ‘well-defined separate, but mutually supportive aspects of a desire to have a voice, to get the writing out there’. At the same time, neither volume positioned itself as representative of either gay or lesbian poetry respectively. Indeed, as a mixed Pakeha and Maori collective, the lesbian editors were disappointed that there were not more contributions from Maori and Pacific Islanders, and editorial discussions broached issues of racism. While the anthology was well received in the gay and lesbian community as well as by the mainstream press, a number of reviewers remarked upon the fact that the volume of lesbian poetry was almost twice as long as *When Two Men Embrace*. This discrepancy, the physical separation into two volumes, and a clear difference in tone – the lesbian volume tending more towards political critique and a celebration of sexuality while the gay one evoked a far greater sense of anxiety – may explain why the volumes now tend to be archived as distinct rather than joint anthologies.

While there are often analogies made between homosexual subcultures in Australia and New Zealand, it is evident that there are quite specific literary histories to be formulated, histories which showcase the variable tropological formations as well as the range of rhetorical and discursive strategies ‘in which sexuality is not only embedded but conceived’. Australian literary histories have, by and large, tended to elide issues of sexuality in relation to poetry, perhaps reflecting a broader tendency in the 1980s to collect them – as well as issues surrounding ethnicity and class – in the hold-all basket of the ‘new diversity’. In their titles alone, the two 1999 New Zealand volumes feature performative acts that might be said to constitute a form of belonging. *Eat These Sweet Words* is a positive and sassily provocative invitation toward active participation by the reader, while *When Two Men Embrace* explicitly foregrounds sexual intimacy. Alternatively, Australian anthologies featuring gay and lesbian poetry tend to foreground the obscurity or subcultural elements that have informed some Australian gay and lesbian experience, and thus to render problematic the concept of a gay and lesbian community.

*Edge City on Two Different Plans* was published by the Sydney Gay Writers Collective. In his foreword, Dennis Altman argues that ‘the idea of an identity based upon [homosexual] emotions and behaviour is … comparatively recent’, certainly the ‘sense that one is part of a community … has only come into being in our lifetimes’. Yet while acknowledging the politicisation of homosexual experience into a ‘gay’ identity, the four editors of *Edge City* – Margaret Bradstock, Gary Dunne, Dave Sargent and Louise Wakeling – focus instead

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8 Sally McIntyre, review, *Canta* 3 (17 March 1999).
9 Mark Pirie, review of *Eat These Sweet Words* and *When Two Men Embrace*, *JAAM: Just Another Art Movement* 12 (October 1999): 128–31 (130); Sue Fitchett, email to the author, 20 November 2011.
11 Dennis Altman, Foreword, in Margaret Bradstock et al., eds, *Edge City on Two Different Plans*, (Leichhardt: Sydney Gay Writers Collective, 1983), p. 13. Subsequent page references are given in-text.
on an undoing of belonging and stability, featuring writing that demonstrates ‘a sense of alienation, of frontiers crossed, of barriers set up and still to fall; of fringe-dwelling in rural and urban ghettos’, and poetry that exhibits affective responses – ‘fear, danger, excitement’ – that come with ‘city living or the slow death of the (homo)sexual self’ (16). In ‘The City of Collective Memory’, Dianne Chisholm suggests that gays, lesbians, and queers owe their emergence and continuing relationship to the world to the modern metropolis. As their ‘habitation [is] primarily the inner city of big cities, where wreckage and renewal are most intense’, the city, she argues, features in gay and lesbian writing as a central yet highly compromised image. This problematising of social belonging in relation to the modern metropolis underwrites Edge City. For the four editors, it may not be a mapping of city sociability on two different plans – gay and lesbian, or straight and queer – but it may sometimes be many plans and sometimes none. The cover of their anthology significantly features an image of an almost melting Escher-esque city (one where stable perspective is undone), and the collection’s title emphasises ex-centricity or marginality in relation to urban life.

A key element of a large city is the idea of a community of the anonymous. Scott Wilson argues that a ‘queer community would be the community of those who do not have a community’. He notes that as ‘national communities in the West and elsewhere are overwhelmingly and, to varying degrees, prescriptively “heterosexual,” homosexual relations call every community into question’. Following the work of Lee Edelman, Wilson argues that what individual members of a gay and lesbian community have in common is a certain negative position in relation to straight society. He continues, ‘The gay and lesbian community, if there were one, would be so much in excess of imposed, derogatory, appropriated, affirmed and invented definitions that it would perpetually exceed definition altogether’. For Wilson, gay and lesbian communities ‘bare the arbitrariness and limitedness of particular communities, exposing the violence that polices and patrols those limits within the boundaries of the nation or the state.

I want to suggest that this idea of a queer community being predicated on an arbitrariness or even absence of community may find affinity with poetry’s notorious obscurity. In Infidel Poetics, Daniel Tiffany argues that lyric substance allows for the existence of ‘certain kinds of hermetic yet expressive communities, certain underworlds, within the social fabric’. He argues that the ‘transitivity of the verbal enigma’ ‘reminds us of the possibility of communities that defy the seemingly inexorable logic of accessibility, universality, and transparency’. So a poetics of obscurity offers a vehicle for unavowable communities such as those of gays, lesbians and queers, which are at once ‘inscrutable and reflective, discontinuous and harmonious, solipsistic and expressive’. Indeed, Tiffany suggests that

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14 Wilson, p. 208.
15 Wilson, p. 213.
lyric obscurity becomes ‘the very ground, or medium, of negative sociability’.\textsuperscript{17} Rather than a community per se, it can engender a constellation, readers unified by expressive correspondences.\textsuperscript{18}

A good example of how lyric obscurity may function as a compositional channel for enigmatic sexed being is the opening poem of \textit{Edge City}, Javant Biarujia’s ‘A Un Javanais’. Not only creating his own language and identity but then combining it with French (as a poetics of mongrelism), Biarujia focuses on ‘shadowy forms’:

\begin{quote}
they always come out silently and somehow beautifully
the prostitutes and the underworld
like certain species of plant which flower in the evening (19)
\end{quote}

The ‘prostitutes and the underworld’ are part of the cityscape not visible by day, and largely unheard, but have some biospheric standing (are metaphysically material in the world). Like ‘A Un Javanais’, Kathleen Mary Fallon’s ‘Perfected’ articulates nebulous desire through a blurring of the urban and nature:

\begin{quote}
you have come up against me again
as you do
like a wet-slap-bang-in-the-face-fish
I was walking down Central Tunnel
the busker the slack offkey music
my life you in my life sad effluent
sad brown water (83)
\end{quote}

Note the busker’s music being ‘slack’ and ‘offkey’, the symbolism of the tunnel being walked down even as it is ‘Central’, and the water being effluent brown. All constitute a poetics of the shadowy and the unclear, providing ironic contrast to the title ‘Perfected’. The sexual coding of ‘fish’ is transparent among a set of reading individuals as to be ‘slap-bang-in-the-face’. Fallon foregrounds the ‘illicit giggle’, the ‘playful joke’ and the ‘old house’ holding the ‘tree to its face like a coquette’s fan’. The social relations on display here are obscure but also an open secret. In ‘For the Writer’, Dave Sargent notes that if life fell into place ‘as the structured characters before me./I’d probably lay down my pen forever’ (179). Form is imbricated in the content of the secret and in what homosexual desire might feel like: ill-fitting, unstructured.

Appearing in 1991, \textit{Pink Ink} was published by Wicked Women Publications and edited by Kerry Bashford, Mikey Halliday, Chris Jones, Peter Kerans, Leonie Knight, and Jan and Wendy Moulstone. It featured a number of writers who had appeared in \textit{Edge City}, including Gay Dunne, Margaret Bradstock, Denis Gallagher, Kathleen Mary Fallon, Carolyn Gerrish and Louise Wakeling, but also introduced a host of new names, many of whom had found a publishing home in the little quarterly magazine \textit{cargo}.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Pink Ink} appeared in the final

\textsuperscript{17} Tiffany, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Scott Wilson does note that ‘however chimerical and strategic the relation between gays and lesbians, such communities do exist in the practical form of crucial support institutions, at the very least’ (p. 212).
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{cargo} was a regular forum for gay and lesbian writing, although it would be joined by others like
year of the five year existence of *cargo*, which was edited by Laurin McKinnon and Jill Jones (as Jill Taylor), and which alternated between separate issues of gay fiction and poetry and issues of lesbian writing (with the exception of a combined gay and lesbian issue co-edited by Pam Brown and Sasha Soldatow).  

A number of gay and lesbian writers would publish under pseudonyms, Jones noting that she published as Angela Mysterioso and Dorothy Moore (in *cargo* and in *Pink Ink*). Many poems in *Pink Ink* reflect on invisibility or the pressure to conform to a normative heterosexual lifestyle, as illustrated in Margaret Bradstock’s ‘Selling Out’:

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Thinking about the rain-forest,
about heading north
to the Rainbow Triangle,
ringed by volcanic mountains,
the roar of traffic
hits you,
sucks at your blood
like infection,
like a destructive love-affair
you just can’t do without.
Running the red lights,
programming the day ahead,
you place the dream on hold,
plug into the memory store
of lead-light windows, superannuation,
an almost nuclear family,
& you know you’ll never make it.
The traffic snakes away,
a grey, swollen river.
This is the worst danger:
the city’s become home. (103)
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It is the city that contaminates and overwhelms, and which exists in opposition to an ontological space of freedom and the ideal. As with Fallon’s poem in *Edge City*, artifice and the organic run together as the urban noise of cars is as pathologically violent in its effect as love. In Catherine Bateson’s ‘Zoo Poem,’ there is the sense of being enclosed or positioned by others’ presumptions of ‘natural’ behaviour. The speaker notes how she and her lover

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20 Interestingly, McKinnon’s impetus to start *cargo* was very similar to Jonathan Fisher’s desire to put together *When Two Men Embrace*: ‘One of my initial motivations in working to construct *cargo*, was that I couldn’t find enough material to read that was written by gay men. This is despite the fact that in the last few years there has been a very marked increase in the amount of printed material here, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom. However, I became frustrated that little of this material related to my world.’ See Editorial, *cargo* 3 (1988), n.p. In her opening Editorial, Jill Jones notes that she and McKinnon ‘want to give lesbian and gay male writers a context for their work, whether it is explicitly about sexuality or about ... anything.’ See *cargo* 2 (1988), n.p.
retreat when a gang of boys call one lioness washing another 'lesbians'. Such open jokiness contrasts against the silence of the speaker who continues:

The lions are soft as cats or children's toys and boys will be …

We all know this story but let me tell it again:
The woman had short hair. She wore jeans, a jacket, boots. She was carrying a can of petrol. The boys stopped her in the street. They made her pour petrol over her head … That was in Boston, 1976.

You cannot kiss with a mouth full of ashes. (266–67)

Even appearing gay or lesbian, or not performing 'proper' gender roles, involves risk and disciplining. Biarujia's moving elegy, 'Extract from Ra', mourns the AIDS-related death of Robert Gamble and highlights the elision between gay experience and the public world through a fractured poetic text that self-consciously draws attention to its own constructedness and obliquity, and which moves between free verse and multiple columns:

it's not in
            a single spot the verb to be
            on a leopards secrecy can be a
            skin stratagem
            not a blotch with smiles
            of ink for innocent enquirers
            on a clean copy and part estranged family
            you can't infer the it wouldn't be
            your first secret examined himself:
            having to look right did I drain the
            having to look left same large cup
            at all the as he
            rules
            of the world 3
            soon you shall a year has unashamedly
            stand between passed
            what I call since you
            the bell faced the
Again, there is the focus on animal imagery, but with multiple perspectives and narratives around the same event. Dorothy Porter’s ‘Extracts from “Thylacine”’ foregrounds the impossibility of containing lesbian sexuality and its excess through language and traditional models of consumption:

Like the gourmets in ‘La Grande Bouffe’
I gorge till I bust,
a romantic appetite,
my language
garish, unlettered
as tunnel graffiti. (285)

In his lengthy introduction to Pink Ink, Michael Hurley cautions that categories of ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ writing suggest ‘uniform bodies of work which can be claimed by homogenised readerships: the gay reader, the lesbian reader in a similar way to how “Australian” functions in “Australian literature”’. He notes, however, that ‘in their quite separate beginnings, ‘Australian’ and ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ writing ‘were assertions of minority cultures in the face of colonial and sexual hegemony – that is contesting a cultural dominant’. While that status of writing as gay and lesbian may come from reading against the grain of how individual writers see their own work, or how others have previously read them, they also register ‘resistant performances in which there is a refusal of definition by each other and wider social regulation. In which “we” speaks myriad preferences’ (13–14).

Hurley suggests that the history of publishing gay and lesbian poetry has been more ‘fraught’ than fiction due, firstly, to

strongly masculinist traditions of criticism; secondly poetry’s position at the heart of ‘literary writing’ and the protective manoeuvres which insulate it from perceived contamination; and lastly some strong colloquial voices that organise anglo-celtic, male heterosexuality at the centre of ‘Australian’ traditions’. (18–19)

Hurley points to the public and critical recognition of lesbian writing via literary prizes for ‘new’ and ‘experimental’ writing and by the mention of ‘the lesbian voice’ in The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets. Yet he argues that there has never been the ‘same demand for gay and lesbian writing as there has been for women’s, multicultural and black material in the mainstream fiction and poetry publishing world’ (22).

Indeed, it would take another two decades from when Hurley wrote in the early 1990s for the next anthology of gay and lesbian Australian poetry to appear. Like Edge City and Pink Ink, Out of the Box was published by an independent press, Puncher & Wattmann, though even its orange and white cover seems to echo the mainstream ‘Popular Penguins’ series. By choosing Out of the Box rather than the alternative Paintbox as a title, its editors Michael Farrell and Jill Jones emphasise movement and decontainment, reflecting the performative titles of the New Zealand anthologies, When Two Men Embrace and Eat These
Sweet Words. The editors decided to select poetry by gay and lesbian writers that did not necessarily have specifically gay and lesbian content, a decision that reflects the approach taken by the lesbian collective that edited Eat These Sweet Words. In ‘Things Get Out’ – his part of the shared introduction – Farrell argued that to denote something as gay or lesbian is not a ‘subtraction but an addition’, in the sense that it might extend the themes covered in the poetry (10).

As with other Australian anthologies of gay and lesbian writing, Farrell and Jones also decided to publish contemporary writing rather than assert a monumentalising tradition. Yet with Out of the Box appearing almost three decades after Edge City, many of the poems reflect the passing of time, an acceptance, even ease with the subject’s fictive variants, and the integration of lesbian and gay sexuality within everyday life. Andy Quan writes of seeing in the youthful poet, ‘the man I/would become blooming in the distance’:

I trampled those days, a lion, believed
in myself with a ferocity that has since
never been the same. They were days
when self-knowing became real, a dented
bud of a tulip infused with its own
fragility and what it might reveal.
I’d discovered Great Men. This late
in the century, in so vast a country, so
few gay poets. (74)

In ‘A History Lesson,’ David Malouf notes that, ‘These lives go other ways/ than the documents intended’ (32). Like Quan, there is a positive attitude of future possibility:

But that is another story. Passed from mouth
to mouth and not set down, it covers the facts, has a beginning and has survived
its middle. Why shouldn’t it end well? (33)

Jill Jones notes:

And remember edges of names
past the established
and stolid
past any eloquence of
the inherited.

And later in the same poem, ‘The world can’t be overwrought/anymore/like childhood’ (99).

In her introduction, ‘Going in Any Direction’, Jones draws attention to the significance of gay and lesbian writing emerging in the 1970s out of ‘shared households that comprised city living in many Australian capital cities prior to the yuppie property booms … of more recent decades’ (22). In Out of the Box, there is a sense of greater mobility, with Jones herself writing of the suburbs, while Martin Harrison engages equally with bush and cosmopolitan topographies. In ‘shame & her sisters:’, Keri Glastonbury demonstrates
how the contemporary world blurs ontological categories of Being, such as the wild and
domestic, and the sexual and philosophical:

instead her voice has a low growl
a pitch
I’m learning to hear as ethical
like an animal
might be
the last wild thylacine probably shot
in a chook pen

this is the banality of her history (154)

Present-day experiences are always already known through previous representations. In
the same poem, a trip to Christchurch is informed by Peter Jackson’s film, Heavenly Crea-
tures (1994), which itself focused on the city’s notorious Parker-Hulme murder trial:

another city of murders
neo-gothic as liquorice all sorts
the scene
some kind of antipodean joust

while
she plays dead
on the floor (heavenly creature) (155)

As true crime has become reel time, this in turn informs a present moment and its ‘affect de
jour’. Sexual identity is framed through easy consumption, playfulness, and citationality. As
Jill Jones notes, ‘you can trace a doubleness, a slipperiness that could be said to characterize
the queer life in the multi-gendered city’ (27). She suggests that the poetry featured in Out
of the Box has ‘less about secret lesbian histories and desires than [there] may have been in
the past’, going on to argue:

Whether these poets still work happily amongst metaphor and simile, as ways of
thinking slant, or prefer self-conscious ironies, there is a questioning of positions,
of the poet, of the text written, and, therefore, of the reader (24).

The anthology leaves the reader to find their own correspondences, whether it be through
recitations of butch or less reverberant sexual identities, or even just a sense of tone that
resonates. And while the anthology appears at a time when gay or lesbian marriage is still
a controversial political issue, there is the possibility of change, even if it is rediscovery of a
past that has been compositionally revised and can be known anew. As Pam Brown notes in
her fabulous ‘Peel Me a Zibibbo,’ ‘you need to/choose/the “I’m feeling lucky” google option’
(137). Out of the Box, along with its Australian precursors Edge City and Pink Ink, and
similar New Zealand endeavours like When Two Men Embrace and Eat These Sweet Words,
provides invaluable imaginaries of a non-republic, a space where constellations of being
can form and fluctuate through the historically bound interstices of language and thought.