

**The Socio-Political Evolution of Lesbian Reality in Queensland  
into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**

A photo documentary project collecting and publishing the stories of lesbian-identified-women who experienced living in Queensland in the pre-feminist era through to present day, and how they perceive the era to have defined their reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

By Heather Faulkner, Doctor of Visual Arts candidate, QCA Griffith University,  
Australia

H.Faulkner 6/4 Mackay Street Windsor Qld. Australia 4030

T: (61 07) 555 27780 / 61 (0)404637367 E: h.faulkner@griffith.edu.au

The socio-political evolution of Queensland lesbian reality into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a photo documentary project focused on collecting and publishing stories of lesbian-identified-women who experienced living in Queensland in the pre-feminist era through to present day (2010), and how they perceive this era to define their reality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This documentary research will contribute towards my Doctor of Visual Arts candidacy, which I may apply to upgrade to a PhD in Photo Documentary Practice.

I am a practicing documentary photojournalist and writer as well as university lecturer in Photojournalism at QCA, Griffith University, Australia. I am also a lesbian and have published several lesbian-related stories such as the lesbian history of the Czech Republic (*Girlfriends Magazine*, San Francisco)<sup>i</sup> and the queer history and scene in Prague (*Time Out: Prague*)<sup>ii</sup>. I was the first “out” queer journalist in Canada to write a queer column in a “straight” weekly publication (*Terminal City*, Vancouver)<sup>iii</sup>, and continued to do so for over decade. The column, entitled, “Grrrl Trouble,” also involved a foray into an autobiographical comic strip. I have covered the landmark Little Sister’s bookstore’s legal challenge to Canada Customs and contributed to the related book, *Restricted Entry, Censorship on Trial*<sup>iv</sup>, by Janine Fuller and Stuart Blackley, with a foreword by Jane Rule and to the subsequent documentary, *Little Sister’s vs. Big Brother*<sup>v</sup>, written and directed by Aerlyn Weissman. I am approaching this research project as an activist and as a personal stake-holder (stories gathered for the research mirror my own experience in growing up and discovering my sexuality in the bible belt of Southern Alberta) in the stories that will subsequently be published from it.

This research is specific to the historical understanding of lesbianism in Queensland and Australia. Researchers including Kristin Henry (*Dancing Across Borders: women who became lesbians in mid-life*)<sup>vi</sup>, Ruth Ford, Jennifer Mary Kelly (*Lesbians' Experience of Menopause*)<sup>vii</sup>, Caroline Bree (*Lesbian Mothers: Queer Families; the experience of planned pregnancy*)<sup>viii</sup>, Lynn Patricia Burnett (*Purple Poppies and Fields of Green, young lesbians speak out*)<sup>ix</sup> and others have contributed written research of various lesbian experiences in Australia, however no historically inclusive visual research on this topic has been undertaken to date.

In *Sunshine and Rainbows: the Development of Gay and Lesbian Culture in Queensland*, author Clive Moore states,

Along the way I have lamented not being able to find more material on women, although I have included it whenever I could. The nature of the sources, largely drawn from court cases that only concern males, have shaped the final product. I can only suggest that Queensland women follow in the footsteps of Jill Matthews, Gail Reekie, Ruth Ford, Lucy Chesser and other women who have begun to write the history of lesbians in Australia. <sup>x</sup>

Moore writes that historically, lesbians were not under threat of criminal persecution yet observes:

...in many ways lesbians still face something of a double jeopardy penalty: first for being women in a gay culture which is substantially male-oriented, and second for

being women in a rampant masculinist capitalist society which values men above women in so many ways. (Moore, 2001, p. 191)<sup>xi</sup>

As I continue my research, Australian federal lawmakers have passed 85 legal reforms that seek equal status for GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) Australians. These include amendments to superannuation funds, Centrelink and the Medicare and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme Safety Nets. Federally, homosexual marriage or registered partnership is illegal, and the Australian government refuses to recognize marriages or civil unions granted to homosexuals overseas. In Queensland, homosexual couples cannot adopt children.

Monica Attard:<sup>[ ]</sup>What about his opposition to homosexuality? Was that something that you thought was a fair enough thing?<sup>[ ]</sup>

Lady Flo Bjelke-Petersen:<sup>[ ]</sup>Oh I think it's right, the Bible says it's not right and as far as I'm concerned it's not right either.<sup>xii</sup>

From October 2003 to September, 2004, 24,718 Australians, aged 14 and over, were surveyed by Roy Morgan Research in an attempt to map homophobic attitudes nationwide. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement, "I believe that homosexuality is immoral."<sup>xiii</sup> A "yes" answer indicated homophobia.

From this data collected, the most telling statistics indicated that the state of Queensland topped other Australian states as the most homophobic region in Australia, as illustrated on the graph below: <sup>xiv</sup>

■ **Most and Least Homophobic Regions in Australia (%)**



Filmmakers make films that viewers attend to. Anthropologists make films that are informed. When one learns the skills of the other, chances for good filmic ethnography improve. It is as unproductive to make an un-viewable film as it is to publish an unreadable book. It is as indefensible to make a misleading filmic utterance, as it is to make a written one.<sup>xv</sup>

The methodology I employ in this research incorporates a circular hermeneutic (interpretive) approach using participant observation (still photography, video and audio recordings as tools of field observation), and involving video interviews, photo elicitation and diarist's notes.

These methodologies are similar to those used by modern visual researchers in the social sciences such as Sarah Pink (visual ethnography)<sup>xvi</sup>, Howard S. Becker (visual sociology)<sup>xvii</sup> and John Collier Jr. and Malcolm Collier (visual anthropology)<sup>xviii</sup>. The research has received ethical clearance for this purpose.

The assemblage of Queensland lesbian histories, told in the first-person, is a random method that does not lend itself to precise, quantitative measurement, and the participant observation method of documentation in the present day, lends itself to social observation and speculation of a phenomena, but not to the quantification of behaviours observed. It is intended that each form of documentation (photo, video, audio), will contextualize the interpretation of the other and be critically reflected on, thus a circular hermeneutic approach will be employed. The research is historical, and acknowledges that in time, the original contextual intention of the research may be open to a new and revised interpretation. I am aware that this research too may be revisited, stories revised, and new stories told.

These methods offer a speculative explanation of the discrimination that Queensland lesbian research participants felt subject to in their histories and in the present day. It seeks to explain why things are as they are for Queensland lesbians.

To find suitable participants for this research so far, I've largely relied on word-of-mouth, via engaging with social groups and websites catering to the interest of lesbians in the age group I'm interested in (late 40s onward). On contacting and eventually attending a meeting with the OWLS (Older Wiser Lesbians) social group in Brisbane, in the very early stages of my research, the research proposal I presented to them was met with encouragement, but all declined to participate. Though some told me their stories off-the-record, and these stories would have made very interesting contributions to the research, one potential participant explained that the fear of being "outed," and fear of possible repercussions in the workplace, especially when close to retirement age, kept her from participating. This person was a noted author in both "straight," and "lesbian"

romance fiction novels (for which she employs a nom de plume) – “it’s all the same,” she said of her work, “I just change the genders.” This was a setback for me early in the research, and has proved to be a major challenge in establishing a participant base.

I eventually found my first participant, Mel, a retiree who loved to surf, paint, travel and dance in equal measures. Through Mel, I’ve met another potential participant, living in Brisbane. Via an online social network site for Far North Queensland, I found Lyn and travelled up to the Atherton Tablelands to interview and photograph her in November 2008. I met another participant named Barbara, when I wound up sharing a table with her at a Brisbane Pride Day event. Now that I have a base of six or so women, through their networks, I’m slowly establishing contact with other potential participants. This non-formal approach seems to work well with women who admit that they’d normally shy away from a more clinical academic approach.

In researching and documenting self-identified-lesbian women, I’m careful to avoid visual stereotyping. Documentary photographer Nancy Andrews writes that in the pursuit of the most “arresting” images, photographers often “portray gay people in only extreme situations, and such photographs have been used to define gay people because of the lack of alternative material.”<sup>xix</sup> On viewing her book, *Family*, she noted that when a colleague at The Washington Post newspaper, “looked at my pictures, he commented, ‘but these people don’t look gay.’”<sup>xx</sup>

I document Queensland lesbians in context to their reality (rather than the “extreme” that Andrews writes of) – at home, at play, at work – and often without partners. As discussed by Jan Zita Grover<sup>xxi</sup> by “removing the most conventional marker of lesbianism – another woman who reminds the viewer of the lesbian’s sexual choice –

such images propose lesbianism as a social essential identity rather than exclusively as a sexual one.” It is intended that by documenting the duality of Queensland lesbians’ identities, the research will “emphasize the subject’s being-in-the-world,”<sup>xxii</sup> and establish a visual knowledge base of the history of Queensland lesbians.

I employ a feminist conflict theory in this research because it is important to explain the history of the Queensland lesbian experience and therefore reject a functionalist theory approach as, “functionalism neglects the meanings that individuals give to their actions by concentrating simply on the consequences of actions.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

### **Victorian Undertones and the Object**

During a video interview, research subject Mel describes her difficulties in securing a mortgage because she was an un-married female. She also recounts the story in which she and her then-girlfriend were found out as lesbians during phone conversations and violently set-upon by men in the community of Cairns, forcing the couple to leave town and settle elsewhere. I then ask her how she perceives these experiences to have contributed to how she defines herself as a lesbian in modern-day Queensland.

In this research I posit feminist philosopher Julie Kristeva’s concept of the object, as the rational supporting this research on Queensland lesbians. For nearly a century, homosexuality was illegal in Queensland, and was decriminalised on November 21, 1990, when the Queensland State Caucus, prompted by the Fitzgerald Inquiry recommendations the year previous, amended the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 1979-1989, to “decriminalise consensual sex between adult males in private.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

Lesbianism was never criminalized in Queensland, but female sexuality was governed nevertheless as a reproductive function.



Lesbians were first labeled as “inverts” by Western sexologists of late nineteenth century such as Havelock Ellis, “the sexologist whose *Sexual Inversion* of 1897 was most influential in constructing the stereotype of the lesbian in Britain.”<sup>xxv</sup> Luce Irigaray posits, “that the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Elizabeth Grosz also theorizes along this line, concluding that, “...there is no pure sexuality, no inherently transgressive sexual practice, no sexuality beyond or outside the limits of patriarchal models.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Informed by Irigaray and Grosz, the research to date suggests that Queensland hadn’t evolved (in a legal sense) from this post-Victorian concept of the invert until the de-criminalization of (male) homosexual acts, in 1990. The research suggests that a (patriarchal) Victorian attitude still pervades the current socio-political climate of Queensland. Furthermore, Michel Foucault, writes, “...the nineteenth century and our own have been rather the age of multiplication: a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms, a multiple implantation of “perversions.” Our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Again, the aforementioned incongruous granting of human rights between heterosexual and homosexual (male and female), individuals in Queensland and indeed, in Australia, supports and validates the theory that the Victorian sexual age still pervades.

Sheilah Jeffries writes that before that time it was routine for married or single women to be involved with each other in “passionate, romantic, often very long-term friendships with each other which included constant expressions of fulsome love and

sleeping in each other's arms and on the same pillow even for a lifetime without seeing this as something unusual or suspicious."<sup>xxix</sup>

It is important to the context of this research to note that Queensland Premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen's aunt, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Tasmanian novelist, Marie Bjelke-Petersen, has achieved "gay icon status," having lived in an "intimate relationship" with Sylvia Mill after meeting in 1898, for over 30 years and after whom, "it is argued, *The Captive Singer* was about."<sup>xxx</sup>

Lesbian feminist historian Lillian Faderman writes that as a result of sexology, many women of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

... fed into heterosexual marriage or developed great self-loathing or self-pity if they accepted the label of 'invert'. By the early twentieth century, European popular literature, influenced largely by the sexologists, was referring to "thousands of unhappy beings" who "experience the tragedy of inversion in their lives," and to passions which "end in madness or suicide". In the popular imagination, love between women was becoming identified with disease, insanity, and tragedy.<sup>xxxi</sup>

We were constantly told, through the challenging pages of the Courier Mail that such representation was not needed, as the Premier of the day, the enlightened Joh Bjelke Petersen had all the advice he needed - from his wife Flo, and from one of the state's great moralizers, a woman by the name of Rona Joyner, a woman who for years, kept sex education out of Queensland public schools.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Propagating this fear of "otherness," in Queensland, were two women: the aforementioned Rona Joyner and Dr. Phyllis Cilento, whose influence spanned over 54 years as a columnist for Queensland Newspapers. One participant, Mel, describes a

confrontation with her mother in which she was made to read one of Cilento's columns, entitled, "Homosexuals are Made, not Born."<sup>xxxiii</sup> According to Cilento, homosexuals are "... actually conditioned at an early age by the pleasure principles into this pattern of behaviour."<sup>xxxiv</sup> She goes on to state that, "girls are far less prone to lesbian practices than boys are to homosexual ones. Their opportunities are less, their inhibitions greater. Fortunately women are more readily changed by the wooing of an insistent lover."<sup>xxxv</sup> I think the "inhibitions," Cilento refers to, are what Kristeva calls the 'abject', the fear of the other. Kristeva writes, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order."<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Cilento cultivates abjection against those who threatened the status quo of the time—those Queensland women who identify and exist outside of the patriarchal-prescribed normative values of the age.

Feminist social theorist Iris Marion Young applies Kristeva's concept of the 'abject' to queer theory, writing that, "the abject provokes fear and loathing because it exposes the order between self and others as constituted and fragile, and threatens to dissolve the subject by dissolving the border."<sup>xxxvii</sup> Young writes that homophobia "is one of the deepest fears of difference precisely because the order between gay and straight is constructed as the most permeable; anyone at all can become gay..." and the only way to defend one's identity is to, "turn away with irrational disgust. Thus we can understand why people who have fairly successfully eliminated the symptoms of racism and sexism nevertheless often exhibit deep homophobia."<sup>xxxviii</sup>

In my research, I anticipate documenting Queensland lesbians who are "read," in the modernist and post-modernist thinkers such as Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler, Sheila

Jeffreys, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz and Julie Kristeva. In preliminary interviews with a subject named Dawn, she made reference to Adrienne Rich's essay, "It is the Lesbian in Us"<sup>xxxix</sup> when discussing the political aspect of her lesbian identity.

In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: a History of Lesbian life in Twentieth-Century America*, Lillian Faderman writes that active lesbian life is a social construct, and that:

...the conception needed to be formulated; urbanization and its relative anonymity and population abundance were important; it was necessary that institutions be established where they could meet women with similar interests; it was helpful that the country enjoyed sufficient population growth so that pressure to procreate was not overwhelming; it was also helpful that the issues of sexuality and sexual freedom became increasingly open; and it was most crucial that women have the opportunity for economic self-sufficiency that would free them from the constant surveillance of family. <sup>xi</sup>

Is this why research participant Mel moved from Cairns to the Gulf of Carpentaria with her lover when they were found out by their workmates and subsequently physically attacked, rather than move to Brisbane?<sup>xli</sup> A question that forms in this research is, "how long did it take for Brisbane to become hospitable for women to consider living as lesbians?" In a video interview with Lyn in Far North Queensland, she describes the difference between living in Brisbane during the Joh-Bjelke Petersen era and visiting Sydney, "...you have that type of rule, where you can't be yourself, whereas you can go down to Sydney and no-one cares who you are...as long as you're a nice person, who cares." <sup>xlii</sup>

Four video pieces from this visual research are exhibited as a part of Prejudice and Pride: Recognising the contribution of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities to Brisbane, at the Museum of Brisbane, June 4 – October 12, 2010. The videos have been edited down to approximately four-minute pieces, and focus on participants' experiences in context to Brisbane and especially the Joh-Bjelke Petersen era. The intention of exhibiting this work is to gain insight into audience response, and to test the employed methodologies and theories considered so far – against an audience who, straight or gay, are stake holders in the history of Queensland's troubled past.

---

<sup>i</sup> Heather Faulkner, 'Prague Gnosis; Former East-bloc Dykes on Cruising, Lesbian Pills and State-subsidized Sex Changes', *Girlfriends; Lesbian Culture, Politics and Entertainment*, Vol. 6, No.1, January 1999, 22–41.

<sup>ii</sup> Heather Faulkner, 'Gay & Lesbian', *Time Out Prague Guide 5<sup>th</sup> edition* (London: Time Out, 2002), 207–211.

<sup>iii</sup> Heather Faulkner, 'Grrrl Trouble' (*Terminal City Magazine* Vancouver 1993–2000)

<sup>iv</sup> Janine Fuller & Stuart Blackley, *Restricted Entry: Censorship on Trial* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers 1995), 145.

<sup>v</sup> Aerlyn Weissman, Director, *Little Sister's vs. Big Brother*, 2002.

<sup>vi</sup> Kristen Henry, 'Dancing Across Borders: Women Who Become Lesbians in Mid-life', (MA Thesis, Victoria University, 2004).

<sup>vii</sup> Jennifer Mary Kelly 'Lesbians' Experience of Menopause' (MA Thesis, Deakin University, 2003).

<sup>viii</sup> Caroline Bree 'Lesbian Mothers: Queer FAimilies; the Experience of Planned Pregnancy' (Master of Health Science Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2003).

<sup>ix</sup> Lynn Patricia Burnett, 'Purple Poppies and Fields of Green, Young Lesbians Speak Out' (Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, QUT, 2007).

<sup>x</sup> Clive Moore, *Sunshine and Rainbows: the Development of Gay and Lesbian Culture in Queensland* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001) xii.

<sup>xi</sup> Moore, 191.

<sup>xii</sup> ABC, 'Sunday Profile,' 1 May 2005.

<sup>xiii</sup> Shirleene Robinson ed, *Homophobia: An Australian History*, (Sydney: The Federation Press 2008) 2.

<sup>xiv</sup> Robinson, 25.

<sup>xv</sup> J. Collier Jr. & M. Collier, *Visual Anthropology; Photograph as a Research Method*, Revised and Expanded Edition, (New Mexico: University of New Mexico, 1986) 160.

- 
- <sup>xvi</sup> Sarah Pink, ‘Doing Visual Ethnography; Images, Media and Representation in Research’, (London: Sage Publications Ltd. 2004).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Howard Becker, ‘Photography and Sociology,’ *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 1, (1974) 3–26. (Retrieved September 4, 2008, <http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/becker.htm>).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Collier.
- <sup>xix</sup> Nancy Andrews, *Family: a Portrait of Gay and Lesbian America*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1994) Forward.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxi</sup> Jan Zita Grover, ‘Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation’, in ed. Richard Bolton, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1989), 178.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner *Dictionary of Sociology* (London: Penguin Group, 1988) 101.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Melissa Bull, Susan Pinto, & Paul Wilson, ‘Homosexual Law Reform in Australia’, *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, no. 29 1991, 2. (Retrieved February 5, 2008 from Australian Institute of Criminology <http://www.aic.gov.au/>.)
- <sup>xxv</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy: a Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution*, (Melbourne: Spinifex Press Pty Ltd., 1993), 3.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 86.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Elizabeth Grosz ‘Refiguring Lesbian Desire’ from *Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality: The Big Questions* Ed. Naomi Zack, Laurie Shrage, Crispin Sartwell (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. 1998) 275.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (Camberwell: Penguin Books, 2008) 37.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Jeffreys, 2.
- <sup>xxx</sup> *Bjelke-Petersen, Marie Caroline (1874-1969)* 2008. (Retrieved September 14, 2008 from <http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE2193b.htm>)
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the love of Men*, (London: The Women’s Press, 1985), 252.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Maxine McKew MP, *What Happens after you Marry Mr. Big?* Speech: 20th Women, Management and Employment Relations Conference Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney, 2008.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Phyllis Cilento, *The Cilento Way*, (Queensland Newspapers, Bowen Hills, 1984).
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Cilento, 152.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Cilento, 153.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Julie Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1990) 144.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Young, 146.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: selected prose, 1966-1978* (New York: Norton 1979).
- <sup>xl</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: a history of lesbian life in twentieth-*

---

*century America*, (New York: Penguin Books,1991) 40.

<sup>xli</sup> Mel Jones, interview, Brisbane, Queensland, September 2008.

<sup>xlii</sup> Lyn Fraser, video interview, Atherton, Queensland, November 2008.