

## **"Coming Out/Going Home":**

### **Australian Girls and Young Women Interrogating Heterosexism and Homophobia.**

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#### Abstract

Based on fictional, reflective or autobiographical submissions received from schoolgirls and young women from around Australia for a forthcoming anthology, this paper explores how culturally diverse Australian girls are addressing the sexual diversity of the society around them and the negative impact of homophobia in their lives. They are 'coming out' and 'going home', challenging heterosexist discourses in relation to their own multiple socio-cultural locations either as lesbian or bisexual young women or as heterosexual young women denouncing the negative impacts heterosexism and homophobia have on family members, friends as well as themselves.

Thus, the paper will also illustrate the need for further educational policy and practice addressing girls and homophobia as it has often been overlooked, subsumed or considered less significant than the need to address boys and homophobia.

## The Interweaving of 'Lifeworlds'

In a collection of diary entries written during her adolescence and entitled "Coming Out/Going Home", Julie Leitch (1998, in press) writes about her coming out as a young lesbian. This necessitates her move to inner city Melbourne to 'be with people like myself and feel more comfortable in my surrounds'. She pays rent while she continues with her schooling and runs a support group for other young lesbians. Hence, 'coming out' has led to the establishment of a new cultural, sexual and socio-economic home as well as setting up a support base, another 'home' others like herself can go to. She also presents another 'going home', regularly returning to visit her mother in the rural area in which she was born and raised. Leitch soon finds that this is also a 'coming out' as she and others around her become aware of how different her life and her aspirations actually are as a young lesbian completing school in an inner urban lower socio-economic area. Thus, her life is a regular journeying to and from multiple homes, multiple 'lifeworlds', where even the train journey itself is fraught with fears of violence because she dares to be 'out' as an independent young lesbian.

As people are simultaneously the members of multiple lifeworlds, so their identities have multiple layers, each layer in complex relation to the others... We have to be proficient as we negotiate these many lifeworlds- the many lifeworlds each of us inhabit, and the many lifeworlds we encounter in our everyday lives (Cope and Kalantzis,

1995:10-11).

Like Julie Leitch, many Australian girls and young women are 'coming out' and 'going home'. In other words, they are assertively interweaving 'lifeworlds', positioning themselves and others as home-sites of confluence and intermixture, rather than as having to assimilate to one 'world' at the expense of another in the negotiation of sexuality, gender and other factors such as class and ethnicity.

Girls growing up in Australia are undertaking three complex social processes of 'coming out/going home' in relation to categories such as ethnicity, sexuality, gender, rural/urban sites, religion and class: the critiquing and interweaving of socially ascribed categories and labels within themselves; the crossing, bridging and bordering of 'worlds' and the regulations and codes of those 'worlds'; and the employment of strategies of adaptation, negotiation and selection in order to live their lives as satisfactorily and successfully as possible. Girls are resisting being trapped in the duality of what they have inherited and what the dominant group wishes to enforce, or indeed any single set of perceptions and ascriptions, keeping in mind that minority groups also tend to enforce their own conformist criteria for 'belonging'.

The call for submissions from girls for my book *Australian Girls* was based on the premise that girls have much to teach about the realities of negotiating ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Thus, alongside the pioneering work of educators such as Georgina Tsolidis

(1986) which established a research model and theoretical framework for educating "Voula" or girls from non-English speaking backgrounds, I believe we need to consider how "Voula" or girls from culturally diverse backgrounds and of diverse sexualities can educate the educators and the wider society. Much of Tsolidis' work was based on listening to girls and their parents discuss their realities. Well into the 1990s, Tsolidis' work is still very relevant as multicultural and multisexual girls' voices are not being given equitable space and are not being listened to in many schools and the wider society (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1997).

#### Australian Girls Journeying Against Heterosexism

Girls are situating homophobia and heterosexism within the parameters of human experiences of oppression and marginalisation rather than positioning these prejudices as outside or deviant from the 'usual' prejudices. They do not need to identify as lesbian or bisexual themselves to be affected by and/or actively challenging homophobia. In her personal essay entitled, "Are You The One With The Gay Brother?", Simone Garske (1998, in press) reflects upon the homophobic harassment she experiences in high school because of her brother who had come out as gay and had left the school a few years before: 'I was like a walking disease; I had the gay virus and I might pass it on to the heterosexual guys'. Homophobic graffiti appears on her house and she experiences abuse on the bus such as food being thrown at her. Despite parental support and complaints, the school offers minimal support.

Throughout these experiences, Simone Garske never loses sight of the fact that the problem is not her own, nor her brother's, nor her parents:

I was hiding from these gutless wonders at school. I was better than they were, I had more to be proud of. My brother was a fabulous person who was gentle, caring and loved me very much.

She realises it is up to her to resist the homophobic harassment and 'comes out' confidently and outspokenly as the sister of a gay brother within an unsupportive educational institution, as well as 'goes home' to an appreciation of the 'world' of acceptance and strength in her family environment :

To girls going through similar experiences,...if you are sure of yourself and you are not ashamed of your family then show it...It is harder for homophobic people to take because it is their fear of the unknown that makes them like they are... Be open and honest. Then they have no ammunition to throw at you. Nothing hurts and they are wasting their time.

She addresses possible homophobic readers of her essay:

I feel sorry for you. To think that you are so uneducated that the subject of homosexuality can make you behave in such antisocial ways makes me realise what a long way society has to go to learn tolerance

She also positions herself as 'living in the real world' where sexual diversity is acknowledged and supported rather than the unreal world of educational homophobia and heterosexism. This successful personal negotiation of the tensions between her 'worlds' of existence has her locating a space for herself where she can live 'exactly the way I want

and I am extremely happy'.

Girls with gay or lesbian parents are also aware of the need to negotiate and bridge the chasms between their 'home' realities and the labels and ignorance of the worlds of school and society. Rebekah Venn-Brown (1998, in press) writes about what happened when her father, a Christian minister, came out as gay and left her mother to live with a man when Rebekah was fifteen. In "You Can Either Get Better or Bitter", she stresses she had no support at school: 'No one recommended counselling, a support network- education and information- absolutely nothing.' So she begins to educate others. When some students in her English Literature class are disgusted that one of the authors they are studying is gay, she asks the teacher if she can address the class for just a few moments.

He agreed. I told the class of my concern with their narrow-mindedness. A gay man's literature is the same as a straight one's! And then I told everyone my father was gay and that if I could be tolerant,...surely they could also. It left the class stunned- and I gave myself a pat on the back.

She is also aware of the social constructions of gender and sexuality as her father and herself move within and between their 'lifeworlds':  
I saw a strange parallel- as I was developing, physically and mentally, into a woman, Dad was changing also. He was dealing with changing into a gay man. Just as my changes were subtle and little by little, so were his.

In "Your Mum's a Lezzo", thirteen year-old Sally (1998, in press)

clearly understands that 'the problem is having a lesbian mum in a homophobic world. Everyone else has got the problem if they can't accept it'. She has developed what she calls 'categories of people who know and the people who don't know', slotting people into these categories in order to assist her in negotiating her 'lifeworlds' of school, home, and small rural community in New South Wales. The people who don't know are 'quite ignorant'. For example, with some schoolfriends who she invites into her home, she knows they say 'You've got a nice Mum.' But she also knows 'they'd just change everything they know or think about Mum' if she told them she was a lesbian. Sally has grouped Christian families in her community into two groups as well, those that she believes live out their Christian principles of love, acceptance and respect for all, and those that are condemnatory and use their religion to hurt others.

Girls are exploring lesbian and bisexual feelings and relationships in their fictional writing. "Felicity Is Admired" is a short story by Emily Porter (1998, in press) in which the protagonist, Andy, is an adolescent girl at school admiring another student, Felicity, from afar and indeed repressing from herself the truth that she feels something more than a desire for friendship. Andy never becomes courageous enough to talk to her because Felicity is socially ostracised due to her poverty, lack of sporting prowess, and resistance to heterosexual norms.

She remembered the unquiet whispers surrounding Felicity's entrance [to the school dance],...the shock of her Partner, a Female Partner...The two

girls sat at their table all night, riding the gossip like a bead of crimson oil on water, but soon made the dank hall shut up when they stood arm in arm and glided electric to the dance floor. Their brave waltz was oblivious to the music, the stares, the strangeness they created, and despite Felicity's boxy frame and permanently oily hair, Andy found herself yearning to be led by the beautiful figure around the waxy floor in such intricate perfect steps.

Eight year-old Stephanie Chiarolli (1998, in press), my daughter, writes in "Meet my Mum" about how sexual diversity has been part of her life as far back as she can remember through her parents' friendship circles. My book *Someone You Know* details my pregnancy while a dear friend was living with AIDS. Jon died when Stephanie was just under a year old. She has sat at the hospital bedside of another gay friend dying of AIDS when she was six, playing Nintendo together. She had become upset that Duane had initially not wanted her to see him because she might be frightened seeing him in a physically emaciated state. Steph had insisted on seeing him, declaring, "I'm not afraid of Duane. He's just sick!" She has been attending the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras since she was four and 'I was in the Mardi Gras one year pretending to be Alan and Malcolm's [family friends] daughter. I was in my purple fairy costume and waved a wand and the gay flag. Lots of people took pictures and I was on the news'. Indeed, she has been trying to bridge her multiple 'lifeworlds' by doing a 'Show and Tell' on her annual Mardi Gras activities since she started school and facing children's ignorance of the cultural event. In Grade one, when she was asked what a Mardi Gras was, she replied, 'It's like a Christmas

pageant, only better'. She also faces other children's curiosity, or more recently, homophobic disgust and harassment, being called a lesbian, or being told 'your mother works with freaks'.

In her article "Being On Patrol and Being Patrolled: Being a Teacher and a Lesbian", Michelle Rogers (1998, in press) writes about her struggles as an 'out' teacher in a high school. Her interviews with lesbian students reveal their strengths and resistances in negotiating their 'lifeworlds' as they both 'come out' to the wider society, particularly in schools, and 'go home' to themselves, as young lesbians. This may involve the interrogation of fixed labels that do not encompass the broader dimensions of living and loving but instead marginalise them as a sexualised minority group. For example, Cloe says,

It doesn't really bug me who I am in love with as long as I am happy... don't think any boxes can be put onto it [sexuality]. I don't go, 'OK, I am sleeping with a girl so I am gay', you know, I go, 'I am totally in love with this person and that's what it means and that's what matters'.

They critically question and deconstruct institutional rhetoric as Lisa does: 'I know one of our mottoes of our school is like 'enabling you to find out who you are' but I'm not sure how the school would react if someone was very openly 'out'.

Their confidence in themselves appears in personal political acts of resistance not only within the school but in the wider public sphere.

Alanna decides: 'I've go to the stage where if I was really happy with someone I would walk down the street holding their hands and it wouldn't bother me'. And again, support in the family 'home' compensates for and subverts the condemnation from school and society as in Shaz's situation: 'I've never really had a problem with my sexuality because my uncle's gay and my mum's...well, they're like really close so I was always taught there was nothing wrong with it'. Indeed, a socially ascribed negativity has yielded positive personal results. 'Coming out' has led to a stronger and more confident sense of 'going home' to oneself: 'I think it's made me develop more as a person because I've had to, I suppose, mature and consider who I am more so than a lot of heterosexual people who just take it for granted.'

Amanda Nickson (1998, in press) writes in "Political Activism: Isn't That A Dirty Word?" about 'coming out' in Brisbane as an anorexic and bulimic young lesbian looking for a space to get support for her multiple interconnected issues: 'there are an incredible number of [social] messages which impact upon the way young women think and feel about themselves'. She discovers no such site exists so 'I decided to start one...All of a sudden I had a political identity as the person who ran the young lesbian support group'. She had constructed a 'home' for herself which would become a 'home' others could also go to. Amanda Nickson concludes, 'dreaming about the kind of world I want to live in is great, but getting out and helping to create it is even better'.

Helena, who is of Greek background, has challenged the boundaries and

rules of the wider society, the school and her Greek family and community, and 'gone home' to herself where she has stopped organising her life and actions according to external ascriptions and definitions: They all go, 'This is a heterosexual school and you shouldn't be here'...I don't see a name on the wall saying this is a heterosexual school...Mum started yelling the house down...that I needed psychiatric help...my dad spat on me about 5 times and threw things on me...Coming out and accepting it myself ...made me feel better as a person...before I came out I used to always be rebellious, since I came out I've calmed down...everything has calmed down' (Rogers, 1998, in press).

Girls and young women are publicly resisting the combination of ethnocentrism, racism and homophobic harassment in their schools and other public spaces. They reflect the impact of Australia's multicultural and immigration policies of the last forty years in producing a generation born to migrant parents and negotiating their multiple life-worlds, resisting external racist and homophobic ascriptions which they perceive as linked, and claiming their particular spaces within their schools and within the wider Australian society (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1996, 1998 in press). In an autobiographical story called 'Lesbos' which interweaves three generations of women in a Greek family both in Greece and Australia, Vicki Karaminas (1998) interrogates the multiple meanings of 'Lesbos' and 'Lesbians' that interweave in the understanding of her own sexual,

ethnic and gender identity. These include: Lesbos as island, Lesbos as home of ancient Greek lesbian poet Sappho, Lesbos as a late twentieth-century tourist attraction for international lesbians, Lesbos as an industrial centre, Lesbos as the site for Greek-Australian lesbians and Greek diasporic lesbians to reclaim a cultural ancestry and identity, Lesbians as inhabitants of Lesbos, lesbians as a sexual and political identity.

In "The Wandering Jew", Naomi Ullman (1998, in press) not only presents the contradictions and paradoxes inherent within her inheritance of the Palestinian/Israeli nationalist chasm, 'a Jewish state Palestinian land/ Arab killing Jew Jew killing Arab' and the added intricacies and insights of living in a multicultural Australia where she is forming friendships with Palestinian and other Arabic girls such as Julieanne, Australian-born with Arabic grandparents, who tells her it's important to me that the Jewish people have a safe place to live...have somewhere for their children...but it's just as important for everybody else too. No one deserves it more than anyone else.

Naomi Ullman also presents the complexity of "Jew killing Jew" by interrogating her ancestors' complicitness in the condemnation and destruction of homosexual Jews.

"You know  
what we did to  
homosexuals in Romania?" my father  
(a camp survivor [as a baby]),

asks.

"What?" dreading

I say.

"We pushed their heads into the water fountain."

"HOW CAN YOU, OF ALL PEOPLE, WHO HAS BEEN PERSECUTED YOURSELF,  
PERSECUTE OTHERS?"

I think to myself, and, out aloud,

"The Nazis also persecuted homosexuals".

A young lesbian of Jewish background, Madelaine (1998, in press), in

"My Mentor", writes of her reaching a crisis-point in needing to  
negotiate and resist the codes and regulations emanating from all  
'lifeworlds':

I decided to have a mid-life crisis at age 16. Nothing else to do. I  
suddenly realised everything was as my parents, school and Jewish  
background wanted me to be. It was not me. So I started from scratch.

The new me.

She goes to a bookshop to get more information and there meets Jan,  
the lesbian bookshop owner, who becomes her mentor, and 'has great  
faith in me, and my ability to be anything I wanted to be.' The many  
possibilities for her life are open to her through the bookshop and  
Madelaine, affirmed with new knowledge from which to make decisions,  
concludes that in her life 'I will do all I can'.

In a poem "Crimes of Existence", Aboriginal lesbian writer Romaine  
Moreton explores the parallels between racism and heterosexism, and the  
internal familial divisions external Christian and Western

condemnations of homosexuality have created.

My mother also doesn't stop

to consider,

that when Great Christian Leaders

& other vilifiers of homosexuality

call society to attention

& ask them to jail.

The queers, leso's & gays,

that what they really mean

is for her

to

incarcerate

her very own daughter

& make sexuality

her crime.

& place her daughter in the cell

next to

her very own son,

for they have already made Blackness his,

under the pretense of faith

&

with the proposition

of

a

Fairer

Australia

Moreton (1998, in press)

Girls are thinking beyond homogenising categories. Their writings of sexuality are not limited to the heterosexual/homosexual divide.

Belinda Pursey (1998, in press) faces the issues of negotiating homophobia in her small Victorian rural town and her need to transcend the categories of lesbian and homosexual in "Evolutionary Love":

My sexuality always presents me with new challenges and forces me to face many fears, especially living in a rural area where everyone seems to know what everyone else is doing. It's not always easy. Then again, sometimes it's terribly easy. The notion that we fall in love with other people because of who they are and not which sex they happen to be is a surprisingly simple truth...In the end, the challenges are nothing compared to the exhilaration of knowing that the real me is allowed to be.

In "Take Three Steps Back (Into The Closet)", Tamsin Dancer (1998, in press) from Adelaide questions the homogeneity and exclusionary practices often at work within what she had thought was a safe, accepting 'home', the lesbian community, when she has a 'brief

relationship' with a male.

The few inroads I'd made into the young lesbian scenes...became dead ends. I felt as though I was playing a board game and had turned up a card that read, 'You realise you are bisexual. Take three steps back (into the closet).

She also challenges other forms of hierarchy and homogeneity within the lesbian and gay communities that replicate those of the heterosexual world:

We need to question why the chic, white, well-dressed image is so attractive. Is it a safe box for the mainstream to keep me in? There are a lot of young dykes, like me, that will never fit that limited category- we are fat, or poor, or people of colour, or parents, or disabled.

'Homophobia is Every Girl's Issue.'

I do not believe it is blasphemous to compare oppressions of sexuality to oppressions of race and ethnicity: Freedom is indivisible or it is nothing at all besides sloganeering and temporary, short-sighted, and short-lived advancement for a few.

(Jordan,  
1996:12)

Girls of diverse sexualities and diverse cultures are cultural negotiators in the social processes of 'coming out/going home'. Schools and teachers can act as cultural mediators between student and family/community, student and mainstream society, and student and social services/organizations/community groups that cater for their

ethnic, gender and sexual identities (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995, 1996).

At the time of writing, Australia is witnessing both confluence and

conflict as the end-products of historical forces and policies in relation to multiculturalism and homosexuality are constructing new inscriptions and resistances to long-standing discriminatory institutions such as education and the Church. Thus, while Pauline Hanson, herself an end-product of feminist activism for women's equal participation in politics and the rights of single mothers, promotes her One Nation political party which is blatantly racist and homophobic, such as calling for the end of Asian immigration to Australia and a reinstatement of homosexuality as 'unnatural' and 'abnormal', she is being challenged and ridiculed by migrants and their heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual girls such as Karaminas and Ullman, who are coming forth/coming out as key agents in eroding long-standing exclusions and silences in relation to multicultural multisexuality in Australian institutions such as education (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1998 in press).

The publication of girls' writings constructs powerful sites of intervention and resistance into homophobic, racist and sexist discourses. I believe the issues of homophobia and heterosexism in Australia have been mainly explored through the boys' education debates. Thus, anti-homophobic policies, programs and practices may be falling into the hands of another form of male-dominated, male-centred

discourse. There are similar and differing expressions of heterosexual prejudices and homophobic harassment between girls and boys, as well as between girls as this paper has illustrated. More spaces need to be provided for girls to 'come out' and 'go home', to cross borderlines and expand boundaries, to explore the contradictions and confluences inherent in the construction of their multiple social positionings as both end-products of larger socio-political and cultural forces, and beginnings of new inscriptions into society, politics and culture. This recognition of multiple locations as sites of possible oppression, power and resistance can do much to challenge ethnocentric, sexist and heterosexual perspectives. Girls need to be encouraged to gain broader and more understanding visions of themselves and others who co-exist with them in their schools, their immediate worlds, and the worlds beyond their perception.

Having raised my concern in regard to the possible co-option of anti-homophobic discourses by the boys' education debate, I also wish to ask two questions that may seem contradictory to that concern. Are boys being encouraged to write anti-homophobic and non-heterosexual texts, personal reflections, fiction? Why aren't we reading the anti-homophobic writings of boys and young men? Thus, although the anti-homophobic debate is dominated by educators in boys' education, as yet we are not hearing from boys themselves in public spaces such as publishing.

Girls' contributions to my book have exemplified young people's great

potential to demonstrate and transcend categorical limitations, oppressions, and the splitting of concurrent realities inherent in the need to homogenise, categorise and simplify. Their recognition of themselves and others as multiplaced persons, constantly undertaking 'coming out/going home' journeys can do much to challenge ethnocentric, sexist and homophobic perspectives. As Trinh T. Minh-Ha writes: as long as the complexity and difficulty of engaging with the diversely hybrid experiences of heterogenous contemporary societies are denied and not dealt with, ... the creative interval is dangerously reduced to non-existence(1991: 229).

The 'creative interval' between and within 'coming out' and 'going home' is becoming a larger and stronger base, constructed and led by Australian girls and young women.

I wish to conclude by commenting upon a recent article by Jenny Pausacker (1997), editor of *Hide and Seek*, one of two ground-breaking anthologies about being young and gay or lesbian in Australia published

in 1996 (see also McLeod, 1996). Pausacker observes that homosexuality has become "an acknowledged part of everyday life- sort of", especially through popular culture if not young people's personal life experiences (1997: 11). Nevertheless, in schools, the "taboos are still intact" (1997: 13). She states:

The changes in the wider society aren't being reflected in our

education system, the place where books like this are needed, and it's left me baffled and frustrated... The laws have changed, the TV sit coms have changed, the newspapers and glossy magazines have changed but the difficulties associated with being young and gay haven't changed at all (1997: 13).

Pausacker discusses meeting teachers at conferences who applaud the two books and then justify their inability to use/introduce them with various reasons, all of which can be addressed the way we have addressed and continue to address antagonism against anti-sexist and anti-racist strategies. One of these strategies is challenging the "present absurd situation where the fear of a single complaint from a single parent can deprive an entire school of important texts" (1997: 14).

I wish to echo Pausacker's sentiments of "let's start working together to end the silence about homosexuality in our schools, so that we can, at the very least, end the alienation of up to ten per cent of your students" (1997: 14). I would add to this, however, the need to end the growing alienation and cynicism among far more students of all sexualities. Like Simone Garske, many students that I come into contact with wryly and cynically consider their schools to be the unreal worlds, worlds that have managed to overcome their monocultural constructions of reality, and yet persist in constructing an artificially sexually homogenous or monosexual mythology. I will end with the words of fourteen year-old Khizran Khalid, I'm the voice of tomorrow.

I'm the one who will make a difference.

I'm the one who will see tomorrow.

But can you take the time to listen?

(1998, in press).

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