Edited by
Chris Tse and
Emma Barnes

Out Here

An anthology of
Takatāpui and LGBTQIA+
writers from Aotearoa

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On Naming

Throughout the process of producing this anthology – from soliciting submissions to writing this introduction – we discussed at length which terms we would use for its title. Although many other recent publications and articles have used 'queer' in their titles, we ultimately opted for 'Takatāpui' and 'LGBTQIA+' to reflect Aotearoa's rainbow community as broadly as possible. However, in our introduction we're going to use the word 'queer' for expediency and in keeping with its use in academic and critical texts (although we're not claiming to be academic writers!).

Despite its historical use as a slur, the word 'queer' has since been reclaimed by individuals and groups as an umbrella term for all members of the rainbow community in an effort to acknowledge both gender and sexual diversity. It allows fluidity and ambiguity in a world that would like to pin us like butterflies, through the thorax, with specific details of who we are and who we fuck. 'Queer' gives shelter and room to develop without needing to know the whole story all at once. We acknowledge that this term is not without controversy in the communities it aims to shelter, especially in recent years, and that some still find pain attached to its pejorative connotations. As we discovered through our research and reading submissions, there is no neat term that fully encompasses all lived experiences and preferences. There are arguments for and against all possible terms. Please know that, for the purposes of our introduction, we are giving room to all labels and identities by using 'queer'.

Introduction

As teenagers, the two of us would look for queer texts in public and in private. Regardless of the setting, we did this as secretly as possible, whether it was looking up keywords in the library card catalogue or waiting until our family had gone to bed so we could use our home computer to read about queer TV shows and films we'd heard about but couldn't watch in New Zealand. Deleting browsing histories with a single click was easy, but letting go of the shame that lingered with these furtive quests was a much longer process.

In what is now an oft-quoted essay for *The Pantograph Punch*, genderqueer writer and editor Jackson Nieuwland writes of the historical erasure of queer identities in New Zealand literature as a symptom of our reluctance (and apathy) as a country in engaging with anything that steps outside a cis / heterosexual / Eurocentric perspective. Nieuwland writes: 'I was introduced to queer writers much earlier than I realised. I just wasn't introduced to them as queer writers.'[1]

Queer books and writing were out there if we knew where to look, but a lack of visibility and access meant it was a lonely task trying to find stories where we could see parts of ourselves, if not our entire selves, represented. We became teenagers in the nineties when New Zealand felt a lot less cool about queerness, and gender felt much more rigid. We knew instinctively that hiding was the safest strategy. But how to find your community if you're hidden? How to find the stories you need to read when you're full of shame?

Over time, this erasure has had a profound effect on access to, and the visibility of, writing by queer New Zealand authors. This has meant that writers such as Katherine Mansfield and Frank Sargeson were never discussed in terms of their queerness when they were writing. Decades later the dots have been connected, but even post-homosexual-law-reform queer writing seemed to be a quiet thread in New Zealand literature – easy to miss, easy to overlook.

Queer New Zealand authors have also had to work in the shadow of oppressive legislation and societal attitudes that viewed queer lifestyles as criminal or unsavoury. In 1971, Ngahuia te Awekotuku was famously denied a visa to the United States of America because she was a self-described 'sapphic woman'. Queer characters in books, films and television shows were often reduced to tropes, the punchline of jokes that reinforced damaging stereotypes. When queer creatives took control of queer representation in an effort to provide positive or realistic depictions of queer lives, this often

1 Jackson Nieuwland, 'Working Against a System That is Working Against Them: Contemporary LGBTQIA+ Writers in Aotearoa', *The Pantograph Punch*, 10 August 2018.

resulted in public outcry and controversy. Critics and queer audiences praised the 1980 New Zealand feature film *Squeeze*, which centres on a bisexual man's relationship with a young male lover, for its sympathetic and groundbreaking depiction of Auckland's early LGBT scene. However, there were also vocal detractors who spoke out against its 'objectionable' content. A vigorous campaign from the Society for the Promotion of Community Standards resulted in MPs debating the film in Parliament.

This, of course, was not the only time queer lives and issues were discussed in Parliament. Activists had pushed for homosexual law reform since the 1960s, but it wasn't until the 1980s, as the HIV/AIDS crisis took hold, that the campaign for such reforms began to gain momentum and was debated by both our politicians and the general public. As Chris Brickell notes in *Mates and Lovers*: 'The Homosexual Law Reform Bill gave rise to the keenest public debate since the Springboks' rugby tour of 1981, and those with a strong opinion lobbied furiously.'[2] Although the passing of the Act represented both a legal and moral victory, the public conversation about what rights queer people would be permitted to have has continued through to the present day, from civil unions and same-sex marriage to anti-discrimination measures and trans rights, including the right to self-identify gender. Public discourse around these topics has a tendency to shine a light on the bigotry and hypocrisy that simmers below the surface of New Zealand's carefree veneer.

However, as Nieuwland notes in their essay, queer erasure remains a contemporary issue: reviews of newer writers such as Hera Lindsay Bird, Gina Cole, Kerry Donovan Brown and Courtney Sina Meredith often disregard or fail to mention the queer context or content of their works in favour of something more familiar – that is, something more heterosexual.

For some queer New Zealanders, the lack of visibility of and access to queer New Zealand writers has meant looking beyond our shores for writing that reflected their experiences of sexuality. Perhaps there's a bit of that national cultural cringe at play too – we're often too quick to dismiss our own experiences or question the value of the art this country produces.

Which is not to say there haven't been queer New Zealand writers pushing in from the fringes and gaining critical and commercial success. Peter Wells, Heather McPherson, Hinemoana Baker, Renée, Witi Ihimaera, Ngahuia te Awekotuku, Paula Boock and others had success throughout the 1970s to 2000s. But again, as Nieuwland notes, their work wasn't always viewed through a queer lens, even when writing on queer subjects.

There have been early attempts in Aotearoa to anthologise the writing of gay and lesbian writers *as gay and lesbian writers*, though often separately and often with that binary division of identity. In 1999, Publishing Giant Press produced a pair of queer poetry anthologies, the lesbian *Eat These Sweet Words* and the gay *When Two Men Embrace*. In a review for *New Zealand*

2 Chris Brickell, *Mates and Lovers*, Godwit, Auckland, 2008, p. 349.

Books, Laurence Jenkins noted the difference in the relative sizes of the two anthologies, in particular pointing out the 'poetic poverty' of the latter, and pondered whether the editors 'might have encouraged some of New Zealand's excellent gay prose writers to come out as poets.'[3] Those gay prose writers are comprehensively represented in *Best Mates: Gay Writing in Aotearoa New Zealand* (1997), edited by Peter Wells and Rex Pilgrim. It was the first collection of New Zealand work by gay men and featured mostly prose selections. We've seen other small collections, hidden away and hard to find.

In the decades since the publication of those books, thinking and discourse around sexuality and gender has developed to include more sensitivity, to cover a wider range of experience and to create a broader language. This shift in thinking is evident in the wider history of zines and other self-published works that bring together experiences by trans, queer, Takatāpui and genderqueer writers. One recent example is *this gender is a million things that we are more than* (2019), edited by essa may ranapiri, which gathers emerging non-binary and genderqueer writers. Every single publication is important; essa's zine was well received and even reviewed on RNZ National. Since its initial New Zealand release, it has been published and distributed by independent Scottish publisher Easter Road Press. There is an appetite for this sort of work and an audience ready to read all of us, both in Aotearoa and internationally.

At the same time as we were finalising our selections for this anthology in October 2020, New Zealand made headlines around the world for voting in 'the queerest Parliament in the world', with eleven MPs in the fifty-third Parliament identifying as queer. In the creative world, this shift in diversity and representation has also occurred in our many arts and literary festivals, with dedicated programmes and events designed to showcase our growing pool of queer talent. The first Same Same But Different festival was held in Auckland in 2016 and is Aotearoa's sole rainbow-focused literary festival. In the programme booklet for that first festival, founder Peter Wells wrote that he hoped it would 'introduce a heightened awareness of the timbre and reach of our voice but also celebrate the richness inherent in difference.'[4] That timbre and reach has been evident in subsequent iterations of the festival, which has hosted dozens of our established and emerging creatives and writers from all fields of the arts, including comics, theatre, music and activism.

At this time of growing representation and awareness, a diversity of queer stories and writers is needed more than ever. Public debates about trans rights and gender nonconformity, and about the inclusion of uniformed police in pride parades, show that there is still work to be done for queer communities to have our voices, stories and opinions heard with respect and empathy and to receive the rights we are due as humans. We wanted to collate

3 Laurence Jenkins, 'Smoke Gets in Their Poems', *New Zealand Books* 1, 3 (August 1999), p. 18.

4 Peter Wells, Same Same But Different festival programme, 2016, p. 2.

an anthology that celebrated the depth and especially the breadth of queer experiences in Aotearoa.

We initially assumed that the pool of writers to consider would be considerable, but modest. We had identified about 110 writers, but we also knew a call for submissions would allow people to suggest more writers to read. This would be particularly important for writers whose sexuality was 'invisible' or not public knowledge.

The response to our open call was overwhelming, and reinforced the need for such an anthology. We received submissions from more than 200 writers, of whom only about 30 per cent were already on our radar. There were so many who were completely and delightfully unknown to us. In some cases, they were established writers whose sexual and gender identities were not common knowledge for a number of reasons. Queerness is often talked about in terms of coming out, and for many of us coming out is a regular action due to the way assumed heterosexuality leaves little space for difference. As described in Jackson Nieuwland's essay, it can be hard enough to find ourselves, let alone connect with others like us, and in literature there are many examples where queer context is ignored:

> Hinemoana Baker's first collection *Matuhi: Needle* was covered in a 2005 *Listener* round-up of new New Zealand poetry. While Baker is often labelled a queer poet, this book doesn't contain a lot of explicitly queer content. So I find it hilarious that the reviewer chose the most sexual lines in the book – 'fat strawberries . . . at night // we pick them by touch / listen to the flesh / release the stem' – as the only extract to quote, and then used them as an example of 'pregnant' imagery, rather than queer innuendo.[5]

As we read through the submissions, the focus of our anthology shifted considerably. We'd originally set out to provide a view of queer writing in New Zealand published from 1985 onwards, but the end result is something that is much more representative of the growth and increased visibility of queer writers being published over the last ten to fifteen years. There are many young and emerging writers in our anthology – for some, this anthology was their first time having their work accepted for publication. We have included as many established writers from the last thirty-five years as we were able to, though we acknowledge that there will be some absences, as is often the case with anthologies.

Our goal from the start was to curate a wide-ranging anthology that brings together writers of as many gender and sexual identities as possible, all working across different genres. We specifically asked for submissions to not only focus on queer life events like coming out or first love. We wanted smaller things, bigger things, different things, to see narratives that aren't

5 Jackson Nieuwland, 'Working Against a System That is Working Against Them'.

always shown for people like us. We imagined this anthology as a riot of brightness, life and feelings. We're exceptionally familiar with tropes of queer unhappiness and we wanted to widen the frame and draw more things into the picture to shift the tragic queer life over to the side of the frame instead of the centre.

We chose works that delighted us, surprised us, confronted us and engaged us. We chose political pieces and pieces that dreamed futures as yet only imagined. We chose coming out stories and stories of home. We followed our noses. What our reading revealed to us is that our queer writers are writing beyond the expectations of what queer writing can be, and doing it in a way that often pushes against the trends of mainstream literature.

If there's a common theme to be found throughout the anthology, it's the role that place plays in the works of queer writers. The queer experience is often one of searching for belonging, which is explored in many of the pieces in this anthology. They are stories of finding a place for oneself, whether that's within a family unit or a relationship, or as part of a community, city or country that allows the speaker to flourish. These pieces take place in strip clubs and art galleries, in motel rooms and courtrooms, and move the reader beyond the shores of Aotearoa to Australia, the United States of America and Sri Lanka.

Our original intention was to order the anthology chronologically, or possibly by subject or even by identity. However, as we worked through the submissions and began making selections we realised that all of those groupings would either be difficult or would be making arbitrary calls and separating people in ways that didn't make sense. In the end, we went with alphabetical order by our writers' first names, which is how we had ordered the many spreadsheets we used to manage our submissions and selections. When we stepped back and looked at it as a whole, we loved the way the pieces by the first and last writers spoke to each other in tone and outlook. We also loved the way that some of the works jangled against each other and were mixed up into each other. It's not traditional to use first names to alphabetise an anthology but we're confident in our ordering and it wouldn't be a queer anthology if it wasn't doing something differently.

It's not our intention to present a canon or a tidy history or to make a definitive statement of what contemporary queer New Zealand writing is right now. We wanted to collect as many of us together as we could, but we know there are absences, some due to the physical limitations of publishing a book and some due to our own personal tastes as editors and readers. Since finalising our selection, a number of writers and books have been published that weren't caught in our original net of submissions and reading. Ultimately, we hope that this anthology is a step forward in the visibility of queer identities in Aotearoa's literary history. We want it to serve as a starting point for anyone else who wishes to take on a similar exercise in the future.

This is why we've named our anthology *Out Here* – to acknowledge not only the writers who are speaking up and sharing their stories and lives with

readers, but also those who continue to step forward and put in the mahi to ensure that future generations of queers are afforded the space to tell their stories and be themselves without fear of retribution or harm.

We'd like to thank all the writers who submitted their work for consideration, and those who suggested writers and books for us to read. It's been a privilege and a huge responsibility to bring these incredible writers together in this anthology. If you are a queer writer reading this and not seeing your name included, please include yourself. We had to say no to many more writers than we said yes to. By its nature, editing is about choosing what to leave out, and often in queer lives the queerness is left out, papered over or ignored. We know you're there and we believe in a future where we'll all get to be seen and heard as ourselves.

— Chris Tse and Emma Barnes