**Screening the Dykes of Oz:
Lesbian Representation on Australian Television**

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SUMMARY. This essay provides a survey of lesbian representation in Australian-made television programming. Beginning with the 1970s, when Australia led the Anglophone world in terms of queer representation on television, the essay discusses major instances of queer women appearing on Australian television including in such shows as *Prisoner*, *Home & Away*, *Neighbours*, *All Saints*, *The Secret Life of Us*, *Last Man Standing* and *Kick*.

KEYWORDS. Lesbian, Dykes, Australia, Bisexual, Television, *Chequerboard*, *The Box*, *Prisoner*, *Raw FM*, *Home and Away*, *Neighbours*, *All Saints*, *Play School*, *The Secret Life of Us*, *Last Man Standing*, *Kick*

Australia was the first Anglophone nation to screen a lesbian kiss on primetime television, and yet, little academic analysis exists which explores the proportionately high number of lesbian characters and desire on Australian-made television. Due to this dearth, this

essay does not seek to analyse a single instance of lesbian representation on Australian television, but rather forms a survey text of lesbian representation on Australian television from 1972-2007, in hopes that these texts will be the subjects of further scholarly investigation.

Although Australian television began broadcasting relatively late, in 1956, by the 1970s it was well advanced in terms of queer representation. In addition to several representations of gay males, there were also internationally significant instances of lesbian and bisexual women, both fictional and non-fictional, on television in Australia in the 1970s.ⁱ Particularly notable was the appearance of lesbian activists Sue Wills and her partner Gabby from Campaign Against Moral Prosecution (C.A.M.P.) on the public broadcaster's documentary series *Chequerboard* in 1972 (Howes; *Hidden History*). The episode "This just happens to be a part of me" (screened 17 October 1972) featured interviews with a gay male couple and a lesbian couple, but mainly focused on the male couple, with the lesbian couple appearing only briefly at the end of the episode.ⁱⁱ Another significant moment in the representation of queer women on Australian television in the 1970s, the first female same-sex kiss in this venue, took place in 1974 on *The Box* (Ten 1974-1977) between Vicki Stafford (Judy Nunn)—"a bisexual TV reporter who was regularly kissing other women and soon proved the most popular character of the series" (Burfitt) — and fifteen year-old Felicity (Helen Hemmingway). While Vicki also seduced a male character in the same episode, this kiss was significant in that it occurred close to two decades before the first televisual lesbian kisses in the U.S. (1991) and U.K. (1993). Of course not all representations of lesbian characters on Australian television during the 1970s were positive. Another of *Number 96*'s queer characters was fiendish lesbian witch Karen Winters (Toni Lamond), whose defining moment was stripping her flatmate Bev Houghton (Abigail) for a sacrificial Black Mass. Surprisingly, this did not spark a mainstream public outcry as may have

been expected for such a scene ('Celebrating 40 Years of Television'), perhaps reflecting the prevailing attitudes of the period (see *The Hidden History* for discussion of 1970s Australian television and societal attitudes towards homosexuality in the 1970s).

Better known to international audiences was *Prisoner* (Ten 1979-1986), which became a popular cult export and "is still one of the most talked about shows across 50 years of Australian TV" (Cox 25). Set in a women's prison, *Prisoner* "tapped into the rise of the women's movement, the emergence of prison reform groups and a growing interest in women in prisons" (Clark and Samuelson 48), and featured a number of lesbian characters over the course of its run. Unlike many other series, *Prisoner* did not subscribe to the imperative of ensuring that lesbian characters on television are played by feminine and conventionally attractive actresses. The first glimpse seen of a lesbian character was Franky Doyle (Carol Burns) in the pilot, slouching and smoking against a wall. Franky was short-haired, wore overalls and no make-up, and was more decidedly butch than any female character seen on even today's television. This butch coding, however, is displayed in a rather negative (albeit camp) way, and it became clear that Franky was meant to embody every heterosexual woman's nightmare of prison – immediately and firmly propositioning her new cellmate within moments of her arrival. Franky was presented as hyperbolically aggressive and slightly unbalanced (though no more so than heterosexual prison bully, Bea). Joan Ferguson was another lesbian character, and Keith Howes remarks that although "superficially, *Prisoner* reinforced every stereotype going (Ferguson was a ratbag sadist, corrupt and potentially murderous) ...For all her misdeeds she was recognisably human as were all the girls: lesbian, straight and undecided" (42). Another key lesbian character was the victimised Judy Bryant (Betty Bobbit), who deliberately got herself sent to prison to be with her girlfriend (who was later killed by a male guard), and eventually set up a half-way house for ex-

prisoners. With the exception of *Prisoner*, lesbian visibility was fairly non-existent on Australian television throughout the 1980s, and it was not until the mid-to-late 1990s that lesbians began to re-emerge on television, beginning with the primetime screening of the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras on publicly owned television network the ABC in 1994. The coverage “threatened to split federal parliament, but went ahead, won the ratings and was among the most watched TV events of the year” (Burfitt).

During the 1990s, the ABC was also the broadcaster of *Raw FM* (1997-1998), in which secondary characters Gerry Sano (Amanda Douge) and Sam Kosurco (Sophie Heathcote) were both portrayed as lesbians, though only two of thirteen episodes gave noteworthy screen time to their sexualities or romantic lives, with one of these episodes focussing on Gerry’s internet romance with a woman, who was later revealed to be a man. This inclusion of lesbian characters, yet hesitance to depict their sexual relationships with women, was also common to some U.S. series that featured lesbian characters, as has been observed by Hantzis and Lehr, Torres, and Moritz. It points towards the beginnings of mainstream “tolerance, which” as was noted by Sue Wills in the 1972 *Chequerboard* episode, “is different from acceptance.”

With the constant thirst for storylines and romantic complication inherent in soap operas, soaps have often been willing to include lesbian desires and trysts, though somewhat more hesitant at truly including lesbian characters and their relationships as an integral part of their story arcs. Short-running soap opera *Pacific Drive* (Nine 1996-1997), however, featured the character Zoe Marshall (Libby Tanner), who came out as lesbian and had relationships with several women over the course of the series. Soap export *Home and Away* (Seven 1988-present) has also included various presentations of bisexual and lesbian characters. These have included minor lesbian character Mandy Thomas (Rachel Blake), and her relationship with major

character Shannon Reed (Isla Fisher). Shannon's character left the series, as well as her male love interest, to live in France with Mandy in 1997 – with this potential relationship thus remaining conveniently offscreen. Desiree Upton (Phoebe Bright) and Gypsy Nash (Kimberly Cooper) also displayed same-sex desire in side-plots, with an ongoing and workable lesbian relationship seemingly impossible to depict within *Home and Away*'s heterosexual economy of desire. The most recent queer female character on *Home and Away*, Eve Jacobson/Zoe McCallister (Emily Perry), was a particularly unfortunate example of bisexual/lesbian representation. Although depicted in a relationship with a male character, she is later revealed as the 'Summer Bay stalker', a previously faceless villain, who had been terrorising the residents for some time, motivated by her love for previous villainess Sarah Lewis (Luisa Hastings Edge). After killing various characters, she eventually died in an explosion of her own devising in 2006. Eve was also in a relationship with Tracey (Sarah Enright), a detective investigating her case, who helped her in various schemes. This murderous, house-burning, bomb-planting, mentally unstable woman was certainly a far cry from anything one could consider to be a positive representation, though the fact that her bisexuality was only revealed in retrospect at least meant that viewers were spared a prolonged exposure to this troublesome and all-too-frequent popular cultural correlation of bisexual women with violent psychopaths.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even the perennial suburban 'family' soap *Neighbours* (Ten 1985-present), which has been described as "the most watched Australian show of all time, claiming a daily audience of 120 million in 57 countries" (Cox 26), has had some lesbian characters. Most notable of these has been the lesbian teen character Lana (Bridget Neval), whose story-arc took place in 2004. Lana's storyline reflected many experiences common to queer teens, including ostracism and bullying. Although she initially attempted to hide her lesbianism from other characters, in

reaction to having had to leave her previous school as a result of the intense bullying she experienced after coming out to a friend, she developed feelings for lead character Sky (Stephanie McIntosh), and kissed her. Lana's character and this kiss were a significant breakthrough in terms of lesbian representation on mainstream Australian television, considering *Neighbours'* 6:30pm timeslot and reputation as a relatively conservative family soap that many children watch. The character, and particularly the kiss, did however prompt a backlash from conservatives (see Nguyen). Although some of the response on the part of *Neighbours'* writers and producers to these critiques were supportive of the lesbian storyline, other statements issued were more disturbing, including those by executive producer Rick Pellizzeri, who asserted that "In the last 18 months, we've tackled breast cancer, drug abuse, postnatal depression, infertility, stalking, behavioural problems for teenagers, police corruption ... we are not condoning or promoting homosexuality ... Ultimately, we're telling a story about tolerance" (Nguyen 5). That homosexuality is not to be condoned, or is indeed in some way akin to breast cancer, drug abuse, police corruption or stalking is farcical, and Pellizzeri's response reflects the limits of the rhetoric of "tolerance."

Actress Bridget Neval, although now living in Australia, has a Canadian accent and was presented as a Canadian character, and so was already positioned as 'other' to the existing characters prior to coming out—a common facet of lesbian representation in film and television. Like U.S. teen series *One Tree Hill* (WB 2003-present), once the queer teen character had come out, Lana's storyline was considered complete, and she was quickly shipped back out of the series. *Neighbours* scriptwriter Helen McWhirter acknowledges that Lana "was introduced to the show as a means of addressing the issue of teenage homosexuality, and therefore only contracted for the duration of the story which unfolded over a few months," with script producer Luke

Devenish noting that “market research told us that people would be pleased to see a wider range of contemporary issues and dilemmas affecting our characters. When we audience-tested the idea of a gay character joining the show we got nothing but positive responses” (Aaron). This approach of addressing lesbian characters as existing only to engage with as ‘an issue,’ and having little narrative value beyond that, is well familiar to audiences around the world, though it could be argued that this storyline, which eventually has Lana with another female love interest, is superior to those that have kept a “lesbian” character, only to rewrite her lesbianism later on.

Neighbours has since followed up with some more minor lesbian storylines, including the 2006 coming-out of lesbian mechanic Chris Rodd (Trudy Hellier), the mother of a newly introduced primary character. This storyline was largely concerned with heterosexual reactions to Chris’ sexuality from apprentice Janae (Eliza Taylor-Cotter) and her daughter Pepper (Nicky Whelan). Pepper herself was later to have two lesbian kisses, with best friend and flatmate Rosie (Natalie Saleeba). After these (consecutive) kisses there are a number of scenes where Rosie’s feelings were left ambiguous while it is made quite clear that Pepper has no sexual/romantic interest in women (or at least in Rosie), and they later had a conversation about it, agreeing that it was “just a stupid moment” that reflected their feelings of closeness for one another, though Rosie is less vocal about this than Pepper. While some ambiguity was left about Rosie’s feelings, she thereafter continues to have relationships with men exclusively, rendering this storyline more like the ratings-stunt kisses between otherwise straight women seen on such U.S. shows as *Ally McBeal* (Fox 1997-2002).

In 2002 Australian hospital drama series *All Saints* introduced a lesbian character, Dr. Charlotte Beaumont (Tammy McIntosh). The character was treated to a drunken one-night-stand with another (heterosexual) female character Bron (played by Libby Tanner, Zoe Marshall from

Pacific Drive), and a brief and largely ignored relationship with another woman, before being handed an arc where she slept with a man and became pregnant. As she developed into a more major character in the series, the writers even went so far as to “have rewritten her back-story. Charlotte now claims to have left her husband because he was incapable of intimacy, not because she was gay, as she’d originally stated” (Petrik).

Play School (ABC 1966-present) the popular and acclaimed show for pre-schoolers, became embroiled in controversy after showing lesbian mothers in 2004. The episode in question showed six-year-old Brenna visiting an amusement park with her two mothers: real life lesbian mothers Vicki Harding and Jackie Braw. Brenna stated early in the ‘through the windows’ segment, “My mums are taking me and my friend Merryn to an amusement park,” before proceeding to discuss her favourite ride. Members of both Australia’s ruling conservative government and the opposition condemned the airing, which occurred “just days after the Federal Government decided to ban same-sex couples from marrying, or adopting children” (Marriner 3). Although federally funded, the ABC is no stranger to causing waves with ruling political parties, and the head of children’s television at the ABC, Claire Henderson, responded that “*Play School* aims to reflect the diversity of Australian children, embracing all manner of race, religions and family situations” (3). A columnist, discussing response to the episode on talkback radio, traditionally a bastion of conservatism, commented, “I did not count the callers for and against but my impression was that about half were supportive” (Warneke 6).

Celebrated Australian drama series *The Secret Life of Us* (Ten 2001-2005) centred on the lives, loves and ambitions of a group of twenty-somethings living in a Melbourne apartment complex. A progressive series, it depicted gay male characters, casual sex and drug use and was not shy about addressing political issues.^{iv} During the third season, one of the characters,

previously-heterosexual actor Miranda (Abi Tucker), becomes attracted to and has a relationship with another woman, her lesbian call-centre supervisor Chloe (Nina Liu). The defining element of Miranda's storyline was its fluidity, reflecting the 2000s trend of rejecting identification. It was clear from the first episode of the season that Miranda is attracted to Chloe, though it took them until the sixth episode to kiss, the seventh episode to have sex and Miranda left the series for America in episode twelve. While Chloe continued as a character in the series, her relationships or sexuality did not play a prominent role, with the exception of one episode in which Chloe faced homophobia at work, and was coaxed into coming out by heterosexual flatmate Christian (Michael Dorman), quite out of keeping with her previous characterisation.

In this portrayal, love was initially dislocated from the physicality of sexual desire. This was seen most notably when Miranda had a conversation with friend Kelly (Deborah Mailman), during which Miranda claimed that "I could never be in love with a woman" because "I could never go down on a woman," to which Kelly responds "I think if I was in love with someone I'd do anything. It's about loving the person," which appeared to encourage Miranda in her pursuit of Chloe. Miranda's desires were, however, later sexualised in episode seven, and she discussed her experience with Kelly, describing Chloe as "*so soft, so yummy. I'm really freaked out by it but - I just want to see her again.*" While she responded in the negative to Kelly's question of whether she did "the dive," she noted that "this thing happened that's never happened to me with a guy," the details of which are never revealed. Like much television, *Secret Life* initially appeared to obfuscate bisexual identity when Miranda later asserts, "I'm heterosexual. I just fell in love with a woman," though a later episode provided a counter to this. After bedding one of Chloe's friends, Christian believed he had slept with a lesbian, who responded that she identifies

as “bisexual, obviously,” and this phrase was repeated twice by other characters during the episode.

Last Man Standing (Seven 2005), a comedy-drama series that depicted the relationships of three heterosexual Aussie blokes, certainly did not seem a likely vehicle for lesbian characters. The fifth episode of the series, however, introduced Marly (Anita Hegh), sister of primary character Adam (Rodger Corser), and her girlfriend Alyson (Monica Sayers), who announced that they were getting married and having a baby. While Marly’s mother was very warm to both Marly and Alyson, and very excited by Marly’s announcements, and key character Bruno (Travis McMahon) was portrayed as supportive of the couple, the episode also included characters espousing homophobic sentiments, as well as the rather strange assertion that any guy “who doesn’t get turned on by the idea of two women together [is either] totally homophobic, or gay.”

After Bruno declined being their sperm donor, saying, “I think when, or even if, I have a kid, I want it to be my kid,” other key character Cameron (Matt Passmore) offered his services, articulating his decision in the discourse of “mateship”—that much-vaunted Australian cultural value. Marly and Alyson eventually turned Cameron down, as they hadn’t yet decided if they wanted “a sperm donor, or a real father.” The question of what a “real father” would be in the context of a lesbian couple having a child is not problematized, and this allowed the scriptwriters to back out of this storyline and not mention it again, and the lesbian characters only rarely appeared thereafter. An interesting phenomenon of the portrayal of these characters was that it allowed a certain dualism of lesbian representation. While Marly was presented as an engaging and likable character, Alyson was presented as rather unlikable through her standoffish attitude towards Marly’s kindly mother, her habit of rendering any discussion formal and clinical, and the distinction drawn between her socio-economic status and that of Marly’s family. One cannot

help but suspect that this was a deliberate gesture intended to allow audiences to project their potential homophobia at one lesbian character, leaving the other intact. It is troubling that the role of the 'bad lesbian' is assigned to Alyson, the second Asian lesbian character on Australian television (and, coincidentally, the first fictional lesbian academic).

SBS, Australia's partially publicly funded multicultural network, is dedicated to broadcasting foreign-language programming and programs that highlight Australia's cultural diversity. Part of this diversity has been its openness to screening gay content, such as the U.K. series *Out* (1989, 1991), which was followed up by two Australian seasons of *Out* (1992-1993), Showtime's *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and the documentary produced for SBS, *The Hidden History of Homosexual Australia* (2005). Recent SBS production *Kick* (2007-present) included as one of its characters university student Layla Salim (Nicole Chamoun), who entered a relationship with Jackie (Romi Trower). Unlike the interracial relationships in *The Secret Life of Us* and *Last Man Standing*, where the Anglo-Celtic characters were the major ones in the lesbian storylines, Layla, a Lebanese-Australian Muslim, was the focus of the narrative in the first season of *Kick*. This made her a rather unique television character, as there are few examples of Arabic or Muslim lesbian representation in culture in general, let alone the very white, very heterosexual world of network television.^v Layla's attraction to Jackie was presented more visually than verbally, which was in keeping with the manner in which heterosexual desires were also represented by the series. The show's website, however, did feature "Layla's secret blog" which provided Layla's internal monologue about her desire for Jackie and her feelings about her sexuality. Despite her clear hesitations and comparative lack of experience, it was Layla who took the role of pursuivant and initiated their first kiss in one of the most visually sensuous scenes the series has offered. The complications to Layla's blossoming love affair were her long-term

(arranged) engagement to Sharif and her unwillingness to tell her family about her sexuality. At first she did not tell Jackie about Sharif, and once her lover found out, Layla proceeded to continue her charade by asking, “Why can’t you accept that I come from a different world? I can’t just do what I want, people get hurt” and “can’t we just go on like before?” until Jackie demanded, “Tell your fiancé that you’re not getting married. And tell your family why.” Thereafter, Layla proceeded to break off her engagement to Sharif, and went to Jackie’s place, insisting to Jackie, “I’m not going to tell [my family], they don’t need to know.” Although the lack of a definitive coming-out scene was in some respects disappointing, the storyline was not unrealistic, and it allowed the first season to end on the positive note of the couple’s reunion.

While recent years have seen important scholarship arise which documents and analyses the history of queer representation on television, this has almost exclusively focussed on television made in the United States, and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom. If we truly want to examine the history of representing lesbians on television, it is vital that we look beyond these contexts. Australia has a rich history of lesbian representation on television, and hopefully scholars will soon begin to interrogate these characters and images. In recent years it has been very difficult to get Australian-made programming to survive past an initial season, with heavy competition from imported programming, and Australian-programming quotas being filled by locally-produced reality-television franchises. Yet, even in such a climate, lesbian characters do persist on the limited number of new Australian shows, such as *Kick*, and this is a promising sign that Australian television will continue, and indeed, diversify its tradition of representing lesbians on television.

NOTES

ⁱ While Gross considered a “breakthrough” the 1972 U.S. telemovie *That Certain Summer* when “two gay men were actually shown touching (on the shoulder), and none of the gay characters had to die at the end of the story” (81), real-life partners Peter Bonsall-Boone and Peter De Waal kissed on *Chequerboard* (ABC 1969-1975) in 1972, and Don Finlayson, popular gay male character on *Number 96* (Ten 1972-1977) kissed his lover in 1974, and managed to have both relationships and flings with other men (Howes 41- 43).

ⁱⁱ Thank you to the archives at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for granting me access to this episode.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exemplary depictions of the conflation of same-sex female desire and violent perversion range from the vampiric Miriam Blaylock (Catherine Deneuve) in *The Hunger* (1983) to Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) in *Basic Instinct* (1992).

^{iv} *The Secret Life of Us* had also previously featured a woman-woman kiss between key character Alex (Claudia Karvan) and a non-recurring character during its first season.

^v While recent scholarship such as *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East* by Samar Habib addresses the history and representation of lesbians in the Middle East, western popular cultural depictions remain few and far between, making Layla’s character all the more significant.

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