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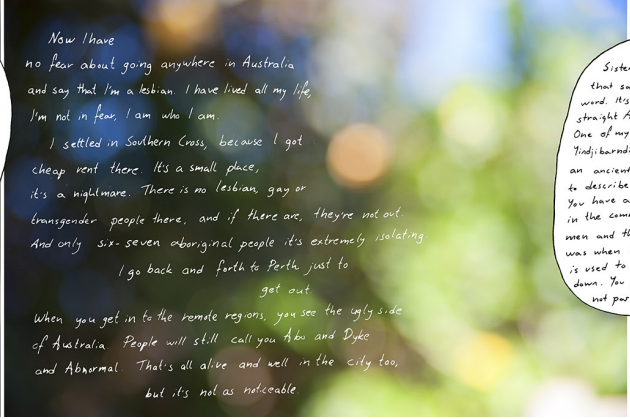
Other
(2018)



Heidi
Lunabba



I've known since I was a child that I'm a lesbian. When I was 16 I caught the bus to Sydney. First thing, I went to Rubys, that was the first lesbian club in Australia. I had to get out of here, one of the worst states to be gay or lesbian was Western Australia in terms of laws, harsh laws. It was really repressive, the police, the government, everything was about putting you down and keeping you in your box.



Now I have no fear about going anywhere in Australia and say that I'm a lesbian. I have lived all my life, I'm not in fear, I am who I am.

I settled in Southern Cross, because I got cheap rent there. It's a small place, it's a nightmare. There is no lesbian, gay or transgender people there, and if there are, they're not out. And only six-seven aboriginal people it's extremely isolating. I go back and forth to Perth just to get out.

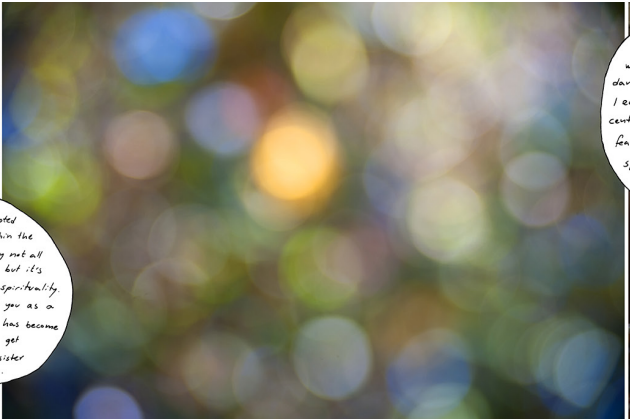
When you get in to the remote regions, you see the ugly side of Australia. People will still call you Abo and Dyke and Abnormal. That's all alive and well in the city too, but it's not as noticeable.



It's an old, old Aboriginal word Sistergirl, my sister, my sistergirl that says it all. It's such a beautiful word. It's a term of endearment that straight Aboriginal women would also use. One of my mothers in the Pilbara, she is an Indjibarndi Elder, she told me "My dear, we have an ancient word that is Dumbale, it was used to describe men having sex with other men. You have a couple of pigs who were known in the community as Dumbale, they were mixed men and they were treated with respect, this was when I was young. Today Dumbale is used to put young Aboriginal men down. You get comments like that's not part of our culture."



Sistergirl is a word that denotes us as female. In our community sistergirls are seen and are accepted as women. We perform support roles of women within the community such as bringing up children. We may not all dress as women or have gender reassignment, but it's not the physicality of who we are, it's the spirituality. Just having a flower over your ear can identify you as a Sistergirl. For us LGBTI community Sistergirl's has become a political word to help in the struggle to get recognition for who we are. The word sister has so many different connotations.



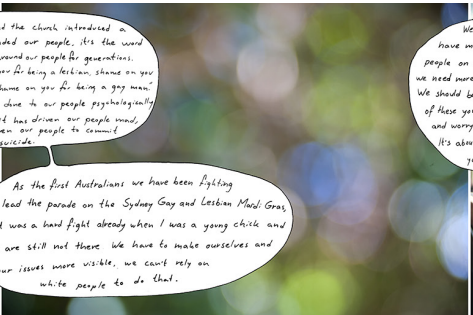
Along the way I saw Drag Shows and I decided that's what I wanted to be, glamorous and beautiful, whilst dancing on a stage. I was in drag shows here in Perth, I ended up dancing in an all-male revue. I was the centerpiece because I was tall and I could hold the ostrich feather fans the highest, they'd be trembling under the spotlights. At 19 I went to Sydney, I found a place where I could feel safe, that's where I created Unnessa.



Twenty years ago I attended a HIV/AIDS conference in Queensland as an escort to a young Peruvian man and whilst there I attended a social health forum and asked the question of the Chairperson "What are you doing about sexual abuse and its impact on the gay and Trans/Sistergirl community?" And to cut a long story short I have been voted into the National Chairpersons position with an overwhelming 97% vote of the national community.



The gay men hated it, they resented being hated it, that a Sistergirl who came from nowhere was now the National Chairperson. My position also solidified the existence of the Sistergirl struggle within the Indigenous Gay and Trans/Sistergirl community. Twenty odd years ago our struggle was divided by the fact that our Indigenous Gay men didn't support us and the Indigenous Gay women didn't want their issues being talked about within our LGBTI context. Thankfully today we do enjoy working relationships.



The missionaries and the church introduced a word that has really banded our people, it's the word shame, and it's hung around our people for generations. "Shame, shame, shame on you for being a lesbian, shame on you for being a Sistergirl, shame on you for being a gay man" what that word has done to our people psychologically is just horrific. It has driven our people mad, it has driven our people to commit suicide.

As the first Australians we have been fighting to lead the parade on the Sydney Gay and Lesbian March, that was a hard fight already when I was a young child and we are still not there. We have to make ourselves and our issues more visible, we can't rely on white people to do that.



We have to look at our world, we get to have more Aboriginal openly gay and lesbian people on the boards of Aboriginal organisations, and we need more Aboriginal people in the LGBTI organisations. We should be there, visible. I'm trying to say to some of these young people that you can't just sit back and worry about what people think of you. It's about you! You've got to live your life, you've got to live your life fully.

