

Voicing the Visions We Longed For and Have Worked Towards

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Abstract

In the late 1990s, we, Bronwyn Fredericks and Pamela Croft were both living in the Australian Central Queensland region. As two Australian Aboriginal women we were both engaged in the same areas of politics and activism and were both undertaking doctoral studies. At times during our studies, we would both become frustrated with the lack of literature and scholarly leadership in our respective disciplines. We also knew we had lots to say that was inside and outside of the scope of our studies and our disciplines. We wanted to talk about history, health, education, culture, the manifestations of whiteness in Australia, the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians and much more. Through our joint history we knew we could work in a partnership with each other in ways that supported and respected one another and recognised each other's skills and abilities. We began to share our visions and talking our ideas through in ways that stimulated creativity and inspiration. We began to plan projects using Pamela's art works and Bronwyn's words. We came to find a space in which we could jointly work. This paper will share part of our visioning journey and highlight some of the aspects of how we work together in our creative partnership. It will demonstrate that it is possible to enact our visions and to realise our dreams and aspirations.

Introduction

In starting to share our story we acknowledge the Darumbal and Woppaburra peoples as the Traditional Owners of areas also now known as Rockhampton and the Capricorn Coast of Queensland, Australia. This is the region in which we both reside and the context in which we live and work. Through our individual and joint history we knew we wanted to and possibly could work in a partnership with each other in ways that supported and respected one another and recognised each other's skills and abilities. We began to talk ideas through in ways that stimulated creativity and inspiration. We came to find a space in which we could jointly work. This paper will share a part of our story and some of the principles and processes that we use in working together in our creative partnership. We believe that the collaborative partnership that we have developed also has the capacity to exist in other localities.

The Geographic Locality of Our Work

The Rockhampton region is situated within what is defined as the Central Queensland region of Australia. As a geographical area, Central Queensland comprises of tablelands, flatlands, plain lands, open scrub, wetlands, river and creek systems, coastal areas, islands, mountains and now cityscapes and urban sprawl. It is these environments within the Central Queensland

geographical area, where peoples lived for thousands of years with their own histories, their own cultures, their own laws, and their own knowledges. There were numerous distinct groups of Aboriginal peoples, who lived within the region and who belonged and belong to very specific areas, Country. These can be sighted in the pictorial map of Australia, which depicts Country belonging to different distinct Aboriginal peoples (Horton, 1999). There may have been, and are clans within these peoples who may have different dialects, different 'Country', different histories and different responsibility areas and roles. Women's experiences and men's experiences were and are different yet shared. It is all of this that is often forgotten by non-Indigenous peoples within the region. Some of the Aboriginal women who live in this region are from Darumbal Country now referred to as Rockhampton and others are from Country from within the Central Queensland region or further away and are now integrally linked to Central Queensland's histories, peoples and places.

The Rockhampton region that we draw reference to in our work is located within this geographic and cultural context. The City of Rockhampton resides within Country of the Darumbal people. The Rockhampton region as defined in several government documents resides within the Countries of the Darumbal, Woppaburra and Gungulou peoples. It is the cattle industry that Rockhampton aligns itself with and the town is the self-proclaimed 'Beef Capital of Australia' (Forbes, 2001:7). It sometimes uses the slogan 'where the beef meets the reef' in advertising materials so as people know that the Great Barrier Reef is also close by. Some of the writings that attempt to detail and explore the life of people within the Rockhampton area and Central Queensland region include Bird (1999) Huf (1996) Huf, McDonald and Myers (1993) and Pattison (2000).

Us as Women

To work with each other as Aboriginal women and giving voice to each other, and then for us not to have a voice within our work and also within the context of our public work is a contradiction. The process of giving each other voice as Aboriginal women is essential. Aboriginal people and Aboriginal women for too long have been silenced. We need to regain our voices and maintain our voices. We decided that we would try not to write in the third person, we refused to become voiceless and silent. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson wrote when referring to her work representing an Indigenous standpoint within Australian feminism, "My role as an academic analyst is inextricable from my embodiment as an Indigenous woman" (2000:xvi). Moreton-Robinson argues that she cannot separate her Aboriginal self away from her academic analyst self. Aboriginality implies certain assumptions about how one sees the world in the same way that other cultures, including Anglo-Australians, have a set of assumptions related to how they see the world. We thus acknowledge our own Aboriginality in the same way that Aileen Moreton-Robinson acknowledges her Aboriginality as integral to her research. Pamela is of the Kooma clan, of the Uralarai people, South West Queensland Her Aboriginality is traced through her maternal kin. Bronwyn is an Aboriginal woman from what is known as the South-East Queensland region. Her Aboriginality is through her maternal kin. Both of us spent our childhoods and young adulthoods in Brisbane and in our 30s we ended up moving to other parts of Australia. We met while both at the Queensland University of Technology in the late 1980s.

In 1995 we reconnected when we were both living in the Rockhampton and Capricorn Coast region. We were both working and undertaking postgraduate studies. We would talk for hours

about the texts and papers we were reading or a conference paper we may have heard or artwork we had seen. We would debate and dialogue on issues and began to unravel some understandings that we had of the world. We began to see that although Aboriginal women were often categorised as marginal and disadvantaged and that this provided us with opportunities to learn, think, judge, speak, listen, and act and to come to know the world as we know it. We came to understand that in terms of knowledge, this is also what gives us power. What gives us power is also our Indigenous worldviews and that this was something that non-Indigenous people could not take away from us. We also came to realize that there were things within our lives, within our knowledge bases and within the way we analysed that went beyond what was being theorised. While undertaking this knowledge journey together we also had to progress our own individual studies. Pamela became the first Aboriginal person in Australia to graduate with a Doctor of Visual Arts (2003) and Bronwyn graduated with a PhD in health science (2003). Pamela is recognised as an artist, educator, community cultural worker and activist and Bronwyn is recognised as a writer, educator and activist and someone who can combine the analytical and experiential within the health and educational arenas. We each made the decision that we needed to place some of our knowledge to one side until after we finished our doctoral studies in light of the silencing we experienced and the anti-intellectualism we found within the educational environments we were in at the time. That is not to say that they are still the same today as we have moved on from these institutional environments.

Through our joint involvement in activism and our individual work, we increasingly felt that we were being asked to fit within someone else's framework of seeing the world. It became clearer how the dominant viewpoints were given privilege, status and prominence in Australian contemporary society and overrode all other views and systems. We are asked through what we were doing to fit in with or accept these views. In essence we were being asked to employ essentialist notions, which act in ways to constrain our voices. We would also struggle countering the objectification of Aboriginal people through a range of mediums. We have thought that at times the images of Aboriginal people, regardless whether visual or written, were more like caricatures, than portraits. We would talk with each other about how we and other Aboriginal people could be more accurately reflected. We wondered how we could depict the vitality of our own and other Aboriginal people's lives and experiences.

Trying to reach out

We did try to work with others within the larger community, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, including women's circles, arts groups and community development groups. We felt that some non-Indigenous women did not welcome our questioning of feminist paradigms within which they worked. Some we think felt threatened with our attempts to bring race into the feminist debate. Other women across a range of sectors focused on particular Aboriginal women that they wanted to include in their projects or events and isolated others in the process by their actions. This happened at the same time they were proclaiming that they were trying to be 'inclusive'. bell hooks describes this process of selection of some people over others. "Black women are treated as though we are a box of chocolates presented to individual white women for their eating pleasure, so they can decide for themselves and others which pieces are most tasty" (1994:80). It is not just white women who are party to this but men are too as are some Aboriginal people. In Bronwyn's doctoral work with Aboriginal women based in Rockhampton one of the participants (Kay) identified the following insight,

... the white world sometimes wants us to be puppets in a way, [it wants] Aboriginal people who don't have as much experience, knowledge, and competition. White race privilege doesn't take empowered people, they don't want empowered people, they encompass you because they can do everything for you ...(Fredericks, 2003:337)

What Kay is articulating is that being an empowered Aboriginal woman can place you in a position of disadvantage. She raises the dialogue around the comfortability of white race privilege and around the desires of others to encompass or do things for Aboriginal people. Further to this, they want people who can just fit in to the white world, the 'mainstream' to be "puppets in a way", or to be told what to do. Basically, if you are an empowered Aboriginal woman who can articulate what you want and need, you may not get the same assistance or be asked to participate because the workers don't necessarily know how to relate to you as you don't fit within their white way of seeing Aboriginal women. How do they "encompass" and "do everything for you" as an empowered Aboriginal woman? Bronwyn believes this to be an historical phenomena, and connected to past colonial practices and the belief that the dominant society was trying to 'rescue' and 'save' Aboriginal women. It is about nurturing dependence and paternalism. It is also about measuring Aboriginal women up to a standard that is not our own and one that is based on a society that believes itself to be better than us. The behaviour of how to work with Aboriginal people who have a sense of their own personal empowerment is one that is still being worked through by both non-Indigenous people and Aboriginal people. We believe that there is personal discomfort at times for some non-Indigenous people in facing Aboriginal people who have a sense of their own personal empowerment. We additionally noticed a change in behaviour of some non-Indigenous people towards us once we both had our doctoral qualifications, in the way of distancing themselves. In some ways this may be linked to the issues already raised.

We longed for environments where we could have open critical dialogue with each other and other people and where we could do so without fear of being judged, excluded, being labelled and where our individual differences and complexities were encompassed. We didn't want to have things done for us. We didn't want to work in ways that would sit us in the framework of whiteness to make it easier for ourselves. We didn't want to surrender to the notion that we couldn't do anything about domination and oppression. We didn't want to be dominated over, ask permission or feel subsumed. We didn't want to sell out our selves and our Aboriginality. We made the commitment to further explore what we could do for ourselves and how we could reach out from Rockhampton to the world.

Working Together

We wanted to assist in giving each other voice and rejoicing in our voices. We felt a need to regain our voices and maintain our voices. Towards the end of our studies we started brainstorming ideas and planning what we could work on together. We wanted to draw on our knowledge, skills and abilities and to step outside the traditional areas of our disciplines or what people expected of us. We wanted to be and act from the positioning of being sovereign women and to put our interests as Aboriginal women. We wanted to illuminate and enhance our intellectual understandings of our Aboriginal woman experiences and the experiences of others. We knew we didn't want to perpetuate the western knowledge that we had learnt back on communities in ways that were biased or neo-colonial. We didn't want to be co-opted into

reproducing western knowledge. We understand based on experience what is colonising in orientation and what is liberatory in nature. We have the capacity to talk back to that knowledge now, which we didn't have before we undertook our studies. From this premise, we started to focus on opportunities for us to create innovation and to contribute to change. We believed that if we developed an approach that reflected our values and beliefs and supported the broader political struggle that we would be reflecting the spirit of our ancestors, the spirits of those people who are alive today and those of the future.

We began to view Pamela's artworks and talk about them, bringing in the theories and knowledge bases we had learnt about and our discussions on them. We drew on areas such as: history, colonisation, decolonisation, feminism, cultural studies and the arts and health sciences. We started to draft works combining Pamela's art works and drawing on Bronwyn's words. We tried a range of ways to present our work and sent some off to journals. They came back with comments such as, we needed to be more 'scholarly'; 'scientific'; 'objective; or 'logical'. It became clear that even some of the journals that regarded themselves as 'more progressive' maintained sexism, racism, imperialism and white supremacy in determining what was 'objective', 'scientific', 'logical' or scholarly'. Bronwyn started to think more broadly and drew from the innovation and creativity in our collaboration and translated it across to the selection of journals. We slowly began to publish our work and we are now getting requests. People quote our work in lectures, tutorials and publications here and overseas.

We work with respect for one another and understand that the gifts we have, and our experiences and knowledges compliment one another. We work not in competition but in ways that help each other grow and develop and become increasingly wiser. We have learnt to respect each other's spaces and the need for silence as well as the need and spaces of speech. We know that silence is powerful just as words can be powerful. We have engaged in activities within the physical environment together in ways that stimulate our senses and drive our passions for our work. We have hunted and collected together for food and for items for Pamela's artworks all the while talking and being Aboriginal women within the landscape of Country. We have laughed madly with each other at our actions and we have cried too for and with each other at the pain and hurt carried by us as women and at our losses. We each offer respect for our sacred bonds between our selves and our partners and don't tread over and on these bonds in the process of our work. The Indigenous men in our lives are steadfast in their support for what we do and what we see as our work.

We want to continue to develop and become better at what we do as individuals and as a collaborative partnership. We want to be wise old women who know and regard each other as sisters. We acknowledge one another's suffering and the struggles we have in maintaining our sense of Aboriginality and the objectification of Aboriginal peoples that at times tries to make us voiceless. We want to dwell within our subjectivity. We want to continue to reject the dominating culture's hold over our lives and the authority that comes with this control in terms of who we are, what we are supposed to be and do. We want to continue to grow in our capacity of naming the world as we see it for ourselves. We want to come to set our own agendas and work towards achieving those. We want to be more proactive and less reactive in our resistance of the dominating culture. We acknowledge that this is hard sometimes and with issues it is very easy to slip into the old reactive behaviours. Sometimes we also feel the harshness of the people and the landscape of the region, Australia and world in which we live. It is at times like this that we

console each other, and then look for the gaps, like crevices within what appears to be barren ground that can be worked on, and utilised to challenge, and to attempt to speak up and make changes that have an impact. We look at present day examples of Australian Aboriginal women speaking up in the Indigenous community and in broader Australian society. We look to the intellectual activist work of Australian Aboriginal women like Aileen Moreton- Robinson, Tracey Bunda, Nereda White, Jackie Huggins, Larissa Behrendt, Wendy Brady, Marcia Langton, Bonnie Robertson and numerous others. We also know that it is useful to reflect on what our ancestors might have done, how they might have acted, and how we might honour them in our behaviour. It is when we are experiencing particularly hard times that we draw on the courage of our ancestors to strengthen ourselves as warrior women.

Conclusion

We have both walked and viewed the great rocks of the Keppel Sands bluffs that reflect and mark the edge of the land and the water of the Darumbal and the Woppaburra. We can view the islands within the Woppaburra waters. We have come to know the place of the Darumbal and the Woppaburra. When we walk along the water's edge we can sense the impermanence within our lives through the wind and the waves as they kiss the shores and our heart beats. We look to the cliffs and feel inspired by their size, steadfastness, strength and beauty. We know that they get smashed hard when the water is angry and the wind is high and we know that they get softly caressed by the gentle waves and circulating soft winds as they tease. All the while they remain composed and intensify in their ability to face what is put before them. We think too that is how we wish to be as humans over time and as we grow into older women. Through our individual and shared experiences of living within, on and in the Traditional Country of the Darumbal and Woppaburra people, the geographic areas now known as Rockhampton and the Capricorn Coast we have been able to forge a strong working partnership. We have been able to work with each other in ways that support and respect one another and recognise each other's skills and abilities all the while arguing for, struggling for and working for a better world for Aboriginal peoples. We have voiced our vision to one another, grew our vision and are now enacting our vision as individuals and together. In essence we have found a site within the Countries of the Darumbal and Woppaburra where we can vision, talk and be who we are, enact strategies for emancipation, liberation, subjectivity and resistance, and where we can individually and jointly speak and work.

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