

Finding a space to make an impact within the contemporary world

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples have generally been the objects of the research as has Indigenous art, dance, stories, artefacts, music and history. This is also the experience of Indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. Collectively Indigenous people are said to be the “most researched people in the world” (Smith, 1999, p. 3). As researchers, Indigenous people are relatively new travellers. This paper will explore using first person narrative the issues experienced by two of these new travellers. Within this paper Bronwyn Fredericks and Pamela Croft share part of their journey which was driven by process and a commitment to the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander political struggle.

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Introduction

In the late 1990s, we were both living in the Central Queensland region and engaged in the same areas of politics and activism and were both undertaking doctoral studies. We are both Aboriginal women. At times during our studies, we would both become frustrated with the lack of literature 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, 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 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 explore the principles and processes that we use in working together in our creative partnership and some of our outcomes that have made an impact within the contemporary world.

The geographic locality of our work

The Rockhampton region is situated within what is defined as the Central Queensland region in numerous government documents. 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, cultures, laws, and 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 people who live in this region are from the 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 the region'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 the Country of the Darumbal people. The greater Rockhampton region which includes the city of Rockhampton and the surrounding areas resides within the Countries of the Darumbal, Woppaburra and Gungulou peoples. 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) and Huf, McDonald, and Myers (1993). The Rockhampton Art Gallery recently produced a publication about the Aboriginal people in the Rockhampton district (Smith, 2007).

Us as Aboriginal 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 peoples and Aboriginal women for too long have been silenced. We need to regain our voices and maintain our voices. We decided that for this paper we would not to write in the third person, we refuse to become voiceless and silent when we are trying to tell our stories. 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, p. 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 Croft is of the Kooma clan, of the Uralarai people, South West Queensland. Her Aboriginality is traced through her maternal kin. Bronwyn Fredericks is an Aboriginal woman from the South-east Queensland region. Her Aboriginality is also through her maternal kin. We have known one another for over 18 years.

We have spent much of our lives being placed in the category of Other in Australian society. We acknowledge up front that we dislike reducing ourselves to Other, yet at the same time know that we cannot reduce ourselves to just dominant, central, non-Indigenous and female. Although as Aboriginal women we attempt to concentrate upon accounts that are truly Aboriginal women's, which deconstructs Eurocentric views, we recognise that we are also tied by convention to the many terms which promote the unitary vision of an Australia. We as Aboriginal women are designated as Other and yet still encompassed within dominant Australian society. Our colonial experiences are tied to the colonisers, while still being them and us, we and you. We know few other words to describe peoples who are non-Indigenous. One is either Indigenous or non-Indigenous, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. We have learnt that one is either White, or not-White, Anglo-Australian or Other. As if you are not an Australian if in the Other category. In this we acknowledge the essentialism that maintains the binary of the – us and them, the same and different, the inside and outside. Some people are mixtures of the binary, coloniser and colonised within our bodies and within our cultural memories (Brady, 1999; Croft, 2003; Robinson, 1997).

We have both experienced a range of privileges that have been given to us because people perceived that we were all White. In this we are referring to whiteness as a cultural construct. It was assumed we were all White in some of our educational, business and broader community exchanges and experiences. We have also experienced the withdrawal of these when people have realised that we are not. Then there are all the in-between notions of part-this and part-that, and the dynamics that come from this. From some there is respect for the whiteness, but not the Other; or respect for the Other but not the whiteness. We have both experienced being excluded based on aspects of our whiteness and on aspects of our Aboriginality.

Over the years we have both felt as if we were increasingly 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 about how Aboriginal people could be more accurately reflected. We wondered how we could depict the vitality of Aboriginal people's lives and experiences.

In 1995 we both found ourselves living in the Country of the Darumbal people (Rockhampton and Capricorn Coast) and the Country (islands and waters) of the Woppaburra people (Keppel Islands). 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, disadvantaged and Other, that this provided us with opportunities to learn, think, judge, speak,

listen, 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. We also came to realise that there were things within our lives, within our knowledge bases and within the way we analysed that went beyond what was being theorised. We each made the decision that we needed to place some of our knowledge to the side until after we finished our postgraduate studies in light of the priorities we had at that time.

Stepping out in our locality

We did try to work with others within the larger Rockhampton community, 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. Locally within the education arena we have both felt sidelined at times and have frequently witnessed the privilege of whiteness in operation. For example, we have watched non-Indigenous and other Aboriginal people be offered jobs over us, when we were more educated and had more experience (sometimes we were told we were too qualified), we have been asked to give our time on projects when non-Indigenous people were paid for their time (even when we were unemployed), and in one instance we watched our issues not being raised by a woman with whom we spoke because she said it might impact her future job prospects even when the topic of discussion was a one-day workshop on whiteness and racism. The woman was a speaker at the workshop and on the organising committee. When such instances have happened locally within the arts arena in terms of choices of artist, it has been particularly hurtful to Pamela as it directly impacted her financial income and therefore her capacity to support herself as a full-time practicing artist. She has been seen as an Aboriginal artist and all the imagery that accompanies this label and not as an artist who has been highly educated in fine arts in terms of techniques, skills and knowledge. There are many other examples that cut across all areas of our lives as Aboriginal women as they cut across the lives of many other Aboriginal women.

Bell Hooks describes in part 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, p. 80). It is not just white women who are party to this but so too are white men and at times other Aboriginal people. In Bronwyn's doctoral work with Aboriginal women 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, p. 337)

What Kay is articulating is that being an empowered Aboriginal woman can place one 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. Furthermore, seeking out Aboriginal people with experience and knowledge might mean that the answer is no or that challenging takes place or questions are asked. We have both been told it is easier to work with some Aboriginal people and not others. 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 way of seeing Aboriginal women.

Why one might ask do they try and “encompass” and “do everything for you” as an empowered Aboriginal woman? Bronwyn believes this to be an historical phenomenon and connected to past colonial practices and the belief that the dominant society was and is at times still 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. Or a society of people that thinks it knows better than us or is more right than us on an issue even if the issue is about us. Sometimes people are viewing us through the distorted cultural, political, and religious lenses that force them to us in ways that are very different to our interpretations of reality. We think that 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 some 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.

Catherine Keoner’s honours thesis (2001) on the topic of reconciliation in Rockhampton adds to this discussion. The research involved interviewing a woman named Grace, who implies that at times it is those Aboriginal people who fit into the frameworks of whiteness who may more easily gain employment (2001, p. 90). That is, Aboriginal people who the white system identifies with because they work comfortably within the framework of whiteness. Trudgen (2000) explains that sometimes Aboriginal people who are “hand-picked by the dominant culture rather than chosen by their own people, can become oppressors” (p. 197). Furthermore,

... where the dominant culture works through a few chosen ...
Aboriginal people instead of working with the whole community, the seeds of cronyism easily germinate. These chosen leaders, irrespective of their original intentions, can easily become corrupted because their position is supported and nurtured by the dominant culture ... this leads these dominant culture agents ... to unconsciously build their own leadership base (p. 197).

Trudgen argues that this is how Aboriginal people become “agents of the dominant culture and therefore of re-traumatisation” (p. 196). We generally found that we weren’t the individuals called upon by non-Indigenous people and when we were and then raised questions or challenged what was asked of

us, the process, nature of the event, or the status quo, we were viewed as if we had spoiled the situation. At times, we have been told by the non-Indigenous people that they were “only trying to help.” At times as a result of questioning or challenging we may be seen as stirrers, troublemakers, hostile or just difficult. 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. Spaces where we wouldn’t be seen as being difficult or just being there to get in the way of well intentioned white people (Monture-Angus, 1995). 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 and others. We didn’t want to surrender to the notion that we couldn’t do anything about domination and oppression (Smith, 1999). We didn’t want to sell out our selves and our Aboriginality or wait to be picked as if one of the chocolates in a box or to be accommodated or tolerated without any real change.

We will explain what is meant by accommodation or attempts to accommodate us. There are many examples to be found where the mainstream systems and the women’s movement attempt to accommodate Aboriginal women within the realm of women. There are examples to be found when talking with Aboriginal women of where we are asked along to women’s events as a guest speaker to read poetry, set up a display of artwork, or speak about spirituality. This additionally happens in the broader community too. Much of this type of activity focuses on cultural expression and the perceived exotic elements of Aboriginal culture: as some Aboriginal women call it, the “pretty business.” There are other examples to be found where Aboriginal women have been asked to give advice on what might make something culturally appropriate or what might encourage Aboriginal women to participate. We have been asked the above and been a guest speakers many times. We have also seen minor adjustments made to a service/s and a few Aboriginal pictures stuck up on walls, without any real changes for Aboriginal women. We have both been called upon to bring forth Aboriginal woman’s experience for the benefit of helping non-Indigenous women better understand Aboriginal women. We have discussed that when we have left some events we have felt that the organisers did their jobs, they ensured that Aboriginal issues were covered and that they and some of the women present need not worry anymore; that they had saved their conscience that Aboriginal issues or women have not been left out. At other times when Aboriginal cultural expression took place, we have left feeling that it was a tokenistic gesture and a form of entertainment for those present. The organisers could argue that they had given space to Aboriginal expression and thus observed what they believed was appropriate. From our experience and through talking with other Aboriginal women, we have come to see all of this as a form of casual accommodation within mainstream women’s business and White feminism. At times a form of tokenism is operating, where those from marginalised groups, in this case Aboriginal women, become almost trapped soothers for women who continue to deny their own subjective identities. It falsely leads Aboriginal women into believing that the women’s movement is seriously attempting to make changes and deludes those in the women’s movement that they are really trying to change. We collectively have not witnessed or participated in a forum where the very essence of what constituted that women’s site, or service or held that group together was up for

discussion; how it or they could be more inclusive, how could we all explore what we mean by feminism, what do we mean by more appropriate or more open for participation by Aboriginal women. This does not mean that it has not happened elsewhere. It just hasn't happened in the places that we have been in as individuals or together. We believe that this would allow for some cross-cultural feminist efforts to be explored. Some experiences for development are explored in the works of Bagar and McDermott (1989), Christensen (1997), Hooks (1992; 1994), Carby (1997) and Moreton-Robinson (2000).

Developing a space to work 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 doctoral 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 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 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. Martin Nakata explains that one issue for Indigenous scholars is how to speak back to the knowledges that have been formed around what is perceived as Indigenous positionings within Western worldviews (1998, p. 4). Nakata essentially asks 'how do we speak to what is known about us, written about us and not owned by us?' We as Aboriginal peoples and as Indigenous researchers within the research academy need to challenge what is written about us and what knowledges are controlled about us, otherwise we will continue to perpetuate the untruths and the ways in which we are marginalised, minimised, misrepresented, represented and devalued (Nakata, 1998; Rigney, 1997, 2001). Lester-Irabeena Rigney states that, "sadly, the legacy of racialisation and its ideology continue to re-shape knowledge construction of Indigenous Peoples via colonial research ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies which is so fundamentally subtle and 'common sense'" (1997, p. 6). Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work is powerful in providing an argument for decolonising methodologies (1999). 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.

Rigney (1997, p. 2) suggests the employment of Indigenist principles, as a, "step toward assisting Indigenous theorists and practitioners to determine what might be an appropriate response to de-legitimise racist oppression in research and shift to a more empowering and self-determining outcome" (1997, p. 2). Wheaton (2000) argues for the need for Indigenous peoples to develop processes that are about us as Indigenous peoples in order to represent us best. There is without doubt a need for Aboriginal processes that reflect who we are, what we do, how we think, our protocols and processes, in order to represent us best. 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; empirical; 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 is objective, scientific, logical or scholarly writing. 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 and publishing companies now want to talk and meet with us. People are quoting our work in lectures, tutorials and publications here and overseas and we are getting paid work in Australia and overseas.

We work with respect for one another and understand that the gifts we have, and our experiences and knowledges complement 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 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 environment together in ways that stimulate our senses and drive our passions for our work. We have hunted and gathered together for food and items for Pamela's artworks all the while talking and being Aboriginal women within the landscape of Country. We have tried to work in ways that honour the ancestors of the Country in which we have worked and asked for their support along with the support of our own ancestors. We have laughed madly with each other at our actions and cried too. We acknowledge too that we both have boundaries within our working relationship. We both have Indigenous partners and offer respect for our sacred bonds between our selves and our partners. We both have significant other people in our lives. Some of whom are known to both of us. We don't tread over and on these bonds. 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. Sometimes we do feel the harshness of the people and the landscape of the 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 make changes that have an impact. We reflected on the work of Robert Warrior (1995, 1999) whose research efforts have stressed the need for Indigenous intellectual sovereignty. He maintains that Native American intellectual traditions need the freedom to break away from the constraints of the Western academy (1999, p. 11). In his argument Warrior outlines that sovereignty is the path to freedom via a process of emergence for Indigenous peoples, as a group or collective (p. 91). He provides direction that intellectual sovereignty is a process; it is not about outcome (p. 91). It is about the speaking, reflecting and articulation through a range of means about the

Indigenous struggle and what strategies to freedom are needed. Rigney in his interpretation of Warrior's writings outlines that,

If Indigenous intellectual sovereignty is to be emancipatory it must be 'process driven' rather than outcome oriented...it is now for Indigenous scholars committed to sovereignty to realise that we too must struggle for intellectual sovereignty and allow for the definition and articulation of what that means to emerge as we critically reflect on our struggle (2001, p. 10).

In order to bring about the required changes within the knowledge bases, we understand that there must be a link between our work and the political struggle of our communities. We also understand that our work joins the collectively work of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. From this basis we refuse to accept that we are being difficult, stirrers or that we are problematic. It is our engagement within the Countries of the Darumbal and Woppaburra that gifted us this learning and which provided us with a site where we can talk and be who we are, enact strategies for emancipation, liberation, subjectivity and resistance, and where we can individually and jointly speak and work.

In terms of our studies, Pamela became the first Aboriginal person in Australia to graduate with a Doctor of Visual Arts (Croft, 2003) and Bronwyn graduated with a PhD in Health Science (Fredericks, 2003). Pamela is recognised as an artist, educator and community cultural worker and has since been awarded a two year Fellowship from the Australia Council for the Arts. At present she is working on her Fellowship and finishing a project with the company 7th Wave where she has been working with Matt Ruggles who is making a documentary about her life. The documentary titled *Back to Brisbane* will be officially launched in 2008. Bronwyn is recognised as a writer, educator and activist and someone who can combine the analytical and experiential within the health arena. She was recently awarded a four-year Post-Doctoral Fellowship from the National Health and Medical Research Council and is based at the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, Monash University and the Centre for Clinical research Excellence with the Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council. She is also a Visiting Fellow with the Indigenous Research Studies Network at the Queensland University of Technology. While sharing these achievements we are conscious that the achievements are markers of success that have developed within the western world. In addition, that while there may be benefits gained from the achievements in that they assist in the political struggle for and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples they do not as entities assist in social justice, equality and equity. They do not remove or contribute towards the reduction of racism or oppression. Monture-Angus, a Mohawk woman, lawyer and academic explains this situation more clearly when she stated that she,

... believed that once I could write enough letters after my name that White people would accept me as equal. I no longer proscribe to the theory of equality because it does not significantly embrace my difference or that I choose to continue to remain different...As I climbed the ladder of success I never understood that I could not climb to a safer place. I now understand that the ladder I was climbing was not my ladder and it cannot ever take me to a safe place. The ladder, the higher I climbed, led to the source of my oppression (1995, p. 69).

We look towards women like Patricia Monture-Angus (1995) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and to Australian Aboriginal women like Aileen Moreton- Robinson (2000), Tracey Bunda (2007), Jackie Huggins (1998), Wendy Brady (2007; 1999) and numerous others for inspiration and support. 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 intellectual 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 have viewed 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 shore 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 and as sisters. 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 voiced our vision to one another, grown our vision and are now enacting our vision as individuals and as a partnership. We are extremely grateful that we have been able to work together with honesty and honour for each other. We have offered a glimpse of our lives as academic Aboriginal women who have tried to find a place for ourselves where we can interweave Indigenous intellectual traditions. We are hopeful that what we have shared is not seen as us having a whinge or as complaining. We write with the desire to educate people about the experiences we have had that maintain us in the positioning of Other within the academy and within contemporary society. We speak up to challenge the status quo. We write in the hope that it develops more than awareness but that we assist in developing a greater understanding of Aboriginal women's lives and the will to make change in contemporary society. We write from the space we have developed to make a difference and an impact in the contemporary world.

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