# Aboriginal Women Talking for Themselves

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Presentation by


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Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands we are meeting on today; the Wurrundjeri people of the Kulin Nation; and pay my respects to their elders past and present. This land was never ceded, a treaty is yet to be negotiated and until that unfinished business is seen to, Australia will never come of age as a nation. I strongly believe this.

I would also like to introduce myself as an Arrernte woman, as per cultural protocol. My family's traditional lands on my father's side are around the Alice Springs region and my immediate families up there are the Liddles (of course) and the Perkins's. On my mother's side, they are all pretty much working class Clifton Hill-born Collingwood supporters. I myself was born in Canberra, and a good portion of my formative years up there was spent hanging around with the extended family from both sides but particularly Dad's side for a number of them were living in Canberra at the time and working in the public service, along with going to the many Land Rights rallies. We moved to Melbourne in 1992 and following high school in the outer south-eastern beachside suburbs, I went on to La Trobe University where I had a most unconventional time – initially being a geology major then eventually ending up with a first class honours degree in theatre and drama. Following my graduation, I worked for many years in Indigenous student support at both Victorian College of the Arts and the University of Melbourne. It was while I was there that I became involved in union activities, and eventually, that led me to my current role as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organiser for the NTEU.

My career in writing has been equally non-traditional. I started my blog "Rantings of an Aboriginal Feminist" a few years ago partially as a way of venting some frustrations and claiming a space for Indigenous feminist writing, and partly to channel some ideas I had or was exploring. Within 6 weeks, one of my pieces was picked up for publication. Since then, the requests have been pretty much non-stop. When I have been on panels about writing and been asked the inevitable question by an aspiring writer "how do I get my stuff published", my usual answer is "I really have utterly no idea". It still, to this day, surprises me that people read and engage with my work and really, I can only put it down to being in the right place at the right time. I started Rantings just as some new online news sites were starting up in this country.

To truly begin today, I wanted to take a slight detour. I have very recently returned from a holiday in Germany – a trip which I had been waiting nearly two decades to take. It has long been my dream destination; indeed my interest in the country goes back to about grade 6 when I learnt German in primary school and became fascinated with the sounds and patterns of their language. This fascination grew when I was at university and one of my favourite lecturers introduced me to the works of Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble. Finally, over the summer break, I booked myself a ticket and went. Three weeks I spent there, exploring the cities, travelling the countryside and eating an incredible amount of food.

Of course, the minute I landed back in Melbourne, I felt that post-holiday deflation everyone feels. Back to the routine. Back to the writing. Back to the office. And all last week, I was

struggling with jet lag. It's the most curious sensation. The first day back in the office, I started to nod off at the desk at about 11am because my body thought it was about 3 in the morning. Each day, that sensation kicked in a little later, so the next day it was around lunch time I hit the wall, then it was 3pm and so forth. That game of catch-up only finished over this weekend and I now feel like I can almost function like a human being.

On pondering this, I thought that jet lag was actually quite a good analogy for this talk. The phenomenon of it being the time now, yet we are constantly waiting for all the mechanisms to catch up. This is often how I feel when I think about the state of play in this country for Aboriginal people, for women, and in particular that intersection which makes up the experiences of Aboriginal women. We are ready, it is time, yet we are continually waiting for the rest of the country to catch up.

And like with jet lag, we get some weird shifts in focus. We compromise because the energy just isn't going to get us where we want it to at this time. We stumble because we are not quite at peak co-ordination at this point. We fall asleep on the job. So yes, as an activist at this point in time, and one who is particularly interested in the issues of women and of Aboriginal people, I get somewhat frustrated because I think that so many of the things we seek are well overdue, yet we are continually waiting for people to catch up; for people to see these things as worth and just; for people to realise that actually, what is good for us is going to end up benefitting everyone who lives in this country in the long-run and most of the lag is due to fear rather than logic.

I say this because I remember being a frustrated teenager in my outer suburban Melbourne high school back in the 1990s, fresh from the political movements of 1980s Canberra. I remember being 16 years old and changing my title to Ms because I felt even back then that my worth as a human being should not be determined by whether a man has claimed me as his possession or not. I remember laughing at some kid on the sports oval who told me to "go back to your own country". I remember being the target of bullying, of rumours, of harassment and of nasty playground politicking because I didn't quite manage to be physically acceptable at the time. Whether that was because I was a little bit brown or because I had short hair, teenage awkwardness and whinged about having to wear the uniform dress is up for debate. I believe it was a combination of the two. In an area which was rather monocultural, in a school which reflected that lack of diversity, I managed to stick out for both and having a wilful and stubborn nature did not help matters. So experiencing this racism and sexism was a normal part of my experience.

And it wasn't limited to the school grounds. I'd feel this same pressure within family and community as well, and there seemed to be the same opportunity to contravene the expectations placed upon me. I often say that it was the continual limitations I felt placed upon me as a young person, both as a girl child and as an Aboriginal person, which led to me staunchly claiming both. Knowing that one false action could "give Aboriginal people a bad name" or that I wasn't being "lady-like" led to an active rebellion. For you have two choices at that point. When continually held to these sorts of standards, when knowing that you could

damn an entire group of people to hell through your actions, you can either adhere or rebel. And though there were some tentative attempts to adhere in the beginning, there are only so many racist and sexist "jokes" one person can endure before they realise that there is absolutely no point.

So this is why you see what you see before you. I am a proud woman. I am a proud Arrernte person and the fact that I have ties in this land mass which go back 4000 generations is amazing. I am a proud lefty and I feel no shame in not just blending in. And at least in my own world, I am self-determined.

My focus of today is the importance of listening to the voices of Aboriginal women, and I would like to begin this with a recent experience I have had in my life of writing and advocacy. Some of you in the audience will be aware of this story, so please bear with me while I fill in the gaps for others. This year, I was very privileged to have been asked to deliver the keynote address for the Queen Victoria Women's Centre International Women's Day function. In constructing my speech, I drew a lot on my development as an activist; in Aboriginal rights, feminism and unionism; I read out the poems of two Aboriginal women who had inspired me infinitely, and I made a variety of arguments. One such argument was around the concept of intersectionality and how, due to the fact that I come at discussion from a number of marginalised perspectives, it's a label I've gained but one I am not necessarily comfortable with. Why? Because I had witnessed the concept of intersectionality becoming lacking of depth and indeed, becoming synonymous with "choice feminism" rather than

structural analysis. In my view, intersectionality should always be about the liberation of those who, through the intersection of multiple social marginalisations, are the most vulnerable. When you liberate these people, everyone else benefits.

To illustrate my point, I drew on the Northern Territory Intervention. I argued that while Aboriginal women were continually used as the justification for this intervention, with politicians using the rates of abuse these women suffered as a reason to remove any type of autonomy from entire towns of people, not once did I see the views of an Aboriginal woman living under these circumstances represented. People were talking for them, around them and in their alleged best interest, yet were never letting them speak. And at the end of the day, these women who were supposed to be the ones the government was protecting were left without any avenue for recourse at all. Indeed, not only were their spending rights dictated to them, but rates of domestic and family violence actually rose during the first couple of years under the Northern Territory Intervention.

My reason for using this example was simple: of the women in society, these are the very women feminists should be working with the view of achieving their liberation. By virtue of their gender, race and class, these women are Australia's most vulnerable and they have the least capacity to fight the injustices inflicted upon them. It was this argument which led news publication New Matilda to select a picture of Aboriginal women painted up for ceremony while engaged in protest action against the Intervention to accompany my speech when they

decided to republish it. It was fitting that the women I identified who stood to gain the most from the feminist movement be the ones who accompanied my words.

And that's when all hell broke loose. I posted a copy of my speech on my Facebook page and copped my first 24 hour Facebook ban because Facebook deemed the image which accompanied my speech as being "pornographic". I was then banned again from Facebook for sharing an article about my banning due to that image. Indeed, all up, I was banned 7 times. It was bad enough that Aboriginal women who were engaged in ceremony thousands of years old could ever been seen in this insulting way by Facebook and therefore women's culture was effectively being silenced, but the 6000 words of an Aboriginal feminist who was advocating precisely for women like this to be given the voice and space they deserved went amiss too. Indeed, the media managed, in their always unique way to turn the story into a case of "Celeste shared a rude picture on Facebook" while neglecting that Aboriginal women in all their proud cultural glory had not only been mindlessly censored, but the words of an Aboriginal woman had been lost in the cacophony.

If there was anything which was going to prove the multiple points made within that speech, it was all of this. The irony was delicious, if frustrating. For every little gain that an Aboriginal woman makes in the social sphere, she ends up being pushed back with gusto. This is a constant issue Aboriginal women face. In a society which centralises the experiences of wealthy white men, there is little chance that our views will be heard. If they

are, they will be perceived to be biased and marginal in ways that the voices of these wealthy white men simply aren't.

It additionally means that where those who are marginalised do make some ground, this ground they gain is usually indicative of their relative social status. Where white men are at the top of the strata, just below them on the next step with the next highest access to social status will be those who can tick at least one box in common with those at the top. In other words, in a white patriarchal world, both white women and black men are perceived as having more rights and status than what black women do. On one hand, the politics of race comes into play, perceiving the voices of those of the same race as having a higher level of entitlement to space, and on the other hand, the politics of gender comes into play ensuring that men who are marginalised by race are preferenced ahead of the voices of the women who are also marginalised by race due to their higher level of commonality with those at the top of the social strata.

When I think about the way Aboriginal women are represented continuously in this country, it would be fair to say that these representations reflect this strata. Over and over again, we see Aboriginal women spoken for, rather than them being given the space to speak for themselves. Take for example the representations we see on television. If ever we needed proof that the white middle class male was the social default, we could just switch on our TV. It's pretty shocking that in 2016, we are still having to have discussions on how ethnic diversity on television is a good thing and how getting an acting gig when your first name is

Mustafa is highly unlikely. To add to this, while it has been absolutely great to see the growth of things such as NITV, and drama series such as Redfern Now, these tend to be the exception rather than the rule. I can't just tune into the news to see an Aboriginal anchor-woman. I'm fairly certain that Aboriginal people are not going to be used to sell me toothpaste or headache tablets. And until this was pointed out to me by someone who lived overseas and had seen how other countries do this, I didn't actually realise how glaring it was.

If Aboriginal voices, and particularly Aboriginal women's voices, are removed at these superficial levels of representation, just imagine how deep this phenomenon permeates throughout society. Earlier, I brought up the Northern Territory Intervention and how their voices were completely erased from this situation. If Aboriginal women in remote communities are experiencing violence at high rates then shouldn't we be listening to these women when they are saying what they need? And unfortunately, it is so embedded in Australian society that Aboriginal women are victims rather than knowledgeable people holding the answers to many of these social ills, that people just accept the stories. Last year, the image of abused Aboriginal women was invoked again by the WA Premier Colin Barnett in his justification for the potential forced closure of Aboriginal communities. Yet while this was going on, a women's shelter in the Pilbara region which had been set up by women who were themselves survivors of family and domestic violence in order to protect other women and children ended up facing closure because it had lost its governmental funding. The

women themselves had been working to fix a social problem and using their expertise for the betterment of others and this vital community-appropriate resource was nearly lost.

Every year since the Apology to the Stolen Generations from the Federal Government, we have had the tabling of the Closing the Gap report. Every year it seems to bring with it the bad news that the gap just doesn't seem to be closing. We have been told there have been small gains in the life expectancy gap yet chronic health problems remain. Despite this, in the most recent funding round of the governmental Indigenous Advancement Strategy it was revealed that over two thirds of the money for Indigenous programmes went to non-Indigenous organisations and that a good portion of this funding was decided prior to the application round. It seems to be a constant feature of how Australian society sees Indigenous issues: non-Indigenous people are experts on Aboriginal issues due to their privilege of distance and alleged non-bias meanwhile Aboriginal people themselves lack the ability to enact their own change for the better.

It gets more complicated than this though. Where the voices of Aboriginal women do break through, they are often treated as if they do not belong here. It is poignant that I am discussing this now, for only yesterday my column went live looking at the extraordinary level of racism and sexism that Nova Peris was subjected to following the announcement of her retirement as the Northern Territory senator for the Labor Party. It was claimed by a media commentator that her resignation fuels the stereotype that Aboriginal people "go walkabout", that Aboriginal people just don't see things through. It was also claimed by a

former ALP National President and current Indigenous parliamentary advisor that Peris had "let her team down" and that her appointment as a "captain's pick" had been a mistake. Never mind that Peris had served a full term of office as a territory-based senator which is three years. Never mind the fact that Peris resigned for reasons which so many other white male politicians have resigned for over the years without issue – that she needed to focus her attention on her family. Yet for some reason, the fact that she had done her job for the required time and to the best of her ability seemed to escape the notice of these men, one of which should have really known better since I'd wager that he too has had experience of the amount of additional pressure anyone who is Aboriginal and takes up a public office feels.

But this reaction was just the tip of the iceberg. Throughout her time as senator, Peris received racist letters delivered to her home address. She received derogatory messages on social media channels. Just this weekend, she was viciously attacked on her own Facebook page and while it looks like the perpetrator of these serious offences may be being served justice, it should be noted that the slurs of this individual only represent the most extreme of online attacks received over a sustained period of time. Most of these things happen in more subtle ways. As someone who herself resides in public space, I know this only too well. Indeed, I tend to much prefer dealing with those who try and silence me by resorting to extreme measures publicly, because it's right out there and other people can see it. It's much easier to deal with this than it is the private messages received, or the more subtle examples expressed publicly implying that I couldn't possibly know what I am talking about for whatever reason. When thinking about Nova Peris' experience, is it any wonder that many

Aboriginal women simply refuse to engage in public life and office? The world doesn't want us to speak and put ourselves forward. We apparently intrude if we do. So if our views are going to be continuously seen as inferior or intrusions on the status quo, where is the incentive to do this?

For a number of years now, I have worked within the higher education sector, first as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer responsible for student recruitment, retention and support. Nowadays, my role is more geared towards Indigenous staff union membership and advocacy within the entire sector. There is one thing which has really struck me and it's a story I feel that so many people are not aware of in this country. Do people know that when it comes to entering the higher education sector as students, Aboriginal women enrol at a rate double what Aboriginal men do? That they tend to do so more often as mature-aged students and are therefore taking care of family while also studying? What's more, are people aware that this is a trend which has been going on for well over a decade now? That's right, Aboriginal women have twice the number of qualifications that Aboriginal men do yet on the rare occasion when the mainstream community promotes Indigenous voices, it tends to look toward the voices of Aboriginal men more often than not due to the limitations of a patriarchal society.

When it comes to the staffing trends in Australian universities, this phenomenon is also reflected. Aboriginal women work in higher education at a rate double that of Aboriginal men. I am additionally proud to mention that Aboriginal women also take up union

membership at a higher rate than our men, and are therefore reflective of the national trend at this point in time where the average unionist is actually an educated woman in a white collar industry rather than that old stereotype of a blue collar man in a fluorescent vest (though don't get me wrong, these men are important to the movement!). Overall, in the sector, Aboriginal staff make up about 1% so clearly we are significantly underrepresented and have a long way to go before we reach what a population parity rate would be.

Yet universities remain elitist institutions which reflect the dominant culture in most circumstances. Therefore, even though we are twice as qualified as Aboriginal men, when you look to the higher levels of employment within the sector open to Aboriginal people, you find that the majority of these positions are held by men. And so the power strata I mentioned before continues to play out. We talk in this country about closing the education gap, yet while Aboriginal women due to their higher levels of access and education should be seen as the experts they are with regards to how Aboriginal people in the subsequent generations can navigate through this system, this is rarely the case.

If I were to go back to the topic of violence, I again see a number of missed opportunities. It is well documented that the rates of violence experienced by Aboriginal women are significantly higher than the rates experienced by other women in this country. One of the most horrific statistics I have read was that Aboriginal women are 70 times more likely to be hospitalised for brain injury caused by domestic and family violence. When it comes to experiencing domestic violence in the first place, we are about 38 times more likely, and we

are also 3 times more likely to experience sexual violence. Yet more often than not, these horrifying figures are used one of two ways. As mentioned before, the first way it tends to be used is to justify the removal of our rights and the imposition of policy upon us. The second way is as a peripheral concern; an add-on to the overall statistics undertaken due to the significance of the numbers.

The opportunity I believe is being missed is this: by seeing Aboriginal women as crucial to the discussion on violence against women and enacting the recommendations which they put forward, we will not only reduce the rates of violence experienced by Aboriginal women, but we could also reduce the rates of violence experienced by all women. Understanding how issues such as disenfranchisement, colonisation and patriarchy combine to produce these horrific numbers is crucial to the understanding of risk factors, social normalisation, trigger and so forth. Learning how Aboriginal women work within their communities to address violence is also crucial. It seems the approach is always that mainstream programmes must be tailored for the benefit of Indigenous women, rather than mainstream people stand to learn from the experiences and practices of others. Yet by engaging in discussions of culture, dispossession, racism and so forth, you gain a better appreciation for the impacts of structural oppression and parallels from these stories can assist in understanding what might end up benefiting all women.

It's interesting to me, because I am up here speaking about why people should listen to Aboriginal women as a broader topic yet I feel I have barely touched the surface. If I were to

summarise my overall view, it would be that as the experiences of privileged white males are constantly centralised in the Australian experience, those who have the most experience and who stand to benefit the most from progressive programmes and policy are continually sidelined when they should, in fact, be treated as the experts they are. Indeed, I feel Australia is incredibly prone to this mindset because we continue to be a country which ignores its own history for the sake of promoting the tales of privileged white males. And to take history as the example, what this means is that everyone ends up losing because mistruths are perpetuated, ignorance is perpetuated and division is therefore perpetuated. Because of this accepted social dynamic, the status quo is never challenged and rather than being seen as defiant, strong and proud human beings worthy of respect, a picture of Aboriginal women painted for ceremony can be seen as an offence.

When I look around today, I see young Aboriginal women staunchly and unapologetically leading the charge. During the Stop the Forced Closures rallies last year, young Aboriginal women were front and centre, organising the rallies, giving the speeches and mustering the thousands of people out on Melbourne's city streets. Young Aboriginal women are out there, in the media, shaping opinion, influencing mainstream and refusing to back down in the hope that their fight will lead to a better future for those who come after us. Young Aboriginal women have been front and centre in the push for a recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and a negotiation of treaties for they know better than anyone else that simply adhering to the current situation of social power dynamics is not going to be equitable, nor is it going to get us anywhere. Aboriginal women are the future, and their voices are crucial.

So I'd like to issue a challenge to all people listening today to me: consciously reframe your points of reference and start turning this dynamic on its head for the betterment of everyone. Aboriginal women are smart, we're survivors and we have knowledge to share with you. We've survived not only the ongoing process of colonisation, but several millennia living on this landmass so we are indeed experts. I challenge people to digest the diverse opinions of Aboriginal women. To read our books. To listen to our news. To watch our television shows. To absorb our stories not for the fringe pieces they are always assumed to be. These stories are crucial as they not only contain better insight into this country and how it operates, they also contain clues on how to benefit all. Aboriginal women's stories must take centre stage if we are looking for a brighter and healthier tomorrow in this country.

I'd like to thank everyone for listening to the ranting views of this Aboriginal woman today. It has been a privilege. I would also like to thank Our Communities for having me here. Take care, and enjoy the rest of the programme.