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Reflections on the Challenges with the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project

Bronwyn Fredericks

Abstract

The Bringing Them Home Oral History Project was one of the Australian Government's responses to the *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (HREOC 1997). Dr Pamela Croft provides reflections on the challenges for her in being an interviewee of the Oral History Project in 2000. She additionally outlines the challenges that have presented since undertaking her interview along with the healing and empowerment that has taken place.

Keywords

Oral History, Aboriginal, Indigenous, Stolen Generations, Healing, Australian History

Introduction

The Bringing Them Home Oral History Project was part of the Government's response to *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (HREOC 1997). Dr Pamela Croft of the Kooma clan of the Uralarai people, South Western Queensland was one of the people who participated in the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project. She recorded her interview with the project on the 24th and 25th April 2000. Pamela currently lives near Keppel Sands on the Capricorn Coast in Central Queensland, Australia and it is there on the 20th February 2006 that I asked her to reflect on the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project. Within this paper, Pamela Croft shares her reflections on the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project and the changes telling her story has made in her life.

Bringing Them Home Oral History Project

The report from the *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* was published in 1997 (HREOC 1997). In the same year, Senator John Heron announced that the Commonwealth Government would fund the National Library of Australia to develop and manage an oral history project. \$1.6million was allocated for the project with the funds being contingent upon a pilot assessing the feasibility of a full-scale project. The 12month pilot was commenced in 1998. It focused on gaining stories from Indigenous peoples with a wide range of experiences of separation rather than gaining stories

from all over Australia (NLA 2006:1). In July 1999 the full scale project commenced and ran for three years. Bringing Them Home was also used as the title of the oral history project.

The aim of the oral history project was to collect stories from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were directly affected by the separations. Others involved in the process of child removals, for example, police, administrators, foster parents of separated children, nurses, teachers and members of religious orders would also be given the opportunity to speak about this period of history and what they knew about it from their experience. The goal was to present oral evidence to assist scholars and members of the public understand what happened in Australia and why it happened.

In contrast, the individuals who gave their testimonies to the Inquiry gave these in complete confidentiality and none of the testimonies are accessible by the public. Some 300 people were interviewed over the life of the project and a publication resulted based on the oral histories making the stories more accessible.

One Oral History Project Participant

Dr Pamela Croft was one of the people who participated in the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project. She recorded her interview with Deborah Anne Somersall on the 24th and 25th April 2000 (TRC- 5000/99). Pamela Croft was born on the 7th June 1955 in Cooma near Mount Kosciusko, New South Wales. She is of the Kooma clan, of the Uralarai people, South West Queensland and lives near Keppel Sands on the Capricorn Coast in Central Queensland, Australia.

Dr Pamela Croft has practised as a visual artist since the mid-eighties and worked as an academic in Queensland and the Northern Territory, Australia. She has facilitated and coordinated various community cultural development projects, curated exhibitions, worked in curriculum design, implementation, evaluation and various other community consultancies and projects. She is an active member and representative for Indigenous and community art groups advocating for artists rights, social justice, self-determination and empowerment. Pamela Croft was the first Indigenous person to gain a Doctor of Visual Arts in Australia.

Croft utilises Bothways philosophy to create alternative story sites for identity and displacement, histories, sense of place and the effects of colonisation (Croft 2002). She has been producing prints and works on paper, painting, sculptural assemblage, and installations with mixed media including found objects. She has exhibited extensively in Australia and internationally in solo, group and collaborative projects including public art. She has been awarded artist-in-residence status in Australia, the USA, France and the Philippines. Her artwork is represented in public and private collections both nationally and internationally. In 2004 Croft won a Public Art Award of Excellence with the Atlanta Urban Design Commission in the USA and Central Queensland of the Year.

Pamela currently lives near Keppel Sands on the Capricorn Coast in Central Queensland, Australia and it is there in her studio on the 20th February 2006 that I asked her to reflect on the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project.

Bronwyn Fredericks: We have known one another for some time but we haven't really talked in depth before about what the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project meant to you at the time you became involved or what it has meant since. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me about the Oral History Project (20th February 2006). Pamela how did you come to be a participant?

Pamela Croft: When I was in Cairns for the Indigenous Art and Craft Conference I met Doreen Mellor. Doreen was the Project Manager for the Oral History Project. Doreen got up and talked and there was just something about her body language, the way she talked. I felt comfortable and I kind of had that instant trust that I could go and ask her and talk with her. I gave her my contact details and the indication that I wanted to be a participant in the project. I wanted to tell my story. I also felt comfortable when I met Deborah Somersall who interviewed me.

Bronwyn Fredericks: Why did you tell your story?

Pamela Croft: I thought that telling my story would be my way of being part of reconciliation for my ancestors who've gone, for the family that's still here and for my future family. I recognised in telling my story, that family was the only thing that I ever wanted in my life. I hope people understand that telling my story wasn't easy. I did it for me, for family and for Australia, for Australians, and for our future. I told my story so that children are never hurt in this way in this country again.

I wanted it for myself and for my children and my grandchildren. I had lived my whole life to the point of doing the interview without all of my identity and my experiences. When I met my partner who I have since married, I saw him with his family, living their identity, living within and with their stories and experiences. I wanted to consolidate mine, for me and also for my partner, my sons, my birth mother, my in-laws and any grandchildren that I might be gifted with in the future.

With reconciliation being talked about, I kept thinking that you couldn't reconcile without knowing and understanding history and what you were or are trying to reconcile from that history. I knew my story was part of that history just like the other stories were and are part of history. When I told my story it wasn't only about what happened to me, Pamela, but something that happened to other people, something that Australia had denied, its past, its history.

Bronwyn Fredericks: Was it challenging telling your story?

Pamela Croft: In the past I was frightened about being put away in a place, a home for people that were suffering with acute mental illness. I thought that if I

told my story that other people would think I was mentally ill. For years I asked myself, did it really happen? I at times didn't believe my own story. I had such a turbulent and traumatic life story that I questioned if it really happened, how could it have happened, how could other people let that happen to me when I was a little girl, or a young woman? I was worried that other people would also deny my story. People like my adopted parents, the people from the fundamentalist Bretheran church in which I was raised, my ex-husband and others. I knew I also didn't want people to feel sorry for me. I didn't want to be put in that victim place or to be victimised.

When I began to think about telling my story, I weighed all of this up. When my adopted parents passed on and were no longer alive, this gave me power to voice my story. I didn't want to hurt them in anyway. I thought about the people from the Bretheran Church and others. Many of them were now older people, just as I was older and they no longer had the hold over me that they once did.

Before I told my story, people were contacting me about my artwork titled *Matters of her Heart* (Figure 1), and I would talk to them a little, but I never revealed too much. *Matters of her Heart* was a major art installation that I produced in 1993 and I'll explain this a little bit later.

I began to think that maybe I needed to go to a counsellor. My early life experiences were really impacting on my adult life. That's when I heard that the Bidgerdii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service in Rockhampton gained some funding for counselling and for people affected by separations. I decided to access the counselling. I went every week for over a year starting in 1998. The counselling gave me the confidence to begin telling my story to my partner, children, family and friends. It also gave me the confidence to actually want to be a part of the oral history project when the opportunity arose in 2000.

It is now 6 years since I recorded my story and I still haven't listened to the tapes. I have only read my story once. That was when I did the editing. One day I might listen to the tapes. The important thing for me is that I told my story. I found my voice. Maybe it isn't important to listen to the tapes. What would it achieve? I don't know.

Working as an artist, I have been working on identity issues for as long as I can remember. I was always challenging myself, but the biggest challenge I needed to place ahead of me, in terms of myself, was to speak my story. I did this through the Oral History Project.

I don't know how other people who didn't have access to counselling, or didn't have the path I had in terms of gradually building up to tell my story managed the challenge of telling their story. It may have been equally as scary and as hard as it was for me, it may have even been harder. I have wondered about them?

Bronwyn Fredericks: Have there been on-going challenges since telling your story?

Pamela Croft: Telling my story has provided a lot of healing. It was a healing tool, which led to me finding my voice. I am pleased that I found the courage to do it. I now see myself as a wise and peaceful woman. My voice is much stronger. Before I held back, on opinions, decisions, group discussions, on all sorts of issues. I no longer do this. I have stopped being a pleaser to others. I have learned to love myself and please myself. I come first in my life now. I can give greater depth to the artwork I do and I can understand my artwork more.

Telling my story has allowed me to articulate my artwork. It has allowed me to complete my doctorate in visual arts. If I didn't tell my story, I don't think I would have completed it as some of the content was about my story and how it has connected and is connected to my artwork. I think I probably would not have been prepared to delve too deeply into my life, my experiences and the artwork I have produced and produce. I am now presenting my story and my artwork internationally. I am talking about the Stolen Generation.

I don't think I would be doing what I am doing if I hadn't had the opportunity to tell my story. I can acknowledge what happened to me without the great pain and trauma that I once carried. The events that took place no longer paralyse some of my thinking and acting. They no longer alter my behaviour. I know what happened to me, happened to me. I don't think that I will be put into an institution for people with a mental illness. The thoughts from this time in my life no longer have power over me.

I have hoped that the others who had the same challenge as me, in terms of telling their stories have found some healing. I have often thought about the other people who have shared their stories and wished for them the same sense of empowerment that I have found. I have also wondered about the Australian public, how many people have accessed our stories, my story? How many academics, historians and researchers have been challenged by what they have read? These are not questions that need to be answered, just thoughts I have in my head and hopes that I have in my heart and spirit.

Bronwyn Fredericks: Can you explain *Matters of her Heart*?

Pamela Croft: In 1993 I produced *Matters of her Heart* (Figure 1). It includes 2 and 3D artworks and was my first artistic exploration of my story. In visually communicating my story through the art works, I symbolically told the story of the 'Stolen Generations'. My intention in creating this installation was not only to gain a greater awareness and understanding of my own story and as a personal healing act, but also to teach others about what happened in Australian history. The collection of works includes photos, documents such as my original birth certificate and adoption papers, letters from myself to others and others to me, cards, acrylic, a self-portrait, text on paper, ochre, hair, wood, book, bronze, twigs and pine frames. There is an incredible power

that emanates from the original photographs and documents; a power that began to show me that what happened was real.

The installation contains many original images of my time as Pamela Victorsen, Pamela Paget (Figure 2) and Pamela Croft. The images at times are complimentary and at other times stand in contrast to one another. The photographs of me with mum and dad Paget (who were both in their 50s when they adopted me) are taken after church, which dominated our lives. It was the place I was taught to fear and to behave in a certain way, the fundamentalist Bretheran way. It was also the place I was taunted about my Aboriginality. The church 'family' made me feel guilty because I was Aboriginal. I was called 'Darkie', 'Abo' and 'Boong' in 'God's' house. The photograph of me in Musgrave Park, Brisbane taken in 1972 when I was 17 years of age was the start of me reclaiming my Aboriginality.

The bleeding heart shown in the large framed self-portrait painting reflects my two sides, the Aboriginal domain and the Western domain (Figure 3). These two contexts are always reflected in pieces of my installations. The red mounting paper in the small-framed documents reflects the Western concepts of danger, blood and red roses for death. In Aboriginal concepts, it connects to the old ways of red ochre as a healing medicine, which was ingested to heal different ailments. Looking further at the framed painting, this is only one of two self-portraits that I have ever undertaken. This self-portrait contains a black side (left) and my life as a child growing up with my adopted parents and within Western culture. This side is fragmented (right). This is representative of grief and pain. The cross is in blood red and titled Jesus loves me this I know - is Matters of her Heart – the bleeding heart.

Matters of her Heart was exhibited at the *National Aboriginal Art Awards* (1993), the *Separation Reunion Reconciliation Invitational Exhibition* (1997) and in a joint exhibition with my cousin Cheryl Moodai Robinson titled *No More Secrets* (1998). Even though I produced the visual representation of my life in *Matters of her Heart* in 1993, I still found it hard to speak my story at that time. I found it hard to voice my story in person. People could see parts of my story through the images and documents and the installation as a whole, but I could not talk to it. It was also the first time my mother gained an understanding of my life and began to also understand what happened to her. *Matters of her Heart* offered other people the opportunity to also see their own story in my story. Some of these came forth to talk to me about what happened to them and somehow gained greater strength to begin to share their story with others. It is also this that I hoped for when I that told my story through the Oral History Project.

Matters of her Heart is now owned by the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia and will be exhibited later in 2006. When it is exhibited it will begin another layer of challenge for me and again challenge people who interpret history, people and art. I will once more speak about my history, speak my story and discuss my artwork. I now have the opportunity to discuss with its exhibition the journey I have made since undertaking the work. I can more openly and honestly talk about all the components of *Matters of her*

Heart and also discuss the importance of the Oral History Project, with its challenges and the healing that I have experienced.

Conclusion

The Bringing Them Home Oral History Project was part of the Government's response to Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (HREOC 1997). While the recordings of the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project was crucial to documenting a significant period in Australian history it has impacted on the lives of those people whom the history is about. This is evidenced by the reflections on the Oral History Project by Dr Pamela Croft who recorded her interview on the 24th and 25th April 2000. Dr Croft articulated that she had found healing and "hoped that the others who had the same challenge as me, in terms of telling their stories have found some healing". Furthermore, that she "wished for them the same sense of empowerment that I have found".

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Figure 1. *Matter of her Heart* (Pamela Croft, 1993).



Figure 2. Pamela Paget, 1963.

