



# Quiet or Shy when we prefer to be, but always resisting Silencing:

*A project of multi-storied descriptions and directions*

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*Two trees collaborating in space in Adelaide. Quiet Crew 2014*

*We are the Quiet Crew, a collective of activists, artists, counsellors, therapists, thinkers and writers with personal experiences of Quietness and/or Shyness. We co-research with others who have experiences of Quietness and Shyness who may join the Quiet Crew. Currently, the Quiet Crew consists of 12 people who live on the unceded lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations of Australia and invite others across the world to join us.*

## *Abstract*

We are facilitating a collective narrative practice project, gathering multi-storied descriptions and understandings of the preferences, experiences, histories and effects of Quietness and Shyness in people's lives. Thanks to the generosity of co-research participants, we feel clearer about what types of stories are important when we speak with someone who is experiencing Quietness and/or Shyness. We have seen and experienced the harmful effects of dominant discourses that describe Quietness and Shyness in single-storied and negative ways. We agree that stories of troubling effects of Quietness and Shyness on people's lives need to be included; however, we have found that it is equally important to include stories of what Quietness and Shyness can contribute to people, families and communities. We are clearer that Quietness and Shyness are experienced and responded to politically, contextually, culturally and relationally. These experiences do not occur on equal grounds, and we intend an intersectional analysis of the ways people might sometimes experience silencing or choose Quietness as a survival skill.

**Key words:** *collective narrative practices; multi-storied descriptions; resisting dominant discourse; intersectionality; co-research; shyness*

## Byellee Welcome to Country

*mi:gan yaya ŋaɖu elam gaŋ*

*da:l ba:buran ŋanaɖurru-ŋuŋ bumi*

*gurruyu yirra yi:ŋan*

*bunda-n gardabi-ŋa ɖaŋa, guwal*

I acknowledge and respect the Traditional Custodians and Elders past, present and future whose ancestral lands we have done most of this work on. I acknowledge that we stand in footsteps millennia old, the cultures and customs that have nurtured, and continue to nurture, this land, since our Old People awoke from the great dream. We honour the presence of these Ancestors who reside in our stories of this land.

Indigenous history in Australia tells the stories of the acts that dehumanised people which led to many Nations' loss of culture and connection. Power and privilege took the option away for choices for Indigenous peoples of Australia. One significant loss and connection was the many diverse languages as the Old People were not allowed to speak in language, they had to speak English, so this cruel act forced many to be quiet. This knowledge and way of being quiet has been passed through the generations. In many situations the way of being quiet can mean many different things, but for my people it has been known to be used as a skill for survival.

The level of responses to the ongoing issue of language loss can be considered an indication of growing assertion of our right to revive and maintain our unique linguistic and cultural identities. Confronting privilege, tradition and conflicting ideas we have shared histories, similar customs, but individual stories. What each language group does is critical to the bigger picture of what we are all trying to achieve in terms of cultural maintenance and survival as the First Nations People of Australia. Each contribution is part of our ongoing struggle.

Annette Dudley

Byellee Descendant

## Introducing the 'Quiet or Shy when we prefer to be, but always resisting Silencing' project



'Quiet Strength' by Jamilla Johnson, 2014

This project has been in existence in some form for at least five years. It is becoming a collective narrative practice and healing project. From the outset, what was originally known as the 'Always Connecting' project focused on challenging dominant discourses that storied Quietness and Shyness in mostly negative ways, and challenging notions of Quietness and Shyness as predominantly biological or medical phenomena. As participants added their stories, they raised concerns that the storying of the Always Connecting project could be read as diminishing of the suffering and other negative effects related to Quietness/Shyness. Quiet Crew membership grew, and this made clear the uneven playing field on which Quietness is experienced and responded to. The role of Silencing was also emphasised. Greater consideration could then be given to storying the effects of discourse and injustice in relation to gender, race, culture, sexuality and class in connection to Quietness, Shyness and Silencing.

This project is open to anyone who identifies as having experiences of or preferences for Quietness or Shyness. We meet participants through our work, our everyday lives, and online.

Some developments and directions so far have included:

- re-imagining histories of Quietness and Shyness
- understanding Quietness as a survival skill
- discovering quiet activism and resistance to Silencing through reading, writing, art and music
- hearing stories of ways injustices contribute to Quietness and Shyness – what tries to silence us?
- naming and responding to dominant descriptions of Quietness and Shyness.

## *Some hopes for our project*

Our project continues to develop in multi-directional ways. Some key hopes currently include:

- creating space for people to perform quiet or shy preferences, and space in which those affected by Silencing can be and speak
- restorying, documenting and exchanging non-totalising, multi-voiced descriptions and responses
- challenging discourses that diminish quiet ways of being, or emphasise ideas of Quietness/Shyness necessarily being things to overcome
- making visible the roles of quiet resistance in people's lives and in our activist, political and therapeutic work.

What we *don't* want is to move into offering new discourses or universal truths about Quietness or Shyness. We respect the words of Albert Maysles: 'Tyranny is the deliberate removal of nuance' (cited in Goodreads).

Most importantly, we hope to share the stories and preferences of project participants. The following are just some of the themes of these stories, with excerpts from participants shared with permission.

### ***Stories of situations when we prefer to be Quiet or Shy***

I enjoy spending time in quiet places. When I think about quiet places, the memories of my trips to the Daintree Rainforest, Bunya Mountains and a rainforest on the South Island of New Zealand come to mind. Being in a rainforest gives me a feeling of relaxation. It puts you at ease. I experience this quietness when I am walking through the rainforest,

seeing all the different types of plants and animals. There's also a sense of exploration. Just thinking about memories of the Daintree can sometimes put me at ease. – Aaron

### ***Stories of negative effects of Quietness/Shyness that cause trouble or prevent us from enjoying the relationships, activities or meanings we prefer***

Quietness has interfered with me sharing who I am with friends. It has had me feeling isolated, weird, wall-paperish and boring. There have been times when Quietness has got in the way of me standing up for myself and others. At other times, it has stopped me from asking questions for fear of being judged. Sometimes, Anxiety has clouded my thinking so that when I tried accessing quiet in times of need, there seemed to be nothing there to help ... so for a long time I thought I had nothing of worth to give ... In this way, Anxiety and Quietness were quite the team. – J

### ***Stories of oppressions, injustices and hardships that try to silence us***

Shyness started affecting me in my teenage years. I think I had been an outgoing kid before that. Shyness getting a hold of me then was probably related to growing up in an Aboriginal family in a mainstream white society. There were cultural differences and we were not living in a traditional way. I went to a mainstream school. The Shyness got stronger whenever non-Indigenous people made you feel subhuman. It was Racism. Sometimes this was from other kids in the classroom. Other times it was from adults. Often in the shopping centres, security guards and shop owners would watch you like you were going to steal something. You speak to your friends and family about it and they went through the same thing. – James

### ***Stories of Quietness or Shyness as a survival skill***

I was a child of abuse, so the quietness when I was a child was also numbness. It was detachment from my pain, my fear and then the shame of my fear, my shame that I lived this life. My mind surrendered to the numbness where I couldn't hear any of the noises that were a part of destroying me as a person, there was just silence and a wonderful feeling of emptiness.

As an adult, the name that comes to mind is selfish silence. In this silence I allow myself to have disregard for others. I ignore my responsibility and isolate myself from family and friends. In this



space the white noises of society disappear into the background and I enjoy my selfishness and my quietness, I can name it as quietness because I am in control. It is my choice to be quiet and I enjoy the solitude that is a healing space for me. – CAB

## *Creating space for ourselves and for others*

Music, writing and meeting a few good people has enabled connection and meaningful communication for me as a person struggling with shyness from a very young age. I was about three when I entered my neighbour's house without my mother knowing ... for the purpose of playing the piano. I was fascinated by the way the piano lid folded down several times to open. I could play by ear at that time, which I wanted to do. Since then I have played, studied and in the last 39 years taught music ... It is one thing that has never dropped from my life. – Susan Lord

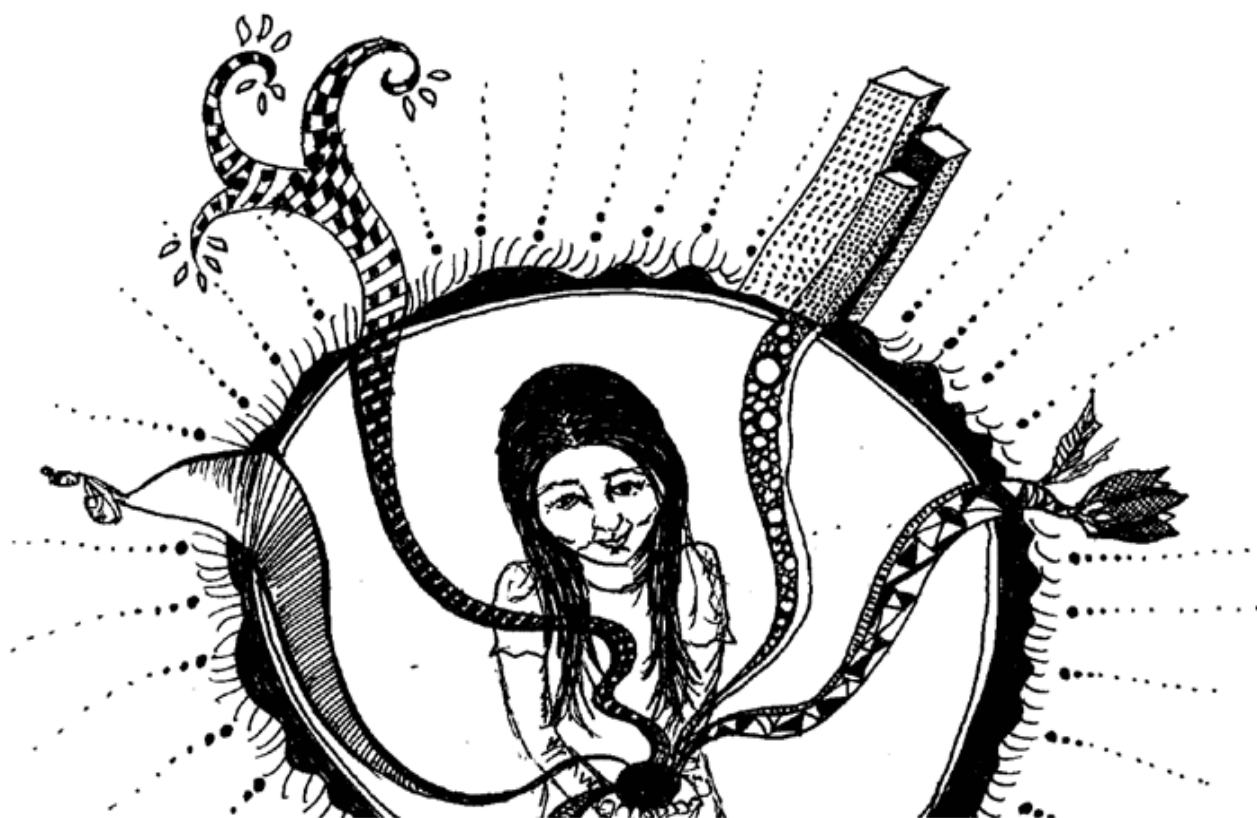
As we have discovered with so many aspects of Quietness and Shyness, creating space is a multi-storied, multi-directional endeavour. Susan Lord and Trisha Nowland of the Quiet Crew have contributed many brilliant ideas, some of which are included below.

Creating space for another is creating space for one's self. – Susan Lord

We have found that creating space for others to speak or be in quietness creates further space for ourselves. As each new person joins they seem to find greater space to be themselves, whether that be in quietness, through voicing or in some other way. This supports the creation of diverse understandings of our identities, leading to a greater sense of space as a collective. Susan Lord has spoken about how this reciprocal creation of space requires an intention to collaborate in space rather than compete for space. There may be times when this requires us to be quieter or to take less space in a conversation. When another inhabits a space that wasn't available before, we perceive greater room and richer identity available for all. Jennifer Swan has described Quietness as 'The Tardis', an infinite space available in places where there seems to be little.

A further outcome of creating space for Quietness has been a toolbox that helps us to explore how Quietness has been present with us. This has been supported by the image 'Always Connecting' created by one of our crew, Jamilla Johnson (2014):

Here a young woman holds out a seed to the sun. It has connections to the time of a tree which takes many years to grow, the power of a great city, the space filled by a beautiful flower and the generative life of a baby. These four concepts of time, power, space and generativity support us understanding what we can hold for Quietness both for ourselves and for others.



## Quiet activism and resistance

Moving quietly in the world has been a way of camouflaging my form of resistance to violence and domination. Being underground like this has made it possible for me to unionise and collectivise people I work with without being noticed and shut down.

People see me as non-threatening and so I get into spaces that other people might not be allowed. –

Jennifer Swan

During our conversations, we have spoken about ways we have used Quietness as resistance to violence and oppression: a form of political activism. Jennifer Swan and Michelle Dang have been influential in shaping our ideas and understandings of the intersectional politics of Quietness, Shyness and Silencing, and of quiet resistances to these politics. We have shared histories of quiet resistance from within our families and communities alongside those struggling with the effects of violence in their lives. These histories draw on intimate knowledge given to us by our elders, whose quiet activism had often gone unacknowledged. We recognised the importance of linking family histories to our work histories and this intentional approach aligns us with our shared values of the *personal being political* that linked these histories to feminist movements' challenges to violence in its many forms.

Throughout our conversations, we have observed insights and questions about Quiet/Loud discourses and binaries including those below:

- When Quietness and Shyness are described as 'personality traits' or as pathologies like 'social anxiety' this silences our shared histories of quiet activism, dislocating quiet ways of responding within the context of history, class, culture, gender and sexuality.
- Ideas of 'Introvert/Extrovert' imply that being quiet or loud is just part of our personalities. This obscures the ways power and context influence the ways we are able to participate and be heard.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced Silencing from invasion and colonisation.
- Quietness has been used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a survival skill.
- Dominant culture in Australia often privileges being forthright and loud. We wondered what it means to put those who perform this type of speaking on a pedestal. Are there other ways to conduct conversations that don't privilege these ways of speaking?
- What are the implications for Australian voices and perspectives when we favour North American writers/

speakers, and what are the histories of this? Is this related to colonial history and/or privileging loudness?

- How can we recognise quiet histories of resistance such as vigils, silent protests and non-engagement?
- How can we stop pressuring those who experience the most oppression to take the most risks?
- In what ways can Quietness or Silence be a testimony or tribute to something that has been violated?
- How do we rescue silent responses from the saying (or not saying) of it?
- In what ways have women used Quietness to not engage with abuse within families? How has this supported protection and maintenance of families? How might recognition of these ways present a challenge to dominant discourses of resistances to rape, assault and violence?

## Some significant impacts of our collaboration so far

As we continue to connect and share these ideas of multi-storied understandings of Quietness and Shyness, we are finding that many participants have experienced significant useful effects as they interact with the project. We include two examples here.

Jade has been having in-person and email contact with Quiet Crew members. Jade's collaborations have contributed much to the project, adding stories and perspectives that have helped shape particular initiatives. Jade wrote her first ever poem, 'The Question', and gladly gave us permission to include it here.

### **The Question**

*What's wrong with you?* Is an accusation  
A closed door in your face.  
*What happened to you?* Is an invitation  
An opening of arms.  
A way of looking at the world  
Like someone coming to sit down beside you.  
How did the world hurt you?  
An important question  
That doesn't get asked.  
A dialogue opening  
Where everyone's pain matters.  
– Jade, 2017

Jesse Langer has become a Quiet Crew member and joined our presentation for the Hong Kong conference. He described in his own words below what project participation has meant to him:

Participating in the project has given me the first opportunity to change the way in which I relate to my traumatic and abusive childhood. It has fundamentally changed the way I contextualise the way I respond to situations that are confronting for me today. As a person who is a survivor of the psychiatric and mental health systems that I experienced as a perpetuation of the injustices faced in my childhood, the interview was a watershed moment where I first began to depathologise my coping strategies and instinctive responses, which in turn has given me momentum and has allowed me to focus on moving forward and creating a positive identity and sense of self where I am central to the authoring of my own story.

## Some observations and developments from the Hong Kong Conference<sup>1</sup>

Sharing our work at the Hong Kong conference led to further significant developments. We found people with experiences of Silencing or preferences for Quietness often have a lot of meaningful things to say when they are in a space that is safe or more equally available. Sharing our work offered an invitation for some people into this more equal space. We also learnt how recognition of quiet activism and resistance can support solidarity among people who may have been affected by assumptions regarding Quietness and Shyness, reducing apathy and increasing hope.

## Into the future

We have developed a 'multi-storied descriptions and evaluations' map that may be useful in externalising conversations and finding preferred ways of understanding and responding to Quietness and Shyness and are working on a website to provide a safe and respectful online

space where multi-storied evaluations can be shared and responded to. We welcome anyone who might be interested in participating in our project to contact us.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge:

- The Hong Kong Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference organisers and volunteers, for the moving invitation, welcome and conference. The opportunity to share our work with peers supported the continuing development of the project
- Those who were unable to join us at the conference – for some, this was because of experiences and effects of Silencing:
- The many significant ideas, practices and movements contributing to the creation of our project, including:
  - existing Quietness movements
  - people's personal histories of Quietness
  - collective narrative practices (David Denborough, 2008)
  - *Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger* (Aunt Barbara Wingard, in Wingard & Lester, 2001)
  - intersections between the personal and professional (White & Hales, 1997)
  - movements and practices responding to intersectional power, privilege and oppression
  - re-imagining histories (marcela polanco, 2015).

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2017 Hong Kong Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference: Honouring Histories and Weaving Hopes organised by Centre for Youth Research and Practice, Hong Kong Baptist University.

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