



*Conversations
about gender,
culture, violence
&
narrative practice*

**Stories of hope and complexity
from women of many cultures**

**Edited by Angel Yuen and Cheryl White
Preface by Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese
Postscript by Ruth Pluznick**



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Contents

Preface	v	
<i>By Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese</i>		
Introduction		
Setting the context: The personal is political and professional	1	
Talking about feminism, culture and violence		
<i>A conversation between Angel Yuen and Cheryl White</i>		
Part One: Working within our own cultures		
1. Alternative interventions to violence: Creative interventions	31	
<i>Mimi Kim</i>		
2. Nurturing resistance and refusing to separate gender, culture and religion: Responding to gendered violence in Muslim Australian communities	43	
<i>Sekneh Beckett</i>		
3. Extending our vision: Responding to violence in Hong Kong families	51	
<i>Angela Tsun On-kee</i>		
4. The work of the community patrol	57	
<i>Djapirri Mununggirritj & Margaret Yunupingu</i>		
On behalf of the Women's Patrols of Yirrkala and Gunyangara		
A reflection from Anita Franklin: Where we need to begin		63
5. Working within our own culture: many steps taken, many steps to go	67	
<i>Mary Pekin, Manja Visschedijk and Genna Ward</i>		
Part Two: Working across culture		
6. Casting light	85	
<i>Mercedes Martinez</i>		

7.	On Meeting Dawn <i>Lisa Berndt</i>	91
8.	Working for gender justice across cultures <i>An interview with Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese</i> <i>By Cheryl White</i>	99
9.	What do we mean by victim? And what do we mean by culture? <i>Aya Okumura</i>	107
10.	Violence Upon Violence: Reflections on Institutional Practices towards Families Affected by Sexual Abuse <i>Maisa Said-Albis</i>	113
	A reflection from Norma Akamatsu: A Question about How Violence Becomes Normalised	119
Part Three: Queer Matters		
11.	Honouring Complexity: Gender, culture and violence in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer individuals <i>Pat Durish</i>	125
Part Four: Working with those who have enacted violence		
12.	Responding to Men's Violence <i>Nancy Gray</i>	137
13.	Conversations in groups with women about their experiences of using anger, abuse & violence <i>Julie Sach</i>	159
14.	Young men and violence: For the love of mothers <i>by Angel Yuen (with a story from Heather Johnson)</i>	181
	Postscript <i>By Ruth Puznick</i>	195
	About the Authors and Acknowledgements	197



4

The work of the community patrol

By Djapirri Mununggirritj & Margaret Yunupingu

On behalf of the Women's Patrols of Yirrkala and Gunyangara

In two remote Indigenous Australian communities in the far north of Australia, a community patrol operates each night. In response to the extent of alcohol use and violence, a number of women from Yirrkala and Gunyangara got together to walk around these communities to care for those who were drunk and to intervene in conflicts. Over time, this 'patrol' has grown in size and now operates each evening with vehicles and in co-operation with the local Police. The principles of the work of the patrol, and some of the skills demonstrated by the women involved, are described here¹.

We have a community patrol now. It started when women walked to bring food to those who were drunk on the outskirts of the community. Now we have a vehicle. We pick up people who are drunk, we treat them kindly, we bring them home, we put them to bed and tell them to stay safe. People listen to us because we have old women with us. Young people do listen. We wait until the next day, when they are sober, to talk with them. If they continue with the stupidity, we send them to a homeland, out bush for a couple of weeks, where there is no grog, no drugs. We always approach people with kindness, even if they are acting badly. We never hit them. We never approach them in ways that could make them fearful. We tell them, 'We care for you, we love you' and they take notice of this. We respect them, and in turn this means that they respect us.

Filling the gap for those who are split from their family

Family is very important to us. When people get disconnected from family, when problems get in the way and when relationships are strained, people become very lonely and this is when they are most at risk. This is because family is so important to us. Even people who think they don't have families who care about them, they do have families. We are all related to each other up here. All Yolngu are related to each other. If we see someone who is in trouble, and if their immediate family is no longer connected to them, then we reach out to them. We talk with them. We try to fill the gap between them and their family. And then we try to link them back with their family. For instance, I saw a young kid, who was very drunk, lying by the side of the road. When I asked him what was wrong he said, 'My family don't love me. They don't care about me'. I took him to my home, put him to bed and gave him a big feed. The next day I took him back to his parents. We sat together and I relayed the boy's concerns. This made a big difference. I have seen him around lately and he is doing really well.

When we notice young people who are losing their way, we cry inside and love to sit down with them. It breaks my heart to see young people lose their talent, their talent is important to us, so I try to reach out to them. We talk together. We talk about getting out of the trap. Alcohol and drugs are like a trap or a pit. We talk together about this, and about ways of getting out. I am always clear that trying to get out is their choice. I share stories with them. Stories about

what it was like here when I grew up. How we saw the first pub being built. How we have seen so many changes. We share history. I also try to reconnect them with the spiritual side of life, to link them back to a sense of spirituality. When I talk to them, they start to picture themselves differently. They can see themselves in a bigger picture. When we speak about the trap, about the pit, they agree with me. They say, 'Someday I might start limiting my drinking. At the moment it is too hard. But sometime ...' We try to enable our young people to talk with us. We find ways to fill the gap and then link people back to their immediate family.

How to respond when someone is despairing and may take their own life

When we are on community patrol we are sometimes called out to young people who are threatening to take their own life. There was a time when a young man had climbed up a pole and was saying he was going to hang himself. When I went up to him, I talked to him very gently, very calmly. And he listened to me and climbed down. There was another time when a young man was on the roof of a house and ready to hang himself. When we speak to them, people do listen to us and they do respond. This is because there are particular ways in which we approach people in this situation. If we are tense, or angry, or anxious, then they will notice this and react to it. Our calm voice calms them down. Sometimes family members take off at these times, it is too much to witness, or they are frightened, they don't know what to do. We turn towards young people at these times. We speak to them with kindness and care. We try to fill the gap between them and their families. Often we then take them off to a nearby beach so we can be alone and sit down and talk together. We talk in ways that enable us to find out what the problem is, why they are trying to harm themselves, what is bothering them. We talk with them in ways that will enable them to speak back. It's not only about responding in these moments of crisis. We also keep a very close eye on people who are vulnerable. Other community members will tell us if they are worried about someone and, once we know this, we will keep an eye on them and have a quiet talk whenever it is needed. Some of these skills we have developed through training courses. We have done role-plays to work out how to respond to people when they are aggressive or when they can hardly talk. We bring all our experiences and abilities to this work. Some of these skills have long

histories. Some of us have lost family members to suicide. We are dedicated to do what we can to prevent further losses of life. Our young ones are precious to us.

Responding to violence

We have also had to develop ways of responding to violence in our community. If we see violence taking place, a man hitting a woman, then we will always intervene. We are strong but we also use humour. The way in which you approach these situations is very important. There are skills involved in how to defuse these sorts of situations. Some of us, in the past, have used our own homes as safe houses where women and children could stay the night if the man is being violent. In the past, we also developed a program to deal with domestic violence in the community. We would hold a meeting with the man and woman and their parents and key community members. We would talk about how domestic violence is not part of our culture and how we must symbolically break all the weapons. We would get them thinking about the children's experiences. And we would always help the women who were having a hard time. We are proud of this history of how we have tried to deal with domestic violence in our community. There is still more to do. We hope one day that there will be a safe house in the community. This is something we are still working towards.

Intervening in conflicts

There is sometimes significant conflict between members of our community. There was an occasion recently when two groups were facing each other with spears. As women, we stood in between them. We broke the spears and threw some of them up on the roofs. There was another occasion when young men turned on the Police with machetes. It was the community patrol women who again intervened and ensured that no-one got hurt. We have to stay calm in these situations. We have undergone self-defence training so that we have ways of responding. If we don't intervene there could be terrible consequences.

Lately, community members have started to call us instead of the Police when there is trouble. If we come across an aggressive person, but they are not

harming anyone, we will let them be, we will come back later when they have calmed down. When we see people who are very drunk or affected by drugs, we will pick them up and take them home. We will leave it until the next day to talk with them. The next day we will sit down with their whole family and talk it all through.

If the situation is tense, sometimes humour is very important. We joke together. They make us laugh and we make them laugh. For instance, if we see a man who is drunk and who is the right relation for marriage we might say, 'Come on, I'll take you home'. And there is much laughter! The other women will then say, 'No, come in our car, we'd better take you!' These are very funny moments. They take away any awkwardness, or aggro, or shame. Some of the older people in the community are having better sleeps now, because they know that the community patrol is out there. There has been so much to worry about. There is still a lot we are concerned about, but it is significant that there are women who are always available now to respond to those sorts of crisis, to respond to people with care, and to link them back to their families.

Note

- ¹ This piece is an extract from a larger document containing the special skills and knowledge of the communities of Yirrkala and Gunyangara (see 'Linking Stories and Initiatives: A narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities' by David Denborough, Carolyn Koolmatrie, Djapirri Mununggirritj, Djuwalpi Marika, Wayne Dhurrkay & Margaret Yunupingu (International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, 2006 #2).