

Pandemic Pandora

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In Greek mythology, Pandora is the first human female. Her name means ‘all-gifted’ or ‘all-endowed’. In popular tellings, the god Zeus gave her a container as a wedding present and, curious, she opened it. All the human vices escaped, plus other horrid things, including diseases. The germs of pandemics, those diseases that spread through the whole world, exposing human frailty, also escaped. Remaining tightly inside that vessel, however, was the last remaining human attribute, Hope.

As this journal is called *Lilith*, and as my first ever publication was in the feminist journal *Hecate*, I have been prompted to reflect upon the journal editors’ deployment of powerful female icons. These figures, whose stories circulated in the northern hemisphere cultures of the Middle East and Europe, were likely selected to fire feminists with *attitude*, a much needed attribute when negotiating the hallowed halls of history, routinely bedecked with representations of the ‘great (male) thinkers’.

Accounts of sassy, super-powered women also feature in Indigenous storytelling traditions around the globe. Australian Aboriginal women have a trove of powerful figures to draw upon. Epic narratives, such as those about the Seven Sisters, are becoming more widely known through women’s storytelling, art, dance and museum exhibitions. Might these epic stories be considered revealing of ‘Histories’ too?

Working with various communities, we are exploring such questions through the Australian Research Council (ARC) Laureate program *Rediscovering the Deep Human Past: Global Networks, Future Opportunities*. Indigenous modes of historical practice address the deep past, not only in a chronological sense of a time span encompassing their long histories, but they also challenge historical periodisation per se. For they take place on their sovereign lands, their Country, in a multilayered temporality translated as the ‘everywhen’.¹

¹ For a full discussion of this concept, see Ann McGrath, Laura Rademaker and Jakelin Troy, ed., *Everywhen: Australia and the Language of Deep History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

The 2019–22 pandemic years have thwarted our ARC Laureate program's goal of running workshops with young Indigenous women in remote communities. Nonetheless, we have offered several early career researcher workshops, in-person and in-pandemic, alongside many stimulating Zoom seminars, panels and talks.²

Via a multi-city hook-up, I was also delighted to be reunited with the co-authors of the feminist history *Creating a Nation*, published in 1994.³ As a young scholar, when Pat Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake and Marian Quartly invited me to write with them, I recall my heart pounding with excitement for days. This was an opportunity to work alongside my feminist history heroines. Our recent gathering was orchestrated by Anna Clark, who wrote about our book in *Making Australian History* (2022). She also noted the significance of Australia's deep history as a framing device—that is, the long history that took place before Europeans arrived. Clark's book hopefully marks the end of an era in which feminist histories were not considered 'general histories'. Possibly feminist historians are 'lonesome no more'?⁴ In the history profession, I certainly take joy in seeing many younger women rising up the ranks through merit, and in several taking on important leadership roles within and outside the university system.

Regardless of the pleasures of Zoom, however, nothing beats developing your own in-person networks of determined women. Recently I had the opportunity to revisit the power of sisterhood in a 'meet-the-author' conversation with Wiradjuri author Anita Heiss, who was a student at UNSW when I was a lecturer there in the 1990s. As Anita explained in her candid memoir *Am I Black Enough for You? 10 Years On* (2022), learning more about the true story of Australian history meant much to her as a young student.⁵ She pointed out the strength and drive of her amazing cohort, which included outstanding female role models such as Larissa Behrendt and Terri Janke.

2 See, for example, 'Training, education, and outreach', *Research Centre for Deep History*, re.anu.edu.au/training/; 'Workshop on Indigenous histories', *Research Centre for Deep History*, re.anu.edu.au/workshop-on-indigenous-histories; 'Deep time workshop', re.anu.edu.au/deep-time-workshop.

3 Pat Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1994).

4 Anna Clark, *Making Australian History* (North Sydney: Vintage, 2022); Ann McGrath, 'The loneliness of the feminist historian', *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no. 80 (2014): 204–14.

5 Anita Heiss, *Am I Black Enough for You? 10 Years On* (Docklands: Vintage, 2022); 'Anita Heiss in conversation with Ann McGrath', *Research Centre for Deep History*, re.anu.edu.au/anita-heiss-in-conversation-with-ann-mc-grath.

A high achiever from my own generation, historian Jackie Huggins, has just published a new edition of her collected essays, *Sister Girl: Reflections on Tiddaism, Identity and Reconciliation*, which explores the sustaining value of her Indigenous female friends.⁶ Not only has she supported many younger women, launching several of Anita's books, she is also an exemplary leader and advocate for Indigenous rights, emphasising the significance of historical redress, including Treaty and Truth-Telling. Currently an honorary professor and senior advisor to our Laureate program's digital map project, *Marking Country*, Jackie has much to share. On a recent visit to Kooramindanjie or Carnarvon Gorge with postdoctoral fellow Amy Way, we were able to witness a deep history of place not as something of 'the past' but as a present story of ongoing connection to Country. Jackie had invited her Uncle, elder Fred 'Cotto' Conway to lead our history lessons, which involved walking on and learning about their Country. Fleeing mission life, Cotto told us how he had worked on cattle stations, as a horse-breaker and in travelling shows, before dedicating 30 years to working on his Country as a ranger, sharing the knowledge he was building with people of all ages and backgrounds. This is Jackie's mother's Country, and we heard how her much of her family was ripped away from her beautiful Country and forced to live on the government-run reserve, Cherbourg. As expressed in her pathbreaking book *Auntie Rita* (1994), Jackie had great respect for her mother's wisdom.⁷

Feminist history means celebrating the lives of those who have taught us so much, some of whom have now left us. Like Mary Pappin, a Mutthi Mutthi woman who taught me how to think about deep time in the Australian interior. What an imprint she has left on my historical consciousness and my soul.⁸ When I return to Lake Mungo, I expect to feel her welcoming presence and her critical eye.

Another strong woman I worked with much earlier—in the early 1980s—was Kathy Mills, a Kungarakany and Gurindji woman who has recently passed. She fought for justice, offering support and leadership

6 Jackie Huggins, *Sister Girl: Reflections on Tiddaism, Identity and Reconciliation* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2022).

7 Jackie Huggins, Rita Huggins and Jane M. Jacobs, 'Kooramindanjie: Place and the Postcolonial', *History Workshop Journal* 39, no. 1 (1995): 164–81; Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita* (1994, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press: 2005). The *Marking Country* deep history map project will feature on the website of the Research Centre for Deep History, re.anu.edu.au.

8 Ann McGrath, 'An inspirational leader', *Research Centre for Deep History*, re.anu.edu.au/an-inspirational-leader-mary-june-tookie-kelly-pappin-mutthi-mutthi-elder.

for Aboriginal women and friendship to all. Her activism was practised through storytelling, poetry, song and through her love and support for family, friends and allies. She was proud of her fighting Irish heritage and of her family traditions of Indigenous activism and leadership. I first met Kathy at Bagot, the urban Aboriginal community in Darwin, in 1980. She and a couple of resident women, Joy White and Sheila Williams, who were both raised according to Indigenous laws and protocols, had started an action group to help Aboriginal women living in this urban setting.

At the first Women and Labour Conference in Sydney in 1978, it was notable that my paper—the first I ever gave at an academic conference—was one of the only ones discussing Aboriginal women's history. The second conference, held in Melbourne in 1980, had more Aboriginal participation and, I hoped, would provide an opportunity for Aboriginal women from the Northern Territory (NT) to speak in their own voices. This courageous trio wanted their issues to be heard. Tired of being ignored, they considered a women's conference an exciting idea. Choosing topics important to their lives, albeit far from the 'hot-button' feminist topics of the day, they prepared talks on household management, cultural rituals for girls and identity issues for those of mixed descent.

Having enjoyed a Western-style education, Kathy was the key cultural intermediary and senior woman. My role had been as fundraiser and facilitator but, in Melbourne, another role was required: translator/interpreter of an unfamiliar academic/feminist cultural world and of a big city. The white feminist movement was totally alien to all three panel members, but particularly so for Sheila and Joy: with the exception of the sacred turf of the Melbourne Cricket Ground (the iconic home of Australian Rules football), so too was the city of Melbourne. This white feminist world was 'My Country', in a way, and I was expected to fulfil hosting duties. I am not sure how well I performed. The women soon opted out of living in the arty group house in Carlton that I'd arranged for them. Instead, they packed up and moved to the outer suburbs, to the home of one of Kathy's older relatives, a senior, highly respected woman. Despite poor knowledge of Aussie Rules and exhausted from driving through traffic to the outer suburbs, I knew how well they would play the role of host in their own Country, so I did my best.

Kathy's paper was about being a 'yeller feller'. She wished not to be recognised as 'Aboriginal' nor as 'part-anything' but as having a plural identity based upon her ancestry. Malak Malak woman Sheila Williams

talked about women's budgeting and how the women of Bagot required training in order to pay bills and to support their families. Joy White, who had grown up in the remote Belyuen community, talked about their empowering and cherished coming-of-age ceremonies for girls. Joy opposed promised marriages but deeply valued special womanhood rituals.

When Aboriginal women and other participants in the urban, mainly scholarly audience, posed questions about male violence against women, Joy and Sheila became distinctly uncomfortable. They did not feel authorised to speak of incidents from other places, nor did they wish to speak of their own personal traumas. They wanted to stand by their men, they explained, for they suffered greatly due to colonialism.

Immediately after the panel, the weight of Joy's radical action—of sharing women's secret knowledge—made her extremely anxious, but when she went outside to be greeted by a big rainbow, she was relieved, for this was the sign that the elders had approved. All was good. Although disoriented by aspects of the unfamiliar culture around them, the three women were elated to be heard, to be listened to in this special way, by strangers, by highly educated Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. We have caught up for some reunions since that special trip.

These women were always leaders. Decades later, Joy became an outspoken advocate for human rights, leading protests against the 2007 NT Intervention, and against the attack on Indigenous autonomy implicit in the 'welfare card'. Joy played an active role in the Bagot community, and cared for many children, being honoured with the title NT Mother of the Year in 2014 and, in 2017, shortlisted for Senior Australian of the Year. Sheila Williams moved away from Bagot and successfully maintained her own house, home and family intact in the suburbs. Courageous and strong, each made many contributions over the decades. None of this could have happened without Kathy. Kathy was the rock and remained a great role model. Amongst her above-mentioned accolades, she also gained the title of NT Senior of the Year, an Order of Australia and an Honorary Doctorate.⁹

9 Nicholas Hynes, 'Aboriginal elder Kathy Mills remembered as formidable leader and brilliant storyteller', *ABC News*, abc.net.au/news/2022-04-26/kathy-mills-indigenous-advocate-obituary/101012466.

Readers, let us honour women like these who speak out, and so bravely support the struggles of other women and their families. Women who organise, who build networks. Who stand up and who march when needed. You could fill in the dots for those people in your own life. And think of the networks that you yourself are yet to build and support.

These days, Hope may have lost its glitter: kidnapped, misappropriated, failing, frequently exhausted. Yet, we cannot give up on gaining strength from women of myth and history. And from our peers and elders, past and present. We cannot relinquish the Hope that we have shared.

Despite Pandora being blamed for letting out all those nasty human vices and viruses, for feminists, the gift of Hope—and specifically the hope that all women might gain equal power in our unequal societies—must be cherished. During the pandemic years, Pandora and other strong female figures have something profound to say to us all.

This text is taken from *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal: Number 28*,
published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/LFHJ.28.08