

Pumahara 45 : Reflections

Some notes from the presentation.

He puna roimata, he maimai aroha; he mihi ki te huinga o te kahurangi, ki a Caterina de Nave, Sharon Alston, Jan Dodd Smith, Pat Robb; moe mai ra koutou.

My talk opened by acknowledging those women from the earliest years – 1970,71,72 – who were there at those first meetings and earliest confrontations. I focused solely on what happened in Auckland; I love Auckland. Recalled the infectious energy and excitement of the time, our clumsy consciousness raising groups, and how as lesbians out there and shameless, a few of us were often the objects of curiosity and desire by our feminist sisters, and some of us liked that! The personal was political, as shown by this article I wrote in Craccum, July 1971, which earned me a vitriolic reprimand from a senior woman academic who favoured discretion, and suffered in the closet. So much was about the right to choose. However, we did see ourselves, albeit naively and noisily, as working for a better world for all women. And working for this meant getting attention, ensuring the media focus on those issues of significance. There were so many issues- equal pay for equal work, free safe contraception, abortion rights, access to education, free childcare. We demanded action. We staged various public events and happenings, one being Suffrage Day in Albert Park 1971, with a Special Awards Ceremony, and a mock funeral for Victorian values beneath the monument to QV herself. Shown here are Pat Enting with the big drum, Lois Ogilvie with flowers, Susan Kedgely, Sharyn Cederman and myself with scripts and lilies, and members of Women for Equality and the University WL Group coming up the rear. I realize now that for me this was a profoundly transgressive and bizarre event – Maori girl with empty coffin in public park – but it was all drama. My poor mother and extended whanau never forgave me for this weird display; although they did understand and accept just about everything else, including the notion of lesbian separatism (there she goes again!), and my prancing around at the airport in a witch costume to capture the superstar Germaine Greer. (She captured me, another story.)

By the mid70s, cracks were forming. This clever cartoon by Sharon Alston from that epic feminist initiative, *Broadsheet Magazine*, suggests what style of the movement fits you best? And can you wash it out? Or will it shrink? One size does not fit all. Gay Liberation began in 1972, as many of us preferred the wild side, with the queens, gay chaps, and working class kamp girls. One founding member of GLF was the sublime Caterina, rear view with indispensable camera; the front board proclaimed, “And your worst fear!!!” This was Gay Week June 1972. Wearing sandwich boards we hustled outside the fashionable 246 complex in mid Queen Street, and did homo-happenings and glittery but gutsy guerilla theatre. But men’s business prevailed, so Sharon, Caterina and others set up the successful Gay Feminist Collective.

More ways of feminist action, theory and lifestyle evolved, including the rancorously contested idea of women’s culture and spirituality. In 1977-78, a separatist enclave occupied a beautiful early colonial house in Summer Street, Ponsonby. Here are some of the residents; the pitchfork holder is me, with Argent (her name at that time), metaphysical Maya Mistral, and the inimitable songstress Rosalie Stilleto Boot. I was compartmentalizing my life, having been told by various hard core believers (most of them middle class pakeha graduates) that by doing a PhD, I was pandering to the patriarchy. Huh. My doctorate was for me, and my whanau, not for them. And I got it.

For most women, however, the sapphic option or strategic offensive remained a seductive but scary possibility, considered thoroughly at a number of meetings and conferences, as another Alston cartoon illustrates.

And for Maori women? Mana wahine? We were always there, and I must emphasise that not all of us were black. We had our own heroines – Makereti Papakura, Tuini Ngawai, Te Arikinui Te Atairangikaahu, Mira Szaszy, Hana Te Hemara, Merimeri Penfold, Charlotte Smith, Mahinaarangi Tocker, (I have withheld the images shown at the talk as I don't have their consent) – we made our own way. And with so many entangled issues - racism, te reo, colonial oppression, violence, land rights, cultural resilience - weaving our own futures remains a challenge.

So the decades passed...but the issues are still painfully with us.

One outstanding example of effective radical intervention for all women was the “Unfortunate Experiment”, the pivotal Cartwright Report, initiated by the passionate and tireless commitment of Sandra Coney and Phillida Bunckle. This had a profound impact on how women's health was perceived, and positioned. It was revolutionary. At this point, I acknowledged Sandra's work. And of course, tonight's organisers! I scanned other initiatives – visual arts, media, film, literature...all too much for one talk – but the action was there. I mentioned the brilliance of Lesbian Balls and special occasions. Also mentioned the engagement of overseas guests – Greer, of course, followed by such luminaries as Margaret Mead, Charlotte Bunch, Dale Spender, Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, Trin Minh Ha, Naomi Wolfe, Marilyn Frye, Alix Dobkin, and in more recent years, Gayatri Spivak, Louise Erdich, Joan Nestle, Alison Bechdel, Lilikala Kame'eleihiwa, and Alice Walker. Such encounters and conversations enrich our feminism, and keep us all honest. (Note the diversities!)

I reflected briefly on the Homosexual Law Reform campaign, the Civil Union campaign, the Marriage Act Amendment campaign, accompanied by pictures. This was the public, and political, environment. Yet the personal also remained the political, and so I glanced at sexuality and diversity, and how much the intimate environment has changed, with reference to sex toy entrepreneurship and erotic adventure – see slide.

The presentation concluded with this ALAC poster, proclaiming that 45 years later, **We are no longer invisible.**

Kia ora koutou.