

Sidonie Smith

## For Kay, and the Collaboration We Shared

Pioneering scholar of Australian women's writing and post/colonial literary cultures. Fearless feminist cultural theorist. Tireless advocate of women's studies curricula and programs. Educator of sometimes hostile colleagues. Dedicated mentor to other scholars and to graduate students. Inspiring professor in the classroom. These were the roles Kay superbly inhabited throughout her career. These her enduring legacies. Sustained brilliance, capacious interests, and ready ambition. These were her defining scholarly attributes. Sparkling beauty, warmth, and generosity. These were the animating features of her soul. Friendship. This was the elixir of her life well-lived, her spiritual center.

Kay shared her life with Robert Iseman and their beloved daughters Laura and Juliet. The girls were her pride, and Robert her ever steady, always loving partner. And she shared her life with so many colleagues in Australia and elsewhere around the world. Friendships are individualized, they are their own distinct arena of becoming through exchange with someone who greets you as you are. So every friendship is loving and sustaining and memorable in its own way. Every friendship makes us anew through its own trajectory. Kay and I were born within a month and a half of one another. We share a generational story of feminist scholars in the academy. And we shared twenty-five years of our lives, in work and in play.

I cannot imagine my career as a feminist scholar of life writing over the last twenty-five years without my friendship with Kay. We bonded the minute we met in the halls of the Women's Studies program at Adelaide University in January of 1994 when I went to Australia as a Senior Fulbright Fellow, first at Adelaide University and then at Murdoch University out west. Through a mutual friend, I knew of Kay before I arrived. But then there she was, a resilient bundle of intellectual and social energy in a petite frame. Even in those early months, Kay taught me a lot about enjoying life, pulling me out of my driven intensity so we could eat good food, drink good wine, party in the Clare and on Kangaroo Island. She introduced me to her wonderful friends, conspirators of camaraderie.

I don't recall that we talked about doing a book together in those early months of our friendship. Kay was deep in the details of her *Eliza Fraser* book at the time. That book, published in 1995, explored more than a century and a half of narratives, images, and filmic versions of the story of this English woman shipwrecked on the Australian coast in 1836, where she lived with an Aboriginal community until her rescue. This sensational episode in Australian history, with its many afterlives, offered Kay the opportunity to trace historical discourses of colonialism, race, gender, and nation. I too was deep in projects as well.

But I knew when I left Australia in July that Kay and I would keep coming together, that we would together make ourselves different kinds of scholars,

engage in new projects beyond our scholarly comfort zones. I would return to Australia in late 1996 so that we could complete work on the first book we did, an edited collection entitled 'Indigenous Australian Voices' (1998). With Indigenous scholar Jennifer Sabioni, we assembled an anthology of poetry, artwork, and prose of thirty-six contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and artists. The anthology offered diverse imaginative engagements with individual and kinship relationships and refractions of the origin stories of 'dream-time' that inform both a resistance to the genocidal heritage of Australian colonization and a unique focus for Indigenous identity. I can conjure up a scene of Kay and I in the condo she rented on Marine Terrace, across from the Success Boat Harbour in Fremantle (where she was spending a study leave). In frenzied activity we struggled to get all the details of the project under control in order to send the manuscript off to Rutgers University Press. Last details were hand-written on file cards scattered across the living room floor. We tore them up as we completed each task. In the end, one card remained. It read "Who is Mary?" We never found the answer to that question, which seemed important at the time but remained forever elusive.

Because we energized one another in our work together, we couldn't let go of the idea that we should start another book project. Driving from Fremantle to Perth one day, we spun out ideas for possible edited collections, landing, somewhat ridiculously, on the idea for what became our second book 'The Olympics at the Millennium: Power, Politics, and the Games'. After all, the summer Olympics were going to be held in Sydney in the year 2000. Why not assemble a collection of essays that would explore how The Games are arenas in which individual and team athletic achievement intersect with the politics of national identity in a global context and how they are riven by cultural politics that involve issues of gender and racialization, spectacle and terrorism.

The Sydney Games were two and a half years away – our plan, to publish it the summer before the Games. That didn't quite work out. For one it took us a while to find the right contributors – all of them out of our fields of expertise. Then it took time to get, edit, and get back their contributions. And, though the publication date was officially 1 August 2000, copies of the book didn't make it to Australia until a month later, and they were far too expensive to sell well. Rereading the table of contents this past January, I admitted that the essays are interesting, the issues important. But neither of us could be very active in marketing the book because we weren't sports sociologists or historians. And Rutgers didn't do much to market it either.

A year later Kay and I were at the First International Conference on Auto/Biography, hosted by the Center for World Auto/Biography at Beijing University in late June of 1999. Listening to some of the papers, we suddenly realized that there was a co-authored book to write on "the right to tell one's story" as central to human rights activism. Here was a topic we were prepared to explore, both of us with expertise in genres and modes and media of life writing and its cultural and political efficacies. Thus began our conversations and our struggles to come to an argument about human rights and narrated lives and the ethics of recognition, the title of our 2004 book.

We were privileged to begin those conversations in depth during our August 2000 fellowship at the Rockefeller Foundation's Villa in Bellagio, Italy, perched above Lake Como. For one month we drafted what we anticipated would be the introductory chapter to the book, a discussion of the post-World War II regime of human rights, its history, its infrastructure, and its cultural politics. Thank God, one of the fellows with us during the last week agreed to read our draft – his expertise was in political theory. He was ruthless in his critique. And in the end we jettisoned what we had written, with the recognition that we needed to have written it but that we had to enter our project from a different angle, one based on our expertise. Over the next two years we had to keep before us the injunction to remember what we were trained to write on the subject.

Neither of us could have written 'Human Rights and Narrated Lives' as individual scholars. Together we wrote an influential book on human rights and narrated lives that explores what happens when autobiographical narratives are produced, received, and circulated in the field of human rights. It asks how personal narratives emerge in local settings; how international rights discourse enables and constrains individual and collective subjectivities in narration; how personal narratives circulate and take on new meanings in new contexts; and how and under what conditions they feed into, affect, and are affected by the reorganizations of politics in post-cold war, postcolonial, globalizing human rights contexts.

After our idyllic stay in Bellagio, Kay and I would come together in Adelaide in 2002, in Canberra at the Australian National University (ANU) during a joint fellowship at the humanities center there, and in a hotel in New York City where we finished last minute editorial details. The book appeared in 2004. To our dismay, we realized that Palgrave had inserted "political science" on the back cover for the purposes of categorization in catalogs and bookstores. There was nothing to be done. It had been miscategorized. But it found its way to people in life writing studies and the cultural studies of literary formations and the literatures of testimony and trauma. And to this day I talk to and hear from young scholars who have been influenced by our book. Kay would have loved to hear that on 20 June 2019, Siobhan Campbell from the Open University in London came up to me at an International Auto/Biography Studies conference in Madrid to tell me how important the book had been in her own teaching and for one of her doctoral students. That student did a dissertation in which she worked with survivors of Hiroshima, interviewing them in Japan. In her final exchange with them, she went with survivors to the places of their experience of survival where they opened up and told their stories to her.

In 2012, I traveled to Adelaide in early July so that Kay and I could write a paper we were to deliver at the 2012 Meeting of the International Auto/Biography Association at ANU on July 20<sup>th</sup>. By then we had begun thinking about the impact of the rise of social media on acts of witnessing to violence. So we wrote a piece that was subsequently published as "Witnessing in the Digital Age". That was our last moment of collaboration.

Let me say something about how Kay and I worked together. We would begin to think as a twosome, melding together our voices, adding our particular expertise and intellectual preoccupations, and our own specific ways of stating ideas.

But we worked differently. Kay took copious notes as she read, and I can see before her those pads of notes through which she registered not only what she read but what she thought of what she read. She would deftly review for me the argument, the line of development, the implications. She pondered her notes before she wrote, and what she wrote was often in fully formed thoughts. I, on the other hand, would take few notes, though I would capture passages that we might quote. Then I'd compose at the computer, typing quickly for the pleasure of seeing something taking shape on the screen. What I wrote was never any good at the beginning; it was sometimes undisciplined and always inelegant. But I took comfort and gained confidence from thinking that I had the beginnings of something. This is how we worked on our separate assignments for the book, the separate chapters we drafted. But when we were writing essays or chapters or introductions together, Kay sat with her notes in a chair talking through ideas and I sat at the computer capturing our thoughts as quickly as I could get them down. Then we would read through what we had written and work through every sentence ruthlessly.

I know Kay got frustrated with me for my failure to let up the pressure and the critique of every sentence and every idea. I remember our late afternoon sessions at the humanities institute at the ANU. We would go to a different space to read through materials we had ready from our work of the day. And she would have to tell me over and over again: Sid, say three good things you see in what we've just written! Please, before you start in with your critiques. I did my best to practice saying three good things for a while and then let it slip, feeling the pressure of getting things done. To this day, I try to remember her mantra – say three good things – when I talk with students about their dissertation chapters.

As I said, Kay would get frustrated with me; but we never had an argument when we were writing or working on a project together. Perhaps because we just had too much fun together. For all the while we were becoming different scholars together, we were traveling together, with our partners, with friends, and sometimes just the two of us. Kay put together a beautiful photo book, which she titled 'Travels with Greg' (for my husband who died in May 2020, after living many years with dementia). She brought it to Ann Arbor when Kay and Robert and Juliet were in the US in 2017. It's a record of much of those travels: In South Australia, China, Italy twice, Western Australia and the Kimberleys, Portugal, Vietnam, Croatia, Brighton, Banff and Jasper Park, Chicago and Ann Arbor.

And there was our last trip out to Western Australia in May 2019, when I traveled to Adelaide. She gave me a wonderful party. And then we caught the jet plane to Perth to see our friend Barbara Milech and our friends in Fremantle Kat and Richard Longley. Then Kay and I drove down to Margaret River, where we walked the cliff edge and watched the sunsets at Surfer's Point in Prevelly, and climbed around the lighthouse at Cape Naturaliste, felt the pressure of a falcon's claws on our gloved hands at Eagles Heritage, the raptor sanctuary. And then we had a glorious afternoon of fine food and amazing wines at Vasse Felix winery. In the sun at a table on the balcony, we were presented with the menu, which included five flutes of wine. Our waiter recited the wine list for those flutes, which included three Chardonnays. Kay gathered herself up, as she did so

often, and expressed displeasure at the list. She made it clear that a Chardonnay rarely got on any list she might be keeping in her capacious memory bank of bottles she'd enjoyed across her lifetime. But the waiter remained unperturbed, insisting that Kay had never had Chardonnays like those at Vasse Felix, that they were indeed remarkable and memorable. And they were. Kay and I were left speechless at how they slipped over the palate and lingered in the aftertaste. Kay knew she didn't have many months left to live. But those days we spent together she remained a remarkable model of courage, elegant resolve, and grace, living intensely in the moment, celebrating friendship and sipping away to the last wine diamonds in her glass.

Let me end with fragmented glimpses of Kay that console me now.

She had a beautiful singing voice. I can see her at the piano in the largest common room at the Rockefeller Foundation's Villa in Bellagio, the composer and pianist John Musto nearby, and Kay's voice floating above us as we sat and listened and watched her pleasure in performance.

She had her own way of eating. I can see her at the dining table, anywhere we ate together, her hands and elbows moving efficiently as she cut everything on her plate into bite-size amounts before she even began eating. The plate was always magically organized so it stood ready for her to begin.

I see her standing before an audience when we gave talks. Trained in debate, Kay never seemed anxious answering questions or fielding challenges to her arguments. She stood her ground, her shoulders back, and mastered her piece of the stage.

She had wonderful posture, evincing groundedness with power. I tried to imitate her, to stand straighter when I was around her.

She dressed in vivid colors, those dense hues that caught the eye. We shared a color palette of blues and purples, reds, and yes, black. But unlike me, Kay wore deep pink with aplomb. It always gave a soft glow to her facial coloring.

And then there was the relationship Kay had to the camera. The camera loved Kay; its aperture capturing the liveliness of her face and the confidence and power of her embodiment. I have no photos of Kay looking anything but beautiful.

I was the beneficiary of Kay's desire to share remarkable book projects; to share her family and her community of friends; to share her love of travel; to share her love of pleasure in living well. I was the beneficiary of her commitment to living fully, actively, and joyously in the face of her knowledge of imminent dying. The memory of Kay's voice, of her embodied habits, of her tensile energy, of her indomitable spirit, of her openness to grace, fills my heart as I write. Those memories bring with them the knowledge that our friendship will always persist, if in another mode.