

Building Relationships: *Blak Brow*: Stepping Back to Move Forward

Sam Cooney

Hello. I'd like to start by fully acknowledging that we are together today at this university, but where we also are is on the land of the first and continuing custodians: the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung peoples of the Kulin nation. We know this place as Melbourne, on the curl of what we call Port Phillip Bay, but for far longer this place has been known as Birraranga, and the bay known as Naarm.

Today we are gathered to talk about building relations, and it's vital to note that people of over 250 nations have been doing exactly this on this continent for tens of thousands of years before us here today. I offer respect to Aboriginal elders past and present, and through them to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I'd also like to acknowledge that Indigenous sovereignty of this land was never ceded, and that colonisation and its resultant genocidal project continues to this day.

My name's Sam Cooney – I'm the publisher of *The Lifted Brow* magazine, and director at the organisation TLB that produces the magazine and publishes books through our imprint Brow Books. We also do a lot of online publishing, as well as run events and award writing prizes.

Today I will talk to you about a very special edition of our magazine, published last year: *Blak Brow*.

The Lifted Brow is a print literary magazine/journal, published four times a year, which is full of literary work: essays, criticism, commentary, fiction, poetry, comics and more. For the 12 years that *The Lifted Brow* has been around, it has been focused on finding and championing the work from those who sit within the literary and/or demographic margins – giving a platform for those stories and ideas that often don't get much of a go in other publications or other media.

In 2016, we at The Lifted Brow started talking among ourselves about how we could be better at recognising the land and the original inhabitants and owners. We'd been publishing First Nations writing and artwork in our magazine, occasionally and increasingly more regularly, but what we also knew was that our magazine—its team and its processes—were a microcosm of the Australian publishing industry, and the arts more generally, and the country even more generally: a core of privileged, institutionally-educated, often-white people holding all the positions of power, and then 'reaching out' to Indigenous writers and artists and offer 'opportunities'.

We wanted to know: how far could we undo the power structures and processes? Even just for one edition. (And if successful, how could we try and instill more permanent change at our magazine and organisation.)

We asked ourselves these above questions, and many more. And eventually we ended up working with the Moondani Balluk group.

We secured extra funding from the state arts body Creative Victoria, and then for months and months we talked and consulted with a variety of Indigenous writers and arts people to figure out a way forward.

Eventually, through an already-existing relationship with the writer and academic Paola Balla, who we'd published in our magazine before through the commissioning of then commissioning editor Ellen van Neerven (a Mununjali Yugambeh woman), we met with the Moondani Balluk group.

Quickly it was obvious that here was our match, and we proceeded forward on the project with them as the new Editorial Collective. Paola Balla, Tony Birch, Kim Kruger, Karen Jackson, and Pauline Whyman.

Key to the project was that the Editorial Collective had absolute control. It wasn't a case of us telling them what to make. Indeed, they didn't even need to make an edition of our magazine, if they didn't want to. We handed over all of the usual money we would use for making an edition of the magazine, plus an extra \$20,000 funding we'd received, and then we stepped right back.

What we did do is host the collective for information and skills sharing sessions, at which our various editors, designers, publicity coordinators, and other key staff took the collective through all the stages and processes we usually go through for making our magazine.

What was always obvious, both long before the project commenced and then all the way during it up until today, is that this was a two-way situation. And in fact, whatever we at The Lifted Brow 'handed over', we always knew that we'd receive back tenfold from the group/the project.

Most interesting to us were the challenges to our usual way of thinking, including about what a literary publication is for, what literary-ness is, what colonising activities we unconsciously supported in our everyday behavior and processes, and how exclusive our magazine really was.

The *Blak Brow* edition was produced. The Editorial Collective focused on Indigenous women's stories and ideas, based around the NAIDOC week theme 'Because of her, we can'.

We were totally floored by the quality of the work, by the ways it was commissioned and edited and designed, by the community-based nature of doing. And we were overwhelmed by the reception to the edition.

The launch of the *Blak Brow* edition at Footscray Community Arts Centre is the single-most inspiring and moving literary event I have ever attended. Hundreds of people crammed themselves in on a stinking-hot summer evening, and the proceedings went for hours and hours, and it was riveting. The people who turned up were people you'd never usually see at a literary event, let alone a literary journal launch: First Nations people, migrant communities, and people from backgrounds and marginal identities that felt like this edition was speaking to them.

Since the edition was published, the *Blak Brow* Editorial Collective and various contributors have been invited to speak at various writers' festivals and literary events all around the country.

The edition also made international waves, with several big outlets interviewing the members of the collective and profiling the edition.

The response from readers was incredible. We printed thousands extra copies of this edition, just because we hoped it would do well, and these copies flew off the shelves. Readings Bookshop in Carlton, just around the corner on Lygon Street, has alone sold more than 500 copies.

I want to finish here with touching on the biggest lessons we learned about how to build relationships with a community that sits outside of your industry.

We had heard the saying “Nothing about us without us” before, but it couldn’t be more evident in the success (in every measure, both qualitative and quantitative) of *Blak Brow* that if you want to do anything properly that involves a community that isn’t yours, you need people from that community running the show.

Building a relationship takes incredible amounts of time, and patience, and flexibility – but by far the most important thing is that the outreach and desire is genuine. If the Editorial Collective had got even a whiff that we weren’t here for the right reasons, the whole project would’ve collapsed. We at The Lifted Brow had a truthful and deep desire to improve, and we were willing to be completely humble about this.

A relationship is about how much you can give, not how much you can take. It was only after we’d handed over everything, and trusted that this would demonstrate our commitment, that there was a chance for us to gain the skills, knowledge, access, and impact that this project did.

And lastly: building a relationship is about human connection. At the deepest level, as well as in every small piece of communication and interaction, human beings did the work. This wasn’t two institutions coming together: it was the people inside the institutions who looked each other in the eyes, literally and figuratively, and decided to do something bigger than the sum of its parts.

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