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Breaking all the Rules: An Interview with Frances Peters

Jacqueline Urla, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*

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BREAKING ALL THE RULES:

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCES PETERS

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INTRODUCTION

A Kamilaroi woman and artist, Frances Peters joined the Aboriginal Programs Unit of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1989. The APU, created in 1987, has a core staff of six Aboriginal producer-directors and two researchers that produces a variety of television programs for a general viewing audience. Peters works primarily for APU's prime-time series, "BLACKOUT," a weekly magazine featuring Aboriginal issues which was just awarded the United Nations Human Rights Media Award. Initially a researcher for the series, she has gone on to produce two documentaries of her own: "Oceans Apart" (1990) which looks at three contemporary urban Aboriginal women who don't appear to be Aboriginal, and "Tent Embassy." Aired in 1992, "Tent Embassy" is named after the protest that erupted in 1972 when four Aboriginal men erected a tent on the lawns of the Parliament House of the Australian Federal Government and declared themselves a sovereign nation. The film explores how these events are remembered today, as well as the successes and failures of this crucial episode in the Aboriginal land rights movement. Peters is a founding member of the International Indigenous Producers Organization, formed at the 1992 Dreamspeakers Film Festival. She continues to work at the ABC and has begun working on a master's thesis entitled, "Responsibility and Representation in Indigenous Media."

A dynamic and fluid speaker, Frances Peters spoke with Jacqueline Urla in Amherst, Massachusetts at "The Shock of Re-cognition" Film Festival (January 1993) about her films, television, and her perspectives on Aboriginal politics and filmmaking.

JACQUELINE URLA: *Frances, could you talk a little bit about your background and how you got into media work? Was this something you always wanted to do?*

FRANCES PETERS: Let's see, it's almost been ten years now. Before I even started to think about doing anything related to media, I'd done a lot of things: I'd been a singer, a writer, a fruit picker... I guess throughout it all I always thought I would do something in the performing arts. I grew up in a family of singers: my father is a singer (Jimmy Little) and my grandfather was a vaudeville performer. My mother's family were more political activists. So, having these experiences and influences from my parents in the performing arts and political activism, it seemed like the most obvious thing to do was to incorporate politics into my art and express myself not just as an artist, but as an Aboriginal person. Mind you, I didn't call it politics: other people may have called it party politics. But I saw it as expressing who I was as an Aboriginal person through my art.

My first introduction to media of any sort was because of music. I was singing in a little band that basically performed for fund-raisers for political causes.

There was no money in it. I was drifting a lot... following where my heart was, expressing myself through the arts, my music, and then also expressing my political and cultural ideals. But I was always broke.

That's when I got into radio broadcasting. There was an Aboriginal radio station, Radio Redfern, that operated out of Sydney. It was obvious for me to get in there, because then I could be connected to music. I stayed on working there as a radio broadcaster for six years. During that time I also started going to university [University of Technology, Sydney]. It was the old thing, you've got to get a job.

So, I was going to university, getting a formal education, and then spending my Saturday afternoons having great fun at an Aboriginal radio station, breaking all the rules. That was the freedom you had in an Aboriginal radio station. We were creating our own sounds, basically, we were promoting our music, and we were telling our own news in ways and forms that we chose. All that raised a lot of questions for me about the media and how I was going to see myself working in it. It was hard; it was a battle, and I used to fight in every one of those classes at University. I was majoring in sound and social and political theory. And I used to sit there in those tutorials and I'd hear all the wonderful French theory about sound and image and I would argue and say, God you Australians, you don't even know who you are and what sound is yet, and yet you're trying to find out what the European sense of image is, to be able to interpret your culture. Forget it, I'm not going to be one of your people! I'm here to learn about me and what I'm going to do with it. And you're going to answer a few questions for me. I was the cheekiest little... unbearable really.

You started working at ABC-TV in 1989. How did that come about?

It was quite by chance. I was still part-time at University and doing freelance work as a broadcaster. I knew a little

bit about media theory but I didn't know anything specifically about film. My expertise was social and political theory; how to analyze media, and do research. The point is I was at home one morning, and I get this phone call at nine in the morning from a guy from the ABC. He said they needed a researcher for two weeks to work on a series called "BLACKOUT" and had been given my name. I said, "Oh yea, I've seen it, it's okay, you need some improvement though." (Laughter) He said, "That's nice. Do you want to work for a couple of weeks?" Well, I was broke. My band wasn't doing so well.

What was the name of your band?

"All in Vain." (lots of laughter) Anyway, I said I'd come over and have a look. He asked when I could come, and I said, right now. So that's how it went. We had a bit of a yarn over coffee and they hired me. It wasn't because I really wanted to be working in television. It was I really needed a job for a couple of weeks. I needed some money for this bloody phone bill. So I stayed there ever since.

What was it like to work at the Aboriginal Program Unit? How did you move from researcher to produce and direct your own work?

I began doing research for other directors, but not all of them were Aboriginal. The other Aboriginal people who were working there as directors were very new in the industry themselves. I worked twelve months as a researcher on about six films, but our roles weren't so rigidly defined. There was even one case where I had to complete a film myself. So, it took about a year of doing research for other people for the series producer to say, look Frances, it's time you directed your own film. And I thought, yea, sure, I can do it. It's that "fake it 'til you make it" kind of thing!

Both of your films address complicated and controversial

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FRANCES PETERS, 1992.

issues. Have the people at ABC been supportive of your work?

The ABC is a kind of network that doesn't depend on ratings. But what we usually hope for is controversy. That's a really good thing for political filmmakers. We don't have to worry about being popular. If you get a following, you stay there. So it does serve the special interest groups. As a producer, you can pretty well go as strong as you like in programming. And that's good for me. As an artist, I don't want to be a safe filmmaker anyway. I'm not interested. Like "Tent," for example. That is a film about conflict amongst ourselves. Most Aboriginal films are still trying to prove the positive images thing. That's too simple.

When we were talking earlier you sounded really committed to television as a medium for Aboriginal productions. What does television offer you as an artist that independent filmmaking does not?

Well I think that TV is really a fantastic way to be able to get a message across to people who don't normally listen. But that idea didn't just spring up overnight, out of a tutorial or something. It was a process of being around independent filmmakers. The more they would rubbish television, the more defensive I got. I used to sit in awe of all these filmmakers because they were the "Real Thing" and I was just this television person. Everyone knows how tacky TV is, right? I would hear filmmakers say, look, television is so trivial; in TV you have to conform to what the audience wants. I used to hear that. And then I thought, so bloody what? Why not? Why make a film if it's not for an audience? I could see there was this preciousness amongst filmmakers. I think it's politically irresponsible if you think that being an artist is only about expressing how you feel. I felt like TV is where you have an opportunity to reach people. It's in everyone's homes. That may be insignificant for some people, but it's extremely powerful for a nation. In the first series I worked on at "BLACKOUT" we received a rating of 12 points, which is extremely high for a documentary series, and that was in prime-time. You can't underestimate that power.

How often did the series air?

Once a week. And the letters kept pouring in from

viewers. I loved to read them and measure up what viewers were saying about programs, even the ones that criticized us. They were good to receive, to see where we were reaching people that filmmakers couldn't. And that's the problem we have as artists. It's not the whole problem, but that is a problem. As an artist, you can become so elitist, reaching just a certain few over and over. Because you are already specialized as an indigenous person anyway. There's a lot more people who have gotta hear from us. For me, it was a big change from being in Aboriginal community broadcasting, where you get the same people listening to you every week. True enough, you get a lot of satisfaction out of that. But is your mandate to educate your own? Or is it to educate everybody else?

How would you answer that?

As I see it, there are a lot more Aboriginal people wanting to make programs for their own people, and there's not enough of us that want to reach out to other audiences. I've come to a point where I feel that I am not going to lose myself by working in mainstream television. In fact, I've finally got enough confidence in myself that I may be able to affect somebody else.

It's so easy for people to say that when you work in mainstream TV, you're not getting across the real message. But I have not experienced that, touch wood. I think our unit, when I was on "BLACKOUT," was so solid, and it's growing, and it really inspires me how far the other Aboriginal people have come as well. The people who feel they are going to lose themselves because they work with whites have just not worked out their identity.

Let's talk about "Oceans Apart," your first documentary. In making that film, you worked with an all-woman crew. Was that a deliberate choice?

There were three reasons, really. The fact is this was my first film, and I communicate better with women. Secondly, the topic was about women, and I wanted that feeling, I wanted that spirit of women to be through the whole process. And thirdly, I thought that if we were going to get into cultural or traditional issues about women, having a man in the crew could have presented a problem for going into specific areas and so forth where they're not allowed. So women worked all the way through. I had a fantastic woman cinematographer, Jan

Kenny, who has won awards and done lots of stuff for Aboriginal women before. The edit crew was all women, and I wrote and sang all the music. There was only one guy in the band, all the rest were women. Now, I have to say it doesn't slight me in the least to have men or whites on my crew. A lot of people think that if you work with whites you will lose control, or it will compromise the politics. It's true that can happen, but I think it's also got a lot to do with how you are as a producer. It's a bit of both, really. Any producer has got to learn to compromise for a lot of reasons, not just because you're an Aboriginal. You've got to have confidence and learn to fight for yourself and for your ideas, even when you're working with an all Aboriginal crew.

"Oceans Apart" gives us three intimate portrayals of Aboriginal women who don't necessarily look "Aboriginal." In your film and your comments here at the festival, it seems that one of your agendas as a filmmaker is to break open the stereotypes about Aboriginal people. Could you talk a little bit about that and why you chose to focus on urban women?

The idea for the film came up after the first season of "BLACKOUT." A lot of the programs had been about rural Aboriginal people living in country towns. Well, lots of letters started coming in saying, when are you going to show REAL Aboriginals? 'Cause what they were looking for was semi-traditional lifestyles in deserts. At least that's been the image in most of the films about Aboriginals that I've seen. I was sick of the letters and the stereotypes. Aboriginal people in Australia are not one nation; the differences are there, but we're all Aboriginal.

Since I'm an urban black myself and a woman, I decided to focus on that. Even before choosing the talent, I decided I was going to do profiles of three women who don't look Aboriginal. I deliberately went out in search of women who were white-looking. In the eighties, identity was a very big topic. Lots of people were discussing Aboriginal identity, the meaning of identity. It was already a well sorted out topic. But fair-skinned Aboriginal people, there has never been anything about that. So that's where the idea came from.

What about the camera work? Stylistically, the film has a modern feel to it that contrasts with the nostalgic or scientific formal qualities that are found in most ethnographic films about native peoples.

Yea, if you look at "Oceans Apart" stylistically, it's a very slick-cut film. It's obviously a film made for television; it's a very TV-style documentary. I wrote the music deliberately to be very commercial sounding, like a pop song. I don't really like it much! (Laughter) What I did was listen to scales in the music styles of Aboriginal traditional music—scales that you don't find in European music—and I adapted that into a pop music style. Kind of like Yothu Lindi: the chords, notes, scales, and the rhythm of the music all come from traditional music. But I did mine as a pop song rather than a house mix.

Then, as I said, the look is very slick. If you study indigenous films, you see they always seem to use a certain style of images, the same setup. There's always wide angle shots and always close-ups to really scrutinize and dissect things. I wanted to do something different and I was lucky to have a very, very good cameraperson in Jan Kenny. I wanted more of an "arty" picture for "Oceans." You don't see a lot of "arty" shots in documentaries, much less Aboriginal documentaries. But there were quite a few in "Oceans Apart," which breaks the rules for not only Aboriginal film, but also for documentary films.

What do you have in mind by an "arty" shot in that film?

For example, the shots of the train snaking towards you, or coming through the tunnel. Or the shot when women are walking along the pier. I wanted to show how you can be "arty" in a documentary without having to rely on surreal images.

I was trying to break a lot of image stereotypes in Aboriginal and documentary film. I think those stereotypes may have something to do with why many indigenous artists are moving away from documentary and into fiction or drama films. We are sick of the documentary format; we've seen so many of them about us, especially in news and current affairs. So, unfortunately, what we've done is associate documentary with just another form of stereotyping film. It's just that we haven't explored how to be more adventurous with documentary. We've got the opportunity as Aboriginal filmmakers to change documentary, instead of racing off to do feature films.

There's another thing I want to mention in terms of images and content: when was the last time you saw (well you might see this more in terms of images of black

"OCEANS APART."

people in America), but when was the last time you saw indigenous people hugging people? You never see it! In Australia you never ever see Aboriginal people holding each other, expressing love and joy. It's always sadness and anger. That's why I wanted scenes like the one of Margaret bathing her child, or the father putting socks on his little child. You know, people forget those little things. The most common bloody image you see is a black hand reaching out for a white hand. Everyone seems to like that image. I hate it! We rarely see Aboriginals touching each other, so I tried to show that, too.

The other thing that you never see are images of indigenous people in a "non-Aboriginal" environment. So when I filmed one of the women, Margaret, the teacher, getting off the train, I used wide angle shots so you could see her amongst hundreds of people at a large

urban train station. Even in the city, most of the time Aboriginal people are shown inside their home, their community, or their rallies. They are always in groups of their own people, not with the rest of the world. So I went for wide shots that broke those stereotypes. There's touching, nurturing, urban shots, intimate shots. These were deliberate choices because I wanted to do something different, to change how we are used to seeing Aboriginal people.

Why the title "Oceans Apart"?

One of the reasons I called it "Oceans Apart" was to break the frame on how we think of Aboriginal people and their environment. People tend to think that indigenous people's environment is just like dirt, or rock, mountain, never the ocean. In the title song I use the words, "born

of sea and land" because many of us are sea people; like my father, he's a coastal person. And many of our stories are in the skies. But you don't get that in most representations of Aboriginal people. We never see Aboriginal people on the coast; they are always in the desert. Then, with all the talk about land rights, there too, you only get a visualization of the land. We think belonging to the land means belonging to the earth, and we forget that the water and the sky are also part of our environment. That's one of the reasons why I also showed the women walking along the beach. They've all been far away: Rosalie has lived in England, and Britta lived in Denmark. Even Margaret, who is the least traveled, moved from the Northern Territory, which tends to be seen as the most "authentically" Aboriginal part of Australia, to a rural area on the East Coast. So they are all united by the sea. That's really what it's all about: regardless of the fact that they have fair skin, have lived overseas, or grew up with overseas parents, like Britta, they are all Aboriginal. That's what being Aboriginal is.

You know there has been a lot of talk about how Aboriginal people have been represented in the media and what kinds of films or image we, as Aboriginal filmmakers, should be making. Marcia Langton is writing about this in her new book.¹ She says that the mainstream media is only comfortable with showing us images of assimilated Aboriginals because that's what whites find acceptable. But I think her analysis is outdated and even dangerous. I think that these days the media is quite comfortable with showing us images of traditional people, with showing us "exotic" images that make Aboriginals seem really foreign to white people. That's safe, you see. What they can't handle are films about those of us who speak their language and who have moved into the mainstream of Australian life and are making trouble, claiming our rights. Marcia seems to imply that we should not care about the mainstream; that we should be making art films or community television for ourselves. That's the trendy place to be in Aboriginal film and video. And her book completely leaves out the work we are doing at "BLACKOUT," even though we are the largest producer of Aboriginal programming in the country! Maybe that's because we are mainstream; maybe because our documentaries don't fit what some people think are the "correct" image of Aboriginals. Well, I'm saying there is no such thing. We need Yothu Lindi; we need traditional people, we need

singers and dancers. But we also need the bureaucrat, the politician, the sports caster. We can't have one without the other. We need to be everywhere.

"Oceans Apart" isn't autobiographical, but it does draw a lot on your personal history and experience being an urban black woman. Was this also true for "Tent Embassy"? Did your own experience in Aboriginal politics shape the way you made this film?

As I said earlier, I come from a politically active family, especially on my mother's side. And I also grew up in interesting times. I was a young girl in the sixties and I can remember the freedom riders coming through. Then in the seventies, as a teenager, and it was the feminist movement, the land rights movement, our first Aboriginal national movement. I remember clearly being a fifteen-year-old when the demos like Tent Embassy took place. That's what started me wanting to know who I was and wanting to let other people know, too.

In my twenties I became politically active. I belonged to this party and that party, and every other party. I was also a committee-type person, always joining groups, everything from Aboriginal student politics, Aboriginal housing, health, women, and education. I started a lot of committees and I learned how to chair a bloody meeting, how to get a conference together, and all that kind of stuff. But I didn't feel very useful and after a while I started de-committeeing myself. I felt I had to be honest with myself and ask, what do I think? Do I agree with this groups of people sitting here, with the leaflets going out? See the thing is, as indigenous people we should be allowed the right to disagree with each other without it being seen as a weakness. Disagreeing and having conflict amongst your own does not offer weakness, it only gives you weakness when other people are going to come in and use it.

In my own life, coming to terms with this was a very painful process. It's very painful when you don't always agree, and you go away and you question yourself... over and over. Party politics can make you feel very guilty. I felt I was being disloyal. If you don't "belong" then your Aboriginality can come under question as well. It was as if there was only one way of being Aboriginal, and if you don't always feel or think that way, if you're not feeling and acting like a whole group of people are feeling and acting, then you get to a point where you question your

Aboriginality. Do you know what I mean? That's something that has been put on us urban blacks. We have to let that go. So I think all of those experiences made me want to make this film.

How would you compare the two films?

"Oceans Apart" was my first film. It's a very nice film. It's got a kick in there, but nobody feels offended, everyone liked it, and yet there were messages in there. It was really pointed at government policy, which is a very easy target because we're all against government policy, right? Even government workers are against their policies! (Laughter) It's a well-practiced sport.

"Tent Embassy" is very different. What I did was to interview all these Aboriginal people about an event that happened in their own lives twenty years before and everyone had a different story, because they all had different positions from which to view their history. There are no heroes and no villains in this film. That was the thing. The bureaucrats weren't straight out villains and the radicals weren't the heroes either. The Aboriginal bureaucrat has the right to think he was doing the best that he could offer. I couldn't just show him as my enemy. It was a complicated opposition. It wasn't so simple as to say they were there because they were going to get a salary, cars, trips.

I'll give you a classic example. Paul Coe, who was one of the activists and led the march into Parliament House. He says the problem with bureaucracy is that it takes the best brains of our Aboriginal youth and indoctrinates them with a way of thinking that works against the interests and growth of the Aboriginal people. But then straight away I cut to an interview with Lois O'Donohue, one of the most powerful Aboriginal people in Australia. Of course she's a woman! And she says, Aboriginal people have the right to choose for themselves if they want to be public servants, and if they want to contribute back to the community the way they see fit.

My position is that I agree with Paul, but who am I to say that other people can't have any choice? After "Tent Embassy" came out, people who worked with Paul were very upset that I put in what Lois had said. 'Cause it was like she came back at him. It comes down to who can say what is representative of a whole group. Are people who believe like Lois less concerned with the interests of Aboriginal people? What were we fighting

for in the first place, if we couldn't have those choices?

What was the most difficult thing about making this film?

It's very difficult to ask activists to examine themselves, and that's what this film does. They are so busy analyzing other people. It's also hard because activists are already in a position of defending themselves, because that's what they are always doing, defending themselves. Not everybody, but that's often what I find.

I wanted people to see that we are still having the same demonstrations and getting the same results. Originally, the idea was to get at the corruption in our bureaucracies. Any oppressed society takes on the worst aspects of the dominant society, and we're no different. We've taken on all the brainless activity of Australian society — meat pies, big cars, driving around wearing football scarves, drinking, wife bashing. Our community organizations are very sexist, very heterosexist, and sometimes violent. I'm not saying that to blame them. I know there is no point in blaming. I'm saying that is what is there. I haven't lost faith, but I can't romanticize "the community."

That's my problem with the idea that came up in the film series round table last night; the idea that as native filmmakers we have to be accountable to the community. Which community? Our communities have become bureaucratized and class-stratified. Accountability is riddled with fear of being made to feel guilty, or that you aren't Aboriginal enough. It's a power thing. So what I attacked in my film was that middle class and the bureaucracy. Charlie Perkins says it really well in "Tent Embassy": there's over 2000 Aboriginal organizations in Australia, so everyone is a bureaucrat, everyone is a public servant. That's what "Tent Embassy" was saying. It was saying something about how our movements have been co-opted in the last 20 years. We've become bureaucratized.

How was your film received?

Audiences get different things out of it every time. And I like that. When whites saw "Tent Embassy" they saw it as a really heroic story. When Aboriginal people saw it, they saw tragedy. It was wonderful, the feedback was just wonderful. White people didn't necessarily see the film as an attack. They saw a debate. When I show the

protesters going back, a lot of white people saw it as a really heroic, romantic story. But in the Aboriginal political community, some activists saw it as embarrassing. But what's wrong with activists being made responsible for their actions? Artists have to go through it all the time!

This gets back to your issue of having to be honest, doesn't it?

Yes. I think the criticism has to come first from us. We're faced with this problem and we have to have the courage to be critical of what's happening. Hopefully our artists will do that.

If we keep repeating the same rhetoric, if we keep romanticizing, then what we are doing is destroying any growth and change. I want to find out what it is that is affecting all of us. I want to recognize what it looks like when it's happening. But more than that, being a filmmaker, I want to show other people what I think it looks like. And then they can disagree with me, if they like. You know the guy who wears a football scarf and comes home at night and his girlfriend is pregnant and he bashes her; he has got a lot to lose, even if he's an Aboriginal man, with what I'm going to say! He's my brother and stuff, but he's got a lot to lose.

I want to close by asking what you thought about the comment Quechua filmmaker, Caesar Galindo, made yesterday at the round table on indigenous media. He's not very comfortable with being seen first and foremost as an Aboriginal filmmaker. He said that the danger of indigenous film festivals like these is that they can function as a ghetto.

I was grateful that he said that last night. I want to get to a point where my work is going to be seen by everyone, too. I look forward to the days when I'll be making films about anything, not necessarily Aboriginal people. But you can't deny that if I did a film about a train strike, or whatever, there's no doubt it's going to give an Aboriginal perspective on it, which is my perspective, Frances, an Aboriginal woman, whose parents were thus and such. For now I am comfortable with being called an Aboriginal filmmaker who wants to do commercial films. But I know how he feels because there is in the back of my head... I do want to make just beautiful films about...

relationships for god's sake, maybe even sex, god forbid, between Aboriginal people!

It seems that one of the consequences of being marginalized is that you get restricted to the particular. Society tells you that you don't have a message for the larger world.

It's like we're not supposed to have an opinion about anything else. So when Caesar says he wants to be regarded as a filmmaker, rather than an indigenous filmmaker, what I think he is saying is that he doesn't necessarily want to be told that this is the sort of film you are supposed to make because you are an Indian man.

It reminds me of the film "In and Out of Africa" that we saw here at the festival.² The film shows you that as an indigenous artist people always want the "authentic" from you. That's one of the things you are up against when you are making commercial films; as a commercial filmmaker I'm like the African artist [in the film] who makes *colons*, those wooden statues sold to tourists. They aren't valued because they aren't seen as authentic and because they reflect back to us an image of colonization, not some sort of pure "primitive" past. As commercial filmmakers we have got a hard row to hoe. I've only been filmmaking for five years. But I've got a message and I belong to the whole world. It's going to be difficult because I make *colons*; because people are going to see themselves in the film. Rosalie says it well in "Oceans Apart;" "white people like our traditional art because they can romanticize it and because it's a commercial venture for them. They prefer that to our urban art because our urban art is about them and what they have done to us."

NOTES

1. Marcia Langton is an Aboriginal anthropologist at James Cook University. She was also an actress in Tracey Moffatt's film "Night Cries." Her book is entitled "Well, I heard it on the radio, and I saw it on the TV."
2. "In and Out of Africa." 1992. Featuring Gabai Baaré. Directed & Produced by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor. Based on original research by Christopher B. Steiner.