

Living in Woolloomooloo

There is something both beautiful and terrible about Woolloomooloo. I felt it on the first day I arrived as if I had always lived here. I felt drawn to it, welcomed, then possessed by it. I was finally home, yet the people I encountered in Woolloomooloo seemed on edge. It is not like other areas of the inner city, and over the years I have realised that human history has somehow been imprinted energetically, into the land, onto the streets, into the bricks and mortar and that energy vibrates under the houses and in the laneways. I sense it mostly at night. The energy shifts as soon as my feet hit Cathedral Street. It is a definite change I feel in my spine as my shadow dances on the pavement when I walk home in the dead of night. I peripherally glimpse other more mysterious shadows that vanish when I turn towards them and then a living stillness, watches me. Woolloomooloo is one of the most haunted places in Sydney. The atmosphere is dense with it - a presence of which very few notice unless it wants you to notice.

The shoreline used to start at Cathedral Street. The house I live in is built on Gadigal land. The whole area used to be an Aboriginal hunting ground, a mangrove & an estuary so Woolloomooloo is historically and culturally significant to the Gadigal people. It was once a place for indigenous ceremonies. Stories from the 1800s tell of two or three hundred people who lived in Woolloomooloo and nearby at the Domain. Traces of that community are found in cave paintings that survive to this day, although the development of Woolloomooloo obliterated the original population. I mean, who knows what is buried under these homes? The Aboriginal people were brutalised all over Australia, so I doubt it would be any different here in one of the first settlements in Australia. Woolloomooloo means either 'good hunting' or 'burial ground'. No one can agree on which. From the ghosts I've encountered here, I think it's the latter. This place is filled with Aboriginal spirits. It's a history you can feel in your spine, disconcerting for a stranger but not to me because this is my home, and it feels as if it has always been my home.

We had huge old-growth trees and owls here once. Powerful Owls began roosting here in Woolloomooloo. Very few saw or cared about the owls. No one looks up anymore. I tried to save the trees they lived in and was told the trees were dangerous, and some people even suggested the owls weren't real. Yes, I was accused of lying even though I documented their arrival and tried my best to create an awareness of the owls. When the trees were felled and the owls were gone, part of my soul was felled with them.

After 25 years, I feel trapped here, as if I cannot extricate myself from the complexities of urban village life. Woolloomooloo public housing is above all a village - where everyone thinks they know everyone and everything about them. For every blessing, there is a problem to be dealt with here. It is as if the single most cursed thing that ever happened to me was moving to Woolloomooloo. After twelve years on a waiting list, my number came up, and I was assigned a 19th-century workers terrace, which I love. The moment I walked into the house, I knew it was mine. I had waited so long that I forgot I'd applied. Back then, I had a two-year-old child and lived and worked in the city. I was a young and talented artist with everything going for me, and I was overjoyed to be finally housed with a lifetime lease. No one could evict us. I was secure at last. However, I was hated in this neighbourhood when I first arrived and for many years after. A confident, attractive

inner-city artist in a public housing estate was rare, and a lot of people did not like me. I've been vilified, ridiculed, judged, physically attacked, had my home set on fire, undermined and underestimated. I've experienced such significant psychological trauma in Woolloomooloo that my career, which had begun to shine, was completely sabotaged.

After ten years of being confronted by ignorance, violence, apathy, addiction, mental illness, ingratitude and negativity, I wanted to get out of the public housing system. Even murder has been committed here deeply traumatising the community. It has been little more than cruel to me, save for a handful of kind people that I now count as friends.

Woolloomooloo surpasses any average level of neighbourhood dysfunction. There are a handful of reasonable people and a few great charities that do excellent work with the homeless and the poor, but in the end, poverty is a state of mind.

I have wanted to move out of the public housing system for some time now – ever since they changed the rules and stopped offering the houses for sale to tenants, which was a foolish policy move. I almost succeeded in leaving on a few occasions, thwarted by the system and a handful of jealous people. I've been attacked, at times continuously, until I could no longer do or enjoy my work. This is a truth about Woolloomooloo public housing that few can accept. It's an artist-killer and an anti-motivator, when it should be the opposite. It should be, and still could be, an affordable urban oasis for creative professionals if we ever get an able government that understands the concept of 'creative capital', urban culture and appropriate placement policy.

This is Woolloomooloo. It's prime real state. People in the private sector salivate over it. The conservatives want it privatised, so that their property values increase, properties they bought cheaply because of the proximity to the homeless, homeless services, and a public housing community. They want it sanitised and gentrified, and at times, I don't blame them. Some days I want the same, but we have a legally binding protection in place called the Tripartite Agreement. The only way this public asset can be sold is if local, state and federal governments are in simultaneous agreement. Conservative state & federal governments have been desperate to get rid of Sydney mayor, Clover Moore who supports and protects these communities and has always done so.

For now, I am here with the ghosts and the ancestors, living and creating in my 1840's terrace on Gadigal land.