PANEL ONE: DECOLONISING VISUAL CULTURE ON NOONGAR BOODJA

The Black Lives Matter movement transformed global consciousness in 2020, bringing questions relating to the stories we make visible in our civic and popular culture to the fore as statues and monuments around the world tumbled.

In solidarity with the protests, the names of some of the hundreds of Indigenous people who have died in custody were projected on a landmark sculpture in Walyalup (Fremantle) during 2020, bringing into focus place, visibility, history and the resonance of the BLM movement in Western Australia, the state with the largest number of Indigenous deaths in custody.

To launch our In Visible Ink Symposium In 2021, we convened a conversation around the themes of deconstruction and reconstruction of visual and civic culture. From a powerful opening conversation led by Aboriginal women and women of colour, to a dynamic panel discussion on the reconstruction and reclamation of sidelined cultural identities through subverting music, design and pop culture, we concluded our event with a series of outdoor projections and playlist that speak to the ongoing history of deconstruction and appropriation of cultures.

PARTICIPANTS

Shaheen Hughes is Chief Executive Officer of The Museum of Freedom and Tolerance. Shaheen has a background in international, national and state policy and advocacy, a master's degree in International Communications and an honours in Art History and English Literature. Shaheen is a tireless advocate of the arts, passionate about creating diverse and inclusive environments and social justice solutions and committed to fighting hate and intolerance.

Sisonke Msimang is the author of Always Another Country: A memoir of exile and home and The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela. She is a South African writer whose work is focussed on race, gender and democracy. She has written for a range of international publications including the New York Times, the Washington Post, The Guardian, Newsweek, Bloomberg, and Al Jazeera. Sisonke has held fellowships at Yale University, the Aspen Institute and the Bellagio Centre.

Professor Suvendrini Perera is John Curtin Distinguished Professor and Research Professor of Cultural Studies in the School of Media, Culture & Creative Arts. She has published widely on issues of social justice, including decolonisation, race, ethnicity and multiculturalism, refugee topics, critical whiteness studies and Asian-Australian studies. Suvendi has combined her academic career with participation in policymaking, public life and activism.

Dr Hannah McGlade is an Indigenous human rights lawyer, Associate Professor at Curtin Law School, and member of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues. She has published widely and her book Our Greatest Challenge, Aboriginal children and human rights received the Stanner Award in 2011. Hannah has been at the forefront of the development of key organisations in Perth and WA, in relation to Aboriginal women legal supports, Noongar radio and Stolen Generations and healing. Hannah has also played an active role in law

reform, and her case McGlade v Lightfoot (2002) was the first successful finding of race vilification of Aboriginal people under Commonwealth legislation. She is also a descendant of Moses Woibung from the Carrolup mission.

Anna Arabindan Kesson is an immigrant art historian, writer and curator. She is Assistant Professor of Black Diasporic Art with a joint appointment in the Departments of African American Studies and Art and Archaeology at Princeton University. In her research and teaching she focuses on Black Diaspora and British Art, with an emphasis on histories of race, empire, and medicine. Her first book Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton and Commerce in the Atlantic World, is available for preorder from Duke University Press

EDITED TRANSCRIPT

Sisonke: Hi, everyone, thanks so much Shaheen. I am really pleased to be here tonight. And I too want to acknowledge that we are on Noongar Boodja, to acknowledge that this is indeed a place of many, many stories, and to acknowledge elders past, present and of course, the community of elders who are yet to emerge, an incredible community of Noongar activists and pioneers who we are seeing all around us constantly in particular want to greet and thank for their presence today, all Indigenous Australians. I want to begin by introducing the panel, and then we're gonna cut straight to a film clip. And then we'll start our discussion. We don't have long but we're going to pack a big punch.

(video plays)

They told us not to come, they told us to be silent. We will not be silent. We will say their names.

We will say their names.

On the 12th of June 2020, in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter marches across Australia, the names of some of the 437 Aboriginal people who have died in police custody were projected on the rainbow sculpture, a local monument by artist Marcus Canning. The sculpture sits at number one Canning Highway, overlooking the Derbal Yerrigan, the Swan River, in Walyelup, the Port of Fremantle, Western Australia. The sight of these video projections between the river and the sea, overlooking the Port of Fremantle, and in the distance Wadjemup, Rottnest Island, the largest deaths in custody site in Australia is one that carries layers of historical significance. Directly above is Cantonment Hill, the seat of British military occupation, reminding us of the colonial monuments being pulled down across the world. The projections bring this site and layers of violence into focus anew.

The Prime Minister thinks that Black Lives Matter should not be imported into this country from overseas. He said we had no slavery in this country. The first building erected in the Swan River colony was the Roundhouse in Fremantle. It was built in 1830 to incarcerate Aboriginal men, who resisted colonists attempts to enslave and indenture them to wealthy pastoralists. Many of the men forcibly taken in neck chains to Rottnest Wadjemup, died at the island, many were executed. And this island is the largest mass grave in Australia today. At night, the families would signal to the imprisoned kin on Wadjemup through secret fires on Cantonment Hill, and hundreds of these men would never see their countries again.

Rottnest is called the black man's grave and may not after all be such delightful spot in which to pass the idle hours as one might fancy.

When we say Black Lives Matter here in Australia, we are speaking of Ms Dhu, Cherdeena Wynne, Chad Riley, Joyce Clark, and many more, we remember the two young men who died after being chased into the Derbal Yerrigan river on a cold and windy day by police.

Sisonke: So, the two of you were involved, of course, in the making of this film, and there's more to it. But I'm interested in talking a little bit about why you decided to make this film, what the impetus was for the film, maybe you want to start Suvendi?

Suvendi: This is the first five minutes of 10-minute film that Hannah and I and a couple of others been involved with. And it's work in progress. The voice that you heard, the male voice that you heard is the voice of Len Collard, we're still putting titles on it. We made this film after a couple of days of the Black Lives Matter protests, when they began in the US, Shaheen, Hannah, and I had a series of conversations and we wanted to stage something local. And there were two things that were central to our idea of the film. One was, as Shaheen said, visual culture, we wanted to do something that would be seen, you know, say their name, see their names. And we were very aware of people doing all kinds of creative things on the streets at the time of the lockdown, so people were standing on their local corner holding up signs, and we wanted to do our equivalent of that.

So, we looked at our local landmark, but we didn't just pick any landmark. We wanted to think about the idea of the monument. And when we talk about monuments, people often think that it means statues. But we think that visual culture and monumentality is something much larger than that. It's wider than that, I sit in this room and I look at the displays, the display cabinets, and I look at what's in those cabinets when I came in here. And I think this also is monumentality. It's what is exalted, and we think of monumentality, also as a kind of infrastructure. So, we had we chose Canning Highway, a sculpture by an artist called Marcus Canning. This was not accidental; they are part of the monumental infrastructure of the state. And we wanted to connect that with the notion of black lives and the taking of black lives and the denial of the genocide against black lives.

Sisonke: In part, this conversation, to frame it a little bit, we are having this conversation, in the context of very real effects of racism, and sexism on people's lives today, and much of your work, Hannah, is centred on protecting the rights of Indigenous people in a system in which black people turn up dead very often. The question for me for an activist like yourself is, why does art matter? In what ways does art matter to someone who is concerned with black lives?

Hannah: This is public art and activism for human rights. And that's always been a part of what Indigenous people have done. And I'm just remembering the rallies that were held a long time ago, and the older activists, some who are no longer here would stop at some of the settler colonial figures. And protest, I remember my mum, giving a former Prime Premier Carmen Lawrence, some flour outside one of the statues. But yeah, I mean, art is definitely a part of our life. And although the investment certainly isn't there, it's also really important to healing. But this was a memorial that I was really happy to be a part of, to highlight the deaths in custody. And

we're now approaching 30 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody, and some of those protests for that Royal Commission actually happened just around here.

Sisonke: It's fitting in some ways that this session is around in visibility, it will not have been missed by people that we are meeting in a week in which there has been a lot of visibility around rape and sexual violence. And I have been thinking a lot about the fact that Ms Dhu was 22 years old when she was killed, and of course, Brittany Higgins is a young woman who is in her 20s. And I think it's really important to note the differential, the differential attention, that different lives garner, how much pain we feel. And I think it's really important to feel pain for what Brittany Higgins has gone through. This is a no way to diminish that pain. But it is to talk a little bit about how we make certain pain more visible. Anna, that's my question for you is, what is the role of art in helping to make what is not visible, visible?

Anna: I can just start with this work by New York based artist Hank Willis Thomas. And it's called The Writing's on the Wall. And this is a projection of prisoners, incarcerated people's writing, poetry, note taking about their fear of COVID. And it's been projected onto the New York criminal department buildings. Hank is an artist who does a lot of work around advertising and branding, but he's also an activist, and he works very closely with a lot of different communities. But I think your question about pain and invisibility, I think one of the really powerful things that Hank's work revolves around is creating the space for not just histories, but I think language and ways of speaking that perhaps are not visible, but also, we're not listening for those for those ways.

Art is a portal, and it activates these histories.

Sisonke: you said in your opening remarks that statues shouldn't be torn down. I want to push you around that one a little bit. Why not?

Shaheen: I quite enjoyed some of the statues coming down. I will say I think the Edward Colston statue in Bristol coming down and then particularly Banksy's evocation of what might be done in its place was interesting and important. But I think statues coming down connotes a sort of violence and an opposition and enforces a polarity between people between people that love the statues and respect the history that they know and understand. And the desecration of those statues is sort of seen as acts of vandalism. I think that polarity is not good.

I think we can use this as a teachable moment to have conversations that are art based, I love the way we have projected on statues. I think my favourite piece in that presentation is the Robert E. Lee Confederate monument with the black ballerina dancers, I think we can do more through art that is less violent, potentially, we need to understand that statues tell one history, but there are many. And art really is the way to do that in a way that bridges and that heals. And isn't this violent desecration that actually hurts people. For me art heals rather than hurts. And I think it's important, we can do more with statues to teach that there is one side of the story, there is also another than merely ripping them down. I guess that's the way I'd approach it.

Suvendi: I just wanted to add one more bit of context to what was happening when we did these projections. And that was that during those weeks, we also had the destruction of the Juukan Gorge artworks. And one of

the questions we wanted to pose was, why was the destruction of those artworks, in what way did we acknowledge sufficiently the kind of hurt and pain and destruction that that caused? And so that that was sort of one of the questions around us thinking about what I said, you know, monuments, monumentality, what counts as a monument and whose monuments can be reduced to rubble? And in what context is that unthinkable? Because it clearly wasn't unthinkable for that to happen. And then the other context that I think is important is that the State Government of WA renamed the Leopold Ranges in that week. And this was seen as a great gesture of, you know, which I agree with, King Leopold, we don't want to have mountains named after him. But who were the people who did that naming, the person who did that naming was Forrest. The first, you know, surveyor, first Premier. How many things have we got named after Forrest? That was the context in which we kind of did our projections.

Sisonke: I'm curious Anna on what you think about this question of statues being torn down?

Anna: I think you should tear it all down. No, let me clarify that. I think, I agree, I think art is about healing. And I think there's, as you said that that projection is, I mean, there's been some really wonderful, fascinating new kinds of monuments emerging from this conversation. Not just projections, but murals and you know, which as Suvendi is saying is, is forcing us to think rethink, you know, what is a monument? What does it mean to memorialise and to remember, I think, though the symbolic gesture of tearing things down is important to hold in place. Because what it reminds us is that if we going to make these changes, we can't make them within the structures as they are. We need to dismantle before we can rebuild. And I think that that's why I think these, this sort of the tearing down can also be the ground from which to rebuild in really powerful ways.

Sisonke: I think that's really interesting. And if we had if we had time for it, I would talk a little bit about the South African example. But I'm the moderator, not a panelist. Hannah, do you think it's easier to talk about the symbolic and to talk about statues than it is to talk about real bodies and black lives?

Hannah: It does seem a lot like that. That the art seems to gain a lot more attention and discussion, although, you know, it's been under attack badly then, say Indigenous human rights and what's happening and Suvendi’s talked about Juukan Gorge. And of course, we've got the Burrup rock art, which is also incredibly ancient, and which is now under threat from two major developments nearby, which is just staggering. We also know that the Bunjuma people had a rock fall last week. And we have had about 100, heritage applications for destroying Aboriginal sites that have been approved. And I think there's about three that have actually been refused. So, this is the society that Indigenous people grow up with here is that our heritage is absolutely, totally disrespected and violated. And we have a big challenge around legislation, the Heritage Act, which is up for Parliament this year still gives the Minister the right to keep just granting approval to destroy heritage. So as Senator Pat Dodson said, we're looking at genocide here, if you destroy all Aboriginal sites and places of worship, what is left? We had a court case a few years ago, where the department officers decided that they would take off about 500 Aboriginal heritage sites from the register. And they determined that places were not Aboriginal heritage unless people went and performed European like worship at those places. We had to go to the court and make sure all those places were put back on but there is no proper legal protection. And there is no proper respect for the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which respects our right to culture, this is absolutely integral to land and heritage.

Sisonke: If we think about this wonderful new word that I didn't know until today about monumentality, can you say a little bit more Suvendi? About what that what that means in the context of money, because the Juukan Gorge example, it's about the ways in which heritage and culture are tied fundamentally, to money, to resource extraction, there's an economic impetus, and I wonder if you can make a comment about that and what that means in a cityscape?

Suvendi: I think it is about money, but it's also about value. It's about what can be valued and what cannot be valued. Or what is seen as worthless, a better word is actually disposable. What is disposable? And what is to use the word I used before? Unthinkable? It would be unthinkable. I'm sorry, I'm kind of obsessed by these objects in the cases. And I think about what kind of desecration would it be seen as if some of those objects, some of those images were, you know, removed? I think it's sort of, yes, its money, but it's also about value. It's about what we value and how do you make that visible in a way that you see the cost that was involved in that?

Sisonke: I think that's a really beautiful way of putting it. It's like, what is the cost of this? What is the cost of having this conversation in this place? What do we value? So, part of the work, I think that many of us are trying to be engaged in at the moment, is the work of thinking about reframing. About if we recognise that the analysis is that, at the moment, black life is not valued by many, and that is actually institutionally devalued. Then what are the things that need to be done to shift that so that black life does matter?

That's what the movement is about. So, what are the ways in which art can do that? And is it about these conversations with shifting the relationship with monuments? What are the ways beyond the tearing down? We've used tearing down statues as one example. And I'm interested in hearing other examples, that one shift value and I guess what I'm doing it clumsily. But what I want to do is to think about moving beyond talking about black people as bodies towards something that might approximate joy, which is something it's very hard to talk about in the context of so much death and so much killing, right.

But what happens is that there's a pathology around blackness, because it's always violence, it's always death. It's always these terrible things that are happening to us. And I want to begin to think about how we talk about joy, and what does that look like? Is it possible? And maybe I'll start that with you Anna.

Anna: I do think part of part of what is needed to move from that pathologisation is different values. I'm always going back to Audrey Lorde. And her quote, the master’s tools cannot be used to rebuild. And so. So that's a very academic answer, it's a great quote, it is a great quote, but I would just think of someone like Amy Sherald, who painted Michelle Obama, but she recently did a portrait of a young African American woman who was shot in her bed, Breonna Taylor in a blue dress. And it's on the cover of Time. And Amy's work is beautiful. But I think that in that question of visibility and, you know, creating space for stories, and for memorialising black women in a place like the US, that's one way of coming up this question of joy, I think another way would be thinking about the way some local community artists are working with murals as a site of collaboration, and memorialization. Which is again very different to statue building.

Sisonke: This is a hard question for you Hannah because so much of the work that you do is so hard, but I do wonder, I think it's an important one for activists for people who are tired and burned out. I do wonder about how you think about the space for joy in the work that you do.

Hannah: We're very connected to our culture, our country, so I go back to my country and all of us say this is how we protect and sustain ourselves. And, you know, believe in our ancestors, in our land. I've been talking, yarning with local women about setting up our Aboriginal women's arts group. I find it pretty shocking that we have no Aboriginal Women's Centre in Perth, we used to 20 years ago. We have no Aboriginal arts centre here. You can go to a lot of communities and there's an investment in Aboriginal arts, but I think there have been some federal cutbacks. This is something that's really important for us to do. But of course, we don't have the support for that, the philanthropy wants to impose cash debit cards on people and it's really, really tough.

Sisonke: Suvendi, same question to you about joy.

Suvendi: Well, I want to say two things. I want to quote Audrey Lorde, who we all love so much, where she talks about the power of the erotic and the erotic is about energy. It's about whatever energises you. And I think we often sort of we polarise things like, there's creation and there's destruction, there's anger, and there's joy. And really, I think those things are actually more connected than we often acknowledge. And I think that there is joy, there is power, there is pleasure in naming things, in making things visible. In speaking, in solidarity, all of those things are things of joy. When Hannah was talking about survival. That's the kind of secret of survival really, you know, it's keeping joy and pleasure and erotic as energy in lives of indescribable pain. And beauty, of course.

Sisonke: Beautiful answer, Shaheen question to you about joy.

Shaheen: Joy is really important. Hope and joy are two things that are incredibly important in our work. And as Suvendi said, they are not polar opposites. They're so intertwined. And so often people are scared to go on these dark journeys, because they think the tunnel is dark. But there is always a light at the other end, every marginalised voice that ever speaks does so to be heard, and to have joy and to sing, and to go back into rich, beautiful cultures that exist throughout the global south, where people make art and sit together and sing and dance. And these are really joyful practices that have been made invisible.

And I think, ironically, with the visibility of the suffering over the last year, it's dehumanized these marginalised populations, because we're used to seeing slaves and chains. And we're used to seeing (people who look like) George Floyd die. And this visibility of suffering has been really hard to bear. And I think at some point, we need to, while paying it respect, flip it, and I'm sort of giving the game away about our next panel.

But you know, we want to talk to the young, black, Indigenous people that are changing that narrative. We're not dead bodies, we're not, walking around with targets on our back. We are beautiful, warm people who sing and make art and who dance.

And that's an area that so many of us can come together. And I think that's the importance of diverse representation. Because we don't just want to see the black people dying on our screens, we want to see black

people laughing and dancing and living and being joyful. And that's the journey that we're all on, which is why I think we do need to deconstruct, but that reconstruction is richer, and will bring everybody joy. I don't think it's just joy for black communities. I think it's joy, equality and freedom for everyone.

Sisonke: Wonderful. I couldn't agree more. The never-ending glory of black cultures, the joy of Michael Jackson, the joy of everything, the joy of jazz, the joy that I think so many Indigenous communities have given to this world wouldn't have existed without the pain that produces those. It is a form of genius, I think.

This is a wonderful place to end, so that we can begin by thinking about hip hop as one of the most important genius things. I wore my T shirt specifically for the panel that comes next. I want to say thank you to all of you for an engaging super quick, super deep dive in such a quick period of time into questions that we can never resolve or exhaust.