

## Displacing Whiteness in the Arts and Education: Dialogues in Action

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In July 2017, Arts House in Melbourne, Australia<sup>1</sup> held an event titled, “Art & Action: Displacing Whiteness in the Arts.” The discussion was hosted and developed by invited Latinx artist-researcher Tania Cañas, in collaboration with Arts House producer Naomi Velaphi. The all-female panel included First Nations Australian choreographer, teacher and dancer Mariaa Randall, academic and writer Odette Kelada, and South African performance artist Sethembile Msezane. ‘Displacing Whiteness in the Arts’ focused on how First Nations Women and Women of Colour navigate and use their arts practice to challenge systemic racism and oppression within the arts writ large, including the whiteness embedded within arts education institutions. The director of Arts House, Angharad Wynne-Jones, was interviewed by Nithya Iyer, an editor for Peril Magazine. The interview focused on how the season’s program, especially this event, was a response to the racial homogeneity of the arts. Iyer (2017) writes,

The arts sector is the least cultural diverse sector in Australia. That’s a track to redundancy. How can we possibly be telling meaningful cultural narratives of any sort unless that changes? I can’t imagine that that’s not evident to mainstream cultural institutions. (Iyer, 2017)

Wynne-Jones noted that the ‘Displacing Whiteness in the Arts’ panel was the most popular event that season and that ‘people are up for it’. ‘It’ here, appears to signify the need and hunger for critical work on whiteness and deconstructing white supremacy and privilege. We suggest that many of the moments in which race is confronted and learning occurs most profoundly is through forums and live

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<sup>1</sup> Arts House is a contemporary performance site based in North Melbourne Town Hall on Kulin Nations Land. It primarily programs new, local live performance, development opportunities as well and critical discussions.

conversations where experiences are exchanged and dialogue is foregrounded. The resonances of the panel conversation continue beyond the day of the event. Thus, here, we present some of the panellists' discussion, questions, observations and stories about displacing whiteness. The panel offered their personal insight regarding the impact of whiteness on artists and the arts, ways to avoid giving more power to whiteness through centralising its placement even while attempting to decentre, and focusing attention on platforms and resources for artists that are marginalised by whiteness. Upon invitation, the panellists were asked to consider : how can art, actions and interventions create sites of resistance within colonial and institutional arts settings?

Public art events that educate audiences through the race narratives of Indigenous and Women of Colour are rare, and moreover, undervalued. Meanwhile, formalised training courses for predominantly white audiences are prioritized and frequent. To activate the audience's awareness of this disparity in organizational values, Tania Cañas, the event host and panel facilitator, opened the night with a performance art piece. Cañas' performance was a satirical take on the type of corporatized race education training delivered at institutions and arts organisations to build "tolerance" for "diversity," and achieve "cultural competency." "Tick-the-box" approaches to race trainings fail to confront a need for core structural and systematic changes that would effectively disrupt dominant power relations and disrupt the construction of whiteness as the assumed "norm." Frankenberg (1997) concludes: In these processes once again whiteness may remerge as the generic place marker, with whites asked to become 'competent' in relating to members of 'marked' cultural groups...(p.18)

Drawing from race educator Robin Di Angelo's work on White Fragility (2018), Cañas' interactive performance sought to reconfigure "marked" cultural groups, and instead apply such language to whiteness. In doing so, whiteness is "marked," it becomes visible, tangible and structural. This shift directly challenges the directional gaze of whiteness as the hubris of zero point (Santiago Castro-Gómez, 2007) and what Rolando Vázquez (2014) later articulates as the epistemological zero point; whiteness as the invisible (to white people), omnipresent and centralised point of analysis, power and structure. In attempting to expose whiteness, the event began with what decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo (2009) describes as an act of epistemic disobedience.

The event's title, "Art & Action: Displacing Whiteness in the Arts", intentionally referenced the book *Displacing Whiteness*, edited by critical whiteness scholar Ruth Frankenburg. Frankenburg's three-part definition of whiteness articulated in the landmark work *White*

Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness has been frequently cited by scholars since its publication in 1993. Capturing the layered conceptual complexity of the term, Frankenburg (1993) writes,

First whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a 'standpoint', a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, at society. Third, 'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (p.1)

The panel queried the notion of displacing whiteness as a possibility given the historic, as well as contemporary, intrinsic nature of whiteness to possess and colonise place and space. Each panellist asked critical questions about how, if at all, an arts practice can displace whiteness. Odette Kelada observed that the word "displacing" is one she hears most often in the context of colonial displacing of people from their land, where the term operates as a "euphemism for genocide and violence." So, in that sense, the term itself enacts and evokes whiteness as whitewashing. Sethembile Msezane opened her remarks by professing, "I don't know if it is possible to displace whiteness. You can make it uncomfortable. You can challenge it". Mariaa Randall articulated her stance as "my life practice is to instil, reiterate, strengthen and focus on blackness, not displace whiteness."

## DIALOGUE

The dialogic potential offered by an event such as "Art & Action: Displacing Whiteness in the Arts" is that it presented an opportunity in which the "experienced reality of racism" amid a historical process of objectification, disregard and silencing may shift into the subjects perspective (Kilombra 2010, p. 41). Subject perspective offers not only a shift in view, but also an interrogation of institutional understandings of individual-collective, knowledge and knowledge-making authority. This shift was also an active and conscious stance to position the panellists as knowing subjects, thus seeking to counter the violence of First Nation and Women of Colour have been historically viewed as subjects that must be known and translated through white institutional practices of research and arts (Smith, 2012). In doing so each speaker challenged the binary of arts as academe and industry being knowing/knowledge maker, object/subject, research/researched, artist/participant, everyday/institutional. For example, Mariaa Randall described her dance practice as "not separate from my life practice" and elaborated that "it is a life practice because my life and my art are not, are never, separate. What goes on in Aboriginal Australia obviously has an effect directly on me."

Kilomba (2010) powerfully argues that the experienced realities of racism are only further exacerbated in “public and academic spheres” (p.40). Therefore this article seeks to make integral the dialogic moments of “Displacing Whiteness” as an event that exposes everyday racism as structural racism, and thus experiences of art making, research and living as interconnected racialised experiences. In this paper, we weave through excerpts of the panel conversation that speaks to themes of whiteness, invisibility/visibility, bodies and institutional power in the arts and education. The dialogue moves from speaking about whiteness to moving on from speaking about whiteness as a politics of refusal (Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2014), demonstrating creative resistance and the importance of community for artists within and beyond mainstream educational institutions. It is by nature of the speaking voices and source as a live event for a public audience, fragmentary and non-linear in presentation and method. We contend that to create linearity beyond that required to understand the insights, exchanges and moments of reflection by the speakers, would involve activating a problematic assumption in such editing acts of how words are expected to be tidied and in effect “cleaned up.” Adhering to dominant academic form and expectation of texts for consumption can re-inscribe whiteness in restoring a “civilising” textual order over the apparent chaos of the verbal and dialogical.

It was a challenge to resist more containment and controlling of the transcript as text, which speaks to the internalisation of expectations of the “article,” the “journal,” the “reader”. It also speaks to how educational institutions, including arts education, are often experienced as sites where artists/students are moulded and pressured into compliant bodies that learn to conform and then to police the tones, methods, curricula, references and desirable outcomes of those that follow them. Aligning with this destabilization of dominant power, Mariaa Randall described, “I want to find out how my body moved without those foreign movements placed upon my body,” referring to the colonial perspective of preoccupation of technique within dance practice. Randall instead asserted that it was more important to have movement itself, as well as have Indigenous language present. With this in mind, in place of neat cuts, we use ellipses. The ellipses are a punctuating form that is commonly described in academic feedback as overused or unnecessary. A full stop should suffice. We deliberately and unapologetically overuse this sign of gaps, pauses, jumps, leaps, tangents, breaks, excesses and omissions as our methodology. Ellipses are how we sample from a fluid dynamic conversation on race, expression and art in text without providing answers, resolutions or conclusions.

We acknowledge that in the choices made of what is buried in the ellipses and not visible in print, there are ethical concerns and questions given the dynamics at play of editorial and authorial power – what is relevant to this topic as determined by us and the shape and forms of our own biases are implicated in this text. We also use [ ] to denote an action that is occurring on stage (eg. mannerisms, a clap).

## **SPEAKERS**

Panellists introductions spoke of context, politics, historical considerations, spirituality, the relational, community and thus a holistic personhood and practice.

### **Tania Cañas**

Host and facilitator. She is a Latinx, Salvadoran born, Australian-based artist-researcher working at the intersection of performance and the politics of border imperialism. Referred to as T.

### **Mariaa Randall**

First Nations Australian independent choreographer, teacher, director and dancer. Mariaa was the female choreographer and co-Artistic Director (2016) for Tanderrum Melbourne Festival's official opening ceremony. It is the meeting of the five clans of the Kulin Nation: Wurundjeri, Boon Wurrung, Taungurung, Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung. Tanderrum is the opening ceremony and Welcome to Country by the First Peoples, the traditional custodians of this land. Mariaa created the performance Divercity, as part of the 2015 Dance Massive; a bi-annual global meeting place to showcase contemporary dance in Melbourne. Divercity shared the many different ways in which Aboriginal languages, movement, paint up and stories differ depending on whose country you are on. Referred to as M.

### **Odette Kelada**

Australian born with English-Irish and Egyptian heritage. Academic in creative writing, her work focuses on voice, gender and race. In collaboration with Noongar artist and scholar Dianne Jones, she designed and teaches the course Racial Literacy at the University of Melbourne. The interdisciplinary course explores race, constructions of Indigeneity and whiteness, and seeks to develop skills for critically engaging, reading and understanding race representation and histories. She guest lectures as part of the intensive: Working in First Nations Cultural Contexts at Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne Australia. Her novel Drawing Sybylla explored the lives of women writing in Australia. Referred to as O.

## Sethembile Msezane

South African performance artist. Her work explores colonial and gender politics in South African acts of public commemoration. In 2015, during the student-led protests of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement, she presented the performance Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell at the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town. Previously she performed a series called Public Holiday in which she placed her body in juxtaposition to Cape Town's colonial monuments.

Sethembile was in Melbourne to perform Excerpts from the Past, a performance installation which interrogates colonial landscape, ancestral memory, remembrance and dispossession. Referred to as S.

### TRANSCRIPT

M: Gulibul, Gidabul, Bundjalung, Yaegl, [ ], Boon Wurrung, Wurundjeri, [ ]

My name is Margaret Mariaa Randall, I am named after my mum's mum, my dad's mum and my mum.

I'm named after three very, very strong women. I'm an aunt, I'm a sister, I am a daughter, cousin, a finance, I am a niece, I'm a friend, I'm a sister in law, I'm a Goori woman from the far north coast of New South Wales. I reside on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung out in Bendigo. I'm a presence, I'm a voice, I'm an artist too.

I'm an artist with a dance practice. A dance practice that is not separate from my life practice. And my life practice is to instil, reiterate, strengthen and focus on blakness<sup>2</sup>, not displace whiteness but to empower blakness in what I do. And how I do that, and for me, saying it is a life practice because my life and my art are not, are never, separate. What goes on in Aboriginal Australia obviously has an effect directly on me. So today, while I talk, my partner is out on country doing repatriation. Friday, two days before, there was a protest for Elijah Doughty, a young man whose lost his life, again at white hands. So for me to kind of sit and to somewhat feel like I dwell in whiteness, I do that and have done that for most of my life. So then for me to try to displace, that is giving power to whiteness and so for me to empower it [blakness] within me and what it is in what I do, it has to be about instilling blakness, instilling Gulibulness, instilling Aboriginalities, instilling a variety of blakness throughout

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2 Blak refers specifically to Aboriginal Australia

what it is that I do.

... one project that I've been able to do that is Tanderrum<sup>3</sup> and a given example of this is that I worked with 5 of the language groups from the Kulin nation which was the Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung, Wadawurrung, Taungurung and Boon Wurrung. And I was able to come in as the female choreographer. There is never one in those kinds of instances, it's male female, and work with them to find ways to bring back links to culture.

And so for me, being an Aboriginal person, it doesn't instantly qualify me to do that job. So in my life I've been able to work in my own community, in other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other wider communities and so that when I do come into something like Tanderrum, I'm not then appropriating Aboriginal culture from far north Queensland or from the Northern Territory - that I'm actually working with the mob down here to actually find ways to re..to find those links back to culture, so that it's a lot closer to them and it's not a kind of version of someone else's...and so finding those tools you know, finding the research ... it's not just working with young people, its working with elders , its working with mob that have never danced before, its working with mob that are starting to learn a language, and so for me as well its somewhat of a privilege to be able to be in that place and so to be able to have the skills and the experience to be placed in that environment is pretty – I find quite lucky- but then also there is a roll out effect as well because then that's part of what it is that is my life practice - that you know one day, whether its 25 years from now, whether its 50 years from now, whether its 100 years from now – that someone from my language group from Gidabul, from Gulibul, from Bundjalung, from Yaegl, is sitting here and speaking fluently in language whether you understand them or not.

So that's my PhD. That's going to be my life practice. I think I can talk quite a lot about that but then when we were doing Tanderrum, one of the Elders, Aunty Fay Carter, a Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta woman who turned 82 that year, said and reminded us all of the importance of an event such as Tanderrum.

So Tanderrum means ceremony in Kulin language and so it's basically the opening of the Melbourne Festival –

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3 <https://2016.festival.melbourne/events/tanderrum/#.XDBkz1wzaM8>

and she basically said that in her 82 years that now she is starting to learn her language and that when she was a kid she was never able to do that and so now that when I find myself presenting stuff on stage, language has to be present, movement has to be present – that is derived from where I come from, so that I'm not necessarily that focused on how well my technique is 'cause I want that to be stripped away, because I want to find out how my body moved without those foreign movements being placed upon my body.. that I want to look at the cycle of ceremony and the way in which it happens and how I put that into space, into place – without explaining it to anybody and that the work that I do create is now focused on black Aboriginal ideologies, methodologies and philosophies and so I don't intend to explain what it is that I create.

And if you don't get it, it's not my fault because I have and we continue to be educating people about who we are, who our cultures are, and what it is that they encompass. But there has never been a way of people taking that on board and going 'oh shit' I can learn that myself. I can learn about France, why can't I learn about Aboriginal Australia? So you know what I mean? I think that's where that for me it becomes empowering, because in that process I'm basically getting the wheels turning. And so then it's not just that are these spots. That they're kind of this continuum of things that becomes a bigger picture, becomes a bigger movement. So it's not just me creating a project for the sake of being an artist. Its actually this- ok I want this to accomplish this- I want this to accomplish and continue to accomplish this [hand gestures] and so then by those 100 years all those things are closer or somewhere near what it is that I want it to be. Yeh. [clap hands together] so yeh. So that's me. [laughs]

[applause]

T: Thank you...Sethembile...How does your practice displace whiteness?

S: I don't know if it is possible to displace whiteness. You can make it uncomfortable. You can challenge it but yeah...My name is Sethembile Msezane. I am from South Africa. I live in Cape Town but I was brought up in Johannesburg and born in KwaZulu-Natal. So being from these three cities I've had kind of a broad experience of what it is to be like as a young South African and a lot of my work speaks about the black female body and memorialised public spaces and I guess it all started in 2013 when I just finished university and I was now



working and I felt a bit mutinous in my own existence. I felt like even though I was a part, a functioning member of society, that my voice somehow did not matter or that was I not seen at all.

So on 24 September, which is Heritage Day in South Africa, where we celebrate our cultural identity, I decided that I was going to perform myself and perform my cultural identity which is being Zulu. So on that day, I performed in various spaces which involved standing on a white plinth, statuesque and I was wearing my Zulu regalia that I was wearing on my coming of age ceremony the previous year. Something happened when I was in various spaces, where I experienced people for the first time noticing that I was actually physically there and addressing me, even though I was not speaking to them.

I will tell you more about it later, but where it became most poignant for me to be in a public space, dressed in my Zulu regalia, on a plinth, was opposite Parliament in front of the Louis Botha statue, which is an Afrikaner Nationalist remembrance of Louis Botha as a former statesman and something else, can't remember. So there I started to understand my practice as something that was recognising that there's an absence of the black female body in the memorialised landscape in terms of statues, monuments and even architecture at times.

So after that, I started performing on public holidays, political ones. Christmas didn't really work. I would embody women who had the same symbolism as the history I was talking about, the space that I was talking about and things that I just wanted to draw out. So my practice has been a lot about remembering, acknowledging and highlighting women's existence within our history, as well as mythology, mostly in South Africa, but also branching out within the broader continent....

O: So my name's Odette Kelada... I work as a lecturer at the University of Melbourne...

so I firstly, who am I, I was born in Melbourne and my mother is white. She was born in London, but all the family are Irish, from Tipperary. My father is Egyptian, from Alexandria, Coptic. Growing up in Melbourne, I had no idea about race, not thinking about it. ...

Then I met an amazing woman who is here today and I'd like to acknowledge her, Dianne Jones, who is an incredible artist, subverting white colonial histories. In our conversations and even just in walking around spaces, I realised and I learnt that this space changes so much depending on the bodies - sounds so obvious - the bodies that we're in and I would see the way that people would look at her and treat her as an Aboriginal woman and the way they would treat me, because I know whiteness, I was brought up in it...

We do have a course, called Racial Literacy, Indigeneity and Whiteness. I spend time predominantly talking to students who are 'discovering' that they are white. Probably we will get into that, but the journey that they're on is one that I know from the inside and that's what I think makes something happen in those spaces, which is difficult to describe, but pretty powerful.

... I think something like this topic, displacing whiteness, I think there's a lot we could say about the title.

Displacing, I normally use - I hear that word in regards to displacing other peoples, as a euphemism for genocide and violence, so that word is inherently white to me, when I hear something like that in this context. So I'm interested now in the creative ways to come at this, in creative arts, to counter...

T: I guess going off these introductions, the fact that in particular in this context, institutional whiteness, citizenship, it's everywhere and there are different ways of reading whiteness, depending on your social positionality and I think that's another sort of important thing to mention. So whether it's a lack of visibility from reflexivity from the self or whether you inherently feel it every single day, even though you might not call it whiteness per se and then come to that understanding after or through a process.

So I wanted to pass on, I guess specifically when we were talking about your practice, you mentioned methodologies and I think you gave us some really interesting examples around you said there's more than one person involved. So what does that mean in terms of how power is situated different in a creative process? As well the thing you mentioned around improvisation not seen as like, oh we just improv'd this on the side, how you really value that as part of a process and being. Could you speak to that a little bit more?

M: So in regard to something like Tanderrum it's obviously the elders hold - there is the hierarchy, whether people believe it or not, the elders kind of hold the hierarchy. But then in this kind of instance where knowledge is - there's the cultural knowledge and then there's the artistic knowledge and where those two things stand.

So for me, coming in, yeah, so it was kind of like a very, very massive kind of matrix of how to negotiate stuff. You've got obviously because I'm not from down here and working with mob that are from down here and then you've got elders and then you've got their community, majority are the grandmothers, you've got their sons and daughters and their nieces and nephews and their grandchildren there as well. So then kind of placing yourself in the context of being a performance is very different of going your place within that and how you navigate that is, again, very different as well. So when you talk about the improvisation stuff, I think it was your yarning more about one of the works that premiered here actually as part of Dance Massive in March, is called *Diversity*<sup>4</sup> which is a work I created with Kuku Yalanji woman, Henrietta Baird and Biripi Ngugi woman, Ngioka Bunda-Heath...

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So when I created *Diversity*, that's what I wanted to have in the space, so I had - there was the yarn that was happening and that there was that relationship that was happening between the dances. But if Henrietta got totally tired, she could just go and sit on someone's lap and go, hey, how are you doing? So that's part of her personality and so there was kind of that - yeah, so there was no kind of disconnection, no passiveness in that regard to it and so that basically kept them on their toes as well, because then they had to be aware of what was going on in the audience and how they could potentially change it if they wanted to.

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M: ... the dramaturgic of the work was based around cultural protocols and so basically that determined how the work rolled out. So for me, it was - so as I done when I began talking, I acknowledged where I'm from and then I acknowledged on whose country I'm on. So that was then decided, like whenever the dancers walked in, they

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4 <http://www.artshouse.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Diversity-by-Mariaa-Randall-Show-Program.pdf>

acknowledged where they were from and then when they stepped into the space, they acknowledged whose country they were on.

So then the way in which we set that conversation up was that so once they enter, then the work is basically about how we navigate as Aboriginal women going to someone else's country and the idea of how we carry country. So carrying country, where that's language, whether that's movement, there's definitely we carry humour through our bodies and from our country. There's one joke that I can tell someone that the other mob just won't know, or there is a general humour that everyone kind of knows about.

So then it became so as the performers on stage, Henrietta's the oldest, so she's the senior, so she enters the space first and then Ngioka comes in and then there is a space of giving each of the dancers that time of acknowledging what country they come from and what they're carrying and then how a conversation starts between the two, so then how that kind of builds over time.

T: I think what's really great about what you shared now about your process is that those aren't auxiliary things to a core process, they are the core process and that in and of itself as a site of resistance even, that you spoke about.

M: Yeah, yeah.

T to S: If you could share a little bit more about your practice in terms of some monuments and public space, would you say it's a form of re-writing history or making visible certain histories? How would you situate your work?

S: Yeah, so I'm not sure if it's necessarily re-writing just because it's very much a part of history, it's just not official history<sup>5</sup>. I am interested in women who have been marginalised and vilified within history and mythology. So within the first kind of segment of my performances, which was the public holiday series, I found myself I guess trying to acknowledge the existence and looking at them within a space that had already formed around me as a young person and saying, but wait, hold on, I cannot find my own identity within this

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5 Something Mignolo (2011) in *The darker side of western modernity* articulates as the modernity/colonial discourse that histories are present and interconnected but one becomes official and the other, as the book title suggests, becomes is the other side of the coin, the darker, silenced, side of western modernity.

space. So how do we begin to rectify that or to even speak about it? Performance as a medium was the best way that I could kind of counter these thoughts.

... with all of these kinds of public holidays, there is a significance behind them which roots back to the injustices that happened during apartheid and some of the political public holidays changed in name so that it could suit the ideals of a more inclusive democracy, I suppose.

So for instance, Human Rights Day now was called Sharpeville Day before and people knew exactly what Sharpeville Day was, when you said it. It was a day when policemen killed people in the township in Sharpeville and people, yeah, they died. But now it's Human Rights Day, which makes it a big ambiguous.

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There's a lot of racial tensions in South Africa. We haven't resolved a lot of things. There's class tensions as well and now we're having problems in which we - people are calling it xenophobia, but it's actually Afri-phobia because it's a type of foreigner that is being rejected, killed and harmed, which is African. So we have all of these issues that I kind of just wanted to speak about through using my body and speaking about women's histories as well, because we've always been engaged within our society, politically but even within the home...

I think I kind of just moved into domestic interiors as well to find who I am as a person because I feel that anyone does this, before they leave the house, you either look in the mirror or you prepare yourself for the day. Sometimes the mental preparation is not necessarily, oh I'm going to work, I need to draft these emails, but it's more subconscious. You're like, wow, I am going to a space now where my boss is going to not listen to what I have to say because I'm a woman, they're not going to listen to what I have to say because they don't see me, they see no value in my views, but my male colleague, or a white woman, will say the exact same thing and it will hold more ground.

So yeah, I guess that's where I was in the beginning with trying to be really present and say, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here and this is the reason why I'm here and see me, not me necessarily, but see black women. Now I'm in a space where I'm in a domestic environment and I'm saying, no, but I do

exist, my people exist and we don't have to explain how, we're present and it should be enough, but within the society that we live in, it isn't enough.

T: Yeah and I think what we're beginning to see and some of us know innately, is that practice and research, it's all one in the same. You're constantly doing the double reading, the triple reading especially at the intersections that we find ourselves in. There's a particular quote by a Chicana theorist called Hurtado that she said in the late '80s and she said that women of colour specifically are like urban guerrilla fighters (Aída Hurtado, 1989). That's how we have to fight and to navigate every moment, every site.

So Odette, you're in a very interesting site, very problematic site. You work in academia and research and then thinking about how creativity works in that and if you can speak a little bit more about the course and what is it like trying to speak to these things at the heart of the beast, so to speak.

O: ... if I've realised that I've been colonised mentally and on deep levels, how - what to do next, how to unravel, how to unwind. That is really tied in with decoding practises and understanding language and understanding histories. Because of that, even though these are words - language, history, representation. They are so much what is creating for me my realities, what I'm standing on.

If I think a word or a concept is what it is, but it's actually not, then I'm just going around being fooled by that for a bit and I'm not going to be able to decode it or find any grounding there. I'm thinking of a specific word, for example, because this is where I start then, with the course - okay, let's take something, like a word, because my background is literature and I do really love words, so race, the word race and we'll do this then as a class.

It's a modern invention, it's not real and there's no biological truth to it. The fact that when I share this with a classroom in Australia in 2017 that some of the students have never heard that before, ... called the epistemologies of ignorance (Shannon Sullivan & Nancy Tuana, 2007) how ignorance itself is a tool and keeping people ignorant is such a powerful thing to do...

So then that will change the conversation both for me internally, but also then for the class, because now we're

using the word race, but we're all using it; it's shifted, because it's not just some word where we think if I use that word, I know what I'm saying and you know what you're saying. No, it's actually rooted now, we've got the roots. Then we could look at a word like white and whiteness and that has its own history. That only emerges into print, gets written down in the - I think it's around the mid-1600s and it's through property law and it's about giving - creating this idea of the wages of whiteness it's called, so giving capital through being white in order to break up alliances between working class indentured servants and slaves in America, so all of these histories are hitting us today when we use these words.

If you throw out something like this, the word Caucasian, this is my final one, the word Caucasian is actually from Johann Blumenbach, white scientist, picks up a skull on the Caucasus Mountains, meant to be where the origin of white people come from and says, this is the most beautiful skull, this is where the word Caucasian comes from. It turns out to be a female skull, young female, who is believed to have died from a venereal disease and most likely to have been part of the slave trade of women in that period.

It is a deeply layered history we stand on. All of this will be coded over, all of this will be mystified and instead, in this country, we'll just talk about race...nobody really knows anymore what we're talking about. So that's the start, just the very first start, to me, then of the practice of attempting to unwind or decode, if it's possible, some of the impacts of being colonised internally.

...

T: Research as a tool, to begin to unpack how research then became an oppressive tool in and of itself is really interesting and probably quite role modelling to students when you [inaudible]. But also in saying that, how it is innate, it's everywhere, it's every day, it's every moment, as I mentioned and that's kind of what I want to pick to talk about for the next bit, is that those every day moments and we talk about doing a performance in space, we talk about this talk here, but it's actually those moments that happen beforehand that are sites of struggle in and of themselves.

So just to give you a quick example, in my practise, I was writing a book chapter that's - and I specifically in my practise and in my methodology always write we and us when I talk about [theatre] sites of resistance for community that I identify with. Then one of the feedbacks that the editor

gave me, the number one feedback was you're assuming that the readers of this are of the refugee and asylum seeker. How is that? Well you're assuming they're not. So even to say we and even to say us is a fight, like these seemingly simple things. [Speaking to M] So I remember we had a conversation about your first chapter in your masters pieces and even having to capitalise the H, like can you speak to a little bit more about those daily annoyances, the struggles?

M: Yes I can [laughter] how much time are we allowed to actually - yeah, so during - when I done my master's thesis, I was basically wanting to hold history accountable, so I basically capitalised it and turned it into a - when I spoke about it, I spoke as him being a man. That just became quite problematic with my assessors and kind of going, I don't get what you mean. Because I'd also quite for a lot of my first chapter quoted quite frequently and so it was like obviously it was I'm wanting history speaking, so let him talk, so I'm not going to try and quote and what is it, paraphrase anything to make it sound any better.

So it just became a bit of a struggle and I said, well what if I write, I'm going to hold my tongue and I'll let history speak, does that work? They were like, oh okay, yeah, it does, it does. So it was just such a small thing, but for me, yeah, it was - at least if it's a thing or it's a person, it's right here, right now, I can actually talk to it as if I'm having a conversation, whereas if it's way back then, I can't and so that's, just by capitalising H, turned it to a person, so that just became very problematic, which I don't think it should have, yeah.

S: Yeah, well, academia. So throughout my masters, I'd have phrases like my people, my people and my supervisors were just kind of like, you have to specific, you can't just say your people. I'm like, obviously I'm talking about black people, you know? They're like, no but it's not so - not everyone knows that. But also, my people was a spiritual my people as well and I found that I had to explain a lot of things that I didn't want to necessarily explain and when it came to speaking about the spirituality in my work, I really froze up and really didn't know how to engage with that at all, because, well, education system in South Africa is still quite Eurocentric... and spirituality, African spirituality or whatever you want to call it, is still kind of a grey area. South Africa is a Christian society mostly and the books that I wanted to read up on the ideas I was having and what I was experiencing and feeling weren't really accessible and available. So I found myself - it was a good challenge in the



end because then I had to become more reflective, speak to my elders about it and I found other books that kind of somewhat linked to what I was speaking about, but I'm not quite sure if that base - they found the holistic-ness of what I was feeling when I would be performing or I would be creating a work.

Animism has been now a term that - or new animism, rather, has been a term that I kind of identify with in my practice, but yeah and also in the beginning of my masters, you know, I was like, I'm interested in black women's histories and those of which are also mythology, that are not so much based on what I've read before, which is quite negative and very marginal....

So I was told to go read more on some of these women I was interested in and I just ignored my supervisors. Something amazing happened because during that time I was also trying to figure out what my masters was about, it was called Kwasuka Sukela: Reimagined Bodies of a (South African) 90s Born [Black] Woman (Team, 2017) During that time, there were talks about the Rhodes statue being removed and I was excited of course because my previous series paid attention to public statutory and how it's so dominant within white colonial and Afrikaner national identity. But I wasn't focusing so much on that anymore, I was quite reflective and within myself and I started having dreams about a bird, that I hadn't told anyone about during that time.

The next meeting came and they were like, right, so what did you learn, what did you read? I was just kind of like, so I hear the Rhodes statue is coming down and we're just candidly talking about the statue and not really as a part of my practice or this meeting, but more as a way to divert them from what they wanted me to do. Then they were like, oh yeah and it's coming down today. She's like, wait, what? We have a meeting today, I mean there's a mass meeting about the statue. They're like, yeah, there was a meeting with council and they decided that it's coming down today.

So then I had to postpone my meeting because I had already decided in that moment that this woman that I was conjuring inside my head and who had come to me was going to be there when he was going to be removed. I think that had I been in a position where I listened to my supervisors and not that I'm being disrespectful of them or anything, they were amazing throughout the whole time, but had I listened to the direction that they gave me, my work probably wouldn't

have been where it is now and I probably wouldn't have been ready for that moment when the statue was being removed, because in making some of the elements that would be a part of the performance, I was almost done, but not quite and it took me a long time to get to that point. So academia can be great, but it can be a problem as well.



**Figure 1:** Sethembile Msezane's performance: Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell, 2015<sup>6</sup>

- T: Yeah, there's a really good article called *Fight the Tower* (Kieu-Linh Caroline Valverde, 2013) - and it specifically problematises around academia and sort of how to define site, see resistance and navigating, because what we're seeing here is these happen and these are the ethical and political decisions you make every day about practise, about what words you use, about what's capitalised. They're everywhere. Did you want to speak a little bit more to maybe theory and how theory situates itself in this context?
- O: ... one of the things about whiteness is that we're using these words in very general terms, but if it was a racialised theorist, we would use that and that would be signalled and that would be labelled. But academia can just exist as academia, but what we are talking about is whiteness and theory, what

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sethembile-msezane.com/kwasukasukela/>

was I guess the conversation we were having and I'm really interested to hear your response and learn more and keep having a dialogue, because I was starting to feel like it was being used in a very exclusive way and on many levels.

So sometimes there is a sense that it - institutions don't even need to be in any way explicitly racist because the very makeup, because from their very roots of how they came in, was - is the core model, will exclude by what it is and how it runs, it is in itself, but it can appear totally invisible. That can create such a sense and I think what gets me is how much insecurity and the impact and the confidence of a very cool people who come in to work in this space because it can feel like they don't belong and I have conversations with very, very bright, amazing people. It's like, this is not my space, this space doesn't belong, I don't look like this space, I don't see myself in this space.

So I'm wondering, I've been wondering about theory being used as one of the kind of neutralised mechanisms to do it, because of who is this canon of theorists who get seen as worthy, who's even taught... why is my curriculum so white movement? ...

But your response also, if I could throw it back over, was really interesting ...

- S: Can I just interject here? With these institutions not really reflecting the students sometimes who are within that institution, so in the performance that I just did, Excerpts from the Past<sup>7</sup>, there's a part where there's a sound clip and there's a student at Rhodes University who says, I want the people to know what happens behind those walls, right? Then the policeman, well some other things happens, he's like, [ ] you know and then there's another student who's like, are you going to shoot us now? So [ ] and then they start shooting. So for me, that moment, wow, was so powerful and so poignant because having been within an academic institution for my second degree now, you know, I felt like you go in there a whole person and then the institution unpicks at your identity and it's like having these bullets coming at you, you know and that's exactly what happens behind those walls, you know?

They strip at your identity and they strip at your selfhood that when you come out, you have some students so - during the movement, the Fees Must Fall and the Rhodes Must

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.artshouse.com.au/events/excerpts-from-the-past/>

Fall movement, a lot of students realised that they were having shared experiences of covert, mostly covert, but also overt racism within the institution. Some students left the institution not really knowing who they are, or assimilating because it's just easier and some students had mental illness, some sort of mental illness, by the time they left the institution, which was quite interesting as well.

T: ... this is something I spoke about during the Women of the World conference which is theory has always been part of us. It became institutionalised, it became externalised from the body and my argument was that it wasn't something that we were then supposed to do, but it was supposed to be done to us. So it became part of a dichotomy and part of [pathologising] and [violent] dichotomies.

This realisation is just growing up quite politicised and one example I give is that we're walking our dog, Tito, a little Chihuahua dog and I was like, oh he walks a bit crooked, maybe I'm pulling this. Then my dad was like, what you did just there was theorise (Cañas, 2018) I was like, that's what academics do. So it's always been everywhere, so the idea that it's not for us is actually serving whiteness.

So let's open it up to questions... Before I do, I just wanted to make a point about reflecting about your social position and positionality outside of this space and to think about that before talking. ...

Question from audience member:

... why we keep on going back to these institutions, even though they are such harmful spaces... making work that goes against the institution is a trap and sometimes I really feel like that...

S: ... In my abstract, I did mention that I'm making this work because I think it sits outside of the canon and I don't understand why that is. I'm not doing it to kind of reveal subjugated knowledge, which is what a lot of white academics do, but to place these histories within mainstream history, because it is important. I think by someone alluding to it being a trap, that is in essence trying to silence these histories, these views that are so present and yet are muted within our society, so yeah... a lot of other mob that have come before, that their defiance of the system has kind of made me come in even more defiant of actually going, yeah, I'm going to speak up louder and yeah, I'm going to jump up

and down and yeah, you are going to see me and I don't give a fuck, you know? It's just, yeah, lack of - because it's either that or it is shrinking into the corner and that's not an option.  
...

Question:

...So how has being black or a woman of colour affected you outside of other - within other arts institutions other than academia? I guess that's what I'm asking.

S: Oh okay. Well my work exists within a public and a private setting in which the - most of my performances have been in public spaces and that's outside of the institution, I suppose. But then the work goes into galleries as well, which is another kind of institution where there's a different kind of audience, not sure every day passer-by. I suppose my work has always been unapologetic.

I remember being in a competition once where I knew I was not going to win, I knew it, but they always present you with this kind of glossed over, no, but it could be you, like you've got a possibility, your work is really strong. But truth be told, it was a big institution and sometimes within these institutions, white supremacy is still within the cracks and within the clientele that institution kind of exists for. So to accept a person like me, ...who stands boldly in public spaces, as a black woman and institutions that were previously catered for white people and saying that I am here in present, that my people have a story to tell and it is not the one of you conquering me, I mean which white institution is going to give a prize to that? You know? It's like, I knew, but I was just like, I'll just go for the free food and stuff.

[Laughter]

...

M: So one thing, for me, one of the things I've started to do a lot more is actually be conscious of who I'm making the work for and that is for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander peoples. So in an instance here is the work *Diversity* that I created, it was actually - it premiered here as part of *Dance Massive* and then was actually part of *YIRRAMBOI*<sup>8</sup> which was six weeks later. So the audience were very, very, very different and so it was nerve wracking in premiering a work in the context of an international context, the majority

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8 First Nations Arts Festival <https://yirramboi.net.au/>

of white people being in the audience, but then taking it to YIRRAMBOI basically was my biggest indicator that's where I'm going and that's what I'm doing and I'm on the right track.

Throughout the process and with a lot of the stuff that I do, intend to do in the future, is that I've done up the little blurbs about my work and then had it sent back going, have you thought about this? I was going, no, no, no, those are my words, you use that, there's no editing. This is what I - like even to that point of going, what's the music that people are coming in, I was playing TLC, all that kind of stuff, because I was building that kind of thing. So it's not just I'm being conscious of what it is that I'm saying that's out there that's my language, it's not someone else's that editing and putting it grammatically together, what image it is.

The majority of what I'm kind of starting to do now is that thing of a lot of my identity is and the way I look has been kind of defined or judged back to me from the outside, so I'm changing my image from me and I'm not giving anyone else the power to do that. So that is like - and I'm looking at that throughout all the things that I do, whether that's teaching with kids or whatever and so that the language with which I use and all that kind of stuff, so it's all part of that, so it's not - yeah, I'm not just conforming again to this template that I should be part of.

...

T: I wanted to offer some concluding sort of thoughts around what each of the panellists have said and even some of the questions coming up around, you know, if we're talking about a context of society, if we're talking about fields of representation and interpretation being systematically unequal then when we talk about exchange or sites of resistance, it's not about an exchange with the idea of equal, I can sit next to the person here, I can sit next to the person there. Because with the idea that the exchange is equal, it's actually not going to be because the field itself is not, the institute of academia is not. They exist in very politicised spaces, so how do these power dynamics change through a practice, through an intervention, through a glitch, through a decoding.

Resistance, I guess and what we've seen by each of the speakers, whether speaking from within whiteness, around whiteness, with whiteness, is that resistance doesn't look

like the shiny way of resistance all the time, these everyday moments are a protest. So thank you very much.

“Displacing Whiteness in the Arts” offered a rare opportunity to have an all female public panel discuss the challenges of everyday resistance practice and strategies necessary when living, learning, working and creating within contexts of institutional whiteness. The panellists spoke about this navigation as a tangible, contemporary and daily reality. The space highlighted how such navigation differs across contexts, however, more importantly how these struggles are interlinked. All four speakers, including the facilitator, spoke from the intersections of being, thinking and practice. From the opening introductions, speakers described themselves as family members, learners and offered their socio-positionalities rather than listing degrees, career positions and awards. This shift destabilized expectations of what constitutes “expert” and moved away from values of western academia and who has the right to knowledge production, authority and dominance.

Importantly, identifying socio-positionality allowed for exploration of the self and lens within critical theory, and by extension, opened up nuanced situated approaches to critique theory via embodied and lived realities. Listening to voices emphasising the interconnected nature of community, research and art works to resist the dichotomy of colonial approaches that seek to compartmentalize disciplines and art practices as separate. The dialogic moments in “Displacing Whiteness in the Arts” challenged linear frameworks by asserting that fragmentation, ellipses, gaps and pauses heard through the transcription of live events. These are necessary moments and valued elements for actively examining pluralistic knowledges and genuine exchanges. Such breaks in expectation and assumptions interrupt preconceived notions of knowledge transferral exemplifying alternative strategies for giving space to the unheard and the unspeakable.

Mariaa Randall describes the example of Tanderrum in which she navigates Elder knowledges, cultural knowledges and artistic knowledges differently; as a “massive kind of matrix” one needs to negotiate. Even as institutional whiteness attempts to “strip at your identity and they strip at your selfhood” as described by Sethembile Msezane, there are still opportunities for resistance. Moments such as capitalizing ‘H’ in history as Mariaa demonstrated, asserting the spiritual practice of “People” as Sethembile spoke about, and an alternative “we” that is not whiteness as the facilitator argued trouble, subvert and counter white norms. Perhaps therefore, as Mariaa asserts, the more important question to ask is not how one can displace whiteness but rather critically ask oneself, “who is this for?” This question invites a decolonial shift of marginal and centre,

offering creative options and a sense of community responsibility. “Who is this for?” is not necessarily displacing whiteness – which as the frame for the question, keeps whiteness as the focus - but reframing the question itself towards actively centering non-whiteness.

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