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# Teaching transnational Morrison: curation and comparative American studies

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**ABSTRACT**

This article is the edited text of a talk given in May 2021 for the AHRC-funded Black Female Intellectuals network. It argues that through comparative, transnational work American Studies scholars can widen the definition of who is considered a Black Female Intellectual first in terms of what we understand to be public intellectual work and also in terms of who American Studies scholars recognise as Black. I explore the act of curation as an act of public intellectualism by looking closely at exhibitions curated by African American writer Toni Morrison and Aboriginal Australian artist Fiona Foley. I then discuss Foley's work as a 'Blak' Female Intellectual and argue that as such, her work should be engaged with and taught within transnational, comparative American Studies classrooms.

**KEYWORDS**

Transnational; Toni morrison; Fiona foley; curation; public intellectual

*I acknowledge and pay my respect to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which my undergraduate university, the University of Sydney stands, and where I first encountered the work of Toni Morrison. These lands were taken from them without their consent, treaty or compensation.*

*Cornell University, where I completed my postgraduate study of Morrison is located on the traditional homelands of the Gayogohó:nǫ' (the Cayuga Nation). The Gayogohó:nǫ' are members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, an alliance of six sovereign Nations with a historic and contemporary presence on this land. The Confederacy precedes the establishment of Cornell University, New York state, and the United States of America. I acknowledge the painful history of Gayogohó:nǫ' dispossession, and honour the ongoing connection of Gayogohó:nǫ' people, past and present, to those lands and waters.*

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This article is an edited version of the talk 'Transnational Morrison' delivered on 19 May 2021 as one of the events run by the AHRC-funded network Black Female Intellectuals in Historical and Contemporary Context. I am grateful to Imaobong Umoren and Becky Fraser for the invitation to speak and indebted to Nicole King for her thoughtful chairing and questioning. This piece is much the richer for their engagement with it. Invaluable access to further context for the film, *The Foreigner's Home*, was provided by Karin Speedy's as yet unpublished translation of the French language companion publication released by the Louvre alongside the exhibition *Étranger chez soi* in 2006. My thanks go out to you all.

*I acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which the University of Queensland stands, and where I was introduced to the work of Fiona Foley. I pay my respects to the Turrbal and Jagera people, their ancestors and their descendants, who continue their cultural and spiritual connections to Country, and who, like the Gadigal, never ceded their sovereignty.*

I begin this article with acknowledgements of Indigenous sovereignty in Australia and the United States because these protocols are necessary steps towards acknowledging if not ever redressing the privileges of settler colonial whiteness. They also establish that knowledge itself, and the way we come to it in institutions of higher education, is predicated in very literal ways on the erasure of others: in two out of these three contexts this dispossession is of Indigenous people in Australia. These acknowledgements follow directly on from my title 'Teaching Transnational Morrison' to broaden the implications of the ways in which Toni Morrison's work speaks to audiences, engages with contexts, and educates students and scholars of American Studies far beyond the United States. Specifically, in this article, I put her work into conversation with Indigenous women in Australia who also identify as Black – or Blak as is commonly used by many of these women – in order both to work against that erasure and draw attention to their shared public intellectual labour.[1]

As a public figure and as a Black Female Intellectual, Morrison needs very little introduction – indeed, this article and the teaching praxis from which it arises is predicated on her visibility. A Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning author, playwright, essayist, curator and editor, Morrison is the author of eleven novels, seven children's books, two short stories, three play scripts, a libretto, a book of poetry and countless essays and articles. She was an early editor of works by Huey P. Newton (*To Die for the People*, 1972) and fellow public intellectual Angela Davis (*An Autobiography*, 1974). In addition to the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes, she was the recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and was an Officer of the French Legion of Honour. She received honorary doctorates from no less than seven universities (including Harvard, Penn, Princeton, Oxford, and Geneva) and a dizzying further array of medals, honours, and awards. Yet the vast majority of these accolades, and much of Morrison's fame, is derived from her novels to the extent that her reading public has been left with what African American Studies scholar Joy James has called 'a strangely lopsided impression of her life and impact' (James, 2019; Morrison 2019). While I do weave in one suggestion for decolonising literary studies here, I largely move away from her fiction to explore some of the other ways in which Morrison has engaged in acts of public intellectualism. I draw widely from the collection of essays published in the months before her death in 2019 (in the UK as *A Mouth Full of Blood*; in the US as *The Source of Self Regard*) to frame my exploration and highlight the ways in which these essays can be used in American Studies teaching to introduce and engage a host of contemporary and historical issues.

In her germinal 2005 work on Black Public Intellectuals, Patricia Hill Collins names Morrison as one of the 'top three' African American public intellectuals, and her exceptional oeuvre certainly bears out this nomination (Collins 2005, 26). Not only does Morrison fulfil criteria laid down by theorists such as Edward Said that a public intellectual is 'someone whose place is to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations' (Said 1996, 11), her work also bears out Collins' observation that

'African Americans who do intellectual work in a society that, from one generation to the next, aims to render us servants must continually struggle to create the conditions that make our own intellectual expression possible' (Collins 2005, 22). In their trenchant critique of institutions, disciplines, and ideologies Morrison's essays give the lie to a definition of public intellectualism such as that proposed by Stanley Fish as cited by Jodi Kushins: 'one who travels easily in the world of ideas, fairly large political and social concepts, and is able to convey the importance and complexity of those ideas in an accessible language' (Kushins 2006, 2). Despite the transporting beauty of her prose and the limpidity of the lens through which she directs our gaze towards injustice, her movement through the realm of ideas is *not* easy. But it is, as Collins points out, hampered by the need to first *create the space into which her ideas can flourish*, and, in turn, to hold that space open for others. For Morrison, art (and fiction in particular) is always already public and communal. As she writes in her 1998 lecture 'Literature and Public Life':

> The novel, I believe, allows, encourages ways to experience the public—in time, with affect, in a communal space, with other people (characters), and in language that insists upon individual participation. It also tries to illuminate and recover the relationship between literature and public life (Morrison ((1998) 2019), 101).

Morrison's established, public, profile means that her oeuvre is firmly situated as a foundation from which to consider Black women's intellectual work. If we are agreed that she is a Black public intellectual – and I think that statement is uncontroversial – then I propose that we can take her work as a model from which to identify others. This is not to flatten out the differences that exist among the myriad ways in which Black women contribute to and shape public discourse but to recognise that Morrison does not stand alone in the Clearing. As Carmen R. Gillespie argues in her edited collection of Morrison's work that takes its title from this space, Morrison's Clearing is not just the fictional space of healing and self-love that readers first encounter in *Beloved*, but is an imperative to her audiences to gather, collaborate, discover, and reflect in the space she has made for us (Gillespie 2015, 3). In this article, I thus focus on Morrison's work in a transnational context in order to illuminate the public intellectualism of Indigenous Australian women, not to suggest that they should be invited into the Clearing, but to show that, as always, they are already there, and were long before my arrival.

My aim in doing so is three-fold:

The first is to widen the scope of what we talk about when we talk about Black Female Intellectuals from its currently largely African diasporic framework and to take into account the work of Blakwomen whose intellectual labour takes on anti-Black racism and demonstrates its prevalence in places like Australia. It has been nearly 25 years since Hazel Carby's *Race Men* (1998) called out the exclusion of women from accounts and performances of early twentieth-century Black intellectualism and while much more recent books like Imaobong Umoren's excellent *Race Women Internationalists* (2018) and collections like Keisha N. Blain, Christopher Cameron, and Ashley D. Farmer's *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition* (2018) do centre women, they remain Afro-centric in their consideration of what constitutes a 'Black' intellectual tradition. Histories like Henry Reynolds and Marilyn Lake's *Drawing the Global Colour Line* 'chart the spread of "whiteness" as a transnational form of racial identification' (Lake and

Reynolds 2008, 3) but this work largely focuses on male intellectuals and politicians at the turn of the twentieth century. Very recently, Lake's *Progressive New World: How Settler Colonialism and Transpacific Exchange Shaped American Reform* (2019) pays significant attention to Indigenous activism in the progressive era but does not give extensive consideration to the fact that Indigenous people in Australia's racial subjectivity was often constituted in public discourse via invocations of Black American history and experience.

Goenpul academic, activist, and ground-breaking feminist theorist Aileen Moreton-Robinson's 2015 book, *White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, explicitly engages Morrison as a critical race theorist but notes that:

> Indigenous peoples are outside the scope of Morrison's analysis. Through the centering of the African American presence, Native American texts that have challenged, resisted, and affected the American literary imagination, politics, history, and Constitution remain invisible. … The most valuable contribution of Morrison's work for my purposes is her thesis that 'blackness,' whether real or imagined, services the social construction and application of whiteness in its myriad forms. In this way it is used as a white epistemological possession. Her work opens up a space for considering how this possessiveness operates within the whiteness studies literature to displace Indigenous sovereignties and render them invisible (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 49).

I agree with Moreton-Robinson's assessment, and with her larger point about the divergence between many scholars of African American studies and those working in Indigenous studies: 'white supremacy as hegemony, ideology, epistemology, and ontology requires the possession of Indigenous lands as its proprietary anchor within capitalist economies such as the United States' and Australia (Moreton-Robinson 2015, xix). But I also want to draw attention to the ways in which it is often the very *visibility* of African American history that artist-activists like Fiona Foley, whose work I examine here, have drawn upon at times in their roles as public intellectuals. I thus want to address this invisibility vis-à-vis Morrison by a comparative transnational analysis of the ways in which Morrison and Foley have publicly responded to histories of anti-Black racism in Australia and the United States. In my endeavour to do so, I am indebted to the work of Clare Corbould at Deakin University, my co-researcher on our shared project, Australian afterlives of the plantation, which looks at the ways in which tropes and images associated with enslavement in the American South travelled across the Pacific to become part of an imaginary of resistance that has produced an outpouring of artistic work on the plantation in Australian life since the turn of the millennium.[2]

Second, in keeping with the aims of others in this Special Issue, I want to contribute to the definition of what constitutes public intellectualism. To use Blain, Cameron and Farmer's definition of intellectualism, I look at those 'carefully devised strategies and tactics' by which Black 'people of all walks of life … proposed solutions … offered critiques, and … challenged others' and which are directed at specific, necessarily public audiences (Blain, Cameron, and Farmer 2018, 4–5). To that end, for the most substantive intervention of this article, I draw attention to an aspect of Morrison's public intellectual life that has received scant scholarly attention: her curation of a 2006 event at the Louvre entitled *Étranger chez soi* (*The Foreigner's Home*), highlights of which have been captured in Rian Brown and Geoff Pingree's 2018documentary film of the same name. In doing so, I consider the ways in which curation is an act of public intellectualism and analyse the

powerful politics of Morrison's exhibition. Morrison's curation demanded that patrons of the Louvre revisit some of the foundational artistic works of European culture in a reinvented space that was opened up to marginalised artists and whose stories, once given voice in that space, created thought-provoking resonances with the permanent collection. By juxtaposing contemporary experiences of migration with historical artistic representations of it, and by changing the way patrons moved through the space, Morrison defamiliarized the Louvre and offered a radical challenge to the idea of artistic institutions as keepers of an immutable version of cultural memory. I offer as a complementary example Badtjala artist Fiona Foley's curation of the 2015 public art installation, *Courting Blakness,* in the Great Court of the University of Queensland. I argue that Foley's work of curation does to the university what Morrison's does to the museum.

Finally, in placing Foley alongside Morrison, I want to give colleagues in American Studies in the UK a comparative, transnational pathway to further decolonise their curricula by offering this example of how we can incorporate her work as a Blak female intellectual into transnational American Studies teaching. But first, a framing anecdote: around five years ago, I interviewed for a job in a UK university, one advertised as seeking someone with expertise in Transnational American literature. I gave a presentation on the literatures of the American Pacific. I started with Melville, Twain and London's travels in the Pacific and ended with contemporary Pasifika responses to the tropes of cannibalism, racial hierarchy, and touristic paradise that suffuse nineteenth and early twentieth-century texts. I did not get that job, and the feedback on the presentation from one very senior academic in the discipline was that I expected too much of the students – how could I expect them to engage with these texts as *literature* when they would have to understand so much extraneous context? There is, of course, an entire critique to be made of this position that is based on the fact that Milton, Shakespeare or Joyce are not simply intuitively understood by British students without adequate contextualisation, but my aim in this article is to take away those kinds of excuses. That is not to say that Morrison is immediately accessible. Far from it. But if the work of teaching Morrison is already being done on syllabi – and we know it is – fewer than five minutes searching online turned up modules mentioning her work from Aberystwyth to York (with Durham, Essex, Exeter, Goldsmiths, Manchester, Nottingham, Sussex, and UEA in between) – then it underestimates our students to assume that they cannot draw connections and distinctions between texts and their contexts when given a conceptual map to get there. As Morrison herself told us, long before decolonising was a 'strategic aim' of UK HEIs, what we put on our curriculum is a *choice*:

> Canon building is empire building. Canon defence is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested. . . . [African Americans] have always been imagining ourselves. . . . We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come into contact. We are not, in fact, 'Other.' We are *choices*. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centres of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centres with the 'raceless' one with which we are, all of us, most familiar" (Morrison ((1988) 2019), 169-70).

Ultimately, I seek to demonstrate that Morrison's work, precisely in its hard-won canonicity, is a gateway, a portal, if you will, not *out* of this world that is our situatedness in UK higher education, but back into a new engagement with a British history. A history, that, to paraphrase Faulkner, is not even past, but is an ongoing lived experience of settler colonialism for both Black and white citizens of the Commonwealth.

## Étranger chez soi

'The word curate,' a recent article in *The New York Times* runs, 'comes from the Latin "curatus," the past participle of "curare," which means to take care of' (Stoppard 2020). The article explains that 'for years, in museums and archives, curators did just that: polishing finishes, inspecting canvases, layering archival tissue. The idea of curators as creative agents in their own right is relatively new' (Stoppard 2020). The article cites Paul O'Neill's *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* and its charting of the rise of the 'curator-auteur.' O'Neill identifies a turning point for the role in the late '80s as understandings of curatorship shifted '*from* vocational work with collections in institutional contexts *to* a potentially independent, critically engaged and experimental form of exhibition-making practice' (O'Neill 2016, 2, my italics). However, I would argue that the work of Morrison and Foley enables us to think about curation as both these things at once: as vocational – a calling – and as a critically engaged, experimental form of exhibition making. Both these women *care* deeply about art; both think critically about the role it plays in public life.

In a 2013 address at Vanderbilt University, Morrison articulated what she called 'The Price of Wealth, the Cost of Care,' urging students to bear the cost of caring in literal, material ways. Speaking of the acts of philanthropy that founded the university, she argued that '[i]nviting compassion into the bloodstream of an institution's agenda . . . is more than productive, more than civilizing, more than ethical, more than humane; it's humanizing' (Morrison ((2013) 2019), 51). This remarkable address concluded with what could be described as Morrison's creed. Infused with the language of faith, belief, and service, her words articulate the need for public art and the intimate relationship between our access to art and our humanity:

> I am a writer and my faith in the world of art is intense but not irrational or naïve. Art invites us to take the journey beyond price, beyond costs, into bearing witness to the world as it is and as it should be. Art invites us to know beauty and to solicit it from even the most tragic of circumstances. Art reminds us that we belong here. And if we serve, we last. My faith in art rivals my admiration for any other discourse. Its conversation with the public and among its various genres is critical to the understanding of what it means to care deeply and to be human completely. I believe. (Morrison ((2013) 2019), 53).

This deep care, this *curation*, was at work in Morrison's 2006 exhibition at the Louvre entitled *Étranger chez soi* translated as *The Foreigner's Home*. This multi-media, multi-disciplinary revisioning of the space of the Louvre has been captured to some extent in the film of the same name. Ten years in the making, this film was released in 2018 to what has so far been a rather limited audience. It is yet to be released in the UK, but university libraries can arrange streaming access and I strongly urge that humanities scholars across disciplines order it as an exceptionally rich teaching resource.[3]

The film juxtaposes footage of the original exhibition (shot by Morrison's son, Ford) with footage of the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Jarring, present-day clips of open boats, crammed with people in an unnamed sea, but highly suggestive of the Mediterranean, sit alongside Morrison's meditations on the history of enslavement in the United States as the camera pans across a reproduction of the infamous diagram of the 'Brookes' slave ship.[4] An interview with Toni Morrison by Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat (who also participated in the original exhibition) is woven throughout to allow Morrison herself to elaborate on the world events that inspired her theme. In drawing together the events held at the Louvre, archival images of enslavement, share-cropping, and Black freedom struggles of the Civil Rights Era with more recent images of mass migration, the film considers the ways in which the foreigner as abjected Other, as a threat that needs to be externalised, is an ongoing preoccupation in American culture. At the same time, it meditates on the scenario in which people become foreigners in their own homes, as in the case of Katrina, and how easily populations can be estranged, made into refugees in their own homeland. Morrison's polymathic moves between ekphrastic description of iconic works of art and pungent critique of contemporary politics, the history of banned musical styles in the USA, and deeply personal reflection on the relationship between her given name (Chloe Wofford) and her chosen name (Toni Morrison) consolidate her position as public intellectual.

In both the film and in her public lectures over the course of *Étranger chez soi* Morrison took as her point of departure Theodore Géricault's 1819 painting *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (*The Raft of the Medusa*). This painting, which depicts the 1816 shipwreck off the coast of West Africa of a boat carrying France's new governor to Senegal, was her starting point for thinking about 'the intertwining of art and politics, of national identity and erasure, and of displacement and destiny,' (Morrison 2006a, 24). Géricault's painting, she argues in her opening address, is an artwork that contains multitudes:

> The gestural implications of race, the vulnerability to the consequences of political adventurism, the call for awareness of despair, destruction and the sadness of the human condition are all magnificently and devastatingly depicted here. On a canvas with a turbulent yet serene background, the abandoned crew members float, bereft of oars, at the mercy of Nature and of their nature, wandering like nomads between despair and hope, between the breath of life and of death. (Morrison 2006a, 22).

In one of the very few scholarly treatments of *Étranger chez soi*, Nancy J. Peterson has proposed that there is a rich conversation to be tracked between Morrison and Gericault. In a powerful comparative reading of *The Raft of the Medusa* and Morrison's 2008 novel, *A Mercy*, she argues for both to be considered 'incendiary art' (Peterson 2015, 288). Such art 'yokes beauty and devastation together in a tense uneasy relationship to provoke the audience, and to produce deep, penetrating knowledge of inhuman cruelty *and* human possibility' (Peterson 2015, 298). As long ago as 1984, Morrison asserted her commitment to writing that was 'unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful' (Morrison ((1984) 2008), 64) and although it is not her stated aim, I would argue that Peterson's essay shares with my own an imperative to demonstrate unapologetically that Morrison's work can school our students in aesthetics as well as politics; that reading Morrison is a gate*way* to an appreciation for art of which the gate*keepers* have so long been white and male. Indeed, this film could sit productively on a syllabus seeking to decolonise transatlantic

meditations on art such as W.H. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts.' When the 'white legs' of Icarus, 'disappearing into the green/Water' are refracted through the lens of Morrison's analysis of Géricault's raft, which centres the figure of the young Black boy at the painting's apex, or placed alongside contemporary images of desperate men, women and children, stumbling ashore on Mediterranean beaches, our eyes are opened anew to exactly whose suffering it is to which we have been indifferent ((1940) 2019, 35).

Morrison also chose *The Raft of the Medusa* as the backdrop for one of her most radical acts of curation. Flinging wide the gates to welcome the so-called 'barbarians' arrayed there, she staged a series of outsider interventions into the space of the Louvre, inviting rappers and slam poets – 'street artists' as they are described in the film – to inhabit the space and respond to Géricault's canvas. This collaboration was of particular significance in 2006 in the wake of 2005 riots in the suburbs of Paris which saw tensions between police and marginalised youth, many of whom were of Muslim and North African descent, erupt into violence. One of the most viscerally arresting moments of the film is the moment at which rapper D' de Kabal steps up to the microphone and intones the first word of his performance: the French word *nous*, we, is drawn out for several seconds as a low, pulsing hum, felt in the body in a way that calls the viewer in a multi-sensory act of interpellation. *Nous sommes là* – we are here – he continues, a statement that is not just the defiant insistence that he and his fellow 'outsiders' belong, but is in fact a clarion call to the crowd (that includes Morrison) to be present in that moment. His declaration echoes resoundingly the parable Morrison told in her 1993 Nobel lecture in which a wise woman – 'Blind but wise' – is approached by the young people of her community, determined to undermine her position of privileged insight, of clairvoyance (Morrison ((1993) 2019), 102). Confronting her in her dwelling on the outskirts of town, they demand: 'Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.' The woman's response confounds their narrow sense of what knowledge is: 'I don't know,' she replies 'whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands' (Morrison ((1993) 2019), 102–3). In the fragment of his performance captured on film, D' de Kabal, too, calls upon his audience in the Louvre to act upon what is in front of them. The film cuts directly from his performance to Morrison outlining for Danticat the significance for her of Géricault's painting as one that captured the experience of being 'cut-off' from the 'colonial ship' and all that it symbolised: power, belonging, recognition. The hum felt deep in our bodies as D' de Kabal offers his words grounds us as viewers of the film, perhaps in spite of ourselves, and reminds us that all we know is that *nous sommes là* – we are here – in front of Géricault's work. What we take away from it is in our own gift.

In inviting members of this alienated group into the very wellspring of French cultural capital, Morrison stakes a public claim not only for their belonging but for their valuable contribution to this capital/capitol. As she proposed in the address 'Harlem on my Mind: Contesting Memory – Meditation on Museums, Culture, and Integration,' one of the suite of talks she offered at the Louvre over the course of *Étranger chez soi*,

> Museums and galleries are an artist's home; his and her place in art history, in cultural history, where national identities are shaped and reimagined. Increasingly, the focus of these art places is on the relationship among what is outside the museum as well as what is inside. Increasingly, the erstwhile "stranger" enriches all of our homes (Morrison (2006b) 2019, 85).

Through these words she makes a strong case not only for the inclusion of non-traditional, outsider art, but also for revisiting art and artefacts whose meanings and place in Western culture are seemingly settled. And indeed, there are not many more spaces that better fulfil the idea of the 'home' of Western Civilisation than the Louvre. It houses not only the most iconic French art – *The Raft of the Medusa*, Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, the French Crown Jewels – but many of the 'greatest hits' of European art history – most famously the *Mona Lisa*, but also Classical and neo-Classical sculpture like the *Venus de Milo*, the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, or Canova's *Cupid and Psyche*. Morrison moved to defamiliarise and recontextualise such works by working with Louvre curators to plot three *parcours* or pathways through the Antiquities collections housed therein. Entitled 'Images of Women in the Ancient Greek City-States,' 'Foreigners in the Land of Egypt,' and 'Foreigners in the Assyrian Empire' these itineraries highlight the disjuncture between the idealised representation of women in Athenian society and their lived reality; Egyptian hostility towards foreigners; and the effects of Assyrian conquest on the mass movement of ancient peoples. Working from the position that 'museological decisions and curatorial ones are as much ideologically determined as they are aesthetically determined' (Morrison ((2006b) 2019), 84) these pathways offer what Director of the Auditorium Jean-Marc Terasse calls 'transversal readings' of the collections (Morrison 2006a, 30). That is, in cutting across the more well-trodden ways of encountering these objects they centre the foreigner and insist upon the place of the displaced within our bastions of cultural memory, our arbiters of value. As Tessa Roynon has succinctly argued in relation to Morrison's 'insistence on the African presences in the classical tradition,' her reframing of Classical culture 'contributes to the ongoing process of re-viewing that body of culture as something always and already impure and unstable, pre-national and pre-disciplinary' (Roynon 2011, 397). In looking forward from Géricault's arresting and controversial work and backward to representations of the foreigner in Western history, Morrison dislodges the entrenched master narrative of 'Western Civilization' as progress.

## Courting Blakness

Towards the end of *The Foreigner's Home*, Morrison explicitly references the violent dispossession of Australian Indigenous peoples and the alienation of such communities from their ancestral lands. Perhaps tellingly, given Moreton-Robinson's critique of the ongoing invisibility of Indigenous sovereignties, accompanying images are not included within the film's visual story. Rather, her forceful analysis of genocide as the result of governments 'seeking legitimacy and identity' is heard as the camera pans in extreme close-up over the figures on the raft of the Medusa (Brown and Pingree2018). The 'democratic' states founded in Israel, the United States and Australia, she goes on to assert, required what she calls the 'annihilation' of Indigenous peoples (Brown and, Pingree 2018).[5] More accurate as a concept than 'annihilation' is Moreton-Robinson's recent theorisation of 'the white possessive' (Moreton-Robinson 2015). She argues that rather than having eliminated its Indigenous population, on the contrary, the Australian nation must be continually socially and culturally constructed as a white possession through repeated rhetorical and performative acts. Such acts are 'hypervisible' to Indigenous people. For example, 'cities signify with every building and every street that

this land is now possessed by others; signs of white possession are embedded everywhere in the landscape. The omnipresence of Indigenous sovereignties exists here too, but it is disavowed through the materiality of these significations, which are perceived as evidence of ownership by those who have taken possession' (, Moreton-Robinson 2015, xiii). Blak female artist, curator and academic Fiona Foley has described this possessive whiteness in similar terms:

> In Australia we currently live in two competing spaces. Through dispossessing the original peoples and denying their sovereignty the first part of the equation begins. The taking of Aboriginal lands historically has made it easy for the continuation of civic spaces to privilege whiteness. To the detriment of Indigenous knowledge systems, constructs of power are used to position cultures in the visual landscape (Foley 2012).

She has thus made public art – art that is designed to be outside of a museum and to take over public space either permanently or ephemerally – a cornerstone of her practice, countering the systematic erasure of an Indigenous past and present in Australian civic spaces.

Foley is a member of the Wondunna clan of the Badtjala people from K'Gari, known in white Australian parlance as Fraser Island, in the Australian state of Queensland. A founding member of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative established in Sydney in the 1980s, she is an artist with over thirty years of exhibition history, known nationally and internationally for her active role in promoting Aboriginal Australian artistry. Her work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions both in Australia and overseas, including a site-specific work she created in 2005 for the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts on my own institution's campus.

In terms of an immediate handle for students of American Studies to grasp, Foley has used African American protest imagery in her artwork to draw together experiences of anti-Black racism in both Australia and the United States. In 2006, Foley held a solo exhibition at the October Gallery, London, entitled *Strange Fruit*. Explicitly referencing the protest song made famous by Billie Holliday, this exhibition included images from her series HHH: Hedonistic Honky Haters. As Louise Martin-Chew writes in her biography of Foley, the globally recognisable message of this series 'was easily translated' (Martin-Chew 2021, 123). In this series, African Americans don hoods and robes structured like those worn by the Ku Klu Klan to terrorise Black communities under the cover of anonymity. Wearing the Dutch wax print fabrics that have come to emblematise West African textile design and production, these members of the HHH – a secret society that Foley tells us was founded in 1965 – stare down the camera unflinchingly, returning the viewer's gaze, which, inevitably, drops away first. Foley has noted that for many Black viewers, these images elicit laughter. The Klan is reduced to parody, figures in fancy dress. But of white viewers: 'It makes many of them uncomfortable,' Foley says. 'I asked myself, what if the tables were turned? I wanted to provoke a conversation about racism' (cited in Behrendt 2020). The HHH subvert the dehumanising gaze of white supremacy; the solidarity and power projected by the grouped subjects resist the Klan's performative mob-based violence, but also potentially turn the threat towards the perpetrator. Foley thus not only draws on visual imagery easily

recognisable from American history and popular culture in order to make a point about the structural similarities between anti-Black racism in Australia and the US but also insists on the viewer's own implication in the spectacle on display.

While images from her HHH series hang in the National Gallery of Australia, the Toledo Museum of Art, the Art Gallery of Western Australian, and the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College, to note just a few nodes of Foley's transnational artistic network, she is equally well known for her public art. It is on this, but with a small twist, I focus here: her work of curation rather than her acts of creation. As Morrison put the Louvre in her sights as a space that needed to be made hospitable to the Other even as it needed to be defamiliarized to itself, so Foley took as her canvas the Great Court of the University of Queensland. Moreton-Robinson has written compellingly about universities as 'places of whiteness' that are nevertheless 'deracialised' (Moreton-Robinson 2000, 240). That is, universities are places in which non-white people are made to feel their otherness even as there is little concomitant interrogation of whiteness as a racialised position. Moreover, universities are, of course, troubled and troubling sites of the collection and curation of knowledge about Indigenous people in Australia – including the curation and display of their artefacts and, indeed, their very bodies in natural history and anatomical museums.[6]

But doubling down on this implication, the University of Queensland is also what is known in Australia as a 'Sandstone university.' Generally founded in the colonial era (though the University of Queensland was established in the early years of Federation) these institutions comprise Australia's oldest and most culturally elite universities. As Indigenous legal academic, activist, author and filmmaker Larissa Behrendt notes in the Foreword to the *Courting Blakness* collection:

> Sandstone universities are elite disseminators of western knowledge, walled bastions of dominant culture values and beliefs. They are spaces where education is highly valued and ideas are cherished, but they have also been spaces where, traditionally, world views and ideologies have been reinforced. Their doors, in the past, were most easily open to those who were already part of the privileged within society (Behrendt 2015, iv).[7]

*Courting Blakness* brought together the work of eight Indigenous Australian artists whose work was exhibited in the Great Court, the semi-circular centre, of the University of Queensland – on its walls, grass, and lightpoles – over the course of three weeks in September 2014. In a tribute written for the university's centenary celebrations in 2011, we get a sense of the proximity of this space to political power. The Great Court was described by historian Clive Moore as:

> a unique space of historical and cultural importance which has now influenced generations of students and staff through its *powerful gravitas and iconic power*. Governors-General, Premiers and captains of industry have been affected by this cultural core. The Great Court is central to the memories of all University of Queensland students, . . . As one of the most important cultural spaces in Queensland, its influence on them has been profound' (Moore 2011, 20, my italics).

Foley's exhibition thus drew 'the most marginalised race in Australia into the heart of this learned institution with its concomitant histories' in ways that ensured that these 'artists spoke their truth and celebrated their positions as Aboriginal public intellectuals' (Foley and Martin-Chew 2015, 15, 18).

The art itself engaged a wide array of questions to do with identity: sovereignty and Country, racial identity and categorisation, national identity, power, knowledge, humanity, and visibility. Some used photography, fabric and sculpture, others were multimedia projections. Foley's curation visualised and literalised what it would look like for Indigenous knowledges to be given centre stage in the contemporary university, particularly as many of the artists used the very sandstone as their canvas. Megan Cope's video work *The Blaktism*, which satirised Australia's history of racial classifications and contemporary preoccupation with making Indigenous Australian people 'prove' their authenticity,[8] was projected onto the Law School, ironising its Latin inscription: 'These are the precepts of justice: to live honourably to do no harm to one's neighbour and to give every man his due' (Moreton 2015, 176). Karla Dickens' video installation *The Honey and the Bunny* was projected directly onto the 'ethnographic' friezes depicting Indigenous Australian people on the inner wall of the Great Court (Dickens, 2011). As Fiona Nicoll describes them, these carvings, commissioned in the 1930s-1950s depict 'Aborigines . . . as anonymous individuals in pre-colonial scenes and scenes of exploration and agricultural and industrial development' (Nicoll 2015, 9). As she goes on to remark, '[t]hese depictions are a striking and literal materialisation of the state of knowledge that informed government policies' in a period in which 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were firmly in place as objects of European disciplinary knowledge, rather than recognised as knowing subjects capable of making unique contributions to universal knowledge' (Nicoll 2015, 9). Dickens' video artwork depicts a moonlight meeting in Sydney's Redfern – home to one of Australia's largest urban Aboriginal communities – between Honey, played by Destiny, a Widjabul/Bandjalung drag queen, and Reggie, the human-sized rabbit mascot of the South Sydney Rabbitoh's Rugby League team. Described as 'a queer fable' this film dramatises the unlikely pairing of Destiny and Reggie: the former Blak and queer, the latter a symbol of a stereotypically 'heterosexual,' 'macho' identity (Martin-Chew 2015, 72). Overlaid upon the university's racist carvings, this simultaneously joyous and poignant film overwrites that racist narrative to explode ethnographic stereotypes of 'Aboriginality' and stake a claim for radical belonging and allyship across colour and class lines via a 'shared fondness for fur . . . and big hair' – even if it is for only one night (O'Riordan 2011).

And yet, for all that Foley's conceptualisation and curation performed Indigenous belonging in the university, there is one event and representative image from the installation that gets to the heart of why this work is so necessary, and which starkly demonstrates Collins' point about Black (and by extension, Blak) intellectuals' ongoing battle to create the conditions of possibility for their own existence. The University of Queensland is a place of many flagpoles. There are in fact five of them on top of Forgan Smith tower, the building that stands as the centrepiece of the Great Court. They fly as a matter of course the Australian national flag, the Qld State flag, the UQ flag, the Aboriginal flag, and the Torres Strait Islander flag. On being approached by Foley to contribute to the exhibition, Kamilaroi/Bigambul artist Archie Moore took note of these five flagpoles and what they projected about national and regional identities. His contribution to *Courting Blakness* thus comprised 14 flags, based on historical accounts of the 14 Indigenous nations of present-day Queensland. Two of these were to be flown from the Forgan Smith flagpole. But two weeks before the opening of the exhibition, permission to fly these flags was revoked by the university, citing the need to comply with

National Flag protocols. As such, only 'officially recognised' flags could be flown.[9] While Moore's flags did fly on the lamp posts around the Court, and one was projected on the interior wall of Forgan Smith tower, the university's refusal to countenance even an artistic performance of Indigenous sovereignty demonstrates the political power of public art. Ironically, the university's move to disempower the artist is precisely what more firmly instantiates their critique and renders it all the more necessary.

As Archie Moore himself writes, '[f]lags are used to identify sovereignty, imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, exploration, possession, power, protection, law over land and sea, piracy and independence. . . . Flags may be jingoistic and are used as markers – to say "We were here first"' (Moore 2015, 120). Flags are thus central to the symbolic logic of Black/Blak public intellectualism in the way that they act as tangible markers of presence, and entitlement – often quite literally. Flags like 'the six American flags placed on the moon in 1969' (Moore 2015, 120) stake a claim in contested territory. I conclude, therefore, with some words of Morrison's that take up this spatialised lexicon of ownership and belonging. In place of flags, she mobilises a literary language that centres African American experiences:

> From the beginning I claimed a territory by insisting on being identified as a black woman writer exclusively interested in facets of African American culture. I made these unambiguous assertions to impose on all readers the visibility in and the necessity of African American culture to my work, precisely in order to encourage a wider critical vocabulary than the one in which I was educated. I wanted this vocabulary to stretch to the margins for the wealth that lay there and thus, not abandon, but reconfigure what occupied the centre. It seemed to me to be a way of enriching the dialogue between and among cultures. (Morrison ((2001) 2019), 335-36).

Fiona Foley and other Blak Australian women artists/intellectuals insist equally fiercely on their Blackness. The dialogues they have entered into with African American history, culture and activism has already reconfigured public space in Australia in significant ways. I have proposed here that there are further conversations that we, as teachers of American studies in all its constitutive transnationalism and interdisciplinarity, can initiate about Black and Blak women's intellectual work. It thus remains in *our* hands to transform the space of the British university, to make choices about our curriculum, to equip our students to enter into dialogue with what is, for many, not another culture, but their own colonial history.

## Notes

1. A note on 'Blak': Destiny Deacon, an Erub/Mer (Torres Strait) and K'ua K'ua (Cape York) woman artist is credited with coining the designation. Clare Williamson and Hettie Perkins, the curators of the collaborative 1994 First Nations exhibition *Blakness; Blak City Culture!* Wrote in the programme for the event that 'Destiny Deacon developed the term "Blak" as part of a symbolic but potent strategy of reclaiming colonialist language to create means of self-definition and expression.' Deacon recently expanded on this, explaining 'Growing up, I always heard the words 'You little black c . . . s from white people. It's still common (to have) black c . . .. s being shouted at us.' 'I just wanted to take the "C" out of "black." I was able to convince Hetti Perkins and Claire Williamson to alter their curated urban Indigenous exhibition to "Blakness: Blak City Culture" (ACCA, Melbourne) without the "c" in 1994!' (Munro 2020).

2. Examples of such work include Nakkiah Lui's 2017 adaptation of the setting of Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins' play *An Octoroon* from the American South to Far North Queensland; Jasmine Togo-Brisby's photographic series *Adrift Amidst the Middle Passage* (2019) which gestures to the entanglement of Australian South Sea Islander experiences of coerced labour and the transatlantic slave trade; and Australian Solomon Islander filmmaker Amie Batalibasi's 2017 short film, *Blackbird*, that alludes to and reworks images and effects from Steve McQueen's 2017 film, *12 Years a Slave*.
3. UEA Library was able to purchase access to the film via Video Project: https://www.videoproject.org/The-Foreigners-Home.html
4. This image of the cramped and dehumanising conditions on board eighteenth-century slave ships was prominent in contemporary abolitionist campaigns but has also long been present in the work of Black artist-activists such as Betye Saar. The history of this image as 'a cultural icon of black resistance, identity and remembrance' is chronicled in Cheryl Finley's 2018 book, *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon*.
5. I understand Morrison here to be espousing something similar to Patrick Wolfe's formulation that settler colonialism is predicated on the 'elimination of the native.' For Wolfe, and, I think, for Morrison, this elimination or annihilation is a 'logic' rather than a literal performance; Indigenous peoples are still very much present on their ancestral lands, staunch in their claims of sovereignty, in the jurisdictions Morrison mentions. Nevertheless, such uncritical use of a term like 'annihilation' is highly problematic and has been addressed in Shino Konishi's 2019 article 'First Nations Scholars, Settler Colonial Studies, and Indigenous History.'
6. See, for example, the 2011 return of ancestral bones by the University of Sydney's Museum of Anatomy. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15335926 Accessed 28 February 2022. While most public debates on the issue tend to centre on national museums (the British, Museum, the Natural History Museum, and the National Museum of Scotland to name just a few of most high-profile), the remains of countless Indigenous people have also been held in university collections across the United Kingdom. For a full list of British and Irish museums, including many university museums, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections, can be found in Gail Scunthorpe, Maria Nugent and Howard Morphy's very recent edited collection (2021) *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums* p. 244–248.
7. In the same volume, Fiona Nicoll reflects on the equivalence drawn between 'Sandstone' 'Oxbridge' and 'Ivy League' universities by some Australian commentators and draws attention to the invention of traditions therein that sought to yoke these relative latecomers to those established long before (Nicoll, 4).
8. Anita Heiss's 2012 memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You*? Is an invigorating riposte to some high profile Australian media commentators who have questioned the validity of her claim to an Australian Aboriginal identity.
9. The controversy around Moore's flag installation is discussed in Fiona Foley and Louise Martin-Chew's essay 'The Politics of Art and Place."

## Disclosure statement

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