

HUMANITARIANISM & HUMAN RIGHTS

48th Annual Symposium

Western Australia · 15–17 Nov 2017



SESSION

Displacement and Diaspora

THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER, 10:00am-11:00am

WA MARITIME MUSEUM, Fremantle

This session focuses on a range of historical and contemporary interventions and representations of refugee, asylum seekers, and others by institutions and community and academic actions.

CHAIR

Dr Shino Konishi

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Shino Konishi is an Aboriginal historian based in the School of Humanities and School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia. She is the author of *The Aboriginal Male in the Enlightenment World* (2012), and in 2017 will begin an Australian Research Council project in collaboration with the Australian Dictionary of Biography on Indigenous biography.

SPEAKER

Mr Alec Coles OBE

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

Emotional Ties: Challenges of sharing stories of identity, origins, belonging, diaspora and displacement

The Western Australian Government is building a new State Museum. Its content will reflect three main areas: Being Western Australian, Discovering Western Australia and Exploring the World. All these themes speak to our origins as Western Australians – but what is a Western Australian? In this place where a 50,000 plus year old Aboriginal culture rubs shoulders with a rapidly diversifying population: Western Australia, much to the surprise of our colleagues on the east coast, is now officially Australia's most diverse state, per capita.

Australia, of course, is often described as a country of migrants but this in itself is multi-faceted: to many Australian Aboriginal people the archaeological account of a diaspora from the west around the Indian Ocean rim sits uneasily with the dreaming stories of their origins. To the descendants of the early European settlers, there is often a cognitive dissonance between a sense of entitlement and of guilt. Post 1945 arrivals left war torn Europe seeking salvation but had to cope with an alien and sometimes unforgiving environment. The ten pound poms rolled the dice in the lucky country – but there were winners and losers. The welcome received by refugees from the Viet Nam war, or communist Eastern Europe, seemed to have evaporated by our 2013 election and was replaced by a spiteful, some would say paranoid, isolationism that saw politicians vie for the most draconian stance on how to deal with refugees arriving by boat. And what of those descendants of the world's longest continuous culture? At various times, displaced, dispersed, disenfranchised and disaffected: in many cases, ultimately, disappointed. These are just some of the more challenging stories of our people that sit along the heroic stories of courage, of innovation, of achievement and of humanity.

So how should a State museum go about presenting these stories and who should tell them? Can some of the more confronting stories of persecution and prejudice be shared without alienating our visitors? We want visitors to think, to learn, and to consider, not be overwhelmed with so much guilt and despair that they fail to engage.

Museums are often described as safe places for unsafe ideas: places where contentious issues can be debated without rancour. The Western Australian Museum aspires to be one of those places: it intends to allow many voices to ensure that multiple perspectives are shared. But this noble commitment will still be challenging to deliver: which voices should be represented and who should decide? Which ideas are just too unsafe? How do we navigate the choppy waters between curatorial control and a cacophony of noise? The new museum will be a \$400 million project – we will only do it once – so we had better get it right.

Alec Coles is the Chief Executive Officer of the Western Australian Museum, the State's museum with branches in Perth, Fremantle, Geraldton, Kalgoorlie and Albany. Alec has held this position since March 2010. He was previously Director of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums in North East England, a post that he held for eight years where he was also lead officer of the North East Regional Museums Hub. Prior to that, he was CEO of the Northumberland Wildlife Trust, a wildlife conservation charity in North East England. In the UK, Alec was a member of the Heritage Lottery Fund's Expert Panel and an executive member of both the National Museum Director's Conference and the Museums Association. He is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences at The University of Western Australia; Executive Member of the Council for Australasian Museum Directors; and Chair of ICOM Australia. Alec is committed to developing and demonstrating the public value of museums. He is driving Western Australia's initiative to build a new State Museum in Perth and aspires to create a museum that is owned and valued by all West Australians and admired by the world. He was recognised for Services to Museums in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 2010, being made an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE). In March 2017 he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters from The University of Western Australia in recognition of his contribution to the Arts.

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SPEAKER

Professor Suvendrini Perera

CURTIN UNIVERSITY

The Deathscapes Project

Deathscapes is a transnational research project, funded by the Australian Research Council that aims to map racialised deaths in custody across several settler states. Its lead Chief Investigators are Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, with Partner Investigators Sherene Razack (UCLA), Jonathan Inda (University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign) and Marianne Franklin (Goldsmiths, University of London). What is distinctive about the research is its grounding of anti-refugee and anti-migrant violence in the logic of the settler-colonial state and its foundational and continuing violence against Indigenous sovereignty. From their very different positions, refugee and the Indigenous bodies are limit-figures that exceed the spatial and temporal bounds of the settler state, and are thus subject to shared technologies of state violence.

This presentation focuses on refugee and migrant bodies as they die in their myriad ways across the deathscape, from the desert borders of the United States to the waters of the Mediterranean and offshore detention sites in Australia. It discusses some of the key analytical concepts developed through the research and offers a preview of the Deathscapes website, which will be a key outcome of this project, demonstrating how the site functions as an interface for diverse forms of engagement and exchange among communities, activists, artists and researchers.

Suvendrini Perera is John Curtin Distinguished Professor and Research Professor of Cultural Studies in the School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts at Curtin University. She has published widely on issues of social justice, including decolonization, race, ethnicity and multiculturalism, refugee topics, critical whiteness studies, and Asian-Australian studies. She has combined her academic career with participation in policymaking, public life, and activism. She is the author and editor of seven books, including *Reaches of Empire; Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies* and *Survival Media: The Politics and Poetics of Mobility and the War in Sri Lanka* (nominated for ISA EMSA Distinguished Book Award). Currently she is the lead investigator on two Australian Research Council funded projects, *Old Atrocities, New Media* and *Deathscapes*. With Joseph Pugliese, she is a founding member of [Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites](#)

Suvendrini's profile photo courtesy of Curtin University.

SPEAKER

Professor Joseph Pugliese

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

Displacement, Diaspora and the Ethical Imperative of the Incomplete Community

Diasporic movements of displacement, specifically in the context of asylum seekers and refugees, are inscribed by relations of ruin and fracture. Fleeing sites of persecution, war, torture and other regimes of trauma, asylum seekers often experience irreparable breaks with their homelands and their communities in ruin. In their desperate desire for sanctuary, they undergo dangerous journeys. In the Australian context, the asylum seekers and refugees who have landed on our shores by boat have had their trauma compounded by their incarceration in camps riven by violence, sexual assault and physical and psychological torture. In other words, they flee a community in ruins only to be compelled to endure the trauma of systemic ruin in the context of Australia's immigration detention camps.

*In the course of the last two decades, together with Suvendrini Perera, I have sought to draw inter/national attention to the gross violations experienced by Australia's asylum seekers and refugees in onshore and offshore camps. Since 2015 we have sought to extend our interventions on this topic through the establishment of a platform, *Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites (RAPBS)*, that attempts to bring together research, creative practice and activism. The platform enables the dissemination of refugee testimonies, critique and acts of resistance as it also aims to share our own theoretical and critical understandings of refugee policy among a non-academic audience.*

As such, the RAPBS platform is an attempt to make available and extend our humanities research among broader communities and coalitions. We understand these as contributions, in Jean-Luc Nancy's terms, to making communities of 'incompletion', that is, communities marked by an incomplete 'activity of sharing' that simultaneously marks the asymmetries of power and resources that inscribe our respective spaces.

This presentation discusses two RAPBS initiatives and reflect on the ethical implications and imperatives of working toward an incomplete community underpinned by the non-negotiable commitment to justice.

Joseph Pugliese is Professor and Research Director of the Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University. His key research areas are: social justice praxis, law, culture and the humanities, colonialism and decoloniality, race, ethnicity and whiteness, refugees and asylum seekers, bodies and technologies, and state violence. His most recent publications include two monographs: *Biometrics: Bodies, Technologies, Biopolitics* (Routledge 2010), shortlisted for the Surveillance Studies Book Prize, and *State Violence and the Execution of Law: Biopolitical Caesurae of Torture, Black Sites, Drones* (Routledge, 2013), nominated for the US Law and Society Book Award and the UK's Hart Socio-Legal Book Prize. His latest book, *Forensic Ecologies*, will be published by Edinburgh University Press in late 2017. With Suvendrini Perera, he is a founding member of [Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites](#)

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Curtin University is hosting Joseph's participation at this year's Symposium.

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