

Humanising what has been dehumanised: On the politics of art, images and names



Background Photo: Behrouz Boochani.

Saying their names

On the Deathscapes site all names are used subject to the protocols established by families of the dead, especially in the case of Indigenous families, in the course of their search for justice.

Removing the names of those who have died in state custody is not a neutral act: on the contrary, it is yet another politically loaded action that risks reducing the victims of state violence to disembodied and anonymous statistics. Unless we name and identify those who have died at the custodial hands of the state and its contracted non-state actors (G4S, Transfield etc), we risk reproducing the very forms of state redaction and censorship that the state itself deploys in order to occlude and efface those who have died through the exercise of state violence.

In this spirit, a number of activist groups have established what they have termed as specifically 'naming the dead' projects in order to counter the state's desire to render its victims as both generic and anonymous. These include groups who name and identify asylum seekers who have died in the Mediterranean, those who have died in U.S drone campaigns, those who died in U.S black sites and in the killings of Indigenous and Black women in North America, such as the #SayHerName movement.

Images and artworks

Precisely because of their graphic nature, images are seen to lend themselves to aestheticising operations that are often perceived as the exclusive purview of the visual medium. This is a fallacy, as all modes of representation – including the textual, discursive, descriptive, analytical, scientific, legal and so on -- are inscribed with constitutively aestheticising attributes that encompass the broad range of rhetorical techniques often seen to be the exclusive purview of 'art': these include the use of metaphor, simile, personification, repetition, and so on. There is no semiotic medium that is not always already constituted by a range of aesthetic techniques and attributes. What distinguishes the medium of art is that it *reflexively* draws on aesthetic techniques in order to convey its 'message.' Other genres and discourses, such as the legal, academic or scientific, disavow their constitutive aesthetic attributes in order to present the fiction that they are purely 'factual,' 'apolitical' and 'neutral.'

Art has been repeatedly mobilised by communities who have been the targets of state violence as a way to counter the state's objectifying – legal, ethnographic, scientific, governmental – accounts. In the absence of access to the official platforms through which to speak back to state violence, targeted communities have drawn on art as a way to represent their otherwise silenced viewpoints and in order to embody and materialise their acts of resistance and protest, to celebrate their cultural practices and histories of survivance and to memorialise and commemorate their dead.

In the post-frontier context of a settler-colonial state such as the U.S., as Philip J. Deloria underscores, 'while military conflict was no longer an option, the struggle between Native people and the United States had not concluded. Across Indian country, the recognition of military defeat had pushed Native people to develop strategies for continuing the struggle ... on the *cultural front*,' mobilising a range of aesthetic practices, including canvas, sculptures, murals, dance, music and so on, to assert their unceded sovereignty and survival of their cultures.

In the Australian settler-state context, for Indigenous people the nexus between culture and politics is inextricable, as is graphically evidenced by their mobilising visual art in their various petitions asserting their unceded sovereignty, for example, the Yirrkala bark petitions and the recent Uluru Statement from the Heart.

In the context of Australia's offshore immigration detention centres, incarcerated refugees have mobilised myriad aesthetic genres such as poetry, art, music, spoken word and film as forms of resistance. Behrouz Boochani's documentary, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, filmed on his mobile phone, has screened at film festivals across the world. In his 'Poet's Manifesto' on the resistance mounted by the men against their forced eviction from Manus RPC in 2017, Boochani writes, 'Our resistance enacted a profound poetic performance', identifying the resistance of bodies as a performative and poetic, that is, aesthetic, mode of action.

*The refugees have been resisting with their very lives.
Against the real politics of the day.
With their very bodies.
With peace as a way of being and as an expression.
With a rejection of violence.
With a kind of political poetics.
With a particular style of poetic resistance.
These features have become one with their existence.*

Boochani 2017

On the Deathscapes site, we do not deploy art works for merely 'decorative' or supplementary 'aesthetic' purposes. The aesthetic is, rather, part of the infrastructure of the site. The artworks on the site operate across a number of intersecting political levels: they offer testimony of what otherwise would remain unsaid and unrepresented; they offer graphic examples of acts of protest and resistance; they instantiate agency in contexts in which it is often so brutally denied; they amplify, through their visual languages, the key analytical and political concerns articulated in the various case studies of racialised deaths.

REFERENCES

Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2004), p. 104. Our emphasis.

FURTHER READING

Accessible via our Inspirations Page

Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter: *'We were a congregation of red-beaded necklace adorners, velveteen ushers, rattlers, and clenched-fist praise dancers.'*

'Reflections from Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter'

<https://hyperallergic.com/322742/reflections-from-black-women-artists-for-black-lives-matter/>

Norval Morrisseau, Ojibwa artist, also known as Copper Thunderbird: *Why am I alive? ... To heal you guys who're more screwed up than I am. How can I heal you? With color. These are the colors you dreamt about one night.'*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/08/arts/08morrisseau.html>

Behrouz Boochani, journalist and filmmaker, 'A Letter from Manus Island' The Saturday Paper December 9, 2017.

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2017/12/09/letter-manus-island/15127380005617>