

Speaker 1:

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Sadiah Boonstra:

Hi, everyone. Thank you for coming out on this cold afternoon. We've had a lot of that this week, but very happy that you all joined us. My name is Sadiah. I'm the Curator of the Public Programmes at Asia TOPA. I would first like to start with acknowledging that we're gathering on the land of the Yalukit Willam, who are part of the Boonwurrung, one of the five major languages of the Kulin nations. I would like to remember that this land was never ceded, and I would like to pay our respects to their elders and ancestors: past, present, and into the future.

Sadiah Boonstra:

I'm very happy to be, today, in the presence of Jamie Lewis and all of you really wonderful ladies. This programme is part of the Lunchtime Talks at MPavilion. That's a month-long programme running at MPavilion. We have more talks and panels like this over lunchtime until the 15th of March. I think, Jamie, I will leave it there and let you introduce all the ladies that you brought today. Great. Yeah. Okay.

Jamie Lewis:

Hi, everyone. I guess to start, I'm going to start here. I'm going to start by sharing a response to an interview I did last year as for Liminal Magazine. I was asked in that interview, "What does being Asian-Australia mean to you?" This was my response, "It's a label other Asian-Australians put on me, growing up in an identity-obsessed Singapore, where CMIO, acronyms for Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others, with a constant marker and boxes to tick. I tick the box of Other: Please Specify: Eurasian. In that alone, my otherness is also so much more nuanced and layered than being non-Australian or Asian-Australian.

Jamie Lewis:

I also relate the word Australian to nationality, of which I'm not. I still hold my Singapore passport, and will probably never ever give it up for as long as I have family there, and so I struggle with referring to myself as Australian. I reckon a big part of the distance is also that I moved here as an adult. Whilst I bring my own complexities of growing up mixed race in Singapore, I've always been very certain and confident of my identity here, carrying and embodied privilege as the majority. In the context of Singapore, that means middle income, educated, can speak Mandarin, that kind of majority, while in the midst of living and working in white Australia. I suppose I tend to say Singaporean Eurasian living in Australia. Maybe that, too, is about remembering home is many places all at once, and that I'm only a guest on these unceded lands."

Jamie Lewis:

I, too, want to acknowledge that we are here on the lands of the Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to the elders: past, present, and future, and to any First Nations people here with us today. We are joined by five incredible women who have just as varied a way in which they have come to now live and work in Melbourne. Like me, they all wear and juggle many hats across their personal and professional lives, and in that, a multiplicity of each of us which shapes the way in which we move in this world today. I have invited them to come and share provocation from this lens that we all share.

Jamie Lewis:

Yuhui, a performance maker who often makes work with non-performers, a mom, recently certified swimming teacher and a fellow Singaporean. Priya Pavri, curator with a big heart for social justice, director of Road to Refuge, general manager at Next Wave, and a co-founder of I Had One Too. I'll let them also tell you more about what they do in their provocations. Alisa Tanaka-King, an artist working across non-traditional forms, combining installation, drawn line, live performance, and cooking. Sandra Tan, a Melbourne-born Filipino writer, editor of DENFAIR, also advisor for the Entree.Pinays, have a big heart in trying to promote Australian-Filipino food culture here in Australia, which she has so graciously recommended Boba Bar which you're enjoying, and Shimona Samson, creative strategies by day, facilitator by day, jazz vocalist by night and co-founder of a company called Humie.

Jamie Lewis:

Since it's not such a big group, so we'll do this all as a group. What I'm going to do is pass a mic so that they can share their provocations and then just take that conversation quite casually and meander through the rest of the afternoon. Let's do that. Also, please reach over, bring the food closer. We are eating and talking at the same time. The more-

Female:

[inaudible 00:06:00].

Jamie Lewis:

Yeah. Okay. Yes. Well, maybe I'll let Sandra tell us what it is, and then we can go from there.

Sandra Tan:

Hello. Everything that we have here today is from a small business run by a single Filipina girl, a young girl, that is a friend of mine called Boba Bar. She does pop-ups. Boba is bubble tea, so milk-based tea with like sago pearls in it. That is the kind of core of her business, but she also does catering. Everything that we have here today is vegetarian, apart from the pork crackling chips. We have on the right-hand side, I think they're all the same, the boxes, vegetarian empanada which is a savoury Filipino pastry; kutsinta, which is it's like a steamed rice cake with freshly grated coconut. Then we have another steamed rice cake. The majority of pre-colonial Filipino sweets are rice-based, like a lot of desserts are I suppose all through Southeast Asia and Asia, I suppose, whereas the empanada comes through from the colonial Spanish who colonised for upwards of 300, 400 years.

Sandra Tan:

The purple thing in the corner is called ube halaya, which is purple yam jam. As we can see, there's a lot of carbs happening here. Carbs and sweet potato root vegetables are a bit of a staple. We would have it as a dessert rather than as you might have mashed potatoes is savoury in Western culinary tradition. On the top right-hand corner, we have an atchara pickle, which is a fresh pickle usually of white radish and carrot, which we use as a condiment for all of our meats. Lastly, the fried thing in the middle is called ... What is it called? Cascaron, which is a Filipino doughnut covered in brown sugar. Please enjoy.

Jamie Lewis:

My mother said don't be shy. If you're shy, you lose out. Please help yourself. Like I said, the conversation will just flow. We'll eat and talk. There may be silence. Silence is also an act of radical

participation, so don't feel like you need to say something as well, but also it's a safe space. I will hold this space. You can trust me. Might pass it to Shimona to start with the provocations as we go down through the group. Also, when you're using the mic, you're a singer, but telling everyone else, if you're talking through the mic ... Ollie is looking at ... Yeah.

Ollie:

[inaudible 00:09:16]. There's mics in the middle. [inaudible 00:09:16] the side holding a mic. Otherwise, do you want me to-

Jamie Lewis:

Great.

Shimona Samson:

Well done. That's one of my pet peeves, too. My name is Shimona. I'm a singer. I've been a singer for about 20 years in Singapore and Thailand, and now I'm in Melbourne. I've been here for six years. I find it interesting just thinking about diversity. I had a chat, and maybe I'll just share this with you to help you think about maybe similar experiences in your own life. We hear about how diversity is important. We hear about that diversity in the workplace is good for collaboration and things like that.

Shimona Samson:

But one of the very interesting real life scenarios I've had recently was when I was actually having a conversation with my business partner who's from the UK. Self-admittedly, he says very typical, "I'm a very white male and so my perspective is very different than yours." He'll say things like that. One day I was telling him a little bit of a story about a friend of mine who recently realised something about herself and how that kind of stemmed from the childhood canings we got. This is a little bit sensitive, but I'm just going to say it, put it out there.

Shimona Samson:

A lot of us, when we were growing up in the Asian culture, well, I speak for myself, but canings are not unheard of. I guess the only difference would be how often you get it. When I mentioned this to him and I said, "Oh, I understand her point of view because my parents would cane me now and then, too," and then he went, "Huh?" It was interesting because in seeing his reaction, it made me double-take and think about what I had just said, because it was so normal for me to identify in that same way as my other Asian friend, whereas that friend of mine from the UK saw that as completely shocking.

Shimona Samson:

It made me spend a whole day reeling, thinking about my childhood and thinking what impacts might that have had on my growing up years. Not that my parents abused me or anything, but it was one of those things. You think, "Oh yeah, I would get punished when it's necessary, if it's part of life." Things have changed since then, of course. But it made me reflect on my cultural upbringing and how that impacted my personality, and that would not actually have been possible if I had not been in conversation with someone completely different than me.

Shimona Samson:

I find that ever since coming to Melbourne and living in a more Western country, for example, my cultural upbringing has become a bit more evident to me, and part of that has been very helpful in helping me find areas of my personality or things about myself that I was not aware of as I was growing up. As a woman now, I'm thinking about how this impacts my future and my bringing up children and things like that. As that provocation, maybe if you can think about any incidences where you've surprised yourself and gone, "Oh, that's completely second nature to my culture but I never thought it would be something surprising to someone else." Anyone would like to share? We'll eat yummy food for a bit.

Female:

[inaudible 00:12:53].

Priya Pavri:

Thanks. My name is Priya. I'm still working out what I am, so I'm not sure what the next line should be. But I have the privilege of doing what's a really amazing work with amazing communities here in Melbourne. The refugee community, the emerging arts community through Next Wave, with amazing women and people in the health profession that share stories about abortion and other access to health. I feel like I, like Jamie said, wear many, many hats and think about community in lots of different ways.

Priya Pavri:

But when I was thinking about this particular conversation and the idea of Asian-Australian, I think this is the first time in 28 years of living on stolen indigenous land here that I've been considered an Asian-Australian, which is interesting to me because my parents and my family, they are living in Mumbai, India, which is part of Asia, that for some reason in our consciousness here, India's not really considered a part of, I guess, Asia or what it is to be Asian in the expanded, broad, street chat kind of way.

Priya Pavri:

I was thinking this idea of what it would mean to start, I guess, owning that term and that phrase and start challenging people's perceptions of what that is. But then I'm thinking about this default we go to here about you being something Australian. Like, you're Asian-Australian, you are Indian-Australian, you are something Australian, and I think, for me, there's power in taking that, in owning that, in owning where your heritage and your family comes from.

Priya Pavri:

I've spoken to some Palestinian friends and, for them, it's like an active defiance to hold on to that identity and make sure that's heard. But then the other part of me, the frustrated, annoyed part who is constantly put in a box because of identity wants to challenge that notion of maybe everyone else to think about, especially people that have had Anglo white heritage, what it would mean for you to put a title before Australian, what would it mean to be English-Australian or Irish-Australian or, I don't know, Australian from the county of somewhere, or a convict-Australian for example, or a settler-Australian.

Priya Pavri:

I guess my provocation to everyone is to think about what that would mean and how would it feel to introduce yourself or in your bio, when someone asks you to be a part of something, that it would be

because you are a convict-Australian. Maybe that's just something that we can start thinking about when we talk about communities in Australia or an identity that actually like all these different things, all these different places that we put before Australian make up this idea of Australia, or especially for me, and if it doesn't, then that's not how it works, then none of us are Australian because there were First peoples that were here and they are the only true Australians. I don't know.

Priya Pavri:

I think that that's what I've been thinking about today in the lead-up to this and this place and this space and this land. I was really, really hit by that when I was walking in and saw those tents over there and saying like, "Well, this and those people are here and Australian," and we're all visitors and guests and maybe we need to start acknowledging that more clearly, all of us, not just those who've come from POC backgrounds. Thank you.

Yuhui:

Hi, I'm Yuhui. I've got a couple of pair words, and I'm going to get all of you to put up your hand and decide which you are, all right? The first pair of words I have are exhibitionist or voyeur. I'll give you five seconds to think about it, but don't think about it too much. Who has chosen exhibitionist? Yup. Who has chosen voyeur? Okay. The next pair of words I have are insider or outsider. Who has chosen insider? Who has chosen outsider? Yup. The next pair of words, mundane or theatrical. Who has chosen mundane? Who has chosen theatrical? Okay. Last pair, last pair of words, reality or fiction. Who has chosen reality? Who has chosen fiction?

Yuhui:

Okay. Who found it very easy to pick? You knew straightaway which you are. Okay. I suppose everyone found it a bit hard to decide. Either way, it doesn't really matter. I suppose it's a reflection on how we are different in different contexts. Like Jamie, I would never think of myself as Asian-Australian. I grew up in Singapore and I've lived in Geelong for eight years. I also don't think about the word I make as Asian-Australian or overtly Asian-Australian in thematic. In fact, I probably haven't really thought about identity politics for a really long time.

Yuhui:

In responding to Jamie's, I guess, provocation, I was thinking about multiplicity, which is such a mouthful, of identity in terms of my arts practise. These are some of the pairs of words are some of the ways that I think about my process and my arts practise, which as Jamie shared, often happens with non-artists. I suppose for those of you who are not in the arts, that might be a bit vague. To give you an example, I'm currently working with a group of gym enthusiasts to create a performance. In our practise, we often talk about these non-artists as experts of their everyday lives, with very special skills that we don't have. With these gym experts, they are very fit. They are really good at a particular kind of fitness.

Yuhui:

Or in the past, we've worked with people who live in Footscray to open up their homes and to perform in their work. We're not interested in them being very good performers in the conventional way that we understand it, we are interested in their own ways of performing themselves. Or I've also made a performance with my three-year-old and my collaborator who decided not to have a child and I had just had a child, and so we made a work about that. I find that often in these situations, I'm negotiating

those roles of being a voyeur and exhibitionist, being watched but also being a spy or a creep and observing people who are very unsuspecting at the beginning.

Yuhui:

Or in terms of being an insider and outsider, like at the gym, I'm from Geelong, [Karenza 00:20:49] is not, but she gets a lot of the Aussie banter that I don't get, so I'm both an insider but also an outsider. In terms of the mundane and the theatrical, we love in our work aesthetically juxtaposing very domestic boring things. In fact, one of my favourite conferences, which I one day want to attend which is happening in the UK soon, is called the Boring Conference. We find the boring quite theatrical and we like contrasting that. I guess with the reality and fiction, we love playing with the boundaries of what's real and not real. These are just some pairs of words that I offer up, which are ways that I view my arts practise, which I think are also words that we can use to think about who we are here in this community, whether it's our cultural identity or otherwise.

Sandra Tan:

Hello, I'm Sandra. Unlike Shimona and Yuhui, I was born in Melbourne. I suppose my journey has been quite interesting in that my parents are Filipino. I'm first-generation Australian. For probably most of my life, I had an assumption about what being Filipino meant to me and to my family. I thought I was pretty all across it, like totally knew it and I would be comfortable bringing that into a school environment or, when I was growing up, in the playground, or owning that identity. But the older I get, the more I realise about how little I actually know about the experience of being Filipino.

Sandra Tan:

A big part of my journey in the last couple of years has really been almost retrospectively looking back at my life and understanding which parts of my own self and the people around me are Filipino and which parts come about because we are Australian and whether there's any importance in making that distinction or whether as a third culture, I suppose, we're creating something new. There's maybe perhaps not any point in reinforcing that dichotomy because it's uncharted territory to a certain degree.

Sandra Tan:

One thing that I would like to put to this conversation is something that I think comes about because, in certain circles, I'm a bit of a chameleon so it's not ultimately obvious to people immediately maybe where I come from, and so therefore, people can cast judgement or make assumptions in their own way. I think what is interesting to me, and certainly something that I've been thinking about in the lead-up to this talk, is what are those things that make us duplicitous in the way that we operate in the world and what are the privileges and maybe the disadvantages that we all share or maybe don't share.

Sandra Tan:

That's something that I'm looking at in my working life in the design industry, which is I think still quite close. It's not as diverse as the world that I see around me when I walk around when I leave my front door. That idea of privilege is very interesting to me, and I think it's something that is useful to sit with and just understand for yourself.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

Hello. Oh, sorry. Did that bounce back or is it just ... Here's okay? All right. Good. I'm Alisa, and I am also Australian born and have had an interesting experience being Eurasian because people's ideas of what I am have often influenced what I feel I am, which I think is interesting and as a kind of semi-awkward way of having this conversation, I'm sitting directly opposite my parents very kindly. You can see and decide which one I look more like.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

I think interestingly, too, I don't, at the moment particularly with pink hair, present as immediately Asian or recognisably Asian, and that's not something that has been the case just because I've had pink or blonde or purple or whatever colour hair I've had. From probably the age of about 15 or 16, people have wondered what my background is. Up until then, I looked quite convincingly Asian. It's funny how things change. But the most common statement, I suppose, that I had as a child up until my teens was, "Oh, you're half Japanese, you're so lucky," and I was like, "Oh, okay, I didn't really get a choice. It's what it is."

Alisa Tanaka-King:

Yes, absolutely, incredibly lucky. I'm lucky that I was born to interesting parents who cared about incorporating that culture in my life, but I have also never known anything different, so it's quite a strange statement to make. Then from the age of about 15 or 16 up until regularly now, people will either say, "What are you?" Or when I tell them about my Asian heritage, they'll be like, "No, no, you're not," and I'm like, "No, no, I know, I'm aware." Within me, that's always sat in just the mix of day to day. I definitely find that when I'm in Australia, I am much more Australian. I've spent a lot of time in Japan. When I'm in Japan, I take on many Japanese traits that don't apply when I'm here.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

For those of you who may not know, in Japan, you don't walk and eat. For instance, you won't buy some finger food and walk down the street, munching on an ice cream. I do that here all the time. I will regularly go and buy an ice cream and walk down the street or buy some sort of snack. I go to Japan, I'm like, "Oh no, I couldn't possibly do that." It's not even fear of what other people might think of me, it's the, "Oh no, I think it might be bad for my stomach," because it applies differently on the other side of the equation.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

I think when looking at that as I've evolved in my arts practise as well, I come from a visual arts background, and still work very visually, predominantly that's my first step. I've always moved towards storytelling as a way of processing everything, whether it's communicating, whether it's understanding something, whether it's just entertaining myself or other people around me, hopefully. Through my teenage and 20s, early 20s, Japan and Japanese culture wasn't at the forefront of my mind particularly probably because I didn't really know how to connect with and then contextualise it in my life that was going on here. It was then through independently revisiting Japan through its arts scene and through its food as an adult that I think it came back to me to mean things.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

I have, since finishing studying, visited Japan many times of my own accord as opposed to just with my family, and have made friends in Japan that are now my friends as opposed to family. I have my own stories within Japan that are meaningful outside of what kind of heritage I hold there. Then alongside

that, I have been working in Ballarat with the community, coordinating community arts programme, which initially was just a job to pay the bills but has actually become a really fundamental part of my arts practise as well.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

I look a lot at the cultural diversity in that area versus the cultural diversity in Richmond where I live. There's a huge Asian influence in Richmond and I feel quite at home there, whereas when I talk about Asian influences in Ballarat, I feel like very few people understand that as something that is quite normal to them. There's a huge refugee population in Ballarat as well who've entered the space there and the most successful story of cultural integration that I've seen is a man who has started a restaurant. He's Ethiopian and he started an Ethiopian restaurant in the centre of Ballarat, and it's one of the most successful restaurants in town.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

It is amazing how food can bring people together, like exactly like we are today. It's certainly something that I've been exploring in my own arts practise but also just in my daily life. I think I was thinking about it about a year ago when I was doing an interview for an article around food and art. The beauty that you see of food in Australia is such a representation of what the cultural landscape looks like at the moment in terms of fusion food, Australian interpretation of food, restaurants that are incorporating native ingredients more and more.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

I'm definitely interested in the conversation of where we can incorporate more indigenous influence in food, but how that tells a story in such a simple beautiful way, that is so successful compared to so many initiatives that we see that are trying to make people connect. I think maybe it's also because I love food, it's definitely a big factor. But that's where I've come to sit very happily with who I am and where I fit within the culture here, and I'm really excited about where that goes as well. That's my-

Jamie Lewis:

Thank you. It's quite a breath of provocations there of things to think about. I know some of you in the audience. I might just actually direct some specific questions but then inviting the people I don't know to join in whenever. Dan, as the-

Dan:

I'll speak on behalf of white people and the [crosstalk 00:32:09] everywhere.

Jamie Lewis:

Yeah. Dan is a very close collaborator so I feel like I can do this. As the one white man in this audience, I want to put Priya's provocation to you in terms of like a dash Australian and what that means for somebody who ... I know you were born here and grew up here, have a very local Melbourne, not just here in Australia but actually have a very local Melbourne relationship with this place. I want to put Priya's question to you and what are some of your thoughts there.

Dan:

Yeah. First of all, I hope I don't talk too long. I'm really enjoying listening in this context. But when you're speaking, I was thinking about my own experience of ... I lived overseas for a while. I went and lived in London. I lived overseas in the way of living in Queensland, which was really different to Victoria. A lot of those things that I hadn't been challenged by came to me in that five-year period, which is really interesting and really healthy for me as well. Well, I find this conversation always really tricky, because on one side of my family it's English, on the other side of my family it's Dutch-German. That's already three really complicated things, because if you talk at the north of England and the south of England, that's very different.

Dan:

The fine detail of what it means to be Dutch-German or Dutch and German, that's quite complex as well. I actually don't identify with any of that, although I recognise the influence of that on the wider culture, especially England. That's clearly obvious in the colonial and invasion context. But I think of my partner as well who is an eighth Chinese, an eighth Russian, has English and da, da, da, da, and like where did the bloodline stop. I don't know. It's maybe, to me, more interesting, at least in my own life, to think about the context that I'm in and how that wider culture has influenced me rather than the bloodline.

Jamie Lewis:

In the context of that then, what might that hyphen be?

Dan:

It's just a long hyphen. There's a lot of hyphens, isn't there? If I'm in a big context now, say that I was born on boundary country and I had to do a very different explanation of who I am now. But it's taken us a really long time to get to that. The first 30 years of my life, maybe I didn't have that way of speaking. I let my life context maybe describe who I am rather than the kind of labels. But I'm totally unresolved. I don't know. Yeah.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

[inaudible 00:34:55].

Jamie Lewis:

Yup.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

Yeah. I'm more in response to yours and in response to Dan's as well of like how many hyphens. At what point, I'm interested in as well, do you stop hyphenating, I suppose, and become something else. I'm married to a white man who has Irish heritage. If I have a child, they will be a quarter Japanese, with an Irish influence, with a German influence. Where does it morph into something else, I suppose, is what I'm interested into. There might not be right answer.

Sandra Tan:

The way that I come to that conundrum, I suppose, in my life is my surname is Tan, which is Chinese, but I don't identify as Chinese because the Chinese relative that I did have, I never met. It was my great-grandfather on my dad's side so I've got the surname, but absolutely no connection to the Chinese side of myself apart from I enjoy Chinese food. The interesting thing about that is maybe moving around in

Melbourne, that doesn't really mean so much. But when I'm in Asia, it becomes more significant because ... That's where this idea of I think we talk a lot, or there's this idea of maybe white supremacy or white-driven narratives.

Sandra Tan:

But actually in Asia, there's a whole other hierarchy that I think people outside of that don't necessarily understand. Me having the Chinese surname cast a lens over who I am, which has nothing to do with me personally whatsoever, but there's a lot of assumptions that my family are good in business, that we are rich, and we're not rich. I just find it so interesting, because I'm technically, in that sense, and eighth Chinese. Yet, I have no connection to that culture. It's almost interesting what the assumptions people make of you as a person without you having any kind of influence over it.

Sandra Tan:

I also get told that I look Chinese, which I don't think I do. Not that I have an issue with that, but it's very strange that people will have a certain way of thinking. Here in Australia, it's a whole framework that does not exist. Like, I'll be talking to the people that I have ... My friends are all different cultures. Probably up until a few years ago, I didn't actually have a lot of Asian friends, intentionally or not, but I didn't grow up in a very Asian-dense area of Melbourne. Those kinds of ways of understanding, like the fact that I'm a Chinese-Filipina, it's not relevant. I don't have to kind of think about at all, or I guess, in some senses, perform any kind of expectation. Yeah.

Jamie Lewis:

I want to invite any other thoughts from anybody else. Yeah.

Female:

[inaudible 00:38:10].

Jamie Lewis:

Yeah. [inaudible 00:38:12].

Speaker 2:

I was actually reflecting on your comment that we're a little pretty hyphenated and at what point does it stop. Finding out just as my dad was dying that my grandmother was Viennese Jewish, and I had hosted Shavuots for years because I had a lot of Jewish friends without knowing that, and then finding out at another point I'm part Algonquin, and all these threads which have landed in Melbourne. I think we're probably all fairly complex genetic mixes that we probably don't even understand what the impact is on us, with the complexity of epigenetics, with the complexity of being affected 14 generations down the line by people whose names probably aren't even still in our oral histories or family trees. I feel like I should make a summary point. I don't have one.

Jamie Lewis:

You don't have to. You don't have to at all. It's an interesting one when the lines between speaking about ethnicity and culture as if they are always the same as well. I just want to put that out there, that there's capital C Culture, and small letter C culture in cultures, that also the hyphens don't always have

to refer to bloodlines and ethnicity, and culture isn't necessarily limited to belonging to one ethnicity. Just to put that back out there, but Sadiah, you had something.

Sadiah Boonstra:

Yeah, actually maybe that connects a little bit to that. Maybe just also to give you a bit of context, because I actually come from a different context. I'm Jakarta-based and I was born in Indonesia, but I grew up in the Netherlands with a Dutch family. I now also have known my Indonesian family, so now I'm like in between. But I've travelled a lot. I've lived in Greece, in the UK, in New York. I live now in Indonesia and spending some more time here. For me, it's very interesting to see that every time I move somewhere else and be part of kind of like life there, that everyone always projects a different image on me. Very different.

Sadiah Boonstra:

Like in the Netherlands, there is still a very orientalist, very Eurocentric gaze on women of colour, and especially Indonesian women, so I'm always objectivized and orientalized and sexualized. If you go to the UK, it's almost the complete opposite. In New York, it's different again. Here, it's different again. Really, over the past few years, I've come to the conclusion, it's not really me, it's not necessarily about me, it's more about images and stereotypes that societies in different parts of the world have constructed, and then everybody tries to fit me in a certain box, and I never fit. I think I've just come to accept that and now just try to be who I am. But it makes it a little bit different because people always push you to, "Oh, where are you from?" Or, "What are you?" I'm like, "I really don't know what I should tell you," which I think is okay.

Jamie Lewis:

It's not me, it's actually you. Yeah.

Priya Pavri:

When everyone was talking, and especially Dan, when you were sort of responding to that question, I was thinking, I understand that there's a big international context here. But if we just think about the context of where we are for a minute, and I guess the hierarchy that sits with something Australian and what it would mean for us to all take on the label of like non-indigenous Australian rather than this group thing, like indigenous Australian that sits over here as another.

Priya Pavri:

If we all collectively took on that label, it would flatten out the hierarchy and flatten out the structure, and also flatten out the hierarchy in what it means to be Asian, Australian, or Euro-Australian, and all those sorts of things, and that would be maybe an interesting way to start thinking about this idea of Australian, but then also everyone else's cultural differences. Then there's no like, "Which fragment of my heritage or history do I acknowledge?" It's just like, "I come from somewhere else or have something from somewhere else that makes a part of me."

Dan:

I was just working on a document at work the other day, and this programme is open to artists from Aotearoa, New Zealand in brackets. I was thinking how we don't have the language yet to say, "How are you from this place," in the language that isn't a colonial language, because Australia is not a native

word, an indigenous word. There's this complete failure of being able to even start that conversation. In the office, we just talked about for 15 minutes, we realised we don't even know where to begin on that, actually. It's just one word of like, "What is this place called?" I'm getting better at knowing this is Kulin country, and maybe down this side is Boonwurrung and over there is Wurundjeri. But still, how do we talk about us is a really big thing, and that's a massive challenge. It's like embedded in language.

Priya Pavri:

Yeah. We've had a similar conversation right now with different artists wanting to acknowledge where they've made work, where they live, and then acknowledge where they present work. There's sort of three different spaces. Then a lot of people have taken on this notion of putting their indigenous places name in their bio title there after the names. But by doing that, then you take away from indigenous artists, who that is such an important part of that culture, and just noticing that within especially the arts community, we haven't quite really thought about actually what those things mean and actually not done ... I guess the next part of that is permission from those groups to then start using those names and those words. Like, it's one thing for us to learn them and know them, but then are we just not taking something else from someone else we've already taken so much? I think I agree. I think there's some learning to do, and I'm not really sure where that starts, but maybe here's a good place to provoke.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

I think on that, it's interesting, too, and two points in that idea of, is it taking something, is it tokenistic, how do we make that meaningful. I'm constantly battling with that when we do acknowledgments of country and trying to make that meaningful instead of just another thing that we do. Like, "Here are the toilets, here is my acknowledgement of country," not suggesting that today's acknowledgement of country was anything like that, but sometimes they are. I think that's problematic.

Alisa Tanaka-King:

Then also in the context of what Dan was saying, we don't have a word for Australia that we can even start with. I'm wondering, and I have done no research on this so it's literally just a question that's popped into my head, but are we thinking of it in the wrong context? Are we looking at Australia in our white gaze as a whole country, when really we should be looking at it as regions and that's what it should be? That's just a question to put out there.

Sandra Tan:

I have a comment this as far as ... My work is mainly in design media, so in magazines and online work, talking about architecture and interior design. For most of my probably seven-year career, I wasn't consciously bringing my whole self to my work. I was approaching it as a very academic thing. This is what I do for a job. My culture is a secondary thing that I leave at home. I don't talk about my Filipinoness, it's not relevant here. I think that's part of the publications maybe that I was associating with, so I didn't feel like that was a space to do that.

Sandra Tan:

Recently, I was asked by one of those publications to write ... I was commissioned to write on a cultural work, which is actually behind NGV. It's a very massive sculpture called In Absence, and it represents a lot of the trauma of the stolen generations and the disconnect that exists still. It was very interesting to unpack it, because it's by a Melbourne-based architecture firm, a collaboration between them. Both of them were white Aussie males. The aboriginal artist, the indigenous artist, her name is Yhonnie Scarce.

She has these beautiful, glass, black, hand-blown yams that exist in this beautiful sculpture. I haven't actually seen it finished, so I'm going to hop over there after this and then take a little look.

Sandra Tan:

But what I found really interesting was this idea that when I was approached to write the piece, I was approached to do it, I think, and it was almost implicitly said, because they don't have any women of people of colour in their writing team. I'm not on their staff, I'm a commissioned writer. It was very interesting, almost a moment of pause for me thinking, "Okay, you've come to me, I'm not an indigenous person or writer who really should be telling this story." It's almost something that I feel writers and people that create a wrestling with, because how do you ... Certainly that was what the conversation with Edition Office, the architects, was.

Sandra Tan:

It was about them really wanting to step aside and give that platform to Yhonnie to show off her work. It became, "What are you going to do and how can we best support it, because we know that our voices are not the ones that should be in the spotlight?" Something really fascinating, I think. In the design and architectural media space, it's often hard to say anything real. Those issues I'm trying to grapple with, too. Yeah.

Jamie Lewis:

I'm just conscious of time and people going back to work and things, so I just wanted to, if there's any other things to add on from Yuhui or Shimona or anybody else in the audience.

Shimona Samson:

Just a quick response about the fitting in a box thing. I think I really like that provocation because it makes me think about how we perceive versus how others perceive ourselves. In that sense, I'm just thinking, "What is the point of us even understanding our own identity?" I think that's probably a big question in my mind, because coming here, I feel this question a bit more than when I was in my home country. But then when going back home, that question is still there because you don't feel like you belong quite anymore. It's weird because you fit, but you don't fit.

Shimona Samson:

Then what I found interesting was that, just a quick example, I was singing in a restaurant one time. Then this lady who was very excited about jazz music, and she came up to me during the break and she said, "Shimona, you have such a lovely voice. If I just close my eyes, you could be black, you could be white, you could be," and I was looking at her thinking, "Oh my God. Is this flattery or a weird racist slur?" I'm not sure what to make of it, but she was very joyous and slightly drunk, so I went, "Thank you."

Shimona Samson:

Then I pondered it that night and thought to myself, irregardless of whatever box she put me in, or maybe it was a compliment saying I don't live in a box, what was important to me was deciding my take on that and how strong I am in my own identity as whatever I look like to present whatever kind of music I like to make to whoever wants to hear. That's been my journey at this point. I think a lot of us have this not sure what the hyphen is, and still figuring out our identity and irregardless of whether

we're Asian or Australian living in this country, I think that's an ongoing question that all of us have to make, because we all come from who knows where, really. That's sort of my take on that.

Yuhui:

I suppose something that I brought up with Sandra as well, the idea of the mestizo, which I guess is relevant to this conversation about multiplicity in Latin America and in the Philippines, so I'm married to a Salvadorian. If you ask them about First Nations or indigenous things, they often just say like mestizo, everyone's mixed and you are a bit of everything. I suppose listening to conversation about First Nations as well, we often talk about it as if there's First Nations and then everyone else is mestizo.

Yuhui:

But in fact, I guess even I've been thinking about how, for many of them, they are also incredibly complex and mixed in their heritage, whether it's like so many different cultures within First Nation culture so they might be mixed that way, or even many of them, I guess, from parents who are from that colonial white background, and that complexity that sits within someone who identifies as First Nations is very complex and not the same as all of us. But to think about that idea of multiplicity and mestizo and whether we collectively can own that, but then the idea of ownership again, I don't know, I don't have the answer. But there are other places in the world where many people are thinking about that multiplicity as well.

Jamie Lewis:

[inaudible 00:52:45] long time. I guess with all that, I just want to end with this little bit. The longer I live here, I'm sitting with words like wrestle, straddle, juggle as common threats between my shifting cultural identity. My work life as an artist, an arts worker, dramaturg, and facilitator, and my emotional being to hold multiple and layered, complex, difficult feelings and scenarios at the same time, to mostly sit in the in between, that perhaps this Singaporean Eurasian, cis woman living in Melbourne, Australia will always be neither here nor there and everywhere at the same time.

Jamie Lewis:

The food will stay here for a bit more, so feel free to linger and finish the food. Feel free to take some back up to the office. Thank you, Sadiah and [Fred 00:53:54] from Asia TOPA in Arts Centre Melbourne. Thank you to MPavilion, Ollie, and [Nania 00:54:02]. Thank you my six provocateurs, who are now so lovely friends and colleagues and all of you for coming on a not so cold, not so hot, typical Melbourne day. Let's continue to wrestle with some of these thoughts and keep this conversation going outside of today. Thank you for joining me today.

Sadiah Boonstra:

Thank you.

Speaker 1:

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