

'Pearls and Blackbirds' was commissioned by the Fremantle Biennale  
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'Pearls and Blackbirds' has been generously supported by the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries of WA Creative Development Grant.



Department of  
**Local Government, Sport  
and Cultural Industries**

'Pearls and Blackbirds' was made in Cultural Consultation with Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre



'Pearls and Blackbirds' was presented at the WA Maritime Museum



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## **ABSTRACT**

*Pearls and Blackbirds*, is a screen-based artwork, filmed partially underwater in the seas around Fremantle and Northern WA, examining both dark and light undercurrents of WA's historically significant pearling industry through contemplation of the lives and stories of female Aboriginal pearl divers and Japanese prostitutes that traversed through the port of Fremantle and Northern WA in the late nineteenth century.

The commercial Pearling Industry of the late 19th century transformed Northern WA into a prime colonial outpost of trade and Fremantle into a flourishing multi-cultural port town, flushed with the affluence of ship building Pearl Luggers and off-season Pearl Masters spending their new fortunes.

The secret histories of 'blackbirding' – forcing Aboriginal women, to dive for pearls is a dark undercurrent that fragments the exotic romanticism of the Pearling story.

*Pearls and Blackbirds* intends to imbue an overdue acknowledgement of the collective histories of trauma and sorrow of women from different cultures who faced unjust violence, dis-possession and agonising distress in the duty of State building Australia.

*Pearls and Blackbirds* was written, produced and directed by Australian artist Kelsey Ashe with Cultural Consultation from the Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre.

## FOREWORD

By Dr. Kate McMillan

I grew up overlooking the Indian Ocean, listening to its rhythms and learning its moods. Its shores were the tideland of colonisation, and the sea itself, considered the playground of the British Empire – where boys became men, forging the highways of trade and exploitation. Settler Australians inherited this perspective, understanding the ocean as a resource, albeit a dangerous one. In the twenty-first century, for refugees crossing it, pursuing the falsehood of freedom, it becomes a beacon of hope as well as a cemetery for their dreams, and oftentimes their lives. It is not surprising that the giant continental prison island of colonial times, is re-enacted in the present-day prison islands that surround our coast. The unattended wounds of our past seep into the mechanisms of contemporary life.

Australia is a seething undercurrent of forgotten and overlooked violent histories, constituting what I call the ‘colonial sublime’ - a sort of terror, awash with the profound and overwhelming beauty of the landscape. Everywhere, all around us, is the detritus of dispossession and the subsequent refusal to acknowledge the ongoing legacy of slavery and genocide. Our oceans, surrounding islands, as well as the land itself, function as memory-triggers to the atrocities we are desperate to bury. Artists are the litmus test for this underbelly – working in defiance of grand narratives, and in many cases, constituting the sole betrayers of sparkling and heroic grand narratives.

The task of memory retrieval is enormous. Researchers at the University of Newcastle are working on the *Frontier Massacres project* and have begun the enormous task of mapping the many hundreds of massacres across Australia between 1776 and 1928. These stories are concealed deep in local histories, barely recorded in police and judicial archives and almost never remembered by anyone other than the ancestors of those killed. Language is used to mask the extent and the significance of cruel and despotic colonial practices. Instead of ‘slavery’, we use the term ‘blackbirding’ to describe the forced removal and enslaved labour practices used throughout Australia and the Torres Strait. This poetic rewriting, is a form of negation and minimisation and what Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan calls an ‘epistemology of ignorance’ – the wilfully imposed mechanism of privilege that cements the untarnished founding colonial story of Australia - constituting an ongoing denial of the impact of systemic violence and dispossession.<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal and islander people were not ‘blackbirded’ – they were kidnapped and forced to work, just as African slaves were, oftentimes never connecting with their families or traditional land again. This practice endured across Australia well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Many artists negate this forgetting, and in the face of systemic racism and the ongoing aftermath of colonialism, such as highly disproportionate incarceration rates, low educational and health attainment, I argue that *all* people must attend to the project of unforgetting. Yet, given the deeply troubling history of

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<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, S & Tuana, N (2007) *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Albany, NY: Suny Press

appropriation within the history of art, it has been with care and trepidation that non-Indigenous artists have begun to address these post-invasion histories in their work. Quite rightly, they refuse to be complicit in the silencing of a broader, more inclusive account of what has taken place, and how and why it has been minimised. This is surely central to reconciliation, sovereignty and justice.

The work of Kelsey Ashe Giambazi is situated precisely in this place. Like the artists explored in my recent publication 'Contemporary Art and Unforgetting in Colonial Landscapes', Giambazi 'listens with her feet'.<sup>2</sup> In her work *Pearls and Blackbirds* she interrogates the ways in which Aboriginal and Japanese women were co-opted into extractive colonial industries such as pearling. Giambazi reminds us that in Australia's not so distant history, it was many types of non-white bodies that were marked through hierarchies of value. Co-opted as labour to undertake the dangerous work of harvesting oysters from the bottom of the ocean, we come to understand the silent but knowing shared trauma and sorrow of women indentured into the business practices of ruthless men. The giant ropes form an umbilical cord between two worlds rendering the ocean a giant womb – they provide sustenance for local communities, but ultimately remain invisible, like the labour of women around the world.

Giambazi troubles the way oceans and landscapes were seen simply as resources, rather than places of deep and enduring memory and culture. In this context, the oceanscapes in 'Pearls and Blackbirds' are sites of both opportunity and danger; death and beauty. The ocean becomes personified, simultaneously concealing and revealing difficult narratives; offering treasure but threatening death. Like the ocean, the work lures us in with its beauty, but ultimately, we are troubled by what it reveals – it is emblematic of the *colonial sublime*. These are indeed troubled waters.

As such, Giambazi's work intersects across many shared histories. This is of course the power of the artist, to not be bound by disciplines and research fields, but to see the wonderful connectedness of all things – of injustice, of struggle, of the voices that are overlooked. It is through this intersection that truths are revealed, but most importantly, it enables these stories to be embodied with empathy. Artists such as Giambazi know it will take much more than text to rewrite our past – that images stick to us; after which we can no longer forget.

Dr Kate McMillan  
King's College, London  
October 2019

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<sup>2</sup> McMillan, K (2019) *Contemporary Art & Unforgetting in Colonial landscapes: Empire of Islands*. London/NY: Palgrave Macmillan

## ESSAY

### Pearls and Blackbirds; Healing Dark history

By Dr. Kelsey Ashe Giambazi

*I wish to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia and recognise the continuing connection to land, coast and sea through their enduring culture. I pay my respect to their people and Elders past, present and emerging.*

This artwork is a meditation on immense beauty and pain, humanity and redemption. It provokes difficult, yet transformative conversation by adding expressive voices to a significant era in WA history, helping to shape our cultural imagination, sense of belonging and identity. By enabling visualisation of hidden heritage, 'Pearls and Blackbirds' also, with hope, has the potential to overhaul pre-conceived ideas about our Australian multi-cultural and Indigenous history and assist in displacing dominant accounts through embodiment of new perspectives.

The film was commissioned by the Fremantle Biennale and will be presented at the WA Maritime Museum during the month of November 2019.

The film hovers through intense and emotive early instances of cross-cultural encounter on Australian shores. Set in 1888, it focuses on a very narrow passage of time where Japanese hard hat divers worked simultaneously underwater with black-birded Aboriginal skindivers - men and women who were stolen, traded and forced to work diving for Pearls.

Although derived from facts and researched archival evidence, *Pearls and Blackbirds* is a fictional tale of the chance encounter between a Japanese prostitute 'Ama' and a young Aboriginal girl of the Pilbara coast, 'Pearl'.

### AN INTWINED HISTORY

Several disparate but intertwined histories collide to make the narrative within the film a possibility. In 1878, in a far-away fishing hamlet of Taiji on the Southern shores of Japan, a female whale gave birth to a calf in the bay. Although it was local taboo to hunt a whale with calf, an economic slump drew almost the entire adult male population out in their boats to capture the whale in a large net. The mother fought with great fury to protect her calf and dragged the boats out to sea. It became dark and the men became cold and exhausted, struggling with their oars to tow the whale. By morning the fleet was scattered, the whale was finally cut loose but the storm worsened.

Within a few days, the elite of the Taiji's whalers, divers, boats and fishermen, had been destroyed or drowned. 130 men were killed leaving a handful of survivors and the tiny village in deep mourning. Unable to survive through whaling, the fatherless, young boys of Taiji heard through the crews of foreign ships of money to be earned in the Pearling Industry in the Northwest of Western Australia and so the area gained some of the best in the Pearling Fleet.

The Pearling industry in the North West was still emerging at this time. Early Swan River colonists moving north for opportunities for wealth drove its development. Initially pearl shell was collected literally off the beach and in shallow water without resort to violence, as the Aboriginal families, traded their labour for food. However records show that from 1868 there was a transition from wading in shallow water, to wading up to the chest and then onto actual diving, requiring a form of more violent coercion from the Pearler to his Aboriginal labour crews of men, women and children. By the 1870s Black-birded Aboriginals were working in depths of around 10-15 metres. With acknowledged superior physical fitness, the Aboriginals proved the equal of any global pearl divers, but drowning, shark attack, illness and violence took many, many lives.

Numerous police and government reports record how Aboriginal people from the Pilbara and Kimberley regions were forced to work as divers. At its peak, blackbirding was a flagrant practice, as described in a report by Government Resident Colonel E.F. Angelo in 1886, when he named three white men who, *"...publicly advertised themselves to procure and put niggers aboard at five pounds a head for anybody, or shoot them for the Government at half a crown a piece."* (Collins, 2018)

Pearl Shell has been integral to WA Indigenous cultural heritage for millenia, in the form of artistic and ritual artefact. The *riji*-shell within Indigenous dress, were and still are, sacred artefacts symbolic for rites of passage. Pearls were not sacred, in fact pearls have been found in ancient middens and anecdotal evidence suggests that they were used as marbles or play toys, discarded afterwards as insignificant. But to the Pearl Master, one decent pearl could set a man up for life, bringing him riches beyond his wildest dreams. The hunt for this treasure of the sea consumed many men and drove many to increasing risk and levels of savageness to achieve. The oyster shell alone was a commodity attracting large sums overseas and many white men became very affluent by relying heavily on the slave labour of Aboriginal crews that spent all day diving, from dawn to dusk without a break. For Aboriginal women on these boats, rape, violence and mistreatment were common. Can we even begin to imagine the pain of violent and often bloody separation from home and family?

Laws were passed in far off Perth in the 1870s to protect the Indigenous, but little if nothing changed for many decades in the North. Skippers could simply choose to ignore the rules out on a vast ocean with only the hunger for more shell and the possibility of a pearl coming up to spur him on. Life was expendable and there was ample supply of these young men and women to dive, albeit held at gunpoint or beaten into submission.

In the 1880s further laws were introduced to protect Aboriginal women and children from exploitation on the Luggers, however with most law enforcement individuals invested in some way or another in the Pearling Industry, the laws were not still not effectively enforced and the practice continued, often in the open but also partially obscured from prying eyes right up until the turn of the century and after. Blackbirding simply went off shore becoming baracooning – isolating Aboriginal women on islands for slave trading and prostitution. Of course there were ‘friendly’ law abiding luggers and crews, but in

general the Indigenous population were subject to horrific acts of degradation, violence and penury during the early days of the Pearling Industry.

The other key instance that makes this filmic narrative a possibility is the arrival of Japanese divers from the 1870s, increasing into the 1880s and beyond. As the laws to protect Aboriginal women and children, mercifully became more abided by, Pearlery relied more upon male Aboriginals as Deckhands and on the Japanese Divers and their hard hat apparatus to scourge the sea bed in deeper and deeper sweeps to lift shell from its ocean bed. Aboriginal divers were kept at close hand however to cover shallower grounds.

1888, is a point in time when women were still being illegally being forced to dive and Japanese men began joining the Luggie crews – it was a time of overlap and cross-cultural encounter, not just for the Aboriginal and Japanese depicted in this film, but also other cultures – Malay, South Pacific, Indonesia, Chinese and Europeans. 1888, is also a trigger, echoing 1788, the year that Australia was ‘settled’. It is a call to re-think vast swathes of time, like a century, and to re-think what ‘Australian’ means.

It is also a time when many Japanese prostitutes were in Broome, Cossack and the surrounding areas. Karayuki-san (literally meaning girl gone overseas) was the name given to Japanese girls and women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries who were trafficked from poverty-stricken agricultural and fishing prefectures in Japan to destinations in East Asia, South East Asia, British India and Western Australia to serve as prostitutes. These women were part of an established and sanctioned prostitution syndicate which was tolerated and condoned by the authorities. Women were bartered and sold to service the Pearling industries’ men and effectively helped build an economy in the North West by providing money for Japanese Divers to become Independent and begin their own companies and crews. These women were largely invisible, working behind closed doors and corrugated iron as laundresses and storekeepers by day and entertainers of men by night.

## **FREMANTLE**

In the 1860s the Swan Colony in Fremantle had been experiencing such a slump in economy and morale that Convictism was re-introduced to stimulate the economy and the town, even though it had ceased in all other parts of Eastern Australia and Tasmania at that time. The Colony was being called a failure, economy and society were depressed, reports of the colony were miserable. But when Pearl Shells began to be gathered in vast numbers in the North West and bought to Fremantle for export, it was a major turning point in Fremantle’s colonial history. Pearling in the north was a windfall for Fremantle, the port became more active, South Bay Shipyards rushed to fill demand to build and repair Pearling Luggers, jewellers were busy setting pearls and hotels flourished as free spending Pearlery and their wives visited the port town between expeditions. The Pearlery bought large quantities of stores, food and supplies, clothing and hardware, to take back with them for the next Pearling season. Improvements to the port facilities were required, extending South Jetty to 139 metres and a massive new jetty was built which extended south-west from Angelsea Point into deep water.



Well prior to the gold rush in the 1890s, it was the pearling Nor'-Westers, as they were then called, that jolted the WA economy and helped build this state, pulling it out of an economic and societal slump. Those who toiled as slaves in the North enabled men to become quickly rich; exchanging Pearl Shell for pounds, towns like Fremantle to prospered.

## **HEALING DARK HISTORY**

A massive swathe of dark history has been swept under the mat, leaving generations of trauma and grief unacknowledged and therefore unhealed. Many are completely unaware that slavery could ever have existed in this sunny land. Some have said to leave the history to rest. But rest it does not. It haunts, lingers and traumatises. The practice went on for decades, generations. The history is stirred by the return of the bodily remains of several young girls from Germany to Australia in 2019, after their removal as 'artefacts' of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australia to Museums in Europe. Repatriated to the Yawuru Country near Broome, the girls remains are confirmed as Pearl diving girls who suffered horrific injuries. The past catches up with the present and traumas are re-lived. How can we account for this? How do we come to terms with the truth of the often brutal, difficult history of how Western Australia came to be? How do we encourage truth-telling in a way that contributes to increased awareness about our past and to reconciliation, so that we may all move ahead together?

The creative arts have a powerful ability to tell stories that written words alone cannot, to evoke sensory memory, and empathy, and compassion, shining a light that heals.

As a mode of recalling shared cultural historical narratives, of situating the past into the present, making it palpable, visible, visceral; contemporary art can do this in potent and unique ways. Immersed into the experience, film in particular with its ability to carry us away, situates the viewer in a mode of receiving sensual and therefore embodied information - something that stays with you, hopefully long after the image recedes.

*Pearls and Blackbirds* offers a vantage point of shared histories and a site to move on from. A position of acknowledgement, and a chance for redemption through placing alternative narratives into the story in a way that only film can. Filmic techniques, enable swift links between an historical era and our contemporary times; seeping into the viewers awareness, capturing the attention of the audience and hopefully resonating long after.

Death and the afterlife, memory retrieval and healing are also some of the sub themes of this work. Academic and author Dr. Kate McMillan names a process of 'Listening with our feet', where sensing, making, responding, listening and remembering are part of the work. In this way an artwork can become deeply auto-ethnographic, as imagined embodied experiences cannot be separated from the life of the artist. My own experiences of pain and grief bleed into and fuel the work, fusing with lateral narratives from generations gone past. Contemporary Art allows for this in a way that some other forms of historical narrative or documentary may not and it is in the potential of this hybridised cross disciplinary research that this work takes place.

I believe that if we are brave enough to face the dark, to hear terrible stories, to listen to them and feel what has gone past, we are deeply sorry for what happened. We are told this is the first part of healing. Remembering, acknowledging, extending love, turning for the light. I acknowledge that we cannot go back and we cannot undo, but we can, listen and begin to foster an appreciation of a culture that is one of the longest continuous ones on earth. It is confrontational and it is difficult, but humans have a resilience to move onwards and upwards...we look to be re-made, re-born and re-created and *Pearls and Blackbirds* aims to explore some of these themes.

Dr. Kelsey Ashe Giambazi

2019

## THANKYOU

I would like to sincerely thank the Fremantle Biennale for commissioning this work and express my gratitude to the sponsors, which have made the making of this film possible:

The Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, The Western Australian Museum, The Aquarium of Western Australia, South Fremantle Sailing Club, The Historic Diving Society, Willie Creek Pearls and Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre.

To the cast and crew; what an amazing experience we've all had. A heartfelt thank you for all your dedication and great spirit.

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**Dr. Kelsey Ashe Giambazi is an Artist, Curator and Academic whose current interests are in the Post-colonial exotic and colonial-sublime sensibilities and contemporary art as a mode of exploring esoteric cultural heritage.**

Ngarla Poems in the *Pearls and Blackbirds* Film and Catalogue have been reproduced with the permission and assistance of the Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Centre.

**(Ngarla and English versions)**

**Wirnta Kataka Pungkurirri, Purnakujarra  
From *Ngarla Songs***

Wirnta jayin pirnu wangkurrungura,  
Wirnta kataka pungkurirri,  
Purnakujarra.  
Jirtamarra pananga nyinila.  
Mirlungkurniny mayinyjangurra, paarlanku,  
Kulpirri karti ngarntumarra, wara ngalparra.

Yintilypirna Kaalyamarra

**Japanese Pearling Fleet**

Masts partly hidden on the open sea,  
Now the whole boat visible,  
Next only the tops of the rigging in view.  
Keep your eye out for them.  
They are gathering again, for pearling,  
Sails in the sea breeze,  
Scattered across the horizon.”

Yintilypirna Kaalyamarra