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The Pandemic of Racism / #Blacklivesmatter

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The COVID-19 pandemic of coronavirus disease affects the respiratory system. While death is not always the outcome, an infection will create lifelong health problems. To minimise the social and economic impact within this country, borders were closed, social behaviour was criminalised, and as of 1 July 2020 over \$176 billion was made available to Australian residents. As individuals, our focus is on protecting those who need it most. If we need to leave our homes we use hand sanitiser and cover our nose and mouth, or wear a face mask.

Covering our face and wearing a face mask is a constant reminder that there is a deadly virus living among us. The discomfort of wearing a mask is challenging; a visual barrier that hides a smile, fogs glasses and muffles our voice, it further isolates us from human connection. Having the mask covering our nose and mouth makes taking in air difficult. When we exhale, the hot moist air mixed with the carbon dioxide in our breath makes for a fetid environment. For those of us outside the medical world, we look forward to relinquishing our mask-wearing responsibilities.

Heightened by all forms of media, a mental health crisis is shadowing the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence about the impact of isolation from loved ones, and the fear and stigma attached to an unstable income and reduced home security, together with the short and long-term effects of compromised physical health, and the dislocated education experience granted our children, indicates increased feelings of anxiety, depression and increased situations of suicide, substance abuse and post-traumatic stress.

As Koories, there is a sense of *déjà vu*. Removal from family and social segregation, empty pockets and hungry stomachs, low levels of employment opportunities, risk of homelessness, truncated life expectancy, and a disengaged education experience are the problems we have faced for over two centuries of white supremacist systems on unceded lands. We are still in survival mode, still recovering.

Since 2008, the *Closing The Gap* report has promised to deliver health, education and employment improvements to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The 12th *Closing the Gap* report, tabled in parliament in



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February, revealed that only two out of the seven modest targets are being met. While Prime Minister Scott Morrison admitted the report proved a “top down” approach that had never really been a partnership with Indigenous people, no additional funding to ease the social and economic impact of ongoing colonisation was made available.

In the midst of the pandemic, on 25 May 2020, while we wore face masks or stayed at home, video footage emerged from the United States of America to recalibrate our feelings about living within the cage of COVID-19, and especially the discomfort of breathing. Handcuffed and pushed to the road face down, African American George Floyd was restrained by four Minneapolis police officers. For nearly nine minutes, during which fellow officers used threats of force and mace to prevent bystanders from intervening, Officer Derek Chauvin knelt into Floyd’s neck taunting him to get up, all the while ignoring Floyd’s calls to his mumma and his now immortalised words: “I can’t breathe.” Floyd told Officer Chauvin at least 16 times that he could not breathe.

The brutal murder, in custody, of George Floyd ignited global rage at the gross misuse of power and systemic racism in the USA. For First Nations people in this country, every image broadcast of a death in custody was an Aboriginal death. In the faces of African American men and women we saw the faces of our family, our loved ones. As living beings tarred by the pandemic of racism, our *déjà vu* had materialised: we know about theft and enslavement, we understand the struggle for equality within the cesspool of white supremacy and the dictatorship of the rich.

The pandemic of racism doesn’t just kill, it infects generations. While hundreds of years of injustice came before, in this time of lockdown and face masks, the minds of people opened and systemic powerlessness was recognised. There were more than 2000 #Black Lives Matter protests in over 60 countries and George Floyd’s final plea, “I can’t breathe”, became the war cry against the global pandemic of racism. *No justice, no peace, no racist police.*

Despite COVID-19 social restrictions, tens of thousands of people in this country marched in capital cities, in country towns, followed the action online and stood alone on roadsides brandishing placards. *I can’t breathe: Stop Black Deaths in Custody - Justice for George Floyd #BLM.* Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance organised the protest on the land of the Kulin Nations. Their communications around safety were substantial: redirecting immune challenged supporters to online platforms and asking protestors to bring sanitiser, they made face masks freely available and insisted that



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people who attended the march must adhere to a strict two week home isolation.

I can't breathe: Stop Black Deaths in Custody - Justice for David Dungay #BLM. In our hearts, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people roared for Dunghutti man David Dungay Jnr who less than five years before, at 26 years old, was held down by prison officers in a Sydney prison while a nurse injected him with a sedative. For more than nine minutes and a dozen times he also pleaded to his killers: "I can't breathe."

Since the 1991 Royal Commission into 99 Aboriginal deaths in custody that made 339 recommendations and concluded Indigenous people were significantly over-represented in prisons, a further 437 Aboriginal men and women have died in custody without one conviction. Until the perpetrators are held accountable, institutions of power – the police force and correctional facilities, medical officers, media outlets, courtrooms and governments – must take action against the virus of racism infecting their ranks. We need positive action and no more fake news.

Monique Grbec is a child of the Stolen Generations. With an interest in identity, the generational effects of institutionalisation, and the White Australia Policy, Monique's lifework is fundamentally text based and addressed through the lens of Indigenous Standpoint Theory. A regular contributor to Witness Performance, her current visual work is multimedia installation and video.