Monstrous critical practice

Desiree Tahiri

abstract

Incisive yet often politically neutralised, traditional academic critique has had little effect on the neoliberal organisational cultures of the university. Monstrosity as a means of subversion and survival can grow a communicative practice that rewrites intellectual critique. ‘Monsters’, the imagined and the real, live in ways that can be instructive for creating lives at the boundary of the neoliberal ‘normal’. The swelling dread and psychopathy of the horror genre mirrors our parallel world of Kafkaesque bureaucracies. To survive and live meaningfully within the horrific neoliberal university, we must become monstrous. Monsters assert freedom and power in their anarchistic threat to the established order. No apologies, nor polite critique. Business schools have opened portals to neoliberalism: we must sharpen the teeth and claws of our critique between the walls of the universities we inhabit and wreak creative, anarchistic havoc.
As Parker contends, ‘seeing things differently might be a precursor to doing things differently’ (2005: 165). Horror holds a mirror up to the dystopian reality we live in. It shows a gory, disturbed world, triggering raw emotions of fear and disgust, rather than telling from a standpoint of conventional academic disconnection. This note descends into the darkness of the horror genre to illuminate the institutional psychopathy of neoliberal universities. The metaphors and allegories conjured by horror are sources for anarchistic inspiration and hold pedagogical value in helping us diagnose the nightmare of our own organisational culture.

Inside these scary institutional castles lurk even scarier entities – under these dire circumstances, we must grow fangs and become monsters. I summon monstrosity as a subversive force, drawing on the countercultural history of the grotesque and the gothic to unleash inflammatory, hybrid modes of critique. Thanem conceptualises ‘monstrosity’ as potent with ‘radically different ways of living, thinking, working and organizing’ (2011: vi). Monstrosity encompasses a critique that shows rather than tells; a critique that is combative rather than complicit with the business school and other wicked bureaucratic regimes.
The goal of this note is a justification for monstrous critique, illustrated with examples of what that might look like. To begin, we shall briefly gaze upon horrific neoliberal growths sprouting during the pandemic. I shall then revive you with the electrifying writing of the Invisible Committee and Jem Bendell, operating beyond academic abstraction and other colonial, patriarchal traditions of objective authority. From here, I will show you monstrous entities such as the multi-headed critical practice of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, whose radical methods of critique push for critical praxis beyond the boundary of academic writing.

Having peered at these expressive forms of non-conventional critique that exemplify the spirit of monstrosity, we return to the business school – which we know is in dire need of a biting critique.

‘Biting back’ conjures visions of the powerful jaws of the vagina dentata. Cixous argues that to undermine phallogocentric authority still embedded within Western patriarchal institutions, women must write their own mythology – ‘taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of’ (Cixous, 1976: 887). The vagina dentata may be our emblem – a monstrous female body that we redefine as subversive in its ability to sabotage organisational logic that works to ‘maintain control of the body as self-contained, disciplined, bounded and detached’ (Vachhani, 2009: 174). It is a figment of female monstrosity that snaps and scrambles the DNA of neoliberal institutions, particularly relevant considering the university’s patriarchal undoing of feminist struggles, as in the severing of humanities studies.

Many images in this note, either my own or drawn from public promotional material, do equal work to writing. The transmutation of visual arts into critical sociology, and vice versa, creates new knowledge and networks, perceived as experimental within the university context. This note aims to jam that system of categorisation.
The plague

2| University café; my own image (2020) digital photograph.

3| University café; my own image (2020) digital photograph.

The values and priorities of our universities have become clear – COVID-19 has exposed the brutality of the neoliberal university. The caution tape in the scenes above could denote the violence universities exercise towards staff and students in their exclusion from a meaningful ‘seat at the table’ in decision
making. The sign in image 3 (situated at a university café) does work to rebrand distancing as collectivity. Such shallow discourses of care and solidarity are offensive. Implicating the now common social practic physical distancing, it is not unusual – except for its peculiar wording. Who is this caution-taped scene at a university reserved for? Is it for the haunting presence of the virus itself, which promotes the reconfiguring of spaces of commercial interaction?

The pandemic produced a ban on travel to and from Australia, and thus – hobbled by an over-reliance on international student fees, Australian universities’ revenue dropped. Subsequent cost-cutting measures are having negative consequences for the quality of education. Both international and domestic students have been abandoned by their universities. COVID-19 has been used to justify the disposal of unprofitable courses and staff, while enforcing class division through the rise in online delivery, in which a reduced quality of teaching is received by the poor, while face-to-face learning remains accessible to the privileged (Cooper, 2020).

A dark vision orchestrated by the Australian Education board is rapidly manifesting: the university as an employer’s production line. Intellectual thought here is most valued in its conversion into economic productivity. In 2020, some degrees doubled in cost, while ‘job relevant’ degrees (in science, technology, engineering, and maths) became significantly cheaper (Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2020; Duffy, 2020). The highest cost degrees (‘funding cluster 1’) house those disciplines that teach critical thinking. Debt is a neoliberal disciplinary mechanism, and reinforces the role of universities in class reproduction, placing equity groups that gravitate towards social sciences at a further disadvantage.
My own image (2020) mixed media collage: menstrual blood, hair, university map, cardboard, found images, dried venus flytrap.

How did we get here?

Our ‘normal’ is a hyper-bureaucratic wasteland producing endless social and environmental problems in its self-serving philosophy and practice. Its autophagic nature foretells its own demise.

COVID-19 has been exploited by the university manageriat as a chance to spring a trap – and in response we must escalate our critique. Despite the dull
discourse of returning to a post-pandemic ‘normal’, talk amongst academic communities of alternative universities guided by anarchistic principles abounds (Connell, 2019; Cooper, 2020; Australian Association of University Professors Administrators, 2020; Fleming, 2021).

Amongst the wreckage of a neoliberal order, it is time to sabotage and rebuild a sustainable, meaningful survival. Thanem argues that ‘organization theory needs monstrous others’ to provide opportunities and space for disruptions to the organisation’s impulse to organise thoughts and bodies (2006: 186). It is no longer worth concealing radicality under blue shirt business school uniforms; we need to do more explicitly punk, robust critical praxis. A radical alternative is the only inhabitable future.

I will attend presently to forms of academic written critique that commence a metamorphosis into the monstrous. It is through this way of doing that a monstrous methodology is constituted; a way of doing things differently from the normal, such as the bridging of this text’s written language and visual media in my framing of the monstrous.

**Inflammatory writing**

We can find literary forms of critique that show rather than tell their critical praxis. The Invisible Committee and Jem Bendell write critique that playfully bends the rules of academic writing.

‘The whole critique of finance capitalism cuts a pale figure next to a shattered bank window tagged with “Here. These are your premiums!”’, The Invisible Committee (TIC) exclaim (2017: 7). An anonymous French anarchist collective of political activists and writers, TIC critique with anger, despair, and passion; it is difficult not to consider opportunities for acts of civil disobedience upon immersion. Their style is inflammatory. When we ‘talk about life’ and ‘talk about conflicts’, as they write, there is a disengaged rhetoric used that projects neutrality through fact relaying, which they argue has depleted its ‘exchange value’ (TIC, 2017: 7). Instead, we should ‘talk from the standpoint of life’; ‘from the midst of conflict’ (TIC, 2017: 7, italics in original). This kind of talk is committed to a particular ethics and politics. It
is fierce, open, vulnerable, and risky. It stands on its own as monstrous writing that embodies a way of living, rather than a distant diagnosis under the pretence of objectivity.

Bendell’s critique forecasts the unfolding climate breakdown, monstrous in its visceral illustration of the accelerating horror we are unavoidably being swallowed by. It is precisely this unfiltered horror we need to be able to confront and come to terms with our dire situation. Bendell practices his critique with passion, apocalyptic imagery, and a strongly communicated politics of resistance (2018).

In his article *Deep adaptation*, Bendell directly confronts the reader with a vivid description of the horror to come:

> With the power down, soon you wouldn’t have water coming out of your tap. You will depend on your neighbours for food and some warmth. You will become malnourished. You won’t know whether to stay or go. You will fear being violently killed before starving to death (Bendell, 2018: 11).

Bendell reflects on moderating his tone, potentially considered dramatic – and thus unacademic. This conclusion would be, as he says, ‘an interesting comment on why we even write at all. I chose the words above as an attempt to cut through the sense that this topic is purely theoretical’ (Bendell, 2018: 11). We cannot look away from the frightening confrontation of this literary monster.

Writing is largely maintained as the most privileged form of knowledge production and dissemination within contemporary Western culture. While the previous examples represent monstrous divergences, there is a still a commitment to talk isolated from action. Writing is a kind of action and should be reclaimed as such, rather than neutralised in the quarantined world of paywalled journals. Resisting these terms forces us down the trajectory of radical monstrosity. Both Bendell and TIC embody elements of monstrosity in their abandonment of obscurantist academic conventions, infusing punk attitude from which we can take inspiration.

If we are to truly scare the university, we must embrace the transformation of our critique into something more indefinable, fearless, and alive.
Monstrous

‘Monsters’ that defiantly inhabit institutional spaces can teach us something about how to practice freedom. Marina Warner traces the etymology of the word ‘monster’ to its Latin roots of ‘monstrous’, meaning ‘I show’, (as in demonstration) (2012: 25). The Latin verb ‘moneo’ is also connected, meaning ‘I warn’, (as located in the word ‘monitor’) (Warner, 2012: 25).

Across humanity’s history, gothic and grotesque monsters have reigned over the shadowy, liminal spaces of the world’s mythologies, freak shows, and arts. As complex creatures of wonder, monsters embody a warning, taboo, or curiosity grounded in their cultural and historical context (Halberstam, 2010). A concoction of gothic, grotesque, and carnivalesque traditions, the discourse of horror is one of otherness, disturbance, violence, and terror. The ‘gothic’ has always been embedded with countercultural attitude, transgression, darkness, and disorder, deviating from Western norms: ‘normality’ still connected to its roots in ancient Rome, the symbol of ‘the center, order, visibility and civilisation’ (Parker, 2005: 154).

Anarchistic monsters corrupt neoliberal institutions with their disregard and manipulation of rules. They autonomously ‘undermine and exceed the boundaries of that enterprise’ (Thanem, 2006: 185). We can learn from the protagonist in the film American Mary (2012), who defied the patriarchal, feehounding medical school – abandoning the institution to operate an autonomous, underground body-modification clinic using the skills she learned (simultaneously ‘deconstructing’ her lecturer). Lessons can be learned from the grotesque slugs in Shivers (1975), which slide into the crevices of the conservative, bourgeois residents of a luxury hotel and transform them into queer, sexually voracious ‘zombies’, liberated through chaotic parasitic control. These stories and many more offer inspiration in their subversive and spirited methods of achieving radically different ways of being. As Newitz writes, ‘nothing is more dangerous than a monster whose story is ignored’ (2006: 2).

Biting back

note | 241
Organisations in Western capitalist societies historically value and are structured upon dominant conceptions of masculinity. Competition, profiteering, control, status, and stoicism: the neoliberal values rewarded within bureaucratic organisations are also those which mark masculinity within Western conceptions of gender. Into this space snarls the abject metaphor of vagina dentata – a monstrous extension of the disordered female body, an omen for the ‘breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction’ between ontological entities (Vachhani, 2009: 173). The phallogocentric discourse through which the vagina dentata is often interpreted invokes a binary of the passive, castrated female body – or its inversion into the castrating femme fatale. Vachhani instead emphasises the fluidity of the vagina dentata, situating it within Western historical constructions of the grotesque monstrosity of the female body. As an entity to align with in a neoliberal, patriarchal business school, the monstrous vagina dentata, with its dangerous bite and scrambling of meaning, disrupts the discourse and logic of Western institutions and what it means to organise (Vachhani, 2009).

5| Artist unknown (ca. 540 B.C.E.) Terracotta painted gorgoneion antefix (roof tile), terracotta, paint, made from mould, 21 x 26.2 x 9.4 cm, photograph in the public domain. [https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253581]
One renowned monstrous female of ancient Roman myth whose spirit we might summon in our critique is Medusa, said to transmute every living thing that met her eyes to stone. The fanged mouths of her serpent hair and the tusks that jut from her grin (as visible in her older depictions) are symbols of the castrating vagina dentata. As a palimpsest of the phallogocentric myth which describes her, Cixous rewrites the Medusa’s story from a feminist standpoint: ‘you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing’ (1976: 885). Here, the monstrous Medusa does not turn her victims to stone, instead deploying her feminine gaze to unfreeze phallogocentric storytelling which revolves around the fear of the emasculating female. Medusa laughs at the ‘trembling Perseuses’ (Cixous, 1976: 885). She knows, as Gourlay asserts, that ‘male superiority is a myth, and their fragile social control is one decisive gaze away from crumbling’ (2020). What we might learn from the story of Medusa, and its rewriting, is that the neoliberal or patriarchal powers that categorise and oppress us are not set in stone. We need not ask permission for freedom, but rather (with care) already assume autonomy and enact the reality we want.

A monstrous methodology involves writing and critiquing that embodies a meaningful, self-determined way of living. Monstrosity charges the micro-politics and tensions of critique within the university with anarchist principles and rejection of victimhood. In a praxis that destabilises the imagined authority of university management, the detonation of monstrous critique is done strategically and carefully; the aim is not to flamboyantly lose one’s job (unless it is). One of the most effective ways to do this is perhaps in numbers. It is much trickier to exterminate a swarm, whether it in the form of collectively organised action such as occupation of administration offices; local, routine forms of resistance such as time-killing, la perruque, and sabotage, declining participation in bureaucratic processes, or waves of creatively hybrid, seditious works.

**Monstrous critical praxis**

Monstrous critical praxis grows beyond the confines of language. It involves refusing the distinction between writing (the standard, secluded realm of
intellectual practice) and other forms of communication, giving life instead to creatures of hybridity. Monstrous critical praxis involves a chaotic continuum of art, writing, performance, activism, and simply being alive in particular ways. Categorisation is refused. As a continual project for ‘finding ways to practice forms of freedom’, enabling genuine negotiation and exploration of alternatives, critical praxis means fully embodying your critique (Tiidenberg and Whelan, 2019: 86).

Consider the confrontational displays below, which do work to both diagnose and counteract the plague of capitalist, colonial paradigms embedded within universities. Energised by forms of carnivalesque humour and civil disobedience that disempowers ‘authority’, their creative critique physically and/or psychologically infests the enemy’s supposed territory.

Culture jamming


The practice of appropriating imagery for political intent has artistic history. One such artist, operating under the name ‘UOWasteland’, conducts critique through visual manipulation of the many promotional images that ‘could be misinterpreted as snapshots of a terrible apocalypse’ (2016). UOWasteland curates galleries on social media of filtered and captioned culture-jammed images. The work alludes to surreptitious neoliberal projects undertaken at
universities: managers scheming within coal mining corporate headquarters, or scientists funded to conduct research into weapons manufacture. This is an effective visual example of critical, carnivalesque humour, subverting managerial authority through the discourse of horror and demonstrating the darkness infiltrating our universities.

Student activism

Left-wing, politically active students are monsters within the system they feed. Many students resist the commercialisation of universities and do discursive and physical work towards realising an imagined alternative – a decolonised, autonomous or free university (Cole and Heinecke, 2020). Their critical praxis does not merely envision, it enacts: monsters impolitely grasp back what belongs to them.

Racist subjugation practiced under apartheid still lingers amongst the structural inequalities of South African society, its neoliberalised universities built upon the legacy of colonisation. It is here that the Rhodes Must Fall movement originates. University of Cape Town politics student Chumani Maxwele had gone to a poor, Black township nearby to pick up one of the street’s buckets of human faeces left out for council to empty and hurled its contents into the bronze face of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes shouting ‘Where are our heroes and ancestors?’ (Fairbanks, 2015).

The statue is a symbol of ongoing apartheid and the Eurocentric foundations of South African academic content and management: the system is coded to erase Black history. Maxwele’s action was a direct, monstrous critique, rejecting victimhood. Waves of protests were triggered, calling for the decolonisation of academic institutions and justice regarding other intersecting issues.

The movement spread, and later that year, at the University of Witwatersrand, a second movement of resistance was ignited: #Feesmustfall. Building on the energy of the previous radical actions, this movement responded to the government’s significant rise in university tuition fees, already an institutional block to education for poor, Black young people.
The students deployed tactics of disruption: occupying buildings, squatting on campus, boycotting classes, and storming administration meetings (Fairbanks, 2015; Ismail, 2016). Alongside these direct actions were also more creative expressions of resistance, including a sombre display of cardboard tombstones installed outside the university’s hall, engraved with university debts; performances of students drenched in fake blood laying within body outlines as dark metaphors for the murder of poor Black South Africans’ futures; and a book, *Rioting and writing: Diaries of Wits Fallists*, that was ‘written, managed, and led’ by student activists (Ismail, 2016; Maldonado-Torres, 2017).

This open access book is an example of monstrous spirit in its reflexive, intentionally ‘unacademic’ literary critique. It was written by student activists directly involved in the struggle that they ‘defended with [their] bodies’ (Chinguno, et al., 2017: 23). The text enacts what it preaches: decolonisation of academic thinking. It consists of a collection of articles that “‘speak from the heart’” rather than being framed by academic conversations’ (Chinguno, et al., 2017: 23). Their intersectional critique is monstrous; its sharpened teeth tear the illusion of authority self-prescribed to the neoliberal institution, and in the process of its own doing, creates a decolonised reality.

**The horror! The horror! The bureaucrat’s labyrinth**

Horror in the capitalist institution is everyday routine, its violence operating through the subtexts of its discourse. The 1980s saw the beginnings of a transformation of Australian universities into increasingly corporatised, Kafkaesque bureaucratic organisations under new neoliberal managerial boards to attract funding. There is a vast literature in Critical University Studies examining the neoliberalisation of the institution, academics, and students (Houghton, 2019; Schwartz, 2019; Connell, 2019).
7| My own image (2020) mixed media assemblage: cicada shells, cardboard, university leaflets, found objects, organic materials.

*Neoliberal Wasteland*

8| Screenshot of item on Curtin University's homepage in 2019. [https://www.curtin.edu.au]
9] Screenshot of item on Maquarie University homepage in 2019. [https://www.mq.edu.au/]

10] Screenshot of item on Western Sydney University’s homepage in 2019. [https://www.westernsydney.edu.au]
11| Screenshot of item on Deakin University’s Bachelor of property and real estate degree webpage in 2020. [https://www.deakin.edu.au/course/bachelor-property-and-real-estate]

12| Screenshot of item on University of Wollongong’s Open Day 2019 webpage. [https://openday.uow.edu.au]
13| Screenshot of item on Deakin University’s Bachelor of property and real estate degree webpage in 2020. [https://www.deakin.edu.au/course/bachelor-property-and-real-estate]

14| Screenshot of University of Wollongong’s webpage on branding in 2020, which includes details such as the specifications of the usage of the logo’s font, colours, and positioning, 2020. [https://www.uow.edu.au/brand/]
Above is a view into a building at the University of Wollongong that opened in 2021 during the COVID-19 lockdown. An entrail-like sculpture hangs in the stair-well, a gruesome reminder of 200 or more permanent staff whose jobs were sacrificed (Latifi, 2021). The waxy indoor plants; large windows, impeccably clean and wide space, and grey-shaded walls and furniture produce a corporate aesthetic.

**Opening the portal: The business school**

The business school was the doorway creaked open to usher neoliberalism into the academy. The ensuing tide of managerialism engulfed any remaining academic capacity ‘to collaboratively and collegially manage ourselves, and to freely research, critique, act, and organize with the wider communities and
movements that characterize our location’, as Spooner and McNinch argue (2018: xxv).

There is a deception woven through our universities by business schools: that capitalism is the best and the only way of organising. This is ‘capitalist realism’ as Fisher terms it, the mundane madness of the rule of profit maintained as logical, projecting a linear progress as parallel with economic growth (2013). Within contemporary business schools, capitalism is, as Parker contends, ‘taught as science, rather than ideology’, alongside the implicit idea that all human behaviour is guided by a rationality of self-interest (2018). This assumed psychology is the basis of business subject areas such as Human Resource Management, concerned with the manipulation of people and their desires in ways that could best serve the organisation or manager seeking control (Parker, 2018).

In the 1980s, while business schools inflated, sociology departments shrunk, forcing the migration of academics across disciplines (Parker, 2015). A decade later, Critical Management Studies grew from this juncture. At first imagining an alternative approach within the business school seeking radical changes to management, it became dominated by business school professors (Parker, 2015). Critique had its teeth filed if not pulled. Across the university, critique has become a performative exercise, channelled through writing which satiates audit requirements. People operate within the department, wearing the sinister skin of neoliberalism, yet harbour the desire to change it. How do they reconcile their occupation?

**Bite back: Critique with teeth**

If the goal is to change the system, then conventional critique has sadly not worked. As Tiidenberg and Whelan write, reflecting on Foucault’s analysis of critique, ‘questioning that which seems inevitable ... challenges the production of knowledge and limits authority’ (2019: 84). To apply this thinking to traditional practices of critique itself, such as that embodied by an academic journal article, inspires the creation of something hybrid, anarchistic, and direct.
Monstrous academics refuse to be subdued within the neoliberal university system yet must negotiate this path to ensure their ongoing employment within a culture of censorship and fear of defamation (Parkinson, 2017). This is the position I find myself in – a PhD student writing from within an institution, about that institution. As Moten and Harney write, ‘to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university’ (2004: 101).

16| My own image (2021) silver gelatin photograph, cooked in hot beeswax.

‘Straight’ rhetorical academic critique has much capacity for incisive insight. Anarchistic abandonments, however, produce texts that are self-aware, emotional, and subjective with creative, practical, ‘fuck-you’ attitude. Texts that flip the rules grow teeth and claws to carve spaces for alternative ways of being.
Forms of critique can be expanded; there are broader references and traditions usually suppressed or ignored in academia. I want to make the case that critique done as an active, unapologetic, and collective praxis – a ‘monstrous’ critical praxis, is especially powerful. If we want critique to be meaningful, relevant, and effective, it must engage with the world as an open, diverse social project. A monstrous methodology means rejecting mainstream institutional standards of what counts as research, how to best do research, and how to present and share research. The essence of my own monstrous methodology is a challenge to hierarchies of knowledge, fusing disparate media and fields on an equal platform, to form a political, practical critique.

Toothed ‘others’ that inhabit institutionally drawn boundaries – precarious academics that bite the hands that feed, alongside indignant students, assert power in their anarchistic threat to the established order. A monstrous critical praxis undoes aloof, phallogocentric, colonial norms of academic methods and Western epistemology. It scrambles bureaucratic logic. Critical praxis as direct action – developing free schools or occupying administerial spaces – forces the disruption of business as usual and demonstrates what other worlds could look like. Critical praxis can also take the form of artefacts, monstrous in their way of doing ‘a text’. The examples of monstrous methodology in this note pulsate amongst others in an enduring mass of resistance; teratomas growing in cracks in the institution, which may eventually overwhelm it. They embody elements of anarchism in their care, creativity, vitality, future-mindedness, and struggle for autonomy amongst the horror of neoliberal work and life. Undertaking a monstrous critical praxis requires courage, an acceptance of risk, and endurance of spirit. Negotiating a way through the established order takes time. As Slavoj Zizek jokes, musing on the struggle to castrate capitalism and those in power, rather than their outright cutting ‘you make small changes and all of a sudden, balls are no longer there’ (2009).

Like the vagina dentata, a queered entity of death and birth, re-written by ‘we, the sowers of disorder’ as Cixous says, a space of infusion between bodies incorporated by her devouring jaws – we must bite back, rewrite, and birth a new reality (1976: 884). The horror of the business school and the neoliberal possession of our universities is not reasonable. In response I have decided not to be reasonable. Critique ought to have teeth, be connected to the world
Desiree Tahiri

Monstrous critical practice

beyond the university, and act rather than hope for change, or else it is
complicit. This is the only way we can meaningfully survive, on our own
terms. I call for action, for the collectivisation of my fellow monsters.
Together our monstrous critique is a formidable force, and it is time for us to
reclaim our university. Sharpen your teeth!

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**the author**

Desiree Tahiri is a Creative Arts PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong. Her work in progress, ‘Bite back the neoliberal institution! Tales of subversive monsters and the institution of horror they haunt’, explores the 3 looming institutional castles that surround a typical university and the entities that subvert them. The work is an experimental ethnographic practice that amalgamates her sociological and visual arts background. Tahiri’s art practice incorporates sculpture, photography, film, performance, and installation.

Email: desireet@uow.edu.au