

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Transcript of an interview with

Anna Arabindian-Kesson

STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA - ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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INTERVIEWER: Sisonke Msimang

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Anna Arabindan-Kesson

I'm Anna Arabindan-Kesson and I'm currently living in Australind, in the Southwest of WA. My family and I moved from Sri Lanka and I was born in Colombo. We moved from Sri Lanka in the early eighties, sort of the height of that kind of 'Asian invasion' narrative in Australia media. So yeah, I think I was the only non-white kid in my school. We actually moved to Victoria first and we spent three years there when I was six. And then we moved to Perth. We were here for another three years and then we moved to New Zealand for eight years and then came back to Perth. So there's been a lot of movement within Australia and then also outside of it. So we moved to Australia in the early eighties, so it was an interesting time to grow up in a country town and in regional Victoria. Our neighbourhood in Geelong was pretty a interesting place to grow up. Then my family and I moved to Perth and we had more of a family network in WA. So that felt very different, I think to our time in Geelong. And after being here for three years, my stepfather got a job in New Zealand and so that's what took us to New Zealand and that's where my siblings were born. And then I trained as a nurse in New Zealand, and then my parents and my siblings moved back to Australia. I followed after I'd finished my degree. I think I was twenty. Yeah, so I was twenty when we moved back and I was at Sir Charles Gairdner and then Royal Perth, I think for two years. And then I did what, you know, every Australian twenty-year-old does, I went to the United Kingdom for two years on a working holiday visa. And that was where I met my husband. We moved back to Perth together. We stayed here for five years. I went back to university, did something completely different at UWA, I graduated, I think thirteen or fourteen years ago. And then we moved to the United States, which is where I've been since.

Sisonke Msimang

Can you tell us a little bit about why it was that you decided to go back to university?

Anna Arabindan-Kesson

So I decided to go back to university after working as a nurse for several years. Mostly because I had always wanted to do something in the humanities. By the end of my Bachelor of Arts I realised that I just really loved what I was studying. I was studying history and looking at the relationship between visual culture and constructions of race and histories of empire. And really on a whim, I decided to apply to universities in the US and my kind of dream program was at Yale. And I got into that. And so my husband and I decided, okay, so we're going to America. And that's really what we did.

We arrived in New Haven in Connecticut in August of 2007. So it was the year before the GFC, financial crisis. It was also just before President Obama was elected. And I think those two things are really key in shaping at least my initial experience of the US. To be honest, at first, I think for the first six months, we just felt like we were on a movie set all the time. We have found this little apartment in the middle of New Haven. New Haven is a really strange, it's a kind of city town that you don't really see in Australia. It's a college town, but there's a very clear divide between the university and its wealth and the rest of the population. And so you sort of walk around New Haven and you'd see this immense wealth and privilege at the same time, you would see so many people and those kinds of stark contrast were just not something that I was used to growing up in Auckland and

Perth. And even having lived in London for several years, it still wasn't quite the same. I had never had that kind of language being used in describing the geography of a place like you don't go pass these blocks, you know, this particular bar don't go, don't walk any further. And so that was very strange for us. And difficult, I think also because we noticed it so much and yet we were with people who either had just gotten used to it, or it just wasn't something that they necessarily cared about. And, and that was also a very strange sort of position to be in, to be kind of working with these people who you admired on one hand, but whose politics were just, there was just almost no overlap. There was no way of kind of approaching that approaching any kind of shared, shared commitment to anything. So I think in many ways, the US is really disorientating at the beginning, but also weirdly nostalgic, because I just kept feeling like I was in some eighties movie, you know, that I had watched growing up as a kid or as a teenager. So it was sort of wonderful and terrible at the same time.

I think that in our first few years of being in the US we imagined that it could be a place we could stay for maybe fifteen, twenty years. That we could establish ourselves and then perhaps find a way of coming back. My area of study, which is African American and black diaspora art, is not necessarily an area that translates as easily to academia in Australia. But yes, I remember the night that Obama was elected. I mean, it was just incredible just parties everywhere I mean, I think the politics of representation goes so far, but in that moment it felt like something had really shifted. And there was, there was hope there was a lot of things, relief as well. And so it felt like we were in the US at a time when things were possible. New ways of relating to each other. Social change was possible. I mean, all of this changed over time, but in that time, I think between 2007 and maybe 2011, it still felt like a hopeful place to be.

And then in 2012, we decided to go back to England. I think our decision was based on my husband's sort of career trajectory. He was looking for that sort of the next step. I became pregnant in 2012 too, so that ended up being another reason for us to move. We thought that it would be better and easier to have it to have a kid when you have family around you. So, we moved in the middle of 2012 and we moved from Brooklyn. And just to give you a sense of what Brooklyn was like the first week that we were in Brooklyn, someone was murdered down the end of the street. But then the other side of the street was these new restaurants opening, every other weekend. So it was just this, you know, crazy but incredible space to be. And we literally, we moved to a village in the middle of Cambridge Shire just outside of London. So it was like going from, you know, Sex in The City to Midsomer Murders.

So then I was finishing up my PhD, I had to start looking for jobs. There really weren't any in the UK. And then in 2014 I got a job in Philadelphia at Temple University in the Art History Department. And so after two years in the UK, we just packed up this time with the baby and went back to the US. I mean, it was crazy. I accepted the job. They flew us over, my husband and I, to look for housing. We went around with a real estate agent, found a house, off the plans, put in an offer, offer was accepted. We were organizing this mortgage kind of from the UK. We flew into Philly. And like a week later we saw our house for the first time and moved in.

So in August, 2014 a young black man, Michael Brown was shot by a policeman Darryll Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. And this was really a catalyst for what we now know as the Black Lives Matter movement. It was police brutality, the harassment and murder of African-Americans has been going on for centuries in the United States. What came was protests and movements against the harassment, surveillance, and incarceration and murder of, of black people in the United States. And so, teaching students about these histories and the ways that these histories have shaped the creation of art and visual culture in the US seemed very urgent. I mean, one of the things I think that really struck me was how Darryll Wilson described Michael Brown. You know, he described him as something like a black demon. These words that have such a long history of association around blackness. The ways that black people have been constructed and the negative associations around blackness.

So trying to teach students about that was challenging. And I remember coming home and they had just acquitted the policemen who killed Michael Brown. And the deflation of that moment was just so palatable. I was talking to a friend because there was no one else I could really talk to who understood just how oppressive that ruling was. What it said about the meaninglessness and the expendability of certain people in society and how futile it felt to even be trying to work against this. It didn't even seem like it mattered. And so right at that moment, actually, my old PhD supervisor emailed me and said, 'There's a job at another place you should apply.' And it was at Princeton University in African American studies and Art History. A few months later, I got this new job. But yeah, that was really the kind of catalyst I think, for me to kind of try and find better conditions, a better fit. And so I started there in 2015.

Sisonke Msimang

You get this new gig, a year later Donald Trump becomes the president of America. Walk us through what it felt like to have a department that felt like a home.

Anna Arabindan-Kesson

So when I started at Princeton I was really nervous because I'd been to Yale. I knew what it was like to work in these elite spaces where often being a person of colour, working on issues around race and colonisation, people don't want to hear about it. What I realised with Princeton was that I didn't have to sort of sugar coat what I thought or what I taught. People just wanted me exactly because of what I thought. And that was such a amazing feeling actually.

2015 was very different to 2008, that optimism, that hope was no longer there. I mean, Obama's administration did not do what it said it would do in some part, partly because it couldn't, but also because, you know, Obama is not the progressive hero that we constructed him to be. You know, there had been other shootings, the death of Eric Garner, and Black Lives Matter movements, and I think the precarity of being a person of colour in the United States was becoming heightened and by 2015, and the vulnerability with just daily life in the US, you know, not having, you didn't have health insurance,

people were dying because of that. And this is something that I think my husband and I experienced.

So in 2016, Donald Trump was elected president. And I think it felt like everything changed because suddenly you couldn't imagine you couldn't kind of fall back on this idea that he wouldn't be elected president. Does that make sense? I think it was just, there was a certain inevitability. And certainly, you know, the racial tensions and the xenophobia and the fascism that he emulates and demonstrates is not new to the US and, you know, he's not the cause. Right? He's a symptom.

Sisonke Msimang

So you're living in Trump's America. You survived a couple of years in Trump's America, and then COVID. So just walk us through what those months were like.

Anna Arabindan-Kesson

So I was meant to go to a conference, a summit in Dhaka Bangladesh at the beginning of February, 2020. Then February semester started, I was back to teaching. I was teaching this really great new class on Art and Colonial Medicine in the British Empire. And I had organised this wonderful trip, because it's Princeton, to London for a week. We were going to go to London. We were going to go to all these different museums and collections and, you know, really kind of map out the material that we were studying. And so we were going to leave on March the 14th. I think beginning of March, we start getting these emails that, you know, you can't travel here. You can't travel there. London was not on their radar yet. And it got to a week before the trip, or maybe ten days before the trip and Princeton still hadn't laid down any guidelines about whether we should go or not. Even though there were certain countries, I think Italy and I can't remember where else now. You couldn't go there. So a couple of my colleagues had their class trips cancelled, and I was trying to get some guidance on what I should do. And, you know, we had someone from the administration come and speak to my class and to talk about what to do when you're traveling and so on. And, they were like, 'Well, can we go?' And she was like, 'Well, you know, we don't we don't want to stop you having your experiences overseas.' And I was like, 'Yes, but there's this virus! People are being quarantined for two weeks. And what about if we go and there's an outbreak in London and we can't leave the country for two weeks? What are we going to do? I have children I have to come back and look after.' Like, 'Please tell me, tell me what to do. Don't make me make the decision.' But they did. I mean, they basically said, 'Well, you have to decide whether you go or not.' And so, I explained to my students, 'Look, I can't take the risk and I don't want to put you at risk. So we're not going to go. That was ten days before we were meant to get on the plane. I made the decision on the Friday, on the Monday we get to university, we get to class. And suddenly I'm getting told by students that the university's going online for two weeks and it's closing down and faculty, of course, were not told this before students. So we were like, 'Oh, well, I'm glad I made that decision then!'

So that was Monday, I think by Tuesday they were saying, 'Okay, you can still teach this week, but everyone has to be socially distanced.' I'm saying this, not necessarily to criticize the university, but just to kind of highlight how rapid, how serious it got. So by

Wednesday I had my last class with my seminar, so we're like, 'Okay, I'll see you in two weeks time, we'll be online two weeks time.' By Friday, school's closed. Okay. The seven-year-old will be at home. He's really, he's great. Very independent. He can, he can learn online. Oh, wait. He's at a bilingual school. We don't know Spanish. His teachers do maths and reading and writing with him in Spanish. Okay. All right. My husband's a teacher. We'll figure it out. The weekend was you know, we just kind of hung out at home and it actually felt quite nice because we thought, Oh great. We're going to have this like time at home together. It'll be fun. On Tuesday, my two-year-old's daycare emails. 'Sorry we have to close.' And I was just like, 'Oh.' We're trying to still maintain their full-time, working life and care for their children without going insane. I think that sense of like escalating just got even more, it was amplified, you know, in the next few weeks, because I think New Jersey initially there was like a, how did it go? It was like a state of emergency and then it was lockdown. And so, we could go out to buy food and exercise. But there was a curfew at a certain point. So everything just had to stop. And we were lucky that we had a little garden and there was also a lovely green lawn space outside. So at least the kids had somewhere to go. But you know, we didn't know anyone really in Princeton, apart from our neighbours and a couple of colleagues. And it was, it felt very alone, very quickly.

My husband, who is an amazing man, basically took over my son's online learning, and then he got sick. And that, I mean, that was awful because he didn't get tested because the doctor said to him there was a testing site that opened but it had run out of tests within half an hour. So he said, don't worry about it. Don't bother getting tested because if you go to hospital, they're gonna test you anyway in ICU. He didn't have difficulty breathing or anything like that, but he lost his sense of taste. He was just really wiped, you know, he was really exhausted and just, it was like the flu amplified, but in this weird way, you know, one day he would wake up and feel, 'Oh, I think I felt okay.' And then kind of get out of bed and then immediately just have to go back. The university was great and in many ways, because we had this great health cover, we had access to these kinds of COVID leave, you know, which was the problem. Like, this is why so many people, why it spread so quickly, that people still had to keep going to work. People didn't have the comfort of having this safety net. Yeah. And so that was really difficult because, you know, I had to have both kids and then it was also trying to work. And then, then suddenly thinking if he goes to ICU, where do I leave the children? When I take him to the hospital, you know, stuff like that, that I was like, 'What do I? What am I doing? Why am I here? What is this?'

It was just really difficult. I wish looking back at that moment that I had maybe just stopped a little and said, 'Okay, just take this as some time to maybe slow down.' But I couldn't, I think that was the thing is that I couldn't slow down.

And so we would have like weekly Zoom happy hours. And my family would sometimes get on and play games. And we were in this pub quiz with friends from the UK. So we would jump on around four o'clock and kind of have dinner and drinks with them while answering these pub quiz questions and the kids would join in. And so there were these lovely moments of connection and community. But then there was, just, getting up every day and not knowing exactly what was going to happen in the wider political, cultural, and

economic landscape. 'Cause it felt like every day you'd get up and you just see the numbers. That's what it felt like from March until June. You just never knew what was going to happen. In May, as work got really even busier, there was talk of slowly trying to roll back some of the restrictions. So, there was talk that maybe school would reopen, maybe daycare would reopen. And so we kept kind of waiting for these dates that never came. I really wish that people had said at the beginning, 'Okay. We just closed until next autumn.' You know? Because I think that made it harder too. Cause you sort of have in your mind, 'Okay, May the 15th, the kids will be going back to school and daycare.' May the 15th came and then the State of Emergency just got extended and the numbers just kept going up.

Politically, obviously, nothing good was happening. I remember there was one news cycle where some, ironically masked, anti-maskers basically stormed a city capital building to protest these restrictions. And I remember getting a text from my dad who, you know, he's pretty even-keeled most times in terms of not panicking and things like that. He wasn't panicking, but he was just like, 'It sounds really bad over there. I know you're thinking about trying to come back to Australia, but maybe you should think about coming back earlier.' My family in Perth was in a lockdown, but people were still seeing each other and that was hard. Like, we'd be on Skype or Zoom with my sister, and she would be like, 'Yeah, I saw my brother yesterday,' or 'We saw these people,' and I was just like, 'Oh, you can see people! You don't have to wear masks everywhere.' That sense of isolation was just amplified.

And so I had research leave coming up and my husband spoke to his supervisor. They weren't going to reopen for the rest of the year. We didn't know about daycares, but even so, I didn't know about sending my son to a daycare when there's still like 150,000 cases of COVID, you know, that didn't seem like the wisest decision to make. So he spoke to a supervisor and said, 'Well, if you want me to do my forty hours a week, I think I'm going to have to go to Australia. Because that's where the kids can go to school. We've got family support, there's no community transmission.' And so they were like, 'yeah, you can go.' So in the middle of May we booked our tickets. We realised my youngest son didn't have an Australian passport. We had to get that done. And it came, I think, two days before a mental leave. June 9th we left and we found subletters for our house right at the end. I mean, everything just came together. So it also felt like this was the right decision to make because everything just came together you know, to make it financially feasible financially to make it, you know, kind of smoothish transition.

So we left. We got on a flight with Qatar Airlines, forty-three--hour flight. We left on June 9th in the morning. We had to fly from Philadelphia to Chicago. We had a six hour live or something. Then we flew from Chicago to Doha. That was, I think, twelve hours. We had another long layover there. And then Doha to Perth, which was twelve hours, all masked. The kids had to be masked. It was a really intense, I mean, we had to have this like special bag of masks, gloves, and we had about twenty bottles of hand sanitizer. And we used that on the plane, like wiping everything down and all of the stewards were in hazmat suits. I thought that my two-year-old might be really freaked out, but he actually wasn't. I think they just thought they were like space suits. I was actually quite grateful because

given that they're moving from all these different people, I was like, 'Okay, at least you'll protect it and protect me.' The planes were not socially distant, you know, quite full. We had, thankfully, we booked two rows with an island, a middle and end seat. And so no one was in the middle. So we had, at least we had that space, it was like something from the Twilight zone. Doha was really empty and it was like no time. It was like being in no time. And then we got to Perth and started the current process, which was very, I could not imagine this happening in the US. It was so well organised and everyone was very kind.

Sisonke Msimang

Did you feel instantly like sense of relief or did that only kick in when you got to the air to the actual hotel quarantine, or did that only kick in after quarantine was over?

Anna Arabindan-Kesson

I think it started to kick in when we got to hotel quarantine, because so when you land, they give you this paperwork you have to fill out basically explaining, like what's going to happen. You go and speak to the police officers who ask you why you're back. And then you go on these transit buses. So it's quite long process. I think the plane landed on the 11th at like 6:00 PM. And we didn't get into a car into our hotel rooms until maybe like 8:30 PM. And so, I mean, we were exhausted, the kids were exhausted, but I was just like, 'Okay, we're here now. No one can make us go back. Hopefully we don't have COVID and hopefully in two weeks time we can leave.'

It's so funny, my husband, so you get tested ten days after you start your quarantine. So that it's exactly fourteen days to the time that you get into the hotel that you can leave. So we got in on a Thursday at like 8:30 PM. So it was two weeks from that Thursday at eight at night, we could have left. My husband woke up on that Thursday with a sore throat. I had thought I was coping pretty well with quarantine. And then I was like, 'No, no, please no!' So they were like, 'Well, we have to retest you.' So they tested him again. They said, 'We can't let you go.' Tested him again. And the results would come back on the Friday and they were going to tell us. And I was just so nervous about it, you know? And the nurse came up on the Friday to give us our papers and we were like, 'Oh, can we go?' She was like, 'Oh yeah, yeah, it's all clear.' And I literally was just skipping. I was just skipping up and down the hallway shouting, and my husband was like, 'How old are you?'. Then we went outside and it was just a glorious Perth afternoon. And we walked down to Elizabeth Quay and saw my brothers for the first time, in two years and hugged them and you know, it was just joyous. My son's just like climbing all over his uncles. We were walking down to Elizabeth Quay and my son, who's seven says to me, 'Mama, do we have to socially distance here? Can I, can I walk close to people?' And I said, 'No, we don't have to socially distance, not in Perth.'

END