

9.00 – 10.30 am: Welcome and smoking followed by keynote address:

June Oscar AO delivers - "Wiyi Yani U Thangani - re-imagining evaluation with a gender justice lens"

40 minutes followed by questions from the audience

Open in Bunuba.

I recognise Naarm, the Country we gather on today, and all elders, past, present and emerging who come from these lands, as well as all First Nations peoples present and participating at this conference.

And what a special welcome and smoking ceremony. Thank you, Perry Wandin.

And thank you Kiri Parata for your opening address.

I also want to thank all the conference organiser for bringing us all here. In particular, to Jess Dart and to the conference's First Nations partner Kowa Collaborations, whose CEO, Skye Trudgett has been a major part of the work I will explore today.

I am very excited for what we have in store for us over the next three days. I can sense that we are in a room of change-makers. In looking over the conference program, it's action-packed, thoughtful, and deeply considered about how we can work within complex systems.

So, I feel confident that present in this room are like-minded individuals and groups who are passionate about the following elements—so take note:

- The first: identifying practices vital to life to be strengthened and the issues causing harm to be deconstructed;
- The second: working out the factors which makes change possible; and,
- Third: how to gather the data that can form an evidence base to be analysed, grown and translated into action.

I'll come back to this, but it's these three elements that are the central pillars of my work at the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute—which means 'women's voices' in my Bunuba language.

Our Institute, newly established in March this year, is the first of its kind focusing on the rights, lives and aspirations of First Nations cis and trans women and girls, and gender

diverse mob. As I speak today, whenever I mention women and girls, I mean us all in our diversity in this fullest sense. Gender justice can only be achieved by embracing all genders.

Keep the Institute and these elements in mind as I speak this morning, because I believe they perfectly reflect the conference theme of Wayfinding.

I want to say in opening, that I am not an evaluator. I will not be ladening you with information about perfect evaluation methods. But I am a wayfinder, and I am going to situate evaluation in this context.

Wayfinding for Indigenous peoples, a skillset as old as the breath of life, speaks to how we orientate ourselves in deeply interconnected ecosystems. It is how we use the senses we are wrapped in—sight, sound, smell, touch, gut intuition all born from, and developed with, the growth of the earth—to interpret and make decisions about how to live in reciprocal relationships with all human and non-human relatives.

It is a skillset desperately needed for this current historical moment.

For all of you as evaluators, a rationale analysis of the global information bombarding us, leaves us in little doubt that the planet and humanity are in jeopardy.

We are confronted by what feels like never-ending crises and self-fulfilling negative feedback loops—things like resource exploitation, wealth inequalities, global heating, leading to mass migrations, miss and disinformation, conflicts, which in turn continue to deplete the planet.

It can feel overwhelming.

But then you stand in a room like this, and you are reminded of the power of people to go beyond the known when the current systems—economies and governance structures—have proven themselves incapable of caring and supporting our planet into the future.

This precious home of diverse ecosystems, buoyant in a universe that so far appears absent of any life like it.

So how do we change the course?

How do we navigate within complexity to care for us and our planet?

And how do we do it while we carry so many of the *tools* of a system that seems in freefall?

As I move forward in answering these questions today, I want to set the tone with an often-used quote by the self-defined, black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet – Audre Lorde.

She said and I quote, ‘For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ end quote.

In leading up to that statement, Lorde was making the argument that in order to change a world in crisis, we have to embrace difference.

For her, it is the profound differences of women of colour, of different genders and economic positions, those who are marginalised, who can give us all the strength and courage to generate new ways of being.

Their ability to see beyond the status quo—precisely because they are excluded from it and their lives can only flourish beyond it—can help to define, and develop the tools to construct, different futures we can all believe in. It is through women’s lived experiences and the deep wells of their feeling, thought and wisdom that we gain, she says, the ‘sustenance to act where there are no charters.’

And this is what I want to challenge us all to think on this week.

Are evaluation practices, the tools constructing the house we already have, or does evaluation offer the diverse tool kit—of feelings, thoughts and wisdom—to construct a new, or better yet, a renewed, house?

I won’t leave you to ponder for too long – I’ll answer from my perspective.

Today, our differences manipulated by political partisanship, are fuelling divisions, pulling us apart at exactly the time when global challenges impacting us all, demand that we come together. The results of the Voice Referendum were a wakeup call, reminding me that divisions fester within our borders where we should and can be united.

When I think of evaluation, and its component parts—data gathering, measurement and learning—I think about it as a form of wayfinding, helping us to step into the unknown together. It is a way to seek out new information that can come to light in reciprocal relationships, where we embrace the potential of our differences, unleashing renewed passions to act and co-create our futures.

Why not let the next three days of this conference be a process of wayfinding to form a charter for a relationship-based evaluation. One where reflection and the desire to act is generated through relationships and deep insight, and is orientated toward producing evidence to construct a more just and equal future.

At the Institute, this is the journey we are embarking on—forming tools that will help us create an evidence platform of our women’s voices and knowledges to transform systems. But platform sounds too technical.

Really, we are wanting to create a sanctuary, or this bigger house, where our evolving ways of knowing are nurtured and can germinate ideas and activities to form the worlds we want to live in.

Because like Lorde, I believe the best way of building the future of our dreams is to illuminate the lives of our women. A gender lens can help rebalance a world severely out of kilter.

Earlier this year, I finished my seven-year term, as the first woman to be the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner in the roles 25-year history.

When I started my term, I was determined to elevate the voices of our First Nations women and girls in all our diversity.

I was fed up with the reductive, often contradictory, one-dimensional mainstream portrayal of our women as victims or frustrated, as passive bystanders to the turbulence of history.

I wanted to get below the statistics of deficit and open a window on who our women and girls are and how their lives matter to the forming of healthy societies.

I want Australia to see us. For us to be humanised not numerated.

For everyone at this conference, to understand that our lives, voices, stories and feelings are data in their own right, it is time to reckon with how mainstream evaluation methods, data collection and measurement have been the mechanisms of colonialism.

To have the determination to create tools fit for now, which use our feelings and intuition to give meaning to analysis, we must appreciate the power of evaluation practices in constructing the road ahead, for better or for worse.

Getting the tools right today takes evaluative reflection, so we can rectify damage caused and galvanise a collective momentum to divert from yesterday's course.

Let me explain, in a potted history.

On this continent and surrounding islands when our Indigenous lands were invaded, at first, we were counted as subjects under the British Crown. Our movements, anatomies, craniums, evolution and cultures monitored and measured as inferior to, and therefore to be controlled by, Britania's ravenous empire. The *evaluative assessment, and this is key*, was that we would be wiped out over time. And at Federation we were deemed not even worth the count.

Our absence in numbers paved the way for a void in the evidence about our existences—the perfect way to erase us in the founding of a new nation-state proclaiming no competition to its sovereignty.

Of course, with formal decolonisation and the march of civil rights, the 1967 referendum folded us into the census. A new era of data collection began, one that saw us as citizens, but citizens on the other side of an inequality divide.

From then to now, in the main, the overarching approach has been to collect population level data about us. At a macro level we are little more than numerical categories, subject to the whims of political interpretation. Usually without a meaningful evaluation of what those numbers mean, and how they can be applied, on the ground in our community lives.

What has this resulted in? Well, you all probably know the term, Indigenous 'demography of disadvantage'ⁱ. In numbers, we remain less than the rest!

I want to be clear; I do believe in Closing the Gap. We have to see where the State continues to fail us; to identify where our citizen rights and needs are not being met. Numbers expose the shocking position we are in, in one of the wealthiest nations on earth, where Indigenous health, access to housing, and educational attainment, it goes on, are far worse than non-indigenous Australians.

But too frequently, these numbers alone, without the rich evidence of our cultures and ways of being on the ground, can be cruelly miss-portrayed as *us* failing the State. As is the case in the Northern Territory right now, we are seen as a burden on resources and the solution is

punishment—lock our kids up and slash welfare supports, and no matter what we are experiencing, just get our kids into mainstream schools.

These are the doomed to fail responses to numbers extracted out of context. They are free from the thinking we desperately need, which must consider the myriad ways in which systems need to change to embrace us.

So, numbers and how we interpret them really do matter. They tell us something about who we are, and they have a prophetic way of dictating our futures.

For Indigenous peoples, data collected about us, by those in positions of power over us, analysed—and by that I mean evaluated—without us, are the tools constructing the master's house. And for Indigenous peoples, as I've explained in this sweeping historical overview, the house and the tools are the patterns and processes of colonisation, on repeat.

That is why we desperately need to embrace the principles and practices of Indigenous data sovereignty. Practices leading not just to our ownership of population stats about us, but to generating our own people and place infused data. The type of data to mirror our lives which can complicate and blur the lines of the macro categories, which are too often used by governments to control us.

I know, you all exist and work in a way to confront this paradigm. But in light of this history, and the practices that persist, we must remind ourselves, that what we choose to measure and evaluate, and how we evaluate, determines the evidence produced, what is invested in and the structures—laws and policies—that govern our lives.

So let me return to the voices below the numbers and how we can evaluate in a grounded way to produce the data of life.

Over my seven-year term as Commissioner, my team and I spoke face-to-face with thousands of First Nations women and girls. We sat around campfires, in community organisations, on the edge of footy fields, visited cemeteries, gathered in town halls and around kitchen tables. And in 2023, we hosted the largest ever Summit for our women in Canberra. In whatever way possible we came together to deeply hear our women's truths.

Across the years of conversations, the cumulative effect of women's stories has become a roar of our collective voice, rising up and out of the void. We have an ambition: to grow our

own evidence and actively pursue the formation of systems and structures which incorporate all of who we are, free from the crises and discriminations of today.

All of what our women and girls have said is captured in the ground-breaking 700-page Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report, and the accompanying Implementation Framework—you can access these online. Most importantly, for our women and girls, was to create mechanisms to elevate their voices into action.

It is the collective triumph of First Nations women and girls, cis and trans and gender diverse mob, that I can stand here and say these mechanisms now exist, in the form of the Institute and the first ever national framework setting out the actions we want to take to form the future we have defined—This is our Change Agenda for First Nations gender justice.

In opening, I challenged us all over the next three days to step into the unknown and create a charter for evaluation, where the tools and methods we construct and use intentionally participates in forming thriving futures.

In finishing my address today, I'll focus on our Change Agenda as a model that can help develop this charter.

Our Change Agenda sets out practical and visionary life-outcomes. These outcomes sit across three layers: defining the work of the Institute, the changes that need to be made to broader systems, and the sustainable and healthy societies and communities' women and girls want and have a right to live within.

In essence, these layers reflect what we have heard over the seven years of Wiyi Yani U Thangani. That women and girls in all their diversity occupy pivotal roles of care and leadership, where they are working 24/7 doing the lion share of unpaid work, love and care to keep everything functioning.

It is our women—me and others—where services do not exist or are wholly inappropriate, who are supporting young and old, those with unique and additional needs and those with trauma. We are often the first responders to family violence and mental health crises, and continue to nurture the sick and those disempowered and marginalised. We run businesses that return profits, and gives employment to our communities, lead community-controlled organisations, while ensuring that our families and people can spend time on Country to

transfer intergenerational knowledges, learn our languages, understand the medicinal and nutritional properties of our flora and fauna, and engage in our ceremonies.

Critically, our women know that the impacts of colonisation, intergenerational poverty and marginalisation are entrenched crisis, community divisions, and lateral violence. They know, and pursue, the foundational need to heal, mediate and overcome conflict and engage in peacebuilding practices, both within our communities and across Australian society, to stop the trauma caused by external Western systems and reweave our social fabric.

We, as women, do it all, and to mainstream society, this hard exhausting work, essential to regenerating our ways of being to form conditions of peace and wellness for our peoples, is invisible.

The Change Agenda finally makes visible the immense worth of our women's realities, and highlights the approaches and systemic changes that can support and enhance what we do, for the benefit of everyone.

And what you will find when you look in the Change Agenda—and I understand there are copies available here—is that the outcomes are not tethered to baseline statistics of deficit.

Like all good wayfinding, the Change Agenda provides us with orientation toward realising broader universal truths. We call these our constellations, framed around self-determination, care of people and Country, economic justice, healing and wellness, and our cultural and linguistic practices.

For us, they are the major elements that have formed our societies since time immemorial and will always be the markers to hold our actions to account and measure success.

This is an Agenda that aims to measure us not by how sick or hurt we are, but on how effective systems are at enabling us to thrive, based on our own definitions of what thriving is.

It will be our women and girls' experiences that will tell us whether the work we are doing is bringing about the change they want to see.

Contained in the Change Agenda are the many signs' women and girls have said they would see, hear and sense if the right change was happening, and the system was singing around

them. These are things like, seeing children playing and laughing more, not feeling stressed about affording meals, and knowing your voice is respected because there is a response to what you've said.

We trust absolutely in the depth of our women's sense-making, which we call signals, to tell us about change, because there is no way that Wiyi Yani U Thangani and this self-determining Change Agenda would have existed without it.

Only our voices could have provided us with such rich data about our lives. It is the depth of women's feelings that is giving meaning to the world. I promise you though, I am not anti-numerical data. I just know that numbers alone, owned and assessed by others, can no longer be our masters.

In many ways we are flipping the narrative. We believe that big data is useful. But our focus is on a relationship-based measurement, learning and evaluation approach grounded in our cultural practices that can form nuanced felt data, that can only be formed and understood within experience and through reflection. It is this MEL approach that has formed the Change Agenda, and will continue to grow our work at the Institute.

I think of it as applied place-based Indigenous data sovereignty. We now have a First Nations gender lens to see other ways of living that can be grown and invested in. Through our lens, we are generating living data. We cannot grow and form the world we want to live in, if we cannot see, feel and understand the knowledges and ways of doing and being, needed to create it. And we want you to step into this different lens to activate these other ways of knowing, and together evaluate the worlds we all want into being.

The wonderful Institute team are here this week, and will be running a workshop today to explore the beginnings of this MEL approach and delve into practices showing how feelings gained through sense-making can better illustrate what needs to change, how and for what purpose.

At the Institute, we are on a journey to form the type of measurement, learning and evaluation tools that enables the depth of our feelings and senses to spark change, and to be used as a way to track progress against accountability measures of wellness, not sickness. Tools that can help us see ourselves and each other, and have empathy, compassion and

fascination for our differences, so we can connect across divides and come to know the importance of other ways of being. Tools that can marry this living data with the big numbers, so they have true meaning in context. Absolutely, these are the types of tools aimed toward peacemaking, and forming social cohesion so we can better mediate and heal from conflict, regenerate our social fabric and construct holistic systems.

These tools, and the feelings, ideas, approaches and models that emerge from them, will be the basis of our Institute's evidence platform—our sanctuary of co-evolving knowledges—for how to live healthy and better existences. The Institute, as the holder of this evidence, will not be a passive repository or archive, but an active place of learning and becoming. A place where the knowledge produced through these tools, comes from, and further helps in, forming a bigger, more inclusive, just, safe, and caring house to accommodate us all and our non-human relatives.

And in a world beset with conflict, where we all need to hear, witness, appreciate each other and connect across differences to illuminate the importance of other ways of being, I invite you all to come on this journey with us. Whatever you do, whether it be analysing population level statistics or working on climate impacts, or health outcomes, let the depths of other people's and other beings' feelings, experiences and realities create meaning in your life and work.

To finish with Lorde, she said within narrow frames of existence defined by profit, we are dehumanised, and our feelings were not meant to survive. Feelings were expected to kneel to thought, as women should kneel to men. But women and feelings have survived.

And she said, and I quote 'the white father told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free' end quote.

Be free this week, with your feelings, thoughts and interactions with others and see how that might orientate you toward the stars, toward a universe not confined to a limited frame, but full of possibility.

ⁱ (Taylor, 2009)