na fallaí ramhar le ceol

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I have been stretching my mouth around the phrase for years now as my understanding of pronunciation develops:

Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine.

This Irish parable translates to "it is in each other's shadow that people survive". It is used to imply a collective interdependence and the need for community, stemming from a time in pre-colonial Irish life where communities were grounded in mutual dependence and the commons – a model of land management before private ownership in which natural and cultural resources were shared.

I began this exhibition with a reminder to myself to continue to listen for similar wisdom; to turn in the opposite direction to that which I was facing and hear language that speaks to a more situated worldview. In the logic of this parable, shadows are a space for positive community and safety, countering the common formulation of shadows as a space of danger or secrecy. For if we need each other for survival, it is in the shadow cast by those that live alongside us, and lived before us, that we can seek shelter and renewal within.

le ceol is an exhibition of artists engaging with languages silenced by colonial contexts, each using song and vocality as a primary place from which language resists. For the past five years I have been an undisciplined student of the Irish language, informed by my position as descendant of Tipperary IRB/IRA volunteers and bounty immigrants to Lutruwita (Tasmania), and Irish settlers who bought stolen pastoral land on Githabul Country in the Southern Downs. Returning to languages that shape one's own position in the world – spoken by ancestors before the technology of writing, across vast timescales that were not linear – is to also be accountable to a wider community of speakers. I present this exhibition as a manifestation of this community that I am answerable to, of whose shadow I shelter in, and who will sing loudly from experiences of resistance that I am unable to comprehend. In this exhibition, the voice is a

site of performance, agency, silences and confusions. Across artworks by 8 artists and collaborations, voice is given form as song, painting, performance, print, sculpture and film.

le ceol starts from the question of individual and collective responsibility to language. Its title is drawn from the line "go mbeadh na fallaí ramhar le ceol" (that the walls might burst with music) by contemporary Irish poet Aifric Mac Aodha, referring to the Irish practice of burying horse skulls under the floorboards of houses and dance halls to increase the sonic resonance of the room. This image becomes analogy for stories and languages temporarily buried, which emerge loudly to resonate into the future.

Starting from place and local context, the development of *le ceol* began with a conversation with Bendigo-based Yorta Yorta artist and Elder Janet Bromley about people thinking and working with language on Dja Dja Wurrung Country. She told me to get in touch with Dr Lou Bennett AM and Harley Dunolly-Lee.

A prolific song-writer, composer and academic, Dr Lou Bennett AM (Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung) is a former member of the internationally acclaimed music trio Tiddas and co-founded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governed not-for-profit major performing arts company Black Arm Band. Central to *le ceol*, her work *jaara nyilamum* is installed to harness the building as instrument that reverberates song onto jaara jharr at 20-minute intervals.

Through song, *jaara nyilamum* tells the story of a baby girl that was ceremonially buried in jaroon on jaara jharr, who was taken from her resting place by a farmer clearing land 100 years ago. She was kept in the Victorian State museum for 99 years before being brought home by the family to jaara jharr and laid to rest again amongst the treetops.

When reflecting on Bennett's contribution of this song, I knew that by exhibiting this in a university museum I risked re-inscribing the colonial violence of capture, described by Yorta Yorta curator Kimberley Moulton as manifesting through the physical presence of cultural belongings housed in museums with minimal community access and little cultural information. She explains that when "dislocated from Country and people, these cultural belongings are trapped in the historical past and their agency beyond the historic past continues to be denied."[1]

1 Moulton, Kimberley. 2025. "Restoring the Spirit: A Yorta Yorta Navigational Methodology for Collection Access and Self-Determination Beyond the Colonial Centre." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 25 (1): 94–104. doi:10.1080/14434318.2025.2510008.

Instead of perpetuating these museum practices, I wanted to be led by the emancipatory logic of Bennett's invitation to sit and listen with this story of return.

By applying excitor speakers to the cladding of La Trobe Art Institute's (LAI) small courtyard, with views to Sky Country, the institutional structures that house the exhibition are shaken, these small vibrations turning the building into speakers. This projects the song onto jaara jharr, liberating it from the institutional container. Visitors are invited to spend time in the courtyard with Bennett's story, yet will also have their viewing of other works in the exhibition interrupted by it. I like to hope that the gums lining the streets around the gallery, and the birds that land on their branches, are listening as well.

Another important speaker of Dja Dja Wurrung language and contributor to the exhibition is Dr Harley Dunolly-Lee (Dja Dja Wurrung), a performer and linguist who recently completed a PhD in linguistics, anthropology and archaeology at Monash University. I first met Dunolly-Lee as they were navigating the lead up to submission of their PhD, our early conversations highlighted the complexities of how Indigenous methodologies of research must maneuverer, while always resisting, the demands of the institution. We discussed their approach and the different language contexts they were working from. Dunolly-Lee has produced a large wall painting, reinscribing the gallery's white walls with cultural and personal story, which explores their family's totems and moiety with animals and Country as Kin, through their connection to the Dunolly clan as ancestors.

Painted in white acrylic paint against a deep charcoal coloured wall, the painting depicts big dingo ancestor, the good serpent, and Waa the raven. Dunolly-Lee's own handprint is used to represent meeting places, with a palm as the central fireplace and fingers and joints representing families in the community coming together. Through this work Dunolly-Lee uses language and image making to explain the traditional names of the Dunolly family clan such as Gal Gal Balak (Dingo People) and Wangarra Girra Gunditj (String Bark Leaves People). Integrated into the painting is a spear and stone tools that Dunolly-Lee has made in collaboration with their mother Debbie Dunolly and their brother Caleb Dunolly-Lee, made with local trachyte and silcrete rocks and local dogwood, mallee tree and yellow box wood, demonstrating familial collaboration of cultural knowledge can

continue connections to Country for Djaa communities that are living off Country.

Driving up the Calder Freeway to Bendigo, Tamsen Hopkinson and I discussed the difficulty of addressing language erasure and preservation on Country we were both visitors to. As the car sped between Wurundjeri and Dja Dja Wurrung Country, she told me about the conflicting epistemologies that shaped her upbringing – that of Te Ao Māori, and a denomination of Baptist belief based on a literal rendering of the King James Bible.

Hopkinson makes exhibitions as expression of Tino Rangatiratanga, and has developed a new work for presentation on Djaara Country that considers the role of language as a means of questioning power structures, oral and written histories, dominant languages and religion.

Stacked high towards the ceiling on industrial shelving are two full sets of second-hand glazing from Holden Commodores – front and back windscreens, windows, rear visions mirrors – sourced locally from Bendigo. These tower over a hand-drawn diagram inscribed directly onto the gallery floor, rendered in silver Posca marker. The drawing is scrawled with verse from the King James Bible in both Te Reo Māori and English, inscribing the gallery with the conflicting epistemologies of Te Ao Māori and Baptist belief. These verses reference divine time, the shadow of God's hand, and language and wisdom being gifted to follower's mouths.

Initially appearing as a sundial, this drawing references the drawing is in reference to the Maramataka, the Māori lunar calendar. Mapping circular time, the markings track direct sunlight and refracted light from car windows arranged in the courtyard across the drawing on the floor and through the monumental stack of glazing. This references a sun dial that was once located on the site of LAI (when it was a Red Cross building) and has since been relocated to the Bendigo Military Museum nearby on Pall Mall.

The work sits within a loud noise-floor of AM transistor radios emitting radio fuzz from the shelves.

Also included in the exhibition is the tabloid newspaper artwork *Whakakite / Whakakore* that Hopkinson has made in collaboration with Aotearoa collective et al. on the occasion of their work being censored in a university museum context. Circulating in the wider world as a free tabloid, the work manifests in *le ceol* as both demonstration of

self-determined modes of exhibition and as repudiation of institutional censorship and risk-aversion. Through *Whakakite / Whakakore* et al. and Hopkinson resist institutional silencing of artistic freedom, a present day continuation of the persecution of languages that threatened colonial logic and domination.

The Irish language was persecuted and erased for centuries. This same violent erasure was enacted on First Nations communities across so-called Australia by colonisers, and was continued by those escaping colonial violence in Ireland that immigrated here. Increasingly, the past few years have seen artists engaging with these overlapping and conflicting colonial histories. Alice Heyward and Oisín Monaghan/Ó Manacháin are a collaborative choreographic duo who together explore these embodied and vocal spaces where mythology, transgenerational grief, horror, and diasporic identity intertwine. Together, they engage with the ancient practice of *sean nós* (which translates to 'old way') song and dance to bring to the surface embodied memories repressed by the homogenising traditions of colonisation and migration.

At LAI they present the live performance *Brigid* in collaboration with multi-instrumentalist Gregor Kompar and dancer Oonagh Slater. *Brigid* will be performed at the opening celebration of the exhibition, yet sculptural stages made by Kompar and performance residue remain and resonate through the galleries throughout the exhibition's duration. The work references the same practices of foundation sacrifice that Mac Aodha's poem describes, echoing the song and dance of the performance not just throughout the architecture but across the exhibition's duration. Heyward and Monaghan/Ó Manacháin approach *Brigid* as a space of transmission and transformation, working from their distinct lived experiences and the unknowability of oral lineage, to resist the neoliberal production of identity politics. By regenerating their embodied ancestral knowledge, *Brigid* considers the healing and revitalising force of mythology without seeking to re-produce meaning.

Ciwas Tahos presents an iteration of her ongoing project *Pswagi Temahahoi*. In the Atayal story told to her by an elder, Temahahoi is described as a transient space deep in the mountains of Taiwan that offers a site for resistance and a model for queer, Indigenous co-habitation. Only women live in Temahahoi, and as keepers of traditional knowledge and power they communicate with bees, sustain themselves on smoke and become impregnated by the wind.

Upon hearing this story, Tahos recognised this as a queer space within her Indigenous oral culture, a space that she sees as an ongoing reassertion of the continuation of queer coexistence with nature, and an avowal that nature itself is queer.

At LAI, *Pswagi Temahahoi* includes a ceramic ocarina that Tahos made in Taiwan. The bulbous instrument contains multiple mouthpieces intended for communal playing and was created as a way-finder to discover the dispersed location of Temahahoi. In the Atayal language, pswagi means 'using or looking at the sun's light and shade to trace or follow ... (wild bees)' which Tahos frames as an ephemeral and temporary tracing of the path to Temahahaoi. The ocarina sits upon a stack of bricks that tesselate and create small spaces that mimic the structures in the landscape that bees build their hives in, or, in Tahos's telling, the creases in society that queer people move through. A corresponding audio work and photographic print shares past iterations of Temahahoi vocalisations made in collaboration with queer community in Narrm, filling the gallery with a sonic connection between past and future spaces of Temahahoi.

An accomplished singer of Kaiadilt songs, Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori was a senior Kaiadilt artist known for strikingly bold and colourful paintings depicting her Country, Mirdidingki, in the Gulf of Carpentaria. She was born around 1924 near a small creek on the southern side of Mirdidingki, Bentinck Island, the Dulka Warngiid (the land of all) of the Kaiadilt people. In 2005 Gabori was introduced to painting at 81 years old, nearly 60 years after being separated from her country. She was one of only seven Kaiadilt speakers of Kayardild language. She painted without reference to inherited iconography of visual signs and symbols, or to a customary painting tradition on object, body, rock or ground, as no such artistic system existed in Kaiadilt culture.

Gabori kept her Country and Kaiadilt culture alive through song, which heavily informed her painting practice. Her unique style evoked geological and ecological flux on Bentinck, such as the transition from land to sea, through mixing wet paints and creating tonal shifts. The intensity and complexity of her knowledge and memory resonates with the colours and textures of Kaiadilt country in her strikingly bold paintings.

My Father's Country from the La Trobe University Art Collection shows Thundi (or Thunduyi), an area adjacent to the river near the

northern tip of the Bentinck, where a large saltpan marks the wet season of the river, which is flanked by mangroves in dry season. *Dibirdibi Country* is one of the extensive number of paintings Mirdidingkingathi Juwarnda Sally Gabori produced of Dibirdibi Country, the Country of the Yuujbanda Ancestor Dibirdibi.

A print by Mary Lloyd Jones also from the La Trobe University Art Collection inscribes her implicitly language-based work with the legacies of gold-mining and extraction on Djaara Country. Born in 1934 and based in Aberystwth, Wales, Lloyd Jones draws deeply from linguistic histories and early uses of written language, particularly the ogham alphabet used primarily in early and Old Irish from about the fourth century. Lloyd Jones's work is equally informed by the landscape she grew up in, folding together references of a rural Wales scarred by a legacy of lead mining with references to cup and ring marks from prehistoric art found across the north-western Europe.

Lloyd Jones was part of an interdisciplinary team of researchers and artists from Australia, Aotearoa and Wales that considered the impact of gold-mining in Central Victoria on the rivers and waterways, bringing into international dialogue artists who were living in regions directly scarred by the dispossession and destruction of mining.[2] Lloyd Jones speaks in this context to her early memories of seeing the golden, orange and ochre stain of waste material cascading down the hillsides of Ceredigion, West Wales, shaped by the spoils of generations of mining.

Susan Hiller was a key figure of British art from the 1980s until her death in 2019. She is best known for innovative large-scale multimedia installations that took as their subject matter aspects of culture that were overlooked, marginalised or disregarded. Her film *Lost and Found* features recordings of what she describes as 23 dormant or vulnerable languages, including Aramaic, Palawa Kani, Kaurna, among many others. In the context of *le ceol*, *Lost and Found* offers a wider field of voices that flow in dialogue and resist classifications of 'extinction'. Many of the voices heard were recorded in the few years before Hiller's work was made. *Lost and Found* is a follow up to her 2007 work *The Last Silent Movie* which used archival recordings of 'extinct' languages to create a commentary on lost worlds. As experienced in *Lost and Found*, these worlds and their

2 Lawrence, Susan, Jude Macklin, Mark Macklin, and La Trobe Art Institute. 2020. "Rivers of Gold". La Trobe. doi:10.26181/16634923.v3.

speakers resist the extinguishing of language implied by 'loss', instead demonstrating a re-vocalisation of languages that were sleeping.

Lost and Found includes a simple, constantly shifting oscilloscopic line that gives visual form to the collage of anecdotes, songs, arguments, memories, and conversations of these recordings. Rendered in green, this dancing line tracks the flow and liveness of the languages, reinforcing their survival. This line sits in stark opposition to the subtitled English, the still-dominant language that has been instrumental in silencing many of these languages. In this exhibition, *Lost and Found* gains new emphasis, not on the extinction of language but rather their resilience and futurity.

Each artist in *le ceol* has engaged with language and vocal practice as a means of celebrating, re-learning, connecting and advocating for the knowledges held in non-dominant languages, as a means of critically reimagining a future built on this embodied knowledge. This is not a future founded on the mastery of language, it is a future grounded in collective learning and community, where imperfections, slippages, and improvisations are embraced. As communities under colonial rule adapted and were forced to learn the coloniser's language in order to survive, too often their creole grammar and phrasing was taken as false evidence of their primitivism, rather than as testimony of creative resilience and adaptive survival. Through *le ceol,* I advocate for the slippages between languages as we attempt to bridge difference through shared and overlapping histories, centring voice and orality for the role it can play beyond words: it can name things, it can protest, it can cry, it can sing, it can preserve, it can demur, it can persevere. In seeking to listen to the artists in the exhibition, I look both to what is buried and what is kept in the shadows, and how the wisdom in these words may shape a future of survival.

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