

Decolonial Subversions

2021

*Y tir wedi'i dad-dewi / The
Land Unmuted: Field Notes*

Veronica Calarco

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Abstract

This visual and aural presentation resulted from an exploration into the struggles of reclaiming and holding onto endangered languages. It visually represents the language in the land and connects it to the land. By mediating languages through land, a space infused with history, identity and connection, this installation explores how the revival of languages resurrects the knowledge held in land. The installation uses a minority language to displace the dominant language with which both languages interact. The endangered language, Gunnai/Kurnai, (an Indigenous Australian language) is in the process of being awoken and the minority language, Cymraeg (Welsh, a European Celtic language), is still under threat. The dominant language of both languages is English, which although it cannot be fully removed has been displaced from its usual central positioning in a decolonial strategy.

These field notes provide a brief overview of the creation of *Y tir wedi'i dad-dewi*, an installation of over 900 baskets with sound. This work provides a space for the voices of the land to retell the story in an unfamiliar style, permitting the previously silenced to have a voice. Australian Aboriginal artists such as Julie Gough and Steaphan Paton believe that narratives can be retold through recreation and reclaiming, even when disrupted by colonialism. With this work, I aimed to not recite the colonial story again but to create a new narrative allowing endangered and minority languages to speak again. Although the two languages are globally and culturally far removed from each other, they were selected because they are part of my lived experience.

Keywords: endangered languages, minority languages, land, language revival, Gunnai/Kurnai, Cymraeg

One of the questions in reviving an endangered language is *How do you get the sounds of the language out there?* One of the difficulties in learning a new language is hearing and learning to pronounce the sounds of that language. This stage can seem impossible when the sounds are no longer easily accessible. Thus, to really get a language ‘out there’, to really make it live again, for a language to be fully reawakened, the words need to be heard and spoken, to become part of our soundscape.

Finding Sounds

Australian Indigenous languages are oral languages which were not written until after colonisation began (Languages). As the colonists and settlers spread across the country, the sounds of many of the languages ceased to be heard. Some of these languages managed to survive in written forms hidden in archives, or through Elders who may have retained some of the languages (Languages). Unlike minority or almost endangered languages, which have a continuous history of being written and spoken, many Aboriginal languages have not had a clear passing down of the full language between generations. Without the continual oral passing of a language from parent to child and the use of it in everyday situations, the language no longer changes over time; it becomes static and is no longer heard. To revive a language when there is very little active language use or little knowledge held in the community, there is a heavy reliance on finding the language in archival records (Eira 82).

When the language can be found, or is still in some usage, it will often have the structure of the new dominant language imposed on it. R & C Berndt write that this causes the speaking land to become muted, with its content and vocal expressions becoming radically different (Bernt 427). Living languages grow and change over time, but with the imposition of another language and the cessation of constant use, the language will become a “static, timeless entity” (Bernt 427). Reviving the language and its sound, speaking and hearing the language, enables the language and its knowledge to live again. Making a shift from just reviving the language on paper to finding and developing the sound, speaking and hearing the language, and eventually using the language on a regular basis, can be a decolonising act.

wunga / clywed: Hear

Sounds of a language are created by the people who speak it and by the environment in which the language develops. When standing and moving in our surroundings, we hear as well as see/view. When I am in the desert, I experience the environment, I view the landscape, I see the ranges and trees in the distance and the grasses and the leaves and bark nearby as I move amongst them. I see the different oranges and reds in the earth, the marks in the ground left by the wind and the living creatures that inhabit the area. I see the non-species contribution of the land’s formation as described by Val Plumwood (Plumwood), the wind, a fire, a downpour, the current marks caused by animals and insects overlaid with human interactions. I hear the noises, the birds cawing, the wind as it rushes past my ears, moving through the trees and the grasses, the scrunch of the sand as I walk on it. Being in

the landscape means feeling it with all our senses – we see it, feel it, smell it, touch it, and hear it. The contours of the land and the sum of trees or shrubs changes the way in which we perceive the sounds, as they reverberate and move the sound around us, creating not only the landscape we experience as we move through it, but also a soundscape.

As with landscape, humans are also not the sole creators of language. Language is formed by the land in which it develops. The sounds of the language echo the sounds of the land and the words themselves derive from the elements of the land. Words are created by the composition of the land, what is vital to the land, its description and to the people who live, use and view the land. Tim Bonyhardy inserts human agency into the land with his belief that “the land itself is transformed by words, phrases and ways of telling” (Griffiths). Aboriginals believe that “everything came out of the ground – language, people, emu, kangaroo, grass” (Rose 9). Thus, each language grows from a place, is specific to that place, and tells the story of the place. Both the land and the language work together, each shaping and forming the other.

Creating a Soundscape

In 2016 I began working with English sound artist Lee Berwick, who aided me in developing a soundscape. In 2017, I received an *a-n The Artists Information Company* Professional Development bursary to work with Lee to develop a sound project, where we could focus on techniques and explore together how to visually present a sound installation.

In an attempt to capture sound, Lee and I recorded in a local adit¹. The adit, as a culturally mediated space, represents the history of the area and man’s impact on the land. It is part of an industry that is associated with the almost disappearance of Cymraeg, but is also a strong part of contemporary Cymraeg imagery and identity. Being inside the adit, which had altered the landscape but was also being reclaimed by the landscape, I kept returning to a line from a poem, *Aros Mae*, by the 19th century bard John Ceiriog Hughes: *mae'r heniaith yn y tir*. The language in the earth. The adit seemed to create its own soundscape, which excluded the outside land/sound scape. Lee recorded me reciting a Gunnai/Kŭrnai myth in Gunnai/Kŭrnai and Cymraeg. The myth tells the story of *Ngoorin* who is looking for his people and instead of his people he finds *brarajak* (strangers). In the recording session, we combined the sounds of the adit – the noise of my feet hitting the stones, the splashing of the water as I walked through the tunnel, the dripping of the water, the way the words reverberated within the tunnel as though they were circling around us, the sounds Lee created to test the acoustics of the tunnel – overlaid with my reciting of the myth in both languages. As I finished reciting the myth, ending with *Ngoorin* saying ‘*Ngalko manana*’ (*‘Dydyn nhw ddim yno*’ / *‘They are not there*’) all went silent for a moment and then two fighter jets² flew overhead, breaking the intense silence, breaking into the world Lee and I had created. Then, as the jet’s roar faded, a bird cawed. It was an eerie feeling, having been so focused on reading the myth in a dark hole in a rock face, unaware of the outside world,

¹ A horizontal passage drilled to lead into a mine for access or drainage

² There is an air force base in north Cymru that uses the valleys of Cymru for training.

finishing a story where the main character's people were no longer there, and then suddenly being yanked back into the present, into the outside by symbols of both contemporary and past Cymru. It made me aware of the other actions that were happening, extraneous to us and the interior place we had created separate from the exterior world. Yet, the exterior world could not be ignored and became part of the recording. The experience simulated the uniting of tangible and intangible sensations and captured a moment that could never be recreated again.

parteong / basgedi / baskets

“... language, which is a sort of monument to which each forcible individual in a course of many hundred years has contributed a stone.” (Emerson cited in Crystal, Language Death 40)

With the above quote, I began to imagine language as a collaborative project, created by the land and by the generations that lived and live on the land. In response to this I experimented with combining the sound with another project I was developing – a landscape of baskets. Each basket could represent the contribution of a stone, of a word. By putting all the baskets together, like words that formed a language, the baskets formed a landscape containing the language in the earth, where it continued to live.

The baskets are woven from rejected prints. Printmakers often proof prints before finally deciding on the final print. As the paper for printing is of a high quality it seemed a shame to throw them away, so I began making baskets from them. As the project grew other printmakers began donating their prints to me. The yarn used was also donated or found. The quality of the paper (some paper was harder to work with) and the strength and thickness of the yarn dictated the shape and colours of the baskets, so there was an element of not having control of the design process. This stopped me making arbitrary decisions regarding shape, colours and size and allowed the baskets to dictate their final look.

Even though the baskets are each individually made by me there is a strong feeling of collaboration with the other artists and their stories. Each contribution of a print or yarn symbolises each individual contributing to the language and the culture. Each basket tells a story: from the artist's original conception, to their creating the print, to the reason why the print had been rejected, to their giving it to me, to the gifting of the threads and to my weaving of it – where I was at the time I made it, which thread I selected and the final shape of the basket. Alana Garwood-Houng (Yorta Yorta) encapsulates the idea that each basket tells a story:

“baskets ... may seem as though they are empty, but held within them are histories. It is not always visible but with time, patience and research, baskets can reveal what is held within. The histories in the baskets are important because they tell a story of a time past and of change. They also hold the threads of the story of their collection and journey to their current resting place.” (Garwood-Houng)

At the start of this project I asked *how do you get the sounds of the language out there?* This project allowed the land, the words, to become unmuted. With this final project, I visualised

Ond mae'r heniath yn y tir, A'r alawon hen yn fyw. The old language lives in the earth, but it will sing to us, speak to us and will release its knowledge ... if we listen.

now-wurn / *geiriad: Word Convention*

There are many different ways of spelling and pronouncing the names used by the different language groups in Australia. I have always known the language as Kurnai, which is the spelling used in Fison & Howitt (1880), but Gunnai/Kuṛnai is now the accepted name.

For Wales and Welsh, I have used the Welsh words Cymru and Cymraeg/Cymreig. Cymraeg is used when referring to the Welsh language, while Cymreig is the adjective, used when referring to something that is Welsh. This usage is to honour Cymru as a country with its own language.

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Review of Short Film *Y tir wedi'i dad-dewi / The Land Unmuted* and Field Notes by Veronica Calarco

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Originality

This is an original, compelling and valuable contribution to *Decolonial Subversions*. The short film and accompanying Field Notes present an inventive, imaginative project of reclamation through art, a process that is affirmative and hopeful in the context of languages and cultures under threat. In this case the Gunnai/Kurnai language is endangered, and Welsh language is vulnerable. Placing one next to the other and eradicating the use of English is a powerful device that is deeply affecting in the artwork itself. The film provides an affecting visual and aural rendering of the artwork and is structured in three movements. The first, presents the visual and aural imprint of two different languages – Gunnai/Kurnai seen/read on paper, and the Welsh words as spoken/heard through voice over. Both together present a disjunction or dissonance between seen and spoken words. This, together with the echo effect and the running water as well as the blurring and re-focusing on the words on paper, build an interesting inter-relationship between the two languages and create a sense of emphasis and weightiness to the voicing of the languages next to each other. The second movement begins with a time-lapse of the setting up of the basket installation. The voice over of the spoken words continues. The camera then seems to hover above the baskets, and we see inside them from above. These openings are evocative and seem to signify the place from where the voice/words emerge, almost like mouths. The third movement is the story of the pry *copyn a'r cocatw* (I wonder whether it is worth mentioning what this story is in the Field Notes, without resorting to explaining it away in English? A suggestion only). The film finishes very powerfully with a step back and a view of the entire installation, to the sound of the planes overheard and cawing of the crows. I found the film to be deeply moving and a representation that captured well the affecting nature of this art work.

Strength of Argument

I am not responding to an argument at all as this is work in the field of art. It should be enough to say that the artwork, mediated by the short film, powerfully conveys the aims of the work as set out in the Field Notes.

Quality of Research and Contribution to the Field

The work is an important contribution to the discourse on language extinction and the responses to it through creative practice. It is entirely original in terms of the application of art in respect of both languages, and the artwork itself deeply moving. It is difficult to capture the power and affect of an art installation through film, but this short film does so admirably through an effective use of vocal and sound evocations, alongside the visual.