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Voice Lessons

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the national referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament that took place in Australia in mid-October 2023. At the time of writing, the aftershocks from the failure of the referendum to gain the necessary majorities were still being felt keenly by many of the Voice advocates and supporters. The hurt and grief of many First Nations people were shared by millions of non-Indigenous “Yes” voters, while much reckoning continued in the subsequent weeks and months. The author here explores what might have been gained if more attention had been given to what an Indigenous Voice to Parliament might “sound like,” instead of the excessive focus on, and public discourse around what it might “look like.” Resources from the philosophies and physiology of voice, communication ethics, cultural studies, critical anthropology, Australian Indigenous writing and scholarship, and psychoanalytic politics are utilised to explore the connections between the human voice, vocal expression, hearing and listening, silence and song.

Keywords: Voice; First Nations; listening; silence; shame; referendum; culture; politics; power

Introduction

In May 2022, the newly elected Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that a referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament would be a priority within the first (3-year) term of his Government. The announcement reiterated a commitment his Labor Party made in their pre-election policy suite to respond to the call in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (2017; see Appendix) for a referendum on a change to the Australian Constitution. This change would have ensured a space for the perennial recognition and representation of First Nations Australians in all future configurations of elected Federal (i.e. national) Governments, independent of Party alignments and politics. What began on the night of the election as Albanese’s very sincere, upbeat and (perhaps naïve) optimism became, over the following 18 months, a highly politicised and intensely contested campaign, both for and against the proposal.

In the weeks following the defeat of the proposal, a number of key Indigenous leaders so prominent (both visually and vocally) during the months leading up to the campaign, remained (intentionally) silent. Their silence resonated, profoundly. Some of them would likely have contributed to the unsigned letter addressed to the Prime Minister, the two Houses of Parliament, the Australian public and (pointedly) much mainstream and social media. In this letter, the Indigenous authors shared their shock and grief about the “shameful victory,” and the “appalling and mean-spirited” result (No authors, 2023). Others, like Torres Strait Islander leader and author Thomas Mayo, Arrernte and Gurdanji leader Pat Turner, and Wiradjuri academic, public

intellectual and media personality Professor Stan Grant started to speak out, and speak back, to the result and its ramifications.

At the time of writing this paper (late 2023–early 2024), many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (including this author) are still *living in the wake* of the referendum result, noting Christina Sharpe’s (2016) multiple uses of this phrase that includes waking up to the harsh realities that the referendum revealed, and having a wake for the death of what held so much promise and hope. Prior to the referendum, Yiman and Bidjara Distinguished Professor Marcia Langton spoke of the moment being an opportunity to either “move forward in healing towards a better future,” or else to remain with “a broken status quo” (Langton, 2023, np). The anticipated problem with the latter was the likelihood of the lives of many First Nations people becoming “worse,” with the rejection of the proposal endorsing “a mandate to do nothing . . . [and] . . . to cause us even further harm” (np). There is, therefore, much reckoning to be done. As a non-Indigenous, mixed settler-colonial/refugee educator, my aim here is to make fuller sense of this failed moment, or spoiled opportunity, and to point to some of the possible lessons we can draw from this for the shared future of the nation called Australia.

Silences, spoken and other

The pained and prolonged silence by many of the key Indigenous proponents of the Voice resonated with some renewed commentary on the status of Stanner’s “Great Australian Silence” (1991). Was the referendum result fresh evidence of the majority of the majority (sic) White population choosing to ignore the ancient and recent histories of our First Nations people (Foley, 2023; Huynh, 2023)? Or has the inclusion, influence and embrace of First Nations’ cultures and voices over recent decades ensured a lasting breach with that “Great Silence” (Matthews, 2023)? The historian Tom Griffiths suggested that the “strange silence” was always, paradoxically, about the “white noise” (2023, np.) of denial. In his recent J.R. Crawford Oration, Stan Grant identified the way in which “truths are silenced by speech” (2023, np). Here, Grant was referring especially to the kinds of speech expressed through the mouths and channels of various popular and social media outlets that violate real lives through lies, distortion and deception. Silence however, for Grant, has a “sacred” component: a silence that humbles us; a silence that demands to be respected; a silence that again, paradoxically, demands to be heard. For the Ngen’giwumirri language group elder and teacher Miriam Rose Ungenmerr, this silence can only be heard by practicing a form of what she refers to as “*dadiri*” — “deep listening” and “respect for inner quiet” (Undenmerr, 2023). Similarly, for the American composer Pauline Oliveros, “how we listen creates our life”, and “listening is the basis of all culture” (2022, p.33). Further to this, deep listening is “listening in every possible way, to everything it’s possible to hear,” and that connects us “to all that there is” (p.29).

Emergent voices

Building on Mladen Dolar’s (2006) pioneering work, Feldman and Zeitlin (2019) suggest that there is nothing “more elusive than a human voice, [and] nothing more confounding” (p.3). The simple, yet potent reason they offer for the elusive and confounding status of “the voice” pertains, for them, to its “paradoxical status . . . as something that hovers between embodiment and disembodiment” (p.xii). Leaving aside the complexities of Dolar’s (2006) Lacanian thinking, it is noteworthy that “all voices are acousmatic, [viz] their source never visible or otherwise fully accessible to their bearers or hearers” (Feldman et al., 2019, p.6). This, then, invites an exploration of the voice literally/physiologically and metaphorically/symbolically, dimensions of which could have been teased out (and perhaps amplified) more both imaginatively and tactically in the months leading up to the recent Australian referendum. Rebecca Solnit (2021) suggests that

“metaphor mends disconnection . . . [becoming] equipment to understand humanity” (p.257). Thinking of the voice metaphorically, therefore, might offer some possibilities for healing from the shock, shame and hurt generated by the referendum (through the months leading up to it, as well as the result and its aftermath).

With so much emphasis on what the proposed Indigenous Voice to Parliament might look like legally, constitutionally, semantically, politically, organisationally, historically, socially and culturally, there was comparatively little exploration of what “the Voice” might sound like. Perhaps this was an inevitable consequence, and shortcoming, of our predominantly visual, or oculo-centric culture, one in which the “future is always envisioned, and not listened for or anticipated in the form of attending to as an auditor” (Pettman, 2017, p.87). Yes, we were hearing arguments for and against “the Voice,” and some of the proponents (especially those in favour) were calling for a renewed commitment (especially for non-Indigenous Australians) to listening more, and talking less (e.g. Castan & Russell, 2023; Davis, 2023; Mayo, 2022). Nevertheless, the actual constituents of the human voice, as well as its expressive, aesthetic, communicative, symbolic and even ethical powers were largely conspicuous by their absence. It is to these dimensions that I now turn.

What constitutes a (human) voice?

One way of deepening this exploration is to recognise the primary site from where the human voice emanates, roughly mid-way between the head (above the throat) and the heart (below, in the chest). As such, even if only for our purposes here, we can think of the voice as a fusion of the intellect and the emotions, the thought and the felt, the rational and the intuitive. Similarly, the voice can be thought of as the interface between the “mind” and the “body” (even if such a binary is problematic), or the medium through which our interior and exterior worlds interplay. Furthermore, it is breathing that activates the movement of the vocal folds as a stream of air, while also being the vehicle by which sound (in any variety of vocal utterance) travels out into the world to be heard and (potentially) responded to. Breathing, voicing, living and surviving are, therefore, closely connected. Nor is this to overlook the fact that not all people have the capacity to actively vocalise (whether due to physiological or psychological reasons), or to hear the results of actual vocalisation. Non-vocal and non-verbal forms of speech and hearing have evolved out of necessity (within deaf communities, for example), although voice-based modes of language-based speech continue to predominate in most cultures.

Cornelius Reid, the maverick American teacher of singing, advocated for all training to cultivate a voice of “full-blown strength” (1992, p.7). By this, he did not just mean a voice capable of being fully heard. Nor did he assume that a big or loud voice (which can often become strident, distorted, or overwhelming) was in any way more desirable or preferable to a voice that was able to express itself quietly, yet forcefully and affectingly. He did, however, seek to nurture voices that worked with minimum effort, to maximum effect. Reid was more interested in the conditions necessary for cultivating, rather than producing a voice. He likened voice cultivation to organic farming, the aims of each being to strengthen and improve “that which is healthy and right” (p.8), and to correct any faults or imbalances if, or whenever, they arose.

Reid’s many years of scholarly inquiry and pedagogical practice lead him to regard vocal tone as “an ecological phenomenon,” wherein “the dynamics of those elements necessary to the development of a harmonious relationship between the nature inside ourselves and the nature outside ourselves will reveal themselves” (p.3). This “nature inside ourselves” related more to the anatomy and physiology of voice, rather than anything more ethereal or mysterious suggested by the notion of our “inner nature.” Nevertheless, there is a boldness to Reid’s suggestion that our physical nature as material beings can align with the (external) nature (Nature?) at large.

Reid developed and worked with a notion of “vocal ecology” (p.9), discovering what was most needed to either restore or further improve the natural conditions under which the voice could optimally function for either communicative-expressive or artistic-aesthetic purposes.

This also required a deep and clear understanding of the physiology of the voice, and how to listen to it functionally. Put another way, for Reid, this kind of (skilled) listening was about the “aural recognition of mechanical laws” (p.19). These laws were equally the laws of nature, laws that needed to be sufficiently in play for natural singing to prevail over contrived, forced, or even faulty singing (p.3). This “natural way” is one that was also cultivated in the voice work of Kristin Linklater (1976), but equally in the natural way of farming proposed by Masanobu Fukuoka (1978) in his “one-straw revolution.”

One other thread to draw out of Reid’s extensive work is the emphasis he placed on the “two-register” theory of natural voice cultivation for the attainment of a free voice. Leaving some of the intricacies to one side, it is worth noting that the two registers — “the falsetto” (in the head) and “the chest” (around the heart) — had to be worked on separately, before being blended and integrated into a full-blown, flexible, free, natural and expressive (singing) voice.

My main purpose here is to invite some fresh or different thinking about the (human) voice, its nature, features and potential. To this end, it can be instructive to listen to a range of voices, whether in conversation, formal speech, performance, song, prayer, pleasure or pain. What do we hear? Where is it coming from? Why, and where, is it affecting us in the ways that it does, and how does this happen? What is the nature and range of responses and associations generated by a human, or perhaps any “*creaturely*” (Pettman, 2017, p.53) voice?

Reiterating Reid’s conviction, when a voice is sounding naturally (either in speech, song, or even less definitively), it resonates with a “full-blown strength” that is simultaneously arresting, compelling, authentic and true. There is something fundamental, even elemental, manifesting here. Roy Hart, the innovative theatre director (in the 1960s), regarded the voice as “the most intimate and naked revelation of our essential self. It is rooted in the very depths of primitive being and yet aspires to the heights of conscious and spiritual awareness” (Hart, 1967, np). These might be colourful claims, couched in some problematic language, yet still worthy of consideration. MacKendrick (2016) writes intriguingly that “there is no first call; voice is always response, the “first” silence already broken” (p.6). Cavarero (2005) too, refers to Cixous’s notion of “the vocalic” as that which “not only precedes the semantic, but permeates every language and exceeds the very codes of language” (p.140; see also Connor, 2000). Again, such formulations might seem somewhat lofty and/or elusive yet they are, perhaps, still worthy of exploration through formal experimentation and just as importantly, through open and consistent everyday observation (listening, noticing, reflecting, speculating). What is going on “behind” those voices that compel us so much, that leave us wanting to listen longer, and to listen more, or to listen again, and again? To what extent is the voice we are listening to a trained one (either for speech, song, or other kinds of sounding and re-sounding), and how much do the vocal qualities appear to grow out of (or into) the personality and character of the speaker? Do some of these voices also have their own personality or character and if so, can they be separated from the speaker within and from whom that voice resides and materialises, or through whom that voice passes? We might further muse on how certain voices (spoken, sung, or uttered otherwise) have the power to move us emotionally, but also to recalibrate and reconstitute us into greater ease, integrity, comfort, wonder, pleasure, joy and even ecstasy.

The core nexus

When thinking about a voice of “full-blown strength” with the power to arrest our attention and compel us to listen, there is often a *vitality* and *muscularity* to the sound that is indicative of dynamic activity in the intricate system of muscle, membrane and cartilage comprising the

laryngeal apparatus. When we sense something of the muscular activity in the “voice box,” it can be an indication of vocal health, a voice that is well connected intrinsically, able to articulate a wide range of thought, feeling, sound and song in meaningful ways (to communicate, express, dramatise, animate, affect). Such a voice tends to be well embodied, utilising breath efficiently (and silently), open-throated, free of undue impediment and just as importantly, derived from sincere and authentic intentions. We hear this honesty and sincerity when we listen to what is being spoken, sung, or sounded. More than this, we are captivated by such qualities, finding them irresistible, and the content of what is being voiced, irrefutable. As such, we hear profound truths, truths that resonate for and within us, truths that also *sound us out*, gaining our consonance and conviction.

Alfred Wolfsohn, a shell-shocked World War I veteran, in working through his war trauma, came to recognise and declare the human voice as “the muscle of the soul” (cited in Wise, 2007, np). This is closely echoed in Dolar’s reference to the voice as “the flesh of the soul” (2006, p.71), with the body-voice nexus also being something that philosophers like Cavarero (2005) and MacKendrick (2016) have explored in significant detail and depth. Conceiving of the voice as the “muscle of the soul” also invites us to consider the relationship between the material-tangible elements of the voice, and its more ethereal (sound, psyche), even spiritual aspects. As Connor (2000) suggested, provocatively, “Not everything in the voice . . . has soul; but everything that impacts upon us as voice or raises the possibility of voice, also raises the possibility of soul” (p.25). Against this backdrop, Stan Grant’s post-referendum references to “the deep wounds of our soul” and hearing “a country that feels soulless” (2023, np), resonate powerfully.

There were, inarguably, both spiritual and material (practical) imperatives informing and driving the move towards a First Nations Voice to Parliament. For First Nations people in the country called “Australia”, there is no clear (or desired) distinction between the “spiritual” and “material” dimensions of existence. Country incorporates the perennial spirits, the solid ground under our feet, the oceans, rivers, waterways and sky. The “call” for a First Nations Voice in the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* sounded from both Earth and Sky, Head and Heart, Intellect and Emotion, Soul and Body (Referendum Council, 2017; see Appendix). So how did we hear and/or heed this call? Or, why did so many people remain so untuned or “tone deaf” to it, able to hear it superficially, but unable to listen to it deeply? Oliveros (2022) makes the important distinction between *hearing* that happens as an involuntary reaction and *listening* as “a voluntary process that through training and experience produces culture” (p.29). The pioneering French otolaryngologist Alfred Tomatis reached a similar conclusion when he stated that, “Hearing is a superficial use of one’s ear, while listening implies an act of will to connect with the sonic environment and learn what must be known” (Tomatis, 2005, p.86). This vital connection between (properly) listening, and learning, should not be underestimated.

Calling in, calling out

Smith and Hyde (2022) discuss how “the rhetorical art of eloquence advances in significant ways an understanding of the scope and function of the call” (p.x). Moreover, “the call,” for Smith and Hyde, “addresses our capacity to be moved, to feel and have a heart for, and thus be touched by what is other than ourselves and in need of acknowledgement. The call is a touching phenomenon” (p.x-xi). While over six and a quarter million voting Australians were touched enough to heed the call by First Nations people in the *Uluru Statement* and cast their vote in favour of the referendum proposal, almost nine and a half million others were not. A further 10% of eligible voters did not show up at all, for whatever reasons. While there were some strong arguments put forward by the progressive “No” campaigners and Blak sovereignty spokespeople (eg. Abbatangelo, 2023; Foley, 2023) it appears that many other “No” voters were swayed by misinformation, and worse.

Professor John Hewson, former leader of the Liberal Party and once an almost-Prime Minister, opened an opinion piece a few weeks after the referendum with the following declaration:

It is time we stop pretending the overwhelming ‘No’ vote at the referendum wasn’t fanned by racism, underlying all the lies and misrepresentation. This is not to say all those who voted ‘No’ were racist. Rather, it is increasingly clear racism was the mostly unstated agenda of some of the referendum’s strongest public opponents: those who clung to the concept of White Australia, the supremacy of white settlers, their dependents and subsequent settlers, seeking to preserve our Constitution as originally drafted. (2023, p.16)

Leaving aside the evidence and arguments to support these post-referendum claims, we need to probe further into what Hewson refers to as the “unstated agenda” of racism that was fuelling much of the conservative “No” campaign.

In a way, Hewson is alluding to what the scholars Watson and Wilder (2018) refer to as “the postcolonial contemporary” (p.2). Included in their layered and closely considered definition of this signifier is the need for the voices of the colonised and marginalised to be expressed and heard (p.7). Critical anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler introduced the notion of “colonial aphasia” (Stoler, 2016, p.128) to capture and reflect the experiences of “dismembering” that comes from “a difficulty in speaking” (p.128) for colonised peoples. Within the recent and current Australian context, there were many examples of First Nations people not only grappling with their “colonial aphasia,” but becoming more empowered and mastering the difficulties, both formally and informally, in relation to the proposed Voice. Notwithstanding these advances, the underlying structural and systemic conditions of racism in Australia, and the many attempts to downplay or even deny such realities, cannot be underestimated. What Leng and Han (2018, p.28) argue in the Asian-American context is just as salient in the context of contemporary Australia, where “. . . race continues to function as the political unconscious of our color-blind age — a self-enforcing social and psychic mechanism in which race constantly appears as disappearing.” Stoler, too, in another work (2022), identifies the need to confront the “toxicities of racecraft” (p.xxvii) and the “sinews of discrimination” (p.xvii-xviii) that bolster all colonial contexts.

As Goenpul woman of the Quandamooka nation and critical Indigenous scholar Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson noted already 20 years ago, Indigenous scholars and activists have been increasingly calling out “where whiteness is centred, constituting the norm and conferring dominance and privilege” (2005, p.127). Even more tellingly, Moreton-Robinson argued that Indigenous Australians “have become extremely knowledgeable about white Australia in ways that are unknown to white settlers” (p.127). For a more “knowing” Hewson, one of the undeniable lessons of the failed referendum is the need “to repair the damage done by colonisation” and to address “the significant disadvantage that persists among First Nations Australians today” (p.17). This same kind of reparatory work is what scholar Sriprakash and colleagues (2022) call for in their educational project of “divesting from [and hence “unlearning”] whiteness” (p.88). The same authors conclude with a vision for a more socially just world permitting a more “capacious humanism” (p.94). Notwithstanding critiques of humanism, this vision points to a future where the dehumanising and life-limiting impacts of racialised and other forms of oppression (for both victims and perpetrators) are dismantled and overcome.

The racial(ised) crux

In her *Quarterly Essay* on “The Voice” in the year of the referendum, Cobble Cobble and Pacific Islander human rights lawyer, activist and scholar Professor Megan Davis (2023) drew on the work of philosopher Jill Stauffer and in particular, Stauffer’s notion of “ethical loneliness,” to build her case. “Ethical loneliness,” for Stauffer (2015), is what victims of oppression or marginalisation

experience when the surrounding world “will not listen, or cannot properly hear their testimony—their claims about what they suffered and about what is now owed them—on their own terms” (p.1). The failures of (even) “just-minded people to hear well” (p.2) have profound impacts on the lives, including both the histories and the futures, on the unheard and the unlistened to. For Stauffer, the essence of ethical loneliness is (nothing less than) “the experience of being abandoned by humanity compounded by the experience of not being heard” (p.9). Such ethical breaches or violations are also epistemic (Wooltorton & White, 2024). This makes the need for a Voice, and voices, morally compelling. Those already haunted by trauma and injustice are destined to continue living in compromised, reduced and dehumanising conditions for as long as they remain not only unheard, but unlistened to.

What Stauffer calls “ethical loneliness” could equally be termed “unethical” or “immoral loneliness” given what is being denied and experienced. Stauffer’s work is grounded in the ethics of Levinas and his conception of human inter-subjectiveness and interdependence. As such, whatever the sense of sovereignty a person develops, it always relies on other people to acknowledge the importance of that sovereignty and to honour its boundaries. For Stauffer then, dehumanisation is, at least in part, “the refusal of that response. Sovereignty is dependence” (2015, p.16).

Distinct from Stauffer’s “sovereignty as dependence,” Lauren Berlant introduced the notion of “nonsovereign relationality” (2022, p.x). Rather than focusing on the ethical implications, and obligations of this relationality (what Stauffer would consider to be a “dependence”), Berlant was interested in teasing out the affective dimensions of what they (playfully, but then with great critical acuity) refer to as “the inconvenience of other people” (p.x). The inconvenience of this “proximity” (p.xi) to other people had, for Berlant, a variety of tensions and connotations, positive and negative, generative and oppressive (and also repressive). Overall, this makes our receptiveness to others ambivalent, sometimes also wanting for things (people, objects, thoughts, our own desires) that are not always “good for us.” For Berlant, however, “historically subordinated populations are deemed inconvenient to the privileged who made them so,” while those who are subordinated “experience themselves as both necessary for and inconvenient to the general supremacist happiness” (p.4). Berlant’s notion of inconvenience derives, at least in part, from Jasbir Puar’s work on the maiming (as opposed to the killing) of certain populations for the maintenance of political power by others (Berlant, 2022, p.5). Silencing, mis-hearing, not listening, distorting, disabling and denying could all be considered forms of the maiming of First Nations people in the current Australian context, forms that were intensified over the months of public discourse and campaigning around the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. Nor is this to underestimate the significant killings of First Nations people in Australia that have taken place, and continue to take place, to this day.

Berlant drew on psychoanalytic theory to inform and illuminate their social, cultural and political critique in incisive and original ways. In recent years, British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has also been exploring racism within a psychoanalytic framework, as well as looking more critically into the genealogy of racism within psychoanalysis. Phillips (2021) notes the way white people struggle to even talk about race due to their (albeit unconscious) excruciating guilt. This guilt is accompanied by a shame about their sense of superiority as Whites, as well as the shattering consequences of racism. This shame is “resistant to articulation” (np). It could be argued that this resistance (to the articulation of shame) was especially evident in the people leading the recent “No” campaign against the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. Rather than admitting to any awareness or influence of racism in their lives or the wider community, those people inverted the problem by accusing the “Yes” campaign of wanting to “re-racialise” the country. Such accusations effectively worked to reaffirm entrenched racial divisions. The twisted logic of “re-racialisation” can be read as an effect of shame, using Phillips’ analysis, a shame that simultaneously confirmed—for those in need—“the truth of our prejudices” (2021, np). These points are echoed in some other post-referendum analyses. Euahlayi academic Bhiamie Williamson (2023), for example, referred to Australia’s addiction to the drug of racism, traceable to “a chain of

prejudice that began with the arrival of the First Fleet” (p.14). Arts advocate and literary editor Esther Anatolitis (2023), meanwhile, referred to “the new lows we have seen this year, so far beneath shame that we shudder to comprehend . . .” (p.19).

The (un)complementary space

The clinical psychoanalytic encounter is premised on the fundamental importance of speaking, listening and being heard, in order for any learning, growth, change and possible healing to occur. Akhtar (2013) details a variety of “clinical listening” practices utilised in the psychoanalytic session. These practices were also the focus of the Freud Conference in Melbourne, in June 2023 where a number of psychoanalysts and therapists talked about the important work they had been doing - especially with youth- in Indigenous communities, providing safe and supportive spaces within which traumatised and disempowered young people are given opportunities to release their choked voice when given the opportunities to be heard and listened to deeply and empathically (see *Creating a Safe Supportive Environment [CASSE]* 2023). In her conversation with the luthier/philosopher Robert Brewer Young, Anouchka Grose (another British psychoanalyst) asks rhetorically, “Why would anyone attempt to make a meaningful sound if they didn’t have the idea that there was a pre-existing, complementary space in which it might be worth their while to lodge it?” (Grose & Brewer Young, 2023, p.11). This echoes Cavarero’s claim that, even before speech, “the voice is an invocation that is addressed to the other and that entrusts itself to an ear that receives it” (2005, p.169).

The representative group of Indigenous leaders responsible for composing the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* would, in good faith, have made the call for a Voice to Parliament with the assumption that such a “complementary space” existed in the hearts, minds and body politic of Australians and Australia. What they, and many others who supported the proposal assumed- both in the months prior and on the day of the Referendum- was that the country, at large, was open and ready to hear (and heed) the call, and to provide the space within which an authorised, constitutionally enshrined Voice could help move the country out of the colonial shackles that continue to generate considerable discrepancies in life opportunities and outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The overall failure of this receptivity left many of those who had dedicated their lives to improving these outcomes, “broken-hearted, wondering whether they knew their country at all . . . whether anyone really listened . . .” (James, 2023, p.11).

To be fair, many people (into the millions) *were* also listening and *were* keen to support the proposed Voice for the sake of necessary and long overdue improvements for Indigenous people, and for the future of the country. Sadly, if not also brutally and shamefully, the No campaign was effective in seeding enough doubt, uncertainty and anxiety while simultaneously playing on populist racist tropes that invoked false fears about unacceptable or intolerable inconveniences. The deepest of these inconveniences lay in the truth of White supremacist shame and denial. As Phillips has noted, “prejudice is the currency of supremacism” (2021, np). Any such prejudice contains a deep resistance to change. This, for Phillips, couples with one of the features of racism namely, “a decision about which people we can learn from” (np). In the context of the referendum campaign, it was clear that many opponents of the Voice proposal were unwilling to listen to, or learn anything from, those promoting the affirmative case. This was a massive educational opportunity, one that is unlikely to present itself again any time soon. In light of this, feminist philosopher Professor Rosi Braidotti’s states appositely that the “praxis of forging communal solutions through the confrontation of uncomfortable truths is central to the ethics of affirmation” (p.241).

(Un)learning

Phillips (2021) suggests that psychoanalysis is “education by other means” and “often turns up, where education fails” (p.21). The reason, for Phillips, that education might fail is that prejudices,

by way of example, are symptoms of deeper fears and phobias, and symptoms have the potential to be cured (but not changed by educative means). It is an interesting distinction, even if educators might choose to differ from Phillips or hope, at least, that he is wrong. Certainly, there has been much good work done, and attempted, in the fields of anti-racist and anti-sexist education. Berlant argued in favour of pedagogies of “unlearning,” working with “an eruption of frankness in many tones” (2022, p.29). Berlant, however, was interested in cultivating tools and concepts for “unlearning the world, which is key to not reproducing it” (p.80). Sriprakash, Rudolph and Gerrard also outline a project for unlearning Whiteness (2022).

In her interconnected thread of poems, Palyku author, illustrator and legal academic Ambelin Kwaymullina identifies the potentially “transformative power” of listening, which also means having to respect silences about “some things too painful to speak of” (2022, p.55-6). Addressing herself directly to non-Indigenous Australians, Kwaymullina states how,

Listening

means learning to hear

the noise of settler-colonialism

inside your head

and all around you

so you can hear past it

to understand our voices

on our own terms.

Goorie and Koori poet, researcher and *Overland* journal co-editor Evelyn Araluen echoes these sentiments when she declares in her poem *Learning Bundjalung on Tharawal* (Araluen, 2021, p.8),

It is hard to unlearn a language:

to unspeak the empire,

to teach my voice to rise and fall like landscape,

a topographic intonation.

If Araluen is prepared to learn how to give voice to a whole new “topographic intonation,” we must all be prepared to listen respectfully, if not also to gradually learn how to give voice in these new and other ways. Araluen refers to this vital process of *Unreckoning* in the title of another poem, a process that helps to loosen “the clunky chains of the colonising tongue” (p.91). In relation to a document like the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, we must grapple with the content as much as the spirit in which it was created and gifted. At the same time, we must also listen closely to the tonal qualities it gives voice to, in its call for a Voice. In Solnit’s terms, we must be alert to ways in which “the voice and its emotional forces transcend the song’s content” (2021, p.256).

Striking a true chord

Typically, by definition, a magnanimous person is generous or forgiving, especially towards a less powerful person, or a rival. Magnanimity, in this mode, is something derived from the noble character of the (ostensibly superior) actor. A magnanimous person, however, might also be one who manages to deflect or transcend resentfulness or vindictiveness, something more likely

demonstrated by a person in a subservient or oppressed position. Some of the affirming discourse leading up to the referendum called on (non-Indigenous and/or White) Australians to give up some of our/their entrenched, systemic power and to permit more unsilenced, trustworthy, qualified voices representative of First Nations people in the future shaping and direction of the nation. Even if this line of argument had merit, and sincerity, it may have missed something embedded in the origin of the word *magnanimous*, that which joins *magnus* (“great,” “big,” “large”) with *animus* (“soul”). Working with this original meaning, we can see/hear the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* as a singular and sustained gesture of *big-soulness*, a gesture by which the representative collective soul of First Nations people in Australia was sounding its call for a more humane, dignified and spiritually nourishing future for all. If the Voice was the muscle of that collective soul, then more of us might have done well to attune ourselves to it, listen closely, hear more nuance, respond in kind, with kindness and in kindred-ness.

As it happened, there was a “chance encounter” at Uluru just a few days before the referendum that both encapsulated and reflected a number of the ideas and issues being discussed in this paper (Hookey & Manderson, 2023, np). This encounter was between a group (*minyma*) of about 20 senior Anangu women from the Western Desert and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Issues of language, listening, voice, song and understanding coalesced in unexpected, potent and moving ways. The moment, “the high point of the campaign for the Voice” (np), was experienced magnanimously and captured magnificently by Aidan Hookey at Uluru, then written up with Desmond Manderson in the month following (Hookey & Manderson, 2023, np.). The essay demands to be read, as written, without any of its nuances being “lost in translation”. Suffice to say that this moment, as experienced and communicated, was an offering from the deep time and ancient culture of Indigenous Australia, while also being a passing premonition of just how much more breath-sharingly beautiful our sacred Country can be, given enough sensitivity to listening with an open heart.

In many of his public appearances in the months leading up to the referendum, Thomas Mayo chose to close his presentation, or the session, with a voiced recitation of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (Mayo, 2023). Although it was performed, it was never performative. When Mayo delivered the *Uluru Statement* publicly and “out loud”, he did so with great commitment, authenticity and sincerity. He knew the text intimately, and he appeared to act as the vehicle or medium through which the *Uluru Statement* passed. He was not trying to impose anything on it, or accentuate anything in it, for dramatic effect. He knew how potent and truthful the words were, as they had been composed. With all these layers of significance, Mayo also delivered the *Uluru Statement* from memory, having learnt the text “by heart,” as we say. In that way, he was able to deliver the message from the heart of Country, and hearts of the Indigenous representatives at Uluru (in 2017), through his heart, to the (sufficiently open) hearts of many in the nation.

The future chorus

In her post-referendum missive, environmental and feminist philosopher Professor Freya Matthews (2023) referred to the *Uluru Statement* as “the most beautiful political bid in all history” (2023, np). As a collective response to the failed referendum, Matthews called out that “we, all of us, store the Statement ‘in our hearts’, learn it ‘by heart’, set it to music, make it our new anthem - the anthem of a new Australia” (np). In this way, she suggested, for generations, even “aeons” to come, “we will still remember this proclamation that heralded the true birth of our nation”. Stan Grant (2023) also referred to the text of the *Uluru Statement* as “a thing of poetry,” and the scope and ambition of the Voice proposal as “monumental” (np). For this to be recognised, it really needed to be talked up and amplified into its inherent fullness or potential, rather than being, as it was, increasingly referred to in apologetic or diminishing terms as “just an advisory body” or “nothing with any real power.” These responses were understandable in the context of the bruising campaign, but they may have had the opposite effect to what was intended and desired by those

who wrote the *Uluru Statement* and introduced the notion and vehicle of the Voice in all its clear and compressed magnificence.

We could do well to practice reading/reciting the *Uluru Statement* aloud both to ourselves, and in the company of others. By each giving actual voice to it, we (and others) might hear vocal qualities behind the text, and perhaps also in our own voices, that move us closer to receiving the most fundamental messages embedded in the text, and to then respond accordingly. Reid referred to voice work as “a venture into the unknown” (1992, p.6). The student (whether novice, amateur, or professional) is first required to abandon habitual systems of (voice) control so that, eventually, “a new control system based on natural reflexes can be instituted” (p.6). In a parallel way, the onus was, and still is, on each of us (especially non-Indigenous people) to cultivate these natural conditions so that they can assert themselves and prevail. Then, more and more of us can, if so desired, sing together in new and different ways, beyond the torment and the tears, the hoarseness and the silences, the pain and the shame, towards (and into) a vibrant new socio-cultural-political ecology resonating with integrity, authenticity, truthfulness and the beauty of full-blown strength. Perhaps this alluring phenomenon of each person sounding out fully their own unique voice while vibrating sympathetically with increasing numbers of others, is what the late, great Gunditjmarra and Bundjalung elder Archie Roach (2022) was alluding to in one of his final lyrics:

*Remember well, what we have told you,
Don't forget, where you come from;
Mother Earth, will always hold you,
'Cos you were born, of just One Song.*

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Appendix. Uluru statement from the heart

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from “time immemorial,” and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a *spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or “mother nature,” and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty.* It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia’s nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is *the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle.* It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967, we were counted, in 2017, we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

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