

# Yimbaya Maranoa: Creating resonant echoes from Country

**Vicki Saunders, Jude Taggart Roberts, Vernessa Fien, Anastasia Tyurina, Helen Hardess**

Affiliation (s): Yimbaya Maranoa Arts Collective; Queensland University of Technology; Central Queensland University.

Location, Country: Bindal Wulgurukaba (Townsville); Meanjin (Brisbane); Gungabulla (Injune), QLD, Australia

Contact Emails: v.saunders@cqu.edu.au, anastasia.tyurina@qut.edu.au, gunjudinbushfoots@gmail.com

## Abstract

This panel discusses an interdisciplinary approach to mediations between arts, sciences, and humanities. Its main objective is to explore the transformative impact of Yimbaya Maranoa in our aesthetic, cultural, scientific, and educational practices. Yimbaya Maranoa (listening for the Maranoa) is a First Nations led immersive arts project developed by Gunggari, Maranoa, and visiting artists on Country. The collective meets and creates on various sites within the Maranoa watershed, contributing to organically growing archival resources for community and creative development. These places hold profound significance for the Gunggari Nation, with a history spanning over 40,000 years. These places are also located along the route surveyed by Sir Thomas Mitchell in 1846. The collective project aims to decolonize maps of the Maranoa by foregrounding a series of arts-related works, stories, and perspectives currently absent or less visible in contemporary and historical accounts of the region. The discussion within this panel aims to illuminate the intersection of diverse disciplines and perspectives within the context of *Yimbaya Maranoa* (listening for the Maranoa, for Country), offering insights into the role of creative relationships as a catalyst for healing our different relationships with Country/Maranoa and to develop meaningful connections and dialogues across multiple knowledge domains.

## Keywords

Interdisciplinary, Mediations, Transformative Impact, Aesthetic, Cultural, Scientific, Educational Practices, Immersive Arts, Country, Gunggari Nation, Historical Accounts, Knowledge Domains.

## Introduction

There is a profound relationship between art, culture, and spirituality binding within our work as a collective of diverse artists, scholars and custodians of Country. The panel discussion is initiated by the thought-provoking assertion that “Art is entwined in the cultural and spiritual experience”. This statement lays the groundwork for a contemplative examination of the role played by artists and creative practices in healing connections with our environment and Country, going beyond mere visual appeal. The emphasis shifts to the sense of belonging to Country, defining one's identity, and establishing a connection to creative expression as a medium for conveying stories, spirituality, and building relationships between individuals, animals, plants, and the land.

The focal point of this discussion is an in-depth exploration of the invisible threads binding us to each other and our surroundings, transcending the visible to gain an understanding of our place in the world. Building on the work of Dr Miriam Rose and the concept of *dadirri* or deep active listening, the concept of listening to the sounds below sound is investigated, aiming to reconcile relationships with place through a sensory experience that extends beyond the

immediate and tangible.[1] The primary focus remains on the creation of arts-related works, stories, and perspectives historically overlooked or rendered less visible in contemporary historical accounts of the region.

Yimbaya Maranoa takes center stage as an evolving immersive arts project, serving as the platform where these conceptualisations materialise. The panel aspires to function as a catalyst for meaningful connections and dialogues across diverse knowledge domains, offering insights into the intersection of various disciplines and perspectives. Joining this panel allows for an exploration of the transformative power of art in fostering connections and understanding across cultural, spiritual, and scientific realms as they bridge the timeless echoes of the past and the innovative beats of the present. Through this delicate balance, cultures evolve, adapt, and continue to shape the ever-evolving story of Country.



Figure 1. Fieldwork at the waterhole adjacent to the East Branch of the Maranoa River near the boundary of Mt Moffatt National Park. ©Photo by Greg Harm.

## Interdisciplinary/diverse perspectives

The panel organises various fields and domains represented by each participant in a deliberate order, weaving a meaningful narrative to connect the audience with the discussion topic.



Figure 2. A group photo of some members of the Collective and attendees of the exhibition held at QUT in 2023 © Photo by Catalina Giraldo

### ***Yimbaya Maranoa: Listening to the sounds below the sounds, Listening for Dunthe/Country/place***

*Yimbaya Maranoa* is a place-based project and program of works centred around our personal and collective relationships and connections with the Maranoa River and the Maranoa region. These relationships allow for the spelling of Country with a capital C – and enable the original names for places to be heard if not spoken. *Yimbaya* is a Gunggari word that we use to mean ‘listening for’ ‘listening with’. Similar to the concept/practice and philosophy of *dadirri* introduced by Dr Miriam Rose, it is used to promote a different way of listening to each other and the Country we gather on. [2]

Within the region, the Maranoa river is traditionally mapped as an ephemeral river by contemporary geographers and mapmakers yet beneath it, unseen, flows the baroo (river) that has never stopped flowing since it began. In Gunggari traditions it is mapped in a whole other way. While unseen below ground, the ever flowing Maranoa River can still be heard, and within its waters are values and stories hard to express, largely silent or silenced in a region internationally known for its stance on not listening to Indigenous Voices and the original voices from and of Country.

The diverse collective of artists who are part of *Yimbaya Maranoa* feel a connection to this region and to the silent stories that flow through it. This connection is something recognised more than understood and as a collective we are interested in amplifying the sounds of this place and its silences as we navigate parallax or shift in the shape of an object when the observers position changes and as we navigate our different perspectives of Country/Dunthe.

The diverse creative mediums we use in our arts practices in a sense amplify or resonate with how country speaks below words, below sound. Framed by a different sense of relationality, poetically, or in poiesis, the practices of yarnning and poetic transcription have helped us unveil knowledges and ways of knowing that are not new and have been uncovered versus discovered in novel ways.



Figure 3. Dr Saunders on the fieldwork at Woodlands listening to the soundscapes of the billabong ©Photo by Jude Roberts

### **Footprints - Walking together in harmony on Country**

The term "footprints" hold significance in representing the impact or impression left on a space, be it a physical surface, a landscape, a verbal expression, a feeling, a knowing, a digital application, or a technical platform, and an auditory path.

This project traces the exploration path of Major Mitchell and the site-specific aspects of First Nations along the Maranoa River. Through this exploration, we aim to build knowledge and relationships, gaining a deeper understanding of both literal and metaphorical footprints to walk together in harmony.

Within the camps and projects, each artist reflects on their personal connection to the land, making it highly relevant to the collective project. It conceptualises the emotions experienced when connecting with Country – listening, feeling, sensing, seeing – and understanding the beauty that envelops them on their journey. It is only through these experiences that one can truly comprehend the significance of connection to Country.

Expressing these footprints through art is a spiritual practice crucial to cultural revival and preservation. It serves as a platform for communities to reconnect with their roots, revive traditional practices, and assert their cultural identity. Art acts as a bridge across time, allowing the celebration of heritage, maintenance of connections to the lands and waters, and the sharing of stories.

Art, as a spiritual practice, plays a vital role in cultural revival and preservation. It becomes a conduit for communities to rediscover cultural knowledge and ancestral pathways. Through the creation of art and its therapeutic power, we have reconnected with the wisdom of our ancestors and elders. Accepting and learning this knowledge becomes a transformative journey, leading to the evolution of our identity and self-expression.

These footprints symbolise not just our own but those of our Ancestors, encompassing both First Nations and European legacies.





Figure 4. Series of footprints. ©Photo by Vernessa Fein

## Geo-graphica (Earth-Drawing) – mapping the interconnections of land and water sites

From its inception, the discipline of geography has had connections with drawing, as it is derived from geographica, a Greek translation of “earth drawing” or “earth writing”. However, geography, which can also translate to “the writing of lands” has been used by invading nations to establish control of land through the exploration and writing of maps. Long before surveyor and navigational maps were created by European explorers, Indigenous peoples were mapping their own lands in terms of songlines and trading routes through cultural arts practices.

In the Maranoa, the first European to play a significant part in the mapping of the region was surveyor and explorer Major Thomas Mitchell who capitalised on the knowledge of the Aboriginal guides and custodians in terms of navigating tracks, water locations and other survival information documented in Mitchell’s journal in 1846.

Fast forward to 2018 to the Remapping Mitchell Arts Collective (now Yimbaya Maranoa), who include Gunggari, Maranoa, and visiting artists/creatives, officially begin a mapping project that share in new creative ways of orientating the terrain and waters of the Maranoa River. This is achieved on sites significant to the Gunggari Nation and a continuum of surveying expeditions, pastoral leases, public stock routes, and tourist destinations. Using diverse collaborative analog and digital approaches and site responsive arts practices, the collective considers the social, cultural, and environmental aspects of the place as a continuing narrative and a place to share approaches to knowing and being.

One approach is the mark making method of Earth drawing, a term the author uses to describe investigative drawing practices that reveal not only the surface of the terrain but the interconnections of the artist’s embodiment to that place.[3] Whereas early ‘discovery’ maps were based on the tabula rasa of omitting specific occupancy or locations, Earth drawing practices contribute to creating maps of shared relationships between participants and the Earth they stand upon.

## Site-specific play with phantoms, voices, echoes and fragments

This project represents a unique invitation from its Gunggari facilitators onto their Country and the Maranoa River; and to live the experience of being truly welcomed. What might that mean in terms of artistic productions, when being challenged to learn, unlearn, and more intriguingly, to realise there are volumes beyond one’s compass?

To hold steady in a state of dissonance. Artistic strategies have hinged on holding in mind the dissonant elements of the magnitude and persistence of Country and its Traditional Custodians, and the vainglory and utter strangeness of those first imperial incursions. Of course, there is the embodied enchantment of being on the river, the sheer “thereness” of Country, provoking the question “what it might mean to know a place from body, mind and heart, and have that place know you back”?

Meanwhile, Australia’s faltering path towards truth telling and Treaty is dispiriting to say the least. Yet, a sense of failure can be displaced or repurposed. This project holds space for sustained reflection, collaborative actions and moments of joy, playfulness, and discovery. These considerations, and the imperial lens of Major Thomas Mitchell’s 1846 diaries, in which he “discovered” the Maranoa, have informed how recent site-specific artworks emerged.

Phantoms and fragments. Conceived in circular time, sites on the Maranoa are stages where phantoms, fragments, stories, voices and characters materialise and dematerialise. To realise this, an art practice grounded in materiality and objects in spatial relations, has slipped into the streams of electronic media. Ultraviolet light shone onto fluorescent objects in darkness makes the invisible visible. Ecoacoustics capture non-human utterances, and geophony specific to place. Actors in costume re-animate exotic, neglected agricultural equipment in a nocturnal performance captured on video. Small events recounted in Mitchell’s diaries are brought to life. Traditional knowledge holders offer up stories, share knowledge, some of this is captured on recorders, some must be committed to memory.

## Bridging art, science, and nature in the exploration of the Maranoa River

An art-science approach, entwined with technology, becomes a seamless continuation of the tools and approaches that humans have historically employed to comprehend their ever-evolving relationship with ecosystems.

Breaking away from the conventional dichotomy, the art-science approach serves as a bridge, utilising technology as an artistic medium to capture and convey the intricate nuances of the Maranoa River. Rather than viewing technology as an external force, this methodology integrates it into the broader narrative of humanity’s connection with the environment. The result is an art form that harmoniously blends the artificial and the organic, offering a novel perspective on the hidden wonders within the natural world.

The artistic exploration delving into the history and ecosystem of the Maranoa River, employing natural

elements like sand, water, and the elemental force of open fire enables creation of captivating images. Guided by creative computer code, these images come alive with movement, offering a dynamic representation of the river's nuanced ecosystem. The use of creative computer code serves as a medium through which the unseen elements of the environment are brought to the forefront, enriching the viewer's experience and fostering a deeper connection to the profound history and natural beauty of the river. [4,5]

The integration of organic elements and digital manipulation serves as a testament to the commitment to unveil the unseen aspects of the environment, contributing to a broader understanding of the beauty and significance of the Maranoa River.

## Acknowledgements

The Panel acknowledges the Gunggari People as the Traditional Custodians of the places that locate the Yimbaya Maranoa project paying respect to the Elders, past present and emerging.

This project was made possible by the support of Gunggari Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (GNTAC) Maranoa Regional Council, Injune Arts Inc., Jawun Research Centre, CQUniversity, More-Than-Human Research Group, Queensland University of Technology along with financial support from Australian Government's Regional Arts Fund, an Australian Government program designed to benefit regional and remote arts practitioners, arts workers, audiences and communities. The fund is provided through Regional Arts Australia and is administered in Queensland by Flying Arts Alliance.

## References

- [1] Miriam Rose Foundation, "Dadirri - Miriam Rose Foundation," April 13, 2021, <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/>.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Judith Roberts, "Drawing the Artesian; Extracting Methods to Visualise Unseen Landscapes", DVA, Griffith University, Brisbane, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/774>
- [4] Toby Juliff and Travis Cox, "The Post-Display Condition of Contemporary Computer Art," EMAJ Electronic Melbourne Art Journal, no. 8 (January 1, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.38030/emaj.2015.8.5>.
- [5] Anastasia Tyurina, "The Unseen Water: Experimentation with Scientific Photomicrography and Creative Coding," BCS Learning & Development, January 1, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.14236/ewic/eva2017.15>.

## Bibliography

1. Beetson, B., Saunders, V., Woodland, S., & Barclay, L. (2023). BU'RA'NGA'MAN | Dadirri | Yimbali: Echoes of listening to country. In S. Woodland, & W. Vachon (Eds.), *Sonic engagement: The ethics and aesthetics of community engaged audio practice* (pp. 21-37). Abingdon, UK: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781003164227-4
2. Roberts, Judith "Drawing the Artesian; Extracting Methods to Visualise Unseen Landscapes", (DVA., Griffith University, Brisbane, 2015.)
3. Remapping Mitchell Arts Collective, "Yimbaya Maranoa with Synched Audio 031123 Hd 1080p 1080p," January 14, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9qsBYEqFg>.

4. Tyurina, Anastasia. "Searching for New Aesthetics: Unfolding the Artistic Potential of Images Made by the Scanning Electron Microscopy." In *Springer Series on Cultural Computing*, 103–19, 2020. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42097-0\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42097-0_7).

## Authors Biographies

**Dr Vicki Saunders** is a Gunggari woman and arts/health researcher who utilizes poetic inquiry and arts-informed research to foster well-being and resilience through understanding our evolving relationships with Country. Currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the Jawun Research Centre, Central Queensland University, and the Centre for Research Excellence-Strengthening Systems for Indigenous Healthcare Equity (CRE-STRIDE), as a Gunggari researcher, she creates space for deep active forms of listening in her research. Vicki consolidates a diverse body of projects at home in the Maranoa and globally, framed around the Indigenist research imperative to amplify Indigenous voices and promote listening.

**Vernessa Fien** is based in the Maranoa and descendant of both Gunggari and Bidjara. She is a creative who facilitates a women's cultural group, *Wandering Spirits*. Art is a significant part of the Aboriginal culture, and Vernessa is passionate about using this to help promote the importance of understanding and acknowledging First Nations people and custodians of cultural heritage.

**Jude Taggart Roberts** earned a 2015 Doctorate in Visual Art, researching drawing and print methods to explore the histories of unseen inland watersheds like the Great Artesian Basin. For two decades, she lived and worked in the Maranoa, later moving to Brisbane to tutor drawing and print media. Currently, Jude creates art in regional areas, connecting with river communities to enhance understanding and appreciation of inland water environments.

**Helen Hardess** is a Meanjin-based interdisciplinary visual artist. With a strong interest in materiality, assemblages of objects, stop motion animation, and acoustic ecology, her spatial practice works at the intersections of other-than-human agencies, the "age of humans", and colonial legacies. In 2022 she completed a Bachelor of Visual Art (Honours) at Queensland College of Art.

**Dr Anastasia Tyurina** is a new media artist and designer who works with emerging technologies, visual communication, scientific imaging, photography, and creative coding to create immersive interactive and visual-led digital experiences that promote social change, better health, and well-being. Anastasia is currently the Academic Lead for Learning and Teaching and Senior Lecturer in Visual Communication at Queensland University of Technology.