

Listening to Country: Immersive Audio Production and Deep Listening with First Nations Women in Prison

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Introduction

We are an interdisciplinary team of four non-Indigenous and Aboriginal Australian artist-researchers. In January 2019, we worked with incarcerated First Nations women to produce a one-hour immersive audio work based on field recordings of natural environments. The project team facilitated a three-week creative program with a group of women in Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre (BWCC), using an interdisciplinary approach combining visual art, performance, Indigenous storywork, and *dadirri* (deep, active listening). The goal of this pilot project, *Listening to Country*, was to investigate the value of acoustic ecology in promoting cultural connection, maintenance and wellbeing among Indigenous communities and groups who experience separation from family, culture, and Country (ancestral homelands) in Australia (Woodland et al. 2019). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples often use the term “Country” to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia. It refers to ancestral connections to homelands and is an essential ontological concept and relationship that grounds understandings of kinship, place and belonging (Carlson 2016). The term is often capitalized to describe and pay respect to Indigenous peoples’ Country or Countries affiliation and belongingness, and to reflect that it is an entity that is family with the same ontological status as a person.

In Australia, as in other settler-colonial nations such as Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada, Indigenous peoples are imprisoned at an alarming rate. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are the fastest-growing prison population in Australia. Representing nearly 30 percent of the prison population, they are currently 21.2 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous women (Australian Law Reform Commission 2017). The majority are mothers, experiencing the trauma associated with separation from family, community, and Country, and their incarceration creates a ripple that affects entire communities (Walters and Longhurst 2017). This is part of the “torment of powerlessness” (Referendum Council 2017) that Indigenous peoples experience in Australia: the continued legacy of forced removal, marginalization and incarceration that began with Australia’s establishment as a penal colony; and the systemic racism that pervades our contemporary institutions (Fforde et al. 2013; Henry, Houston, and Mooney 2004; Paradies 2006). Current prison programs are failing to address the specific needs of First Nations women, and research has shown a demand for holistic, culturally focused and flexible approaches to engage and support women and their children before, during and after entering prison (Kendall et al. 2019). Connection to Country is central to most dominant narratives of Indigenous wellbeing, with the majority of ongoing efforts in native title, health, education, environment and cultural heritage being focused on strengthening connections to place, belonging and Country. The *Listening to Country* pilot, funded by the Lowitja Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research,¹ therefore represented an original

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experimental creative approach to promoting cultural maintenance and wellbeing among mothers, daughters, sisters, aunties, and grandmothers who are experiencing disconnection from family, culture, and Country in prison.

Our decision to create immersive audio resulted from a direct request from a group of Aboriginal women at BWCC to create, in their words, a “culturally relevant relaxation CD”—a sound recording for the purpose of reducing stress and connecting to natural environments and to Country. From 2011, Sarah Woodland, a non-Indigenous arts practitioner-researcher, had been delivering participatory drama projects in BWCC, and while these projects had been open to both First Nations and non-Indigenous women, more recent works directly addressed the colonial legacies and impacts of female and Indigenous over-incarceration in Australia (Woodland 2019). One of these projects, *Daughters of the Floating Brothel* (2015), was an audio drama that engaged the women in creative processes such as making scripts and monologues, vocal soundscapes, Foley effects and audio production (Woodland 2021). It is likely (although unverified) that the women’s participation in these programs led to their request in 2017 for a sound-based project that emphasized Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as their next creative endeavour.

Following this request, Woodland enlisted support from Aboriginal artist-researchers Dr. Vicki Saunders (Gunggari) and Dr. Bianca Beetson (Kabi Kabi/Gubbi Gubbi) to colead the project, along with Dr. Leah Barclay (non-Indigenous), a composer, sound artist and acoustic ecologist. The team engaged in extensive consultations with Dr. Claire Walker (Wiradjuri) from the Murrighagun Cultural Centre at Queensland Corrective Services and the Brisbane Council of Elders to shape the project and finalize the logistics and continued these consultations throughout and post-project. Aunty Melita Orcher and Aunty Estelle Sandow² from the Council were engaged as cofacilitators for the *Listening to Country* pilot workshop series, and the team also worked closely with the Aboriginal Cultural Liaison Officers within BWCC. This approach reflected our commitment to codesigning the project with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a focus on Country as being central to place and belonging and thus healing, and the importance of the Elders’ involvement in maintaining a culturally safe, culturally focused and culturally responsive project.

This paper outlines the creative process we undertook with women in the *Listening to Country* pilot at BWCC, as informed by key Indigenous and arts-led theories and practices such as acoustic ecology, dadirri, Indigenous storywork, and arts-led and poetic inquiry. The women in BWCC provided the artist-research team with permission to share the work outside the prison. However, as the soundscape was produced for a very specific purpose inside the prison—that is, to facilitate cultural connection and healing for a particular group of women—the version that we shared publicly on the website and in other public forums such as conferences and workshops was adapted with changes that included filters on voices so the participants cannot be identified (available at www.listeningtocountry.com). In this essay, we share details of the creative process that we led inside the prison and a soundscape created by Leah Barclay that features excerpts of the original immersive audio work that the women in BWCC cocreated with the team, some of the original environmental field recordings, and a poem composed and read by Vicki Saunders. We hope that this soundscape evokes in the listener a sensorially enhanced understanding of the project, which encompasses the original pilot work, the original soundscape produced with the women at BWCC and our ongoing engagement with it as artist-researchers. The soundscape was created to engage the listener/reader in understanding the healing potential of environmental sound in a prison context and the ethical tensions, with the poem serving to anchor our positionality as artist-researchers navigating complex ethical and cultural terrain (as we will discuss further below). This approach reflects our ongoing methodology for generating

and translating knowledge from the research in ways that draw on the acoustic and poetic resonances of our experience.

As we undertook this process, the principles and practices of acoustic ecology and *dadirri* (deep, active listening) underpinned and framed our understanding of the connection between listening to environmental soundscapes and the wellbeing of individuals and communities. Acoustic ecology is a dynamic interdisciplinary field concerned with the ecological, social, and cultural impact of our sonic environments. While the field evolved from research investigating the value of listening to natural environments and the negative implications of exposure to noise on our health and wellbeing (Schafer 1977), acoustic ecology incorporates other understandings around the value of listening. Acoustic ecology draws on Steven Feld’s “acoustomology,” which approaches sound as a distinctive medium for knowing the world (Feld 1996), and Pauline Oliveros’ “deep listening,” where sound facilitates expanded consciousness and healing with transformational changes in the body and mind (Oliveros 2005).

From an Indigenist research perspective, acoustic ecology echoes the practice and principle that is becoming more widely known as *dadirri*—an active and deep way of listening to the world around us, the Country. *Dadirri* comes from the Ngan’gikurunggurr and Ngen’giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River region (Northern Territory, Australia). Aboriginal healer and educator Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (2017) introduced this term to frame and explain the philosophy and concepts behind her work and ways of being the world. As a practice, *dadirri* means listening with more than the ears; it is whole body listening. Arts-led and poetic inquiry were central to our methodology, in which creative acts such as drawing, poetry, storytelling and performance became the processes by which knowledge was generated and translated (McNiff 1998; Prendergast et al. 2009).

The Creative Process

In order to fulfil its purpose of promoting cultural connection, maintenance and wellbeing, *Listening to Country* reflected an equal emphasis on the process of engaging in reflective listening and creative practices and the outcome of producing the audio work. The team worked over a three-week period with a group of women at Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre (BWCC), a reception and remand centre located just west of Brisbane where, at the time of the project, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women made up nearly a quarter of the prison population. The participant group fluctuated in size between one and twelve, depending on a range of outside factors that included health or legal visits, transfer to other centres, or release. The creative process initially involved the group listening together to recordings of environmental sounds and soundscapes that we brought in from outside, *yarning*³ (talking) together about what feelings and memories these evoked, and then discussing and documenting what other sounds or environmental soundscapes might connect the women to their Country, or their “belonging place.” It was important to include the broader idea of belonging for those women who did not know their Country or ancestry, which for some First Nations peoples can bring about feelings of shame or distress due to the ongoing effects and ruptures brought about by colonization.

For these incarcerated women, separated from community and family networks and Country, and denied opportunities to engage with their cultural traditions and practices, *yarning* about places of belonging was an important aspect of the creative inquiry process and ethics of the project throughout. It invariably drew out positive memories and stories, for example, about swimming in waterholes as a child, sitting by a campfire in the evening, or listening to children’s laughter. Indigenous storywork is grounded in the idea that Indigenous meaning-making occurs through the relationship between the storyteller and the story. Indigenous stories within a

predominantly oral knowledge system are living stories held within Indigenous bodies (Hughes 2013; Archibald 2008). Health research in Australia is often framed within “deficit discourses” that position Indigenous peoples as a “problem” to be “solved” by Western knowledge systems (Fogarty et al. 2018). Working with Indigenous stories in health research involves confronting or raising awareness of the culturally toxic stories imposed on Indigenous bodies by colonizing storytellers. The goal for working with story through this approach is to tell Indigenous stories in ways that make us all stronger through a collective process of affirmation and acknowledgment of our strengths and knowledges (Abadian 2006; Wingard and Lester 2001). By grounding our *Listening to Country* methodology in the women’s positive stories and memories, specifically by representing these through sound and soundscape, our project speaks back to mainstream health and criminology research in Australia that continues to silence these women and frame their experiences through deficit narratives and discourses.

After the yarning sessions, the research team went off-site, as the women were unable to leave the prison, and made recordings of the sounds and environments that had been identified (where possible). We recorded over eighty hours of material during the field recording for this project. These recordings were edited into short soundscapes from each location (over fifteen sites) and brought back to the prison to begin the process of listening and collaborative composition with the women. The sound recordings reflected the yarning stories and memories shared by the women and included sounds of waterfalls, birdsong, children laughing, ocean waves and dolphins underwater and a traditional song sung by Kabi Kabi/Gubbi Gubbi artist Lyndon Davis.⁴

As we played back the environmental field recordings through high-quality speakers in surround sound, we invited the group to listen deeply while engaging in reflective drawing with coloured pastel on large pieces of paper. This further strengthened a sense of embodied listening and expressiveness connected to the women’s sites and sounds of belonging. In addition to environmental sounds from outside the prison, the women were keen to incorporate human sounds in the soundscape, such as breathing, heartbeats, traditional clapsticks and so on, which we recorded with them inside. This included recording a poem that reflects the women’s feelings about listening to Country, an excerpt of which we share below. The poem was created through a poetic inquiry process, where our team kept a journal of verbatim comments made by the women after each listening session to the field recordings and during our yarning circles. Their comments focused on their reflections and responses to listening to the soundscapes, including the effects of the soundscapes on their sense of wellbeing and their connection to Country and/or culture. After we shared these verbatim comments with the whole group, two of the women worked together to sequence comments into a poem, which they then read aloud and recorded for the final soundscape:

Like a dreamtime story / it is beautiful to my ears / and the sounds of my kids’ voices / the sounds of water flowing / and the flood of fish / makes me feel free, spiritually alive / sounded like she was outside in the world on her journey. / Spiritually alive / I just get goose bumps / my ancestors were there telling me where to walk / When you hear it you can feel it. / The only thing I hear is my heart beating / sitting in the dark / can’t hear no birds, no fire / I can’t say the meaning / the true meaning is deeper than us, in the dance. / I feel warm / I feel my soul / like voices walking away / centring your spirit. (Excerpt from original poem, also reproduced in Morrison et al. 2020)

The poem reflects the generation of meaning and knowledge that is possible through poetic inquiry—creating qualitative, arguably deeper understandings of wellbeing and healing that move beyond positivist empirical approaches (Prendergast et al. 2009). This also supports the goals of Indigenous storywork discussed earlier, where the embodied knowledges and cultural strengths shared by the women through yarning were highlighted and reflected back through the poem.

The poem also reflects our commitment through the *Listening to Country* process to using sound intentionally to promote “acoustical agency” (Rice 2016), where participants might take control of the sonic environment and resist the oppressive industrial soundscapes of the prison. On a larger scale, this approach involves using sound as a form of “sonic agency” (LaBelle 2018) or resistance to the structurally racist systems of health, welfare and criminal justice that keep First Nations women such as those in our group in a state of “systemic entrapment.”⁵ The collaborative process our team took with women inside the prison was at times empowering and transporting, enabling the women to make and listen to sounds and soundscapes that, as alluded to in the poem above, were ordinarily drowned out by the oppressive machinery of the prison and the wider systems of entrapment surrounding their lives.

Our entire creative process was not without tensions arising from the project’s situation within a secure custodial environment. Despite the potential for “sonic agency” described above, the process of deep listening and recording was nevertheless constantly challenged by the industrial soundscape of the prison environment, with slamming doors, air-conditioning vents, two-way radio chatter, and interruptions all disrupting the potential for quiet focus and reflection.

For security reasons, after initially being given permission by Corrections, we were ultimately unable to bring a laptop into the prison, and so the women were not allowed to edit the soundscape in real time. The women’s involvement with the composition process therefore occurred without sound composition and production technology, but instead through paper printouts: drawing, brainstorming, and constructing “maps” of different sounds. These included images and words depicting animals, birds, human sounds, and landscapes recorded outside the prison, arranged in a sequence on the floor of the workshop space through a process of discussion and negotiation. This limitation created key tensions around cultural safety and ownership, which became apparent during one workshop when the women became angry and highlighted their concerns about cultural appropriation and their loss of control over the creative process. Addressing these tensions with the women led to the creation of the poem called “Echoes of Listening to Country” described below.

Despite these tensions, there were also many moments of meaningful engagement and connection, where the women described the soundscapes that they heard and composed as making them feel calm, relaxed, and free. Professor Elena Marchetti from the Griffith University Law School conducted an independent process evaluation of the project, which included interviews with three of the women involved, as well as staff from BWCC (see Marchetti et al. 2022). The evaluation found that the women involved in the project felt a reconnection to or strengthening of their connection to culture and Country, facilitated through discussion and deep listening to sounds from the natural environment and by interacting with Elders. This, combined with our own observations and reflections on the project and the poetic and storied responses from the women through the process, demonstrates that this unique, interdisciplinary approach might have, at least in part, reached its goals.

The Artist-Researchers' Response: "Echoes of Listening to Country"

The *Listening to Country* methodology, which we piloted inside Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre (BWCC), continues outside the prison environment. Since our time with the women on the project, our team has generated and shared knowledge through different modes of research translation, including listening events, workshops, and written works. This includes the soundscape "Listening to Country," which is the living text of our work with the women in the prison. In addition, we have made a new soundscape, "Echoes of Listening to Country," for this special issue, which represents our own ekphrastic response as researchers to the creative process we led inside the prison.

Extending on the more traditional definition of ekphrastic poetry (as a poem written in response to a painting), researchers might create a work of poetry, music, sound, or performance in response to a creative artifact or experience. This process of ekphrasis arises from the resonance or embodied listening and knowing that occurs through the experience (see Maddison-MacFayden 2012). While it features excerpts of the original work the women in BWCC cocreated with the team (used with permission), the ekphrastic sound work published here reflects our experience as researchers as we navigated this emergent mode of inquiry through methods such as yarning, echo poetry,⁶ and audio composition. The idea of resonance continues as we researchers acknowledge the need to use our privileged voices to interrogate our own practices and help amplify the voices of those who are seldom heard.

The "Echoes" soundscape includes elements of the project we used with the women at BWCC. It features environmental field recordings that we recorded off-site, some of which were used in the original "Listening to Country" soundscape and some that were not. These include a dusk chorus of insects deep in the rainforest, distant waterfalls, ocean waves, humpback dolphins and a thunderstorm recorded from the banks of the Nerang River. The soundscape also incorporates recordings of the women's voices that have been processed and filtered through the soundscapes.

"Echoes" opens with a poem written by Gunggari team member Vicki Saunders and recorded inside the trunk of a tree at Curtis Falls on Yugambah Country in Queensland. Saunders wrote the poem during the *Listening to Country* pilot as a direct response to the challenge of working sensitively, safely, and intuitively toward meaningful cultural connection while inside such a tense, culturally unsafe institutional environment. She shared the poem with the group inside BWCC as a way of opening up a conversation within the yarning circle. The poem reflected her feelings of questioning and being unsettled, knowing that she held a sense of cultural responsibility and a duty of care as one of the artist-research team members to hold the workshop space. The poem asks why we (the women and the project team) were here—not in the prison, but coming together to do this work. Saunders approached this poem as a gentle way to work with the tensions and conflicts mentioned earlier, using poetry as an alternative way to create space for discussion. The idea to record the poem inside the tree occurred later during one of the off-site field recording sessions in the bush when testing the sounds within a large "grandmother" tree with a wide hollowed-out trunk. Reading the poem standing inside the tree created strong reverberations for the human voice, so the poem was performed and recorded there. This second performance extended the poem's meaning far beyond its initial impetus, moving the question "Why are you here?" out of its initial context and into a more existential realm via the presence and reverberation of a wholly natural space.

Conclusion: Healing through Soundscapes

Recent research has suggested that listening to natural environments through remote experiences (such as sonic performances and installations) has the potential to evoke a profound connection to place (see Barclay 2018; Bates et al. 2020). The project evaluation supports the idea that women’s listening from within the walls of a prison could have similar health benefits to physically listening on Country (Marchetti et al. 2022). Actively listening to environmental soundscapes in an embodied way facilitates a sense of ecological interconnection and resonates with what Timothy Morton (2012) describes as the vast intertangling “mesh” flowing through all dimensions of life. It highlights the temporal and performative nature of sound and how its attendant process of listening can facilitate a presence and connection to place.

As we continue to share the *Listening to Country* approach through different knowledge translation platforms and encounters in scholarly and community settings, we see the potential for sound-based collaborative creative processes such as this to be adapted and applied to different institutional settings where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples might experience dislocation or distance from places of belonging and Country. Following the pilot program delivered in BWCC, the researchers delivered a two-hour workshop to sixteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at Southern QLD Correctional Centre as part of the knowledge translation activities for the project. As we describe in Morrison et al. (2020),

these women listened to the work that had been created in BWCC, and engaged in yarning and reflective drawing. When asked to reflect on the usual soundscape of the prison, the women said that the sounds of doors slamming, keys, two-way radios and other industrial noises contributed to feelings of anxiety and stress. They understood clearly how listening to environmental soundscapes from outside on Country might help to mitigate these feelings. Afterwards, they reflected that the session had made them feel relaxed and calm, and they were very keen for the program to be delivered in that centre in the future. The healing benefits of the project were seen by stakeholders to be particularly relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were displaced and vulnerable in other settings, such as those in hospital or medical settings.

The process and work we undertook with the women in the pilot is an ongoing, generative movement of knowledge and resonance, potentially creating a “social echo” (Lederach and Lederach 2010) that reverberates well beyond the walls of Brisbane Women’s Correctional Centre. Our hope is that these reverberations continue the deep listening necessary for transforming oppressive and punitive systems of entrapment and healing the harms associated with colonization.

Notes

1. This Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led Research Institute was established in 2010 to generate high-quality, high-impact research and knowledge translation in health and wellbeing for Australia’s First Peoples (<https://www.lowitja.org.au/page/about-us>).
2. The title “Aunty” is commonly conferred in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture to a female Elder who has seniority and cultural authority in her community and, by extension, in other communities and contexts.
3. Yarning is a First Nations cultural form of communication and conversation that privileges building respectful and reciprocal relationships. The use of a yarning circle (or dialogue circle) is an important

process within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and has become an important method of inquiry, promoting relational accountability in participatory research that involves Indigenous communities in Australia (Barlo et al. 2021).

4. Examples of original recordings used in this stage of the process include Kookaburras at https://soundcloud.com/leah_barclay/listening-to-country-kookaburras/s-qme6Sr0vMPh and Dusk Wetland Frogs at https://soundcloud.com/leah_barclay/listening-to-country-dusk-wetland-frogs/s-7pWESo7OC4y.

5. See the research project “Systemic Entrapment,” interrogating the intersecting government systems that maintain First Nations peoples’ oppression: The University of Wollongong, <https://www.uow.edu.au/global-challenges/building-resilient-communities/systemic-entrapment/>.

6. In this context, we are using the term to refer to the process of echoing back that which resonates in the listener/the poet listening—to echo what others have expressed/articulated, amplifying their meaning/expression in a creative form. Echo poetry aims for resonance—that which is heard by the listener/observer and expressed back verbatim using the words that are “heard.”

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Excerpts of the original work that was created in collaboration with the women at BWCC are included here with permission from the women participants.

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