

**relative
NATIVE**

7

INTRODUCTION:

r e a: NATIVE

Angela Goddard

15

*r e a: belonging and
becoming*

Anne Marsh

27

*(r e a)ch out: worlding
stories with our bodies,
our truths*

Franchesca Hebert-
Spence

43

BIOGRAPHY

47

LIST OF WORKS

native

INTRODUCTION: *r e a: NATIVE*

Angela Goddard

The interdisciplinary approach of *r e a*, a descendant of the Gamilaraay, Wailwan and Biripi people, as an artist, curator, activist, researcher and cultural educator, has positioned them as a prominent figure in Australian Indigenous new media theory and practice since the early 1990s. With a focus on technology-driven works, *r e a* explores themes of Indigenous identity, representation and the post-colonial experience across mediums, including photography, digital media, film, video and installation. As *r e a* has said: “One of the most important aspects of digital new media practice for me has been finding new ways to speak.”¹

Existing in what *r e a* calls “unoccupied space”, technology offers them a space of practice and purpose.² As Jennifer Biddle and Lily Hibberd propose, with *r e a*, this unoccupied space

exists beyond the colonized terrain of traditional arts. For *r e a*, unplugging from the colonial system of representation empowers an Indigenous artificial intelligence and a freedom to perform nonbinary Gamilaraay/Wailwan/Biripi ways of being and of Country that are embodied, affective, alive, powerful, and sovereign.³

At the heart of this exhibition project *r e a: NATIVE*, developed for Griffith University Art Museum (GUAM), are two interrelated installations delving into the historical and colonial archive, a longstanding interest of the artist. In the first room, we present a remastered

iteration of r e a's earlier work *Native*, which emerged from their Australian Indigenous Artist Residency at the Blacktown Arts Centre in 2013. *Native*, 2013/24, incorporates archival sound in a layered installation, intertwining the voices of children reading excerpts of texts sourced from Australian literature, film, songs and political speeches—historically important texts and lyrics that have shaped conversations surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and history. The installation is further enriched by the soft melodies of the Mount Druitt Indigenous Choir singing in language, creating a multilayered exploration of Indigenous experiences and narratives.

In the second room, *Native (yugal/song)*, 2024, incorporates video and movement sensors that enable viewers to use their bodies to trigger sound and images on the screen. The conceptual and physical touchstone of both installations is the Blacktown Native Institute. Its historical context is acknowledged, as an institution founded in Parramatta in 1815 and relocated to Blacktown in 1823, a place now home to the largest urban population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in New South Wales. However, the project extends beyond this focal point, offering broader reflections on reclaiming Indigenous history and identity.

Highlighting the primacy of language in r e a's overall artistic project, the term “native” is central to these works. This word is seen and understood by r e a as being integrally related to the body, and they have written of making works that react to the viewer's body through sensors:

I can't dictate how people are going to react to the word “native”, but I'm hoping that it's actually an opportunity for people to feel ... the power of what a word like “native” can do to one's body physically as much as what it does to the direction of how their life pans out. It's what you carry in your body, the energy.⁴

Both *Native* and *Native (yugal/song)* installations work together as a kind of reclamation, as a means of processing such trauma.

As authors Anne Marsh and Franchesca Hebert-Spence point out in this publication, r e a is deeply concerned with the primary function of language, and the devastating effects of its loss. Throughout r e a's practice, in which history and the present are intertwined, we see a concern with the reclamation of language and its role in identity. As noted by senior feminist art historian Anne Marsh, r e a's *Native* series exemplifies this narrative. In her essay “r e a: belonging and becoming”, Marsh points out that r e a's practice draws on Indigenous standpoint theory, which is informed by family and collective consciousness, knowledges, politics and history. As leading Goenpul author and academic Aileen Moreton Robinson notes:

Stand point theory's recognition of partiality and subjectivity brings together the body and knowledge production, which is in contrast to the disembodied epistemological privileging of “validity” and “objectivity” within western patriarchal knowledge production.⁵

In recognising the interconnectedness of Indigenous struggles with other forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and environmental injustice, r e a's work reflects an intersectional approach, addressing multiple layers of discrimination and advocating for solidarity among marginalised communities. Through collaboration and community engagement, r e a's art promotes dialogue and collective action towards social justice and reconciliation.

An international First Nations perspective is brought to r e a's work by curator and writer Franchesca Hebert-Spence, who is Anishinaabe (a member of Sagkeeng First Nation) from Winnipeg, Manitoba. Hebert-Spence contributes a reading of r e a's approach to reworlding,

storytelling and truth-telling— concepts important to many Indigenous communities—to further enrich our understanding of their works.

Native and Native (yugal/song) encapsulate the fundamental principles present throughout *re a*'s practice and decades of artistic experience and academic engagement. Collaboration is integral to *re a*'s methodology, reflecting a commitment to collective creation and shared narratives. We sincerely thank collaborators Kimmo Vennonen, Perrin Ellis, Daniel Sala, Simone Hine, Paul Howard and Cara Austin.

This project presents an innovative and dynamic contemporary exhibition that is responsive to local, national and international contexts, aligning with GUAM's commitment to support and honour the work and contributions of First Peoples to our artistic and wider culture. *Native and Native (yugal/song)* contribute to the discipline of Australian Indigenous new-media theory and practice, asserting *re a* as a major voice within this field.

This exhibition *re a: NATIVE* contributes to the University's reputation as a hub of creative experimentation in which dialogue and understanding are fostered. It honours our collection's roots in early video-art practice and our focus on First Nations art and political practice—a continuing and vital aspect of the GUAM collecting and exhibition program. We are grateful to *re a* for the privilege of working with them on this project, and we are enthusiastic about continuing to inspire and challenge audiences as we reaffirm the importance of Indigenous art and narratives in contemporary discourse.

This work is being staged during the prestigious International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA), which brings together scholars, artists and scientists from around the world to explore the intersection of art, science and technology. This year's conference theme,

Everywhen, explores the human perception of space-time, questioning our understanding of past, present and future in the days of singularity and climate change. This concept describes the notion that past, present and future are cohabiting in any given location. While many Western cultures believe time is constant and travels in a linear fashion, First Nations Australians describe the time before then, then, now and the future as co-existent. We thank our ISEA partners and feel this is the appropriate context in which to showcase this major exhibition by a leading exponent and practitioner in digital new media theory and practice since the 1990s. Most of all, we thank *re a*, for the myriad ways they have influenced our understanding of contemporary art.

Notes

1. *re a*—Regina Merle Saunders, "‘Vaguely Familiar’: Haunted Identities, Contested Histories, Indigenous Futures," PhD thesis, (Sydney: University of NSW, 2019), 6.
2. *re a*, Jennifer L. Biddle and Lily Hibberd, "The Artificial as an Intelligent Indigenous/Indigenizing System: The Experimental Art and Artifice of *re a*," *Visual Anthropology Review* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 461.
3. Ibid.
4. *re a*, in correspondence with the author, 14 April 2024.
5. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Towards an Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory: A Methodological Tool," *Australian Feminist Studies* 28, no. 78 (2013): 333.

r e a: belonging and becoming

Anne Marsh

The easiest and the most “natural” form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible.

—Marcia Langton¹

Native, 2013/24, and *Native (yugal/song)*, 2024, are complex and multilayered installations by *r e a* that invite and perform ideas of belonging and becoming in a poetic critique that prioritises the voice over the sign. They untangle the knot of representation and agency and the entwining of language and identity. In the history of First Nations people the loss of language and dialect is primary. To lose one’s birth language, or never to know it, is a fundamental loss in terms of being and becoming. What is my culture? Without my language, how can I tell you who I am?

An acknowledgement of the primary function of language runs throughout societies. This is why immigrant parents teach their children their “native” language; it is what keeps Greek, German, Chinese and other bilingual schools going throughout our cities. But until very recently there was little acknowledgement that Aboriginal Australia needed these services. Historically, Australian “native” tongues were not welcome in the colony, so they were wiped out, silenced, forgotten. Speaking about their experience, *r e a* said in a 1998 interview:

I don’t relate to the English language . . . I find it a very oppressive language. I find it a very obnoxious language. And I find it also a very restrictive

language—a language that doesn't provide a framework for an Aboriginal person. But for me, because I don't have my own Gamilaraay language, I can't actually work within my people's language to even turn that language into a translation of English that people can understand. I don't have that. I only have the body feelings and the thoughts and that's why I do the work I do, because that's about the language for me.²

Today there is a national revival of Indigenous Australian languages, and it is becoming easier to find elders and descendants who are teaching those dialects which have survived and been translated from oral languages into spoken and written word.³

Native, 2013/24, is informed by *re a*'s earlier work *Native*. In 2013 *re a* and other artists participating in the Australian Indigenous Artist Residency at the Blacktown Arts Centre on the site of the Native Institute, came across this problem of language and culture while working with the descendants of the Darug/Dharug people of that region. Artists came into the program with diverse cultural knowledge about language and Country and found themselves experiencing their own intergenerational trauma in response to the site. They each needed to navigate experiential territories and cultural differences to find a way to respond that was both politically relevant and culturally respectful. "It was about being respectful while giving the topic the voice that was due", *re a* said.⁴ This involved deep listening. The original custodians of the land on which the Blacktown Native Institute stood had ample reason to guide the kind of representations that could be made because these would become part of a continuing history.⁵

This issue about language—who speaks it and who owns it—is fundamental throughout the Western canon of philosophy and more recently feminism and critical theory. Ironically, the language issue is likely to be seen as a failure of postmodernism and poststructuralism,

both of which put great faith in language, declaring that "language speaks the subject" and thus in many people's minds foreclosing on human agency.⁶ This was the point of these theories, to dismantle and deconstruct social norms, but their prioritisation of social construction over lived experience had the effect of silencing the other—especially women and minorities who felt that, yet again, they had been marginalised and their experience denied. Whatever the academic complexities of the arguments, and there are many, it wasn't washing well on the coalface.

As part of *Native* 2013 *re a* installed a portable, digital road sign on the site of the Blacktown Native Institute with the word "native" appearing in big letters. It was a sign, a proclamation in the language of the oppressor, the language of colonisation. (It is revisited in a different format for the 2024 installation.) The display included other words that had been re-invented by the artist, word plays such as "Rekon-silly-nation". The words were outside, signs for things, ideas, ideologies. They are part of the "Symbolic" field, the "Law of the Father" in a Western psychoanalytic tradition.⁷

"Native" is a word consumed by white colonial philosophical and anthropological interpretation. It is an example of how language writes "the subject", the person or the people to whom it is deemed to apply. To be "native" in the Western enlightenment tradition was to be closer to nature, further away from civilisation. To bring the "native" into "civilisation" in the nineteenth century was seen as "white man's burden", part of an imperialist/colonial program of "manifest destiny" in which white people are perceived as superior in all aspects of being.⁸ The realisation of this ideology was made possible through institutions such as the Blacktown Native Institute, established "as part of a campaign, led initially by Governor Lachlan Macquarie to extend enlightenment ideals to the indigenous peoples of the Sydney colony".⁹ Christian churches, with their missionary zeal, were the pedagogical and

“spiritual” enforcers of the re-education programs that supported this ideology. Martin Nakata has spent his career unpicking the complexities of the enlightenment position as it developed in anthropology and explaining how Indigenous peoples became the object of study as Western philosophy became intent on tracing the origins of the species via intensive studies of the “native”.¹⁰

In the current exhibition *re a: NATIVE*, *re a* has revisited their first iteration of *Native*, 2013, to further expand on its use of language, sound and moving image and offer a new culturally sensitive experience. As the visitor walks into the gallery, they encounter subtle lighting and a neon sign with the word ‘native’ written in white light across a black background. The installation is without the original church pew and *re a* has remixed the soundtrack. As viewers move through the space lit by the neon sign their individual bodies trigger hidden directional speakers. The Mount Druitt Indigenous Choir sing softly in their language of Darug/Dharug as another group of children read excerpts from various historic texts drawn from Australian literature, film, songs and political speeches that have “represented” or addressed the ongoing conversation around Aboriginal identity and history and who belongs where. The voices of the children take up space in their physical absence, creating a tender strength that challenges the ominous sign. Four young voices alternate in reading the script (excerpted here):

Treaty.

Lay down the stone axe take up the spear.

Let us turn the page together and write the new chapter in our nation’s story together.

Blacktown Blacktown, 1823.

Black boy black boy the colour of your skin is your pride and joy.

The Native Institute 371979915.

We are learning how to see Australia through Aboriginal eyes.

No more boomerang, no more spear, no more

corrobboree, now all civilised.

This land was never given up.

This land was never bought and sold.

Apology in the spirit in which it is offered is part of the healing of the nation.

A land of sweeping plains, of rugged mountain ranges, of drought and flooding rains.

The town of Parramatta, 1814.

No more boomerang, no more spear.

We have committed ourselves to succeeding in the test which so far, we’ve always failed.

We take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

Let us turn the page together and write the new chapter in our nation’s story together.

[Each child asks individually:]

We fail to ask: how would I feel if this were done to me?

We fail to ask: how would I feel if this were done to me?

We fail to ask: how would I feel if this were done to me?

We fail to ask: how would I feel if this were done to me?”¹¹

In another life the Aboriginal children in this group may well have been taken away from their families and placed into “care” at the Blacktown Native Institute. There they would have been “trained” to do menial work. Their families would have been broken, their history shattered, their culture torn from them. These children know this pain even though they didn’t experience it directly because intergenerational trauma is a reality for all Aboriginal people. These children have relatives who were stolen and broken.

The first encounter in the gallery makes the split between language and culture as experienced by

contemporary Aboriginal people come alive for the visitor. In the background the singing in Darug/Dharug language envelops the voices of the children who read in English. This tenderness washes through the space on the soundwaves.

When r e a said in 1998 that “I only have the body feelings and the thoughts and that’s why I do the work I do, because that’s about the language for me”, they may well have been forecasting *Native*, 2013/24, in their imagination. In their PhD thesis they worked through the methodology of the research and how language and feeling are different. In it, there is a profound recognition and respect for Country, for going home, for being and the revelation of belonging, even though they didn’t have the language. Here reigns the language of the mother, the body and the land.

In *Native (yugal/song)*, located in the second gallery space, the visitor encounters three video screens on three walls and becomes immersed in video images that have become abstractly visible via the soundtrack. r e a is interested in experimenting with the spatialisation of experience, and hopes that the historic photographic archives will come to life here as ghostly images start to appear on the screen. Of those who have been invisible, stolen, forgotten. For this sequence, r e a said they were revisiting imagery and sounds that “resonate through their ancestors and elders”, especially when they are on Country.¹²

Indigenous standpoint theory, new materialism, care/empathy ethics and various readjustments of feminist critical theory and psychoanalysis have explored the ways in which feeling, emotion and sensation can radically change the world. This realm of experience has been reclaimed after decades of Western theory deemed it essentialist and part of the humanist concept of the individual self. Freud started it off by “discovering” the unconscious, but that too is likely, in all its interpretative performativity, to be a social

construction after all. It has certainly been commodified by the Western canon.

The issue most pertinent now seems to be agency, and this requires that it be possible to act effectively from a multitude of points of difference.

North American scholar and anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has been following Indigenous digital and film/TV culture in Australia for years and has deemed it a “new wave” because she sees aspects in common with the radical French new wave cinema of the 1960s.¹³ But Marcia Langton started the conversation in 1993 with her famous little book *Well I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television* and before her the anthropologist Eric Michaels analysed the critical and experimental approaches to film and TV in remote Australia. His paper “Bad Aboriginal Art” is still a major contribution to critical theory and influenced generations of scholars.¹⁴ Electronic and digital media provide new platforms for artists. Writing in 2019, r e a said: “I found in digital media a creative space of seemingly limitless experimental possibility; a space where colonial trajectories were not dictatorial.”¹⁵ These installations provide viewers with immersive experiences that allow them to get close to the issues by deep listening and careful looking.

Notes

1. Marcia Langton, *Well I Heard It on the Radio and I Saw It on the Television* (Woolloomooloo, NSW: Australian Film Commission, 1993), 24. The book’s title was a line from rock band Yothu Yindi’s famous song Treaty (1991).
2. r e a and Vicki Crowley, “Postcolonialism Considered: An Interview with Digital Artist R e a,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 19, no. 3 (1998): 357.
3. r e a, correspondence with the author, 10 December 2023.
4. r e a, correspondence with the author, 10 December 2023. For an extensive discussion see r e a—Regina

Merle Saunders, “‘Vaguely Familiar’: Haunted Identities, Contested Histories, Indigenous Futures,” PhD thesis, University of NSW, Sydney. 2019, especially Chapter 2, where r e a discusses methodology and rights of access, saying: “Being Aboriginal myself did not mean I had axiomatic rights to this site, or rights of access to Dharug country. If anything, my being Indigenous complicated the conditions of my access,” 59.

5. The Institute was founded in Parramatta in 1815 and re-established in Blacktown in 1823. For a concise history see Heidi Norman, “Parramatta and Black Town Native Institutions,” *The Dictionary of Sydney*, https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/parramatta_and_black_town_native_institutions.

6. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1979).

7. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*.

8. Rudyard Kipling published his poem “The White Man’s Burden” in 1899, championing imperialism, empire and colonisation. The title of the poem became a phrase in colonial history. Cornel West provides a compelling contemporary analysis of colonisation and notes that: “By 1914, European maritime empires had dominion over more than half of the land and a third of the peoples in the world – almost 72 million square kilometres of territory and more than 560 million people under colonial rule”. See Cornel West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” *October* 53 (Summer 1990): 102. For a visual arts perspective see Melissa Banta, Curtis M. Hinsley, et al., *From Site to Sight: Anthropology, Photography and the Power of Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

9. The Native Institute was first based in Parramatta and later re-established in Blacktown; an area that had previously been known as Blacks Town. See Norman, “Parramatta and Black Town Native Institutions.”

10. Nakata is a champion of standpoint theory and indigenous research pedagogy. See especially Martin Nakata, “Anthropological Texts and Indigenous

Standpoints,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1998, no. 2 (Autumn 1998): 3–10.

11. r e a, “‘Vaguely Familiar,’” 65.

12. r e a, in correspondence with the author, 10 December 2023.

13. Faye Ginsburg, “Australia’s Indigenous New Wave: Future Imaginaries in Recent Aboriginal Feature Films,” Adriaan Gerbrands Lecture, 29 May 2012, Leiden, The Netherlands, published online, <https://satellitedreaming.com/sources/australia-s-indigenous-new-wave>, and “The Indigenous Uncanny: Accounting for Ghosts in Recent Indigenous Australian Experimental Media,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 67–76.

14. See Langton, *Well I Heard It on the Radio*; Eric Michaels, “Bad Aboriginal Art,” *Art & Text* no. 28 (March–May 1988): 59–73.

15. r e a, “‘Vaguely Familiar,’” 32. Also see r e a, Jennifer L. Biddle and Lily Hibberd, “The Artificial as an Intelligent Indigenous/Indigenizing System: The Experimental Art and Artifice of r e a,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 459–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12284>

*(r e a)ch out:
worlding stories
with our bodies, our
truths*

Franchesca Hebert-Spence

I want to begin by sharing a story about learning a word in Anishinaabemowin, my language, as both the word and my experience relate to how I perceive r e a's art. This year I attended a tour of Chris Chapman's exhibition *Run to the Hills* at Carleton University Art Gallery in Ottawa, led by Chapman with curator Dani Printup.¹ Both Chapman and Printup are Anishinaabe—Chapman is from Fort William First Nation and lives in Thunder Bay, both in Ontario, and Printup is from Kitigan Zibi, and resides in Ottawa, Ontario. This conversation between artist and curator was held during a gathering that had a large proportion of Anishinaabe community members and Indigenous cultural producers, who candidly spoke with the presenters throughout the tour. There was a contingent of Elders from Kitigan Zibi (Printup's community) as well as individuals who knew Chapman's parents and family. The event completely changed the way I experienced the work within the gallery space. In this discussion, this moment, I came to learn that in Anishinaabemowin the word for great-grandparent and great-grandchild is the same: *aanikoobijigan*. This highlights a cultural difference from the way English conceptualises time and space. In Anishinaabemowin the words for familial members are not defined specifically by generations, as time is not chronological or linear, but are expressed as role-oriented and omnipresent. Simply stating the translation falls flat, because 'understanding' or deep knowing is beyond the equation 'English word = Anishinaabemowin word'. This equation doesn't encapsulate the real meaning, or the stories shared during the tour that created

the experience necessary to reach deep knowing. This was the kind of experience that *re a* constructs within their work, in which their temporal and spatial understandings, storying, and role as a witness echo and clash with one another; this leads visitors to a deeper, felt understanding and challenging Western perception of Indigenous experience as analogous.

I am Anishinaabe, a member of Sagkeeng First Nation in the province of Manitoba, within the nation-state Canada. I was raised in, and aged out of, Child Family Services,² primarily in Winnipeg and communities in southern Manitoba. I currently live in Inuvik, Northwest Territories, and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, which is my partner and his family's territory. I have chosen to take a more theoretical approach than is usual in this text; first, because of the existing literature on *re a*'s work that interprets its visual language in terms of the ongoing colonial violence experienced in Australia, within its specific political contexts; and second, because as an international guest it's not my place to speak to the political aims of Australian Aboriginal communities, or to presume that their realities can be equated with mine. I want to share how complex and deep *re a*'s work is, and its significant place within critical international Indigenous discourse, by contextualising their work in relation to the act of 'worlding'.³

re a has been exhibiting artwork since 1990. Throughout their career, their plural practice has been hard to describe for writers and critics used to making hard distinctions between mediums, or between high art and folk art, craft or kitsch. This can be resolved by simply framing *re a*'s practice as "engaged with the digital". As *re a* has said, it was encounters with the digital that created a space where they could create works that spoke to their experience and through which they could best communicate their ideas.⁴ But aside from the vehicle chosen, it is the aim that defines *re a*'s practice as an artist: that of worlding. This is not straightforward. While we could easily describe

re a's immersive, experiential installations—such as *Don't Shoot Till You See The Whites of Their Eyes*, 1999, *gins_leap / dubb_speak*, 2006, and *Native (yugal/ song)*, 2024⁵—as examples of worlding because they create alternative spaces within galleries, this does not address the multiple strategies and approaches that *re a* had to deftly integrate to create such spaces. It is *re a*'s understanding of storying and reality, time and space, that is key to making these dynamic digital works. To simply say an immersive installation is 'worlding' loses the nuances of *re a*'s work in recontextualising and challenging cultural perceptions of reality prior to worlding.

One of the requisites of worlding as an exercise is to understand and accept pluriversal realities and the possibility of creating them. To begin, I'd like to push *re a*'s constant revisiting of 'storying' as a means by which they build pluriversal realities.⁶ A significant focus within responses to *re a*'s cultural production, be it in writing or curating, is around memory and educating about colonial history. Though this is undeniably significant—grappling with colonial legacies is an ongoing and pressing project—my intention here is to draw closer to the notion of 'story', to counter the aggressive delineation of 'history' from 'stories/storying' that privileges Western myth-building as 'fact'. History and the past are very different: the past is what happened (from a chronological understanding) or is happening; history is how the past is recorded, documented and shared and is heavily influenced by the cultural context in which it's produced. Even as I'm writing, it is 'history' that dominates: a non-plural, single story of how and why things are today. In the process of worlding, or bending temporal spaces, it is necessary to put aside a Eurocentric understanding of a mono-reality, to suspend disbelief and accept pluriversal realities.

When we define "history" as "storying nation-states" we change the dynamic between Indigenous and Western cultural production methods. Instead of

delegitimising Indigenous knowledge and information sharing, and relegating them to creative pursuits rather than methods of intellectual production, we can address the disciplinary barriers that quell the activist potential of art. Art historian Jolene Rickard, of the Tuscarora Nation, has spoken about history as the means by which Indigenous art-making has been kept in check as a powerful agent of change.⁷ Eurocentric “facts” make colonial nation myth-building fragile and defensive in response to the exposure of oppressed and ongoing histories. For example, Western monuments and memorials are ineffective when they continue to function within monohistories by reifying a singular narrative, even when it is adjusted or challenged. Compare this to r e a’s body of works, from *Look Who’s Calling The Kettle Black*, 1992, to *gins_leap / dubb_speak*.⁸ While they address colonial legacies, they stem from the core of r e a’s own lived experience, storying their family’s experiences or Country. These works blend discourses and welcome a phenomenological response to their articulations of intersecting pluriverses. “Active Indigenous memory” is the phrase r e a uses to refer to this aspect of their work.⁹

The act of storying as a means of creating new realities or spaces for Indigenous realities requires a fluid understanding of temporality to be successful. If there are multiple realities existing simultaneously then the idea that time is chronological must be rethought, in the way *aanikoobijiganag* identifies both great-grandchildren and great-grandparents as ancestors and descendants.¹⁰ This concept is present in the work of Rebecca Belmore’s *March 5, 1819*, 2008, a silent film that positions viewers to look for clues as to what specific story or historical moment Belmore is creating. The catch is that Belmore isn’t sharing a specific instance of colonial and gendered violence but instead a shared phenomenological response to such violence. Similarly, r e a’s multimedia work *PolesApart*, 2009, presents a personal familial story and history. The silent video of a woman running in the bush isn’t a “historical”

recreation but layers meaning through site, creating an ambiguous time and space in which colonial violences aren’t historicised or melded into the monohistory. Belmore and r e a pull ongoing violence into a continuum of simultaneous occurrence, allowing for entry points and to activate shared stories and experiences—this is “active Indigenous memory”. Their compound storying circumvents colonial structures that compromise the safety of individuals bringing stories forward.

The photographic triptych that is part of r e a’s installation *PolesApart* creates spatial ambiguity and echoes the well-known triptych by Frederick McCubbin of the Heidelberg School, *The Pioneer*, 1904.¹¹ Illustrating, constructing or showing land or country is a way in which contemporary artists, especially Indigenous artists, create spatial friction, exploiting the inherent contrast between “place” and the non-location of the gallery’s “white cube”. Here r e a creates a secret resonance between three pockets of space linked to one another: art-historical landscape, the activated space of the gallery itself, and the real space that is the landscape recovering from the fire. The silence of *PolesApart* opens up a separate space for speaking and sharing stories that resonate with the work. It is in such silent moments that r e a would have heard about their grandmother’s and great aunt’s experiences, and that individuals responding to r e a’s work can share theirs. The folds and overlaps of experience, that r e a’s sharing uncovers, the threads that travel between people and places, make this work incredibly powerful, compelling and evocative.

The spatial elements of r e a’s work gesture towards a locative or positional visual language, which I see as central and integral to worlding strategies. In Canada, in tune with the trend occurring internationally, it has been standard protocol for Indigenous folks to state our (Indigenous) Nation and more recently, our specific community and familial affiliations, when introducing ourselves. This has folded into a larger conversation

about the idea of people from other communities following suit.¹² A great snapshot into the nuances of this discussion can be found in a footnote of the essay “World-Making” in the *Ābadakone* exhibition catalogue from the National Gallery of Canada—where contributors had initially been encouraged to share their relationship to place, and, in doing so, some had to name themselves as Settlers. A statement by r e a demonstrates their early and very deliberate consideration of positionality as a contributor to a collaborative essay in 1994: “I feel that coalition politics is important, but first we need to have an understanding and acceptance ... of differences. We have to confront honestly our own racism, sexism, homophobia and classism and acknowledge the differences between us.”¹³ New ways of introducing and situating oneself and taking responsibility for the range of communities one is accountable to are becoming more widespread, particularly applied to the recognition of territory or Country. In concert with this, r e a’s practice is informed by a sense of ethics and responsibility that informs their making of work in territories not their own, such as the second iteration of *maang (message stick)*, 2007,¹⁴ and *Native*, 2013/24. These artworks find their way through song lines and through deep listening to community members. This led r e a to connecting songlines between Yuin, Gamilaraay and Wailwan Country within *maang (message stick)*, 2010, (third iteration) and informs a shared history regarding the Stolen Generation at the site of the Blacktown Native Institute in *Native*, 2013/24.¹⁵

* * *

This leads us to a third reflection on the word *aanikoobjiganag*, not its translation but the meaning. As Adam Spry wrote, in a review of poetry by his language professor Margaret Noodin:

(In class) we learned that the stem of the word, “aanikaw-,” indicates the act of binding or joining things together. For example, anikoogwaade refers

to something sewn together and aanikoobidoon means to extend through the act of tying. Therefore “aanikoobjiganag,” as Prof. Noodin explained, describes those who bind us to the present—the relations who tie us to both our past and our future.¹⁶

This is an insight into Anishinaabe epistemologies that construct identity as plural not individual, as formed by a series of reciprocal community relations and responsibilities. To take it a step further, looking at my relationship to individuals four generations apart from my present, they are *aanikoobjiganag* but so am I, and that knowledge informs the way I move through the world. Culture shapes our realities, in the way that language shapes our world views. When I see r e a’s art practice and work, I see them constantly making and remaking themselves within a larger conversation that seamlessly moves through time and space in ways that parallel Anishinaabe worldviews in language. The power to weave pluriversal realities is urgent when we consider that other forms of reworlding can function as colonial tools. As r e a has pointed out, “I have spent a lot of time contemplating what belonging means in a society where heteronormativity and racism may be social constructs, but ones that as lived realities have made my life problematic.”¹⁷ When we share stories, especially those related to the land, our family or our experience, truth-telling has significant power—it is a responsibility but also takes a heavy toll.

Truth-telling encapsulates the multitudes of generous ways in which our communities tell stories in attempts to build new worlds and futures—from daily interactions, where the onus of education is put upon us, to participating in large reports, task forces, judicial committees, advisory circles, etc. It requires enormous fortitude to continually do this type of work, and for every action there are dozens left unfinished or which have led to little or no action. In Canada, as far back as the Citizens Plus “Red Paper” of 1970 (published

in response to the 1969 White Paper which aimed to abolish the Indian Act), chiefs called for an end to reports reiterating what had already been repeated to government officials. Fifty years later, only a fraction of that document has been addressed—either because they were overt human rights violations or due to the ongoing pressure of further truth-telling events. Many new reports have been submitted since. In Australia, the individual stories in the “Bringing Them Home” report (1997) about the Stolen Generations had a strong impact on the Australian public,¹⁸ but many of its recommendations have still not been acted on. Writing on the beginning of the Native Institute Project in Western Sydney, *re a* observed, “I felt the Darug community was disillusioned by politics in general; they did not seem eager to embrace art as a platform that could make a difference, unless and until they had primary rights to their country first.”¹⁹

These examples show the labour required for truth-telling, its importance and its power and the stakes inherent in such storying. When truth-telling is in conversation with, and considers, positionality and territory (Country), and respects the protocols of Indigenous folks from different nations around how to speak on another’s territory without subsuming the realities of others, we find multi-layered works that continually evolve and grow, such as *re a*’s *Native*, 2013/24, and *Native (yugal/song)*, 2024. They discovered that their truth “lay in what is already contained within my body; a blueprint of my past, present and how the future could be different.”²⁰

Let’s begin with the earliest iteration of the Native series, *Native*, 2013, an audiovisual installation with a neon sign as the main light-source, and four directional speakers that were activated when people sat on a church pew in the gallery, each spot having its correlating sensor. The audio components featured excerpts from Paul Keating’s Redfern Park Speech on 10 December 1992; the National Apology delivered by

Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008; and Mount Druitt Indigenous Choir (also known as the Darug/Dharug Children’s Choir) singing Christian hymns as well as their own versions of *I Am Australian* (1987) by Bruce Woodley and Dobe Newton, *No More Boomerang* (1966) by Aboriginal poet and scholar Oodgeroo Noonuccal (aka Kath Walker), *My Country* (1908) by the Australian writer Dorothea Mackellar, and Yothu Yindi’s song *Treaty* (1991).²¹ Excerpts from all these references are woven together in readings by children both Indigenous and Settler.²²

By ignoring linear time and categories of cultural production, *re a* created a poetic response that made stark juxtapositions, but these make sense coming from the lived experience of a person impacted by, and aware of, the ongoing squeeze of colonialism. Particularly in the audio, the collaged references create a palimpsest, as described by xwélmexw artist and curator Dylan Robinson:

To look at a palimpsest is never to see all the layers as equally readable but instead to sense faint traces, some words and symbols more present than others, sometimes below the threshold of recognition as words and symbols, that allow only the knowledge that something beneath lingers.²³

The use of layers and imagined ghostly images is inherent to *re a*’s storying in experiential work such as *Native*, 2013, and reinforced by the spatial qualities of audio and a presentation that challenges conventional listening or consumption. It is impossible to listen to all four channels simultaneously, but being able to hear doesn’t guarantee knowing or understanding. The presentation of *Native*, 2013, was cheeky, hyper-aware of the role of the visitor in performing and participating in exchange for experiencing some of what *re a* had heard, felt and gleaned from being in the Native Institute’s Indigenous Creative Residency in 2013.²⁴

*“our artworks are in fact ongoing
acts of retrieving and uncovering”*

—r e a

The biggest shift in r e a’s latest work in 2024 is a more explicit and vulnerable balancing of r e a’s own story in relation to the history of the Native Institute. Its two components are each experiential works that occupy entire rooms: a neon sign with four directional sound works, and a three-channel video sound work.²⁵ To access the second part, *Native (yugal/song)*, 2024, viewers must pass through *Native*, 2013/24. This first room includes a remix of the original audio from *Native*, 2013, using gentle lights on the ground instead of a church pew to demarcate the positions of the four directional speakers placed in the ceiling. This is a major difference in spatial worlding interventions.

The worlding approach in *Native*, 2013/24, allows for serendipitous experience—a viewer can pass through the sound and experience it at any point in its loop. This removes the potential of listening to the audio “start to finish” as in *Native*, 2013, where moving along the pew from left to right to listen to the tracks was a deliberately orchestrated response. While r e a had intended to create discomfort through this rigidity, drawing on the compliance in “learning” behaviour deeply socialised into all of us via institutions such as schools, churches and public spaces, the sharpness of this critique could be lost within a university gallery. Conversely, in *Native*, 2013/24, r e a offers participants the opportunity to seek out the audio track locations, so that learning can be based on visitors’ own culturally informed models.

The shift in *Native*, 2013/24, is subtle, although the sound component remains as charged as in its predecessor. *Native (yugal/song)* is a major addition to the series, with explicit ties to r e a’s experience in conversations with the Darug/Dharug community

and their Country, the site of the Native Institute. The three-channel sound video articulates their mutual vulnerability as it moves across screens on three walls, blending the visualisation of the sound mix in a way that echoes the audio component of the first room.

Native (yugal/song) completely envelops the viewer visually and aurally. The surround-sound is accompanied by a video graphic that moves with the sound wave. Fading in and out, leaving space for moments of visual silence and moments when sound is made physical through vibrating energy into the body. This is a poetic work, where the visualisation of the audio mix, emerging from the energy of the sounds, is accompanied by an identifier or a conversation with r e a. On a personal level, *Native (yugal/song)* functions as a string of memories and a stream of consciousness which are responsive and responsible to the network of relations r e a has developed: with their family, with the Indigenous community at large, and with their Country. When I hear the words “immersive experiential digital works”, I think of flashy, punchy works where spectacle invites immediate response, and such works do play an important role within Indigenous cultural production. Alternatively, r e a’s subtle and gentle way of engaging with technologies in *Native (yugal/song)* demonstrates self-assurance and confidence in the intrinsic value of their story and experience. The two rooms balance one another, with both audio and visual elements using non-directive, non-linear modes of storytelling. They challenge received ideas about language, as r e a continues to find new words for their lived experience and shares them with fierce generosity with individuals who wander into the spaces they build.

It’s my hope that you, the reader, had the opportunity to peruse this essay in the gallery space alongside both installations, and found your own threads and anchors to r e a’s work. No words about a work can get you to a place of deep knowing until you experience it yourself. For myself, there is grief when I visit with

Indigenous folks—from different communities, Nations, and in this instance, continents—and recognise the resonances between our experiences and the colonial projects we are forced to grapple with. That grief exists simultaneously with a swelling in my heart in the presence of tireless work that demonstrates a deep love of community, the hard introspection that comes from a place of ceaseless learning and growing, and the artworks that generate pluriversal reworlding.

For all the worlding, storying and explaining, as Dylan Robinson states, “Sovereign speech does not necessarily provoke specific forms of sovereign listening. And sovereign writing does not guarantee that the reader will engage in an act of sovereign reading.”²⁶ It’s not necessary for every person who engages with *r e a*’s work to read every aspect of it for it to be successful—*r e a* is a generous maker who leaves many threads for individuals to follow into their own work and experiences. Their practice of experiential digital work serves as a model of reworlding, storying and truth-telling that is meant to be engaged with from a space of pluriversal understanding and positionality.

Notes

1. Solo exhibition curated by Danielle Printup, *Christian Chapman: Run to the Hills!* Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, ON, 17 September—17 December 2023.
2. This is the Canadian equivalent of Child Protection Services in Australia, which also has disproportionate rates of apprehension of Indigenous children.
3. For more on ‘worlding’ in the arts, see Greg Hill et al., “World-Making: Indigenous Art and Worlding the Global,” in *Ābadakone*, exh. cat. (Ottawa, ON: National Gallery of Canada, 2020), 115.
4. Christine Judith Nicholls, “PolesApart by R E A: Re-Negotiating the Past through Visual Art,” *The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities, and Nations: Annual Review* 10, no. 1 (2010): 248.

5. For more on these works, see Christine Nicholls, “Digital Indigeneity,” *RealTime*, no. 52 (December–January 2002): 20, <https://www.realttimearts.net/article/issue52/6920>; Christine Nicholls, “*r e a*-framing landscape, memory and identity: an introduction to *rea*’s *gins_leap / dubb_speak*,” in *r e a: gins_leap / dubb_speak: d/Tour/2006*, touring ex. cat., d/Lux/Media Arts.
6. See Carmen Robertson, “Writing and Sharing Our Art Histories: Storying Histories of Art: Activating the Visual,” in *The Routledge Companion to Indigenous Art Histories in the United States and Canada* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 335.
7. Jolene Rickard, contribution to “Visioning New Horizons—A Symposium by Post Image,” Concordia University, Montreal, QC, 3–4 November 2023.
8. For more on the Kettle Series see *r e a*; Jennifer L. Biddle and Lily Hibberd, “The Artificial as an Intelligent Indigenous/Indigenizing System: The Experimental Art and Artifice of *r e a*,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 39, no. 2 (September 2023): 458–74.
9. *r e a*—Regina M. Saunders, “‘Vaguely Familiar’: Haunted Identities, Contested Histories, Indigenous Futures” (PhD thesis, 2019), <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/62997>, 55.
10. Chris Chapman and Danielle Printup, “Chris Chapman Tour,” (curatorial discussion with community members and language speakers, Carleton University Art Gallery, ON, 19 November 2023).
11. Nicholls, “PolesApart by R E A,” 257.
12. Hill et al., in *Ābadakone*, 2020, 124.
13. Robert Aldrich et al., “Peopling the Empty Mirror: The Prospects for Lesbian and Gay Aboriginal History,” in *Gay Perspectives II: More Essays in Australian Gay Culture* (Sydney, NSW: Department of Economic History with the Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, University of Sydney, 1994), 7–8.
14. The second iteration of this work, a 3-channel video with sound, was included in *SIGGRAPH 2007: Global Eyes*, San Diego, California, USA; the third iteration was a site-responsive work included in *SITEWORKS 2010* at Bundanon, NSW. See Sophie O’Brien, “R E A: In Conversation,” Bundanon, 29 April 2021, <https://www.bundanon.org.au/exhibitions/rea-in-conversation>.

bundanon.com.au/projects/siteworks/2020-2/r-e-a-in-conversation.

15. Refer to the history of the Parramatta (later Blacktown) Native Institute in *r e a*, “‘Vaguely Familiar’”, 54.

16. Adam Spry, “What the Chickadee Knows Gijigijigaaneshiinh Gikendaan (Margaret Noodin),” *Transmotion* 7, no. 1 (2021): 241.

17. *r e a*, “‘Vaguely Familiar’”, 43.

18. Nicholls, “PolesApart by R E A,” 258.

19. *r e a*, “‘Vaguely Familiar’”, 59.

20. *r e a*, “‘Vaguely Familiar’”, 39.

21. *r e a*, “‘Vaguely Familiar’”, 64–65.

22. *r e a*, “‘Vaguely Familiar’”, 66.

23. Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 64.

24. For more insight and reflections of *r e a*’s experience, see their dissertation “‘Vaguely Familiar’.

25. There is a large gallery space at Griffith University Art Museum for this iteration of the *Native* series, exhibited as part of ISEA 2024. There had been less space in Blacktown Arts Centre (BAC) in 2013, as *Native*, 2013, was part of a group exhibition, but there was also a site outside BAC (where the Native Institute was originally located) where each artist had the opportunity to create a site-responsive work.

26. Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 64.

native

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Biography

r e a is a Gamilaraay/Wailwan/Biripi artist from Central West New South Wales. Their research-based visual arts practice, which spans three decades, employs photography and new media processes to investigate the critical discourse and intersectionality of Aboriginality within the disciplines of creative arts, Australian history and colonisation, as well as gender and identity politics. Their practice charts a shift from analogue to digital technologies and the creation of immersive media and sensory experiences, while consistently examining the bonds between bodies, politics, memories, place and future.

r e a's early work emerged in the 1990s from new approaches in experimental arts using photographic and digital technologies, which have been vital means for Australian First Nations artists to contend with the history and experience of the Stolen Generation and its entwinement with institutionalisation and forced domestic labour. A number of r e a's immediate Aboriginal forebears were part of the Stolen Generation, removed from their families then brought up in children's homes and subsequently placed in service as maidservants for wealthy white people.

One of r e a's earliest series, *Look Who's Calling The Kettle Black*, 1992, was created while r e a was completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Visual Arts) at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales. The works juxtapose archival photographs of Aboriginal women working as domestic servants with textbook definitions and the derogatory, racist terms used to describe them, superimposed onto computer graphics of household items such as kettles, frypans and irons in the high key colours of Pop art.

re a's experiences in 1996 at Pop, Mass 'n' Subculture, a three-month thematic artist residency at the Banff Centre in Alberta, Turtle Island, Canada, saw them become connected to a group of Indigenous international artists, including Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew and Cheryl L'Hirondelle. Here re a explored and experimented with new technologies, using hypertext software that converted text, sound and image into works that would later become known as multimedia or interactive media. These artists were challenging colonial ideologies in a technologically fluid space as-yet-undefined by a colonial, hegemonic language, at a time when the internet was also being anticipated as a liberatory space for LGBTQ+ people.

In the context of encountering this new international Indigenous artistic community, re a began to understand the power and accessibility that new technologies could offer them, and shifted from traditional photography to an array of experimental digital media, mobilising new methods towards processes of cultural survival.

An installation comprising layered photographic images, sculptures and a soundscape, *Don't Shoot Till You See the Whites of Their Eyes*, 1999, was produced a number of years later when re a returned to university, and was awarded a Master of Arts (Research) at the Australian National University, Canberra, in 2000. In 2004 they were awarded a Master of Science in Digital Imaging and Design at New York University, New York. A decade later, another major work, *Poles Apart*, 2009, continued re a's investigation into Australia's colonial history and its legacy in the bodies and minds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In this silent video we glimpse re a, the protagonist, dressed in a Victorian-era black mourning gown and running through a charred landscape away from unidentified pursuers.

Throughout the 2010s re a participated in several artist residencies, including the Native Institute Indigenous Artist Residency at the Blacktown Arts Centre, New

South Wales, in 2013. In 2019, re a was awarded Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Anthropology at UNSW Art and Design. Their PhD research linked their own story to the stories of their grandmother and aunt, in an intergenerational counter-history that documented their creative resistance to technological determinism, exclusion and oppression at the intersection of nonbinary Indigenous experience.

From 2019 to 2023, re a was an academic and research fellow in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland and was part of the Big Anxiety Festival's Empathy Clinic in 2019, inviting audiences to experience new forms of listening through storytelling. In 2020, re a was awarded the Australia Council Award for Emerging and Experimental Arts, an acknowledgement of their achievement in making an outstanding and sustained contribution to the practice of emerging and experimental art. In 2024, they were included in the 24th Biennale of Sydney.

Currently living and working in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales, re a continues to create spaces of Indigenisation through the sensorial and intersectional convergences of Aboriginality across the arts, technology, history and colonialism. Most recently, they have created interactive spaces using sensors, sound and video that prompt new interactions between the body, art and technology.

re a is the artist and author's full name. Due to Western and academic naming conventions, some of re a's writings have been published under the names re a Saunders and Dr Regina M. Saunders (Morris). re a also uses the name re a noir as a play on the colour black and the French Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

**Stop
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me
!**

**Self
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1972 - 2013**

**n a t i v e
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**Rekon
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List of works

Native, 2013/24

audiovisual installation: neon sign, sound

Courtesy of the artist

Native (yugal/song), 2024

audiovisual installation: sensors, sound; three-channel

digital video (colour, sound)

Courtesy of the artist

IMAGE CREDITS

Page 5

Installation view of *The Native Institute* exhibition

curated by Brook Andrew and Paul Howard, Blacktown

Arts Centre, 5 July – 21 September 2013.

Photo: Jennifer Leahy of Silversalt Photography.

Image courtesy: Blacktown Arts Centre

Pages 41, 42, 46

Native, 2013 (detail)

text

Courtesy of the artist

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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gamil aravy
wailwan
piripi