

This is a Language Warning!

Gini Wade in Conversation with Dr Veronica Calarco

INTRODUCTION

"To be brought up with a language, be it Welsh or any other minority language, is to share a sense of close fellowship with other speakers of that language. To have an almost 'hidden history' of allusion and collective memory. To understand, as one grows older, the fragility of that culture and to feel a sense of custodianship towards it".

Bala, 2020

Veronica Calarco's PhD exhibition showed lithographs, silkscreen prints, paintings, and a large sound installation emanating from prints which had been woven into basket forms. The title 'This is a Language Warning!' was taken from double j, an Australian radio broadcast, and subtitled 'Visualising an Endangered Language as Realized Through the Notion of Country.'

Calarco's topic highlighted the politics of endangered and minority languages and how they are consumed and colonized by a dominant language of a more powerful ethnic group - in this case the English language. The two languages which Veronica featured are an endangered Australian Indigenous language named Gunnai/Kŭrnai, the language of her native homeland, and Welsh, the language of her adopted homeland. All the images reflected her exploration of these two languages through names, words, myths, and the natural world.

DIALOGUE

Gini: I would like to start by asking what led you to focus on languages under threat as the subject of your PhD? On the face of it, an exploration of language is not an obvious theme for the visual language of printmaking.

Veronica: After learning Welsh, it felt wrong to be able to speak the language of a country to which

I had no familial connection and not know one of the languages of my native land . On a return trip home to Australia, 2015, I purchased artist Judy Watson's (Waanyi) stunning catalogue (2009), where she echoed this lament. I began to research the language Gunnai/Kŭrnai, thinking I could set myself the task of learning it. Instead of learning the language, I found out how hard it is to access a language that has been deliberately destroyed and has only remnants left, with a few people trying desperately to revive it. At the same time I read David Crystal's keynote speech (2003) from the

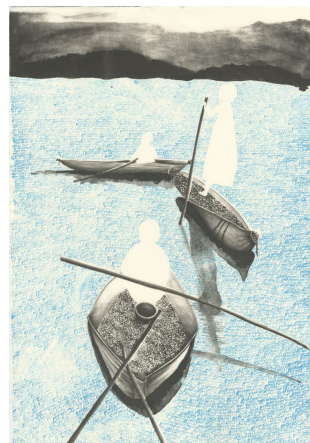


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Pidgeongul / Gorffennol (Past) (2019) by Veronica Calarco. Lithograph 515x750mm. Photo credit: Neil Holland
 Figure 2. Toonalook / Lle llawer o bysgod (Where the Fish Flow) (2019-20) by Veronica Calarco. Lithograph, variable size. Photo credit: Neil Holland

2003 UNESCO conference) where he highlighted that academic books about endangered languages reach only a select group of people, and that we need to find ways to inform the public of what language loss means to humanity. Crystal suggested that artists were one of the groups who could do that in a unique way. I struggled at first with how to include language in my prints, as I did not want to include text as visual forms. I began including words within the image so that they became part of the composition and texture.

English is the dominant language for both populations of speakers of Gunnai/Kürnai and Welsh. In this project I wanted to remove the English and allow the two languages to interact with each other. The removal of English was assisted by creating a visual language referencing the landscape allowing other language speakers to find a way into the two languages – if they wanted to bridge the gap. Choosing to explore the languages through a visual notion of country enabled the use of elements of landscape – trees, mountains, rivers to represent the words and stories and allowed the landscape to speak.

In works such as Toonlook (Ile mae'r pysgod yn llifo ... or where the fish flow), I was able to use aspects of the printing process without feeling I had to make identical multiples. This is where lithography comes into its own – the technique allows for drawing, deleting and repetitively printing, which created an installation that reflected the meaning of the word Toonlook.

Gini: Do you see any relationship between your exploration of endangered languages and your use of lithography as part of the exploratory process? After all, lithography could be considered an endangered visual language which has been literally pushed out of most UK art schools by digital technology.

Veronica: Lithography feels like a physically and mentally challenging, time-consuming printmaking technique to learn. Learning a language feels similar – it is also time consuming and mentally challenging. There are some linguistic phrases which talk of the physical labour in art-making. For example, the Welsh use the phrase tynnu llun for the verb 'to sketch' which literally translates to 'pulling a picture'. In the English language, the physical process of lithography also involves 'pulling a picture' with every print. I have not been able to find any parallel to this in Gunnai/Kürnai. This could be that there is no equivalent or because not all the words have been saved and recorded.

Gini: Your print installation Toonlook is a creative way of using lithography. I believe the way the first print begins full of fish, gradually, with each print, the fish disappearing, that this relates to what is actually happening to rivers in Australia? While we are on the subject, what can you tell me about the subtitle of your exhibition 'Visualizing an Endangered Language as Realized Through the Notion of Country.'

Veronica: The lithographic process helped to develop the story in this work and the direction it took. Initially I drew many fish on a stone,

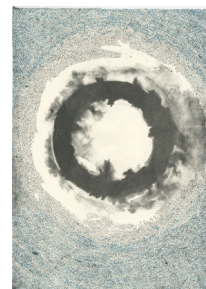


Figure 3

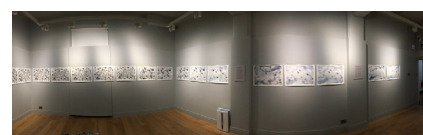


Figure 4

Figure 3. Wurrin / Diwrnod (Day) (2019) by Veronica Calarco. Lithograph 515x750 mm. Photo credit: Neil Holland

Figure 4. Toonlook / Lle llawer o bysgod (Where the Fish Flow) (2019-20) by Veronica Calarco. Lithograph, variable size. Photo credit: Neil Holland

intending to print them with a layer of tusche and a layer of text. But I realized by deleting fish I would create an installation where the fish would gradually disappear. Over the next few months I would pull three or four prints from the stone each printing session, deleting fish after each printing session. This resulted in prints with different layers and numbers of fish. One of the things that kept happening is that the fish would occasionally reappear (perhaps needing a stronger acid) – sometimes just on the stone and sometimes on the paper. This really spoke to me. It seemed the fish were fighting to live, to remain. I drew a parallel with the strength of indigenous languages that are fighting to live despite attempts to be rid of them. Plus, the process of deletion of the drawing with chemicals symbolically represents the misuse of Australia’s river systems. Artist Jonathan Jones (Wiradjuri, Kamilaroi) (Nicholson, 20120) describes the rivers as once being superhighways of colonial invasion yet Ian D. Clarke (2009) suggests the rivers are no longer superhighways today, but dying, dusty and salted tracks representing environmental and cultural devastation. The gradual disappearance of the fish as the prints curve around the room represents not only the loss of languages and their accumulated knowledge but also the diminishing of the rivers and the life that lives around and within them.



Figure 5



Figure 6

My visual language is drawn from the landscape as I believe language came from the land, is formed by the land and in turns forms how we view, describe and use the land. By visualizing the interconnectedness of landscape, culture and language, we can understand how language influences and dictates our way of viewing the landscape and its agency. One of the key phrases that influenced the project was the line *mae’r heniath yn y tir* (the old language is still in the land) from the poem *Aros Mae* by John Cerriog Hughes ... the old language is still in the land waiting for us to reawaken it, to use it again, to make it live again. Hence my exploration of the languages through the visual notion of country.

Gini: Your imagery is all about the natural world – notably trees, birds and fish. Can you tell me more about your use of images and how they came to represent words, names and myths?

Veronica: The four projects in this body of work arose from examining factsheets (<https://www.vacl.org.au>) created by the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages in 2014. These factsheets provide a guide to a community who are attempting to revive a language and do not have recourse to linguists. I used them to create a framework for the research in four steps as follows.

The first step is to go out into the local area and find names of places using the local language. The recommendation is to find a place name that is in the local language rather than in the coloniser language and translate that word, if possible, into the coloniser or majority language. I chose instead to take a river named by the coloniser (after another coloniser) and use the Gunnai/Kŭrnai names and their translation to create images that responded to the indigenous names, thus bypassing

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Figure 5. Braak/ Cocatw̥ (Cockatoo) (2019) by Veronica Calarco. Linocut 420×300 mm
Photo credit: Neil Holland
Figure 6. Priodas / Wandyokandu (The Wedding) (2020) by Veronica Calarco. Drypoint,
lino 355×695 mm. Photo credit: Neil Holland

the coloniser name.

The second step is to collect as many words as possible. I began by creating a series of prints representing the words I had collected from archival sources, from a self-published word list by P.D. Gardner (1996), and MA research by Eve Fesl (1985), but eventually settled on a set of eight words that, when placed together, became a sentence. Rather than making a direct visual representation of each word, I developed a visual language as an alternative translation, using images of the landscape rather than images that represented a literal visual translation of the word.

The third step is to collect myths. I chose two myths, the first a Gunnai/Kurnai myth whose characters are a cockatoo, a spider and a beetle. I portrayed the three characters as trees to allow the landscape to be the story.

The second myth is a Celtic myth – Branwen Ferch Llŷr (daughter of Llŷr). Because the names of the characters translated into birds, I represented the characters with birds. For this series of ten prints I used a mixed media technique: a text layer scratched onto Perspex that formed a sea of words, and lino and vinyl blocks for the characters.

The fourth step is to get the language ‘out there’. I had to decide what ‘out there’ meant – how could I get the language out there in the context of the research project. If it was a community developing this project then they would attempt to use it in their everyday conversations and promotions (such as creating signs and posters, writing letters and emails). But in the terms of this project I translated the idea of getting the language ‘out there’ to mean the creating a work that would use the sound of the language, allowing the language to be heard.

Gini: Yes, I would like to ask you to talk more about the fourth step that consists of over 900 small baskets woven from discarded prints. It has a sound installation, Y tir wedi’i dad-dewi (The Land Unmuted) which seems to come from the baskets themselves. Could you talk about the meaning and significance of the baskets and the sound?

Veronica: This installation responded to the notion of “how to get the language out there”. I chose to interpret this with sound, as I feel that language is only truly alive when it is being spoken. In 2017 I collaborated with sound artist, Lee Berwick. We recorded the Gunnai/Kurnai myth of Mermandho il Braak (Spider and cockatoo) in an adit (an adit is a horizontal tunnel to a mine for the purposes of entering the mine, ventilating it, draining it of water, etc.) above Corris (where I have my studio). The adit seemed to create its own soundscape, which excluded the outside landscape. The recording combined the sounds of the adit – the noise of my feet, the dripping of the water, the way the words reverberated within the tunnel as though they were circling around us, the sounds Lee created to test the acoustics of the tunnel – overlaid with my readings of the myth in both Welsh and Gunnai/



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 7. Y tir wedi’i dad-dewi (The Land Unmuted) (2013-2020) by Veronica Calarco. Baskets made from prints, found yarn, speakers, variable size. Photo credit: Neil Holland
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Kŭrnai. As I finished reciting the myth, all went silent for a moment and then two fighter jets flew overhead[1], breaking the intense silence, breaking into the world Lee and I had created. Then, as the jets' roar faded, a bird cawed. It was an eerie feeling, having been so focused on reading the myth in a dark hole in a rock face, unaware of the outside world, finishing a story where the main characters' people were no longer there, and then suddenly being yanked back into the present, into the outside by symbols of both contemporary and past Wales. This recording became the sound work.



Figure 9

Over the years, printmakers have donated their unwanted prints to me, which I have torn into strips and carefully woven into small baskets. I have made more than 900 of these; they feel like a contribution from a population of artists representing the way we all contribute to the gradual changing of language. We decided to hide speakers inside these baskets. When the baskets and sound piece was installed together they created a visual and aural landscape. This allowed the language to come out of the earth ... to finally be unmuted.

CONCLUSION

“On the one hand, one might say, language loss has been a reality throughout history; and on the other, the loss of a language is of no great moment either for the science or for human intellectual life. I think personally [...] that language loss is a very serious matter. (Hale, 1992)

There are several linked themes in Calarco's visual contemplation of these two endangered languages; she investigates names, the natural environment and myths. But as voiced in the quote above from Ken Hale, the project considered from the start whether endangered languages are worth saving. Surely, in a world of many languages, wouldn't fewer languages aid in transcultural communication?

The title of her exhibition gives us a clue –‘This Is a Language Warning!’

When she started the project, it was based on the premise that saving a language also saves the knowledge of the fauna and landscape that is contained in it: valuable information that could help us sustain our environments. However, as her project progressed, she realised the cultural knowledge embedded in a language is absolutely vital, that “each phrase, word or part of a word carries layers of meaning and knowledge” and that by knowing and understanding these layers we will then know something of the area, of the object (plant, river, rock etc), how it was used and how we can use it to help heal the land today.

Words have a profound value to the speakers, on both a personal and community level. When working in Aboriginal communities Veronica heard repetitively people's accounts of their feeling of loss at being separated from their language, land and culture. She realised that a living, breathing language and culture connected to the land gives people a sense of personal value that extends to the lives around them and their environment and this is echoed in many accounts published

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by the Aboriginals themselves.

Myths and stories are one of our strategies to understand the world around us; they talk of nature and value, friendship and betrayal. Veronica's strategy is to create her own lexicon of images from Gunnai/Kurnai and Welsh myths, to relate them to "a notion of country' that is fundamental to both languages.

Veronica's exhibition compares the situations of the Welsh language, on one side of the world, to Gunnai/Kurnai on the other. Thanks to Welsh activists, the Welsh language is relatively alive and well. Sadly the same cannot be said of the Gunnai/Kurnai language. The colonial and the White Australia policy persecution of aboriginal peoples in Australia has been even more savage than that endured by the Welsh. Nonetheless Veronica says: 'Just as the people are still here, still getting out of bed every morning, the languages are still here, still being spoken even if in a limited form. The words may only exist as remnants in dusty books or in the memories of Elders, or in a few words in the younger generation. They may be words that name a local place or a name that is being fought over. They may exist only as individual words as part of the colonising language, but they still live in the land, and in the voices and hearts of the people who are awakening them. They can still be heard if we listen.'

The full exhibition can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PObaHBO5B8Q&t=7s>

<https://www.aberunidegreeshow.com/veronica-calarco-phd>

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AUTHORS

Veronica Calarco was awarded her PhD at the University of Aberystwyth, Wales, with Paul Croft and Dr Lucy Taylor as her supervisors, in April 2021. She completed a degree in printmaking and a post-graduate in weaving at the Australian National University in the mid 1990s and spent 10 years working as a community artist, first in Canberra, then in the Australian outback at the Kimberley Language Resource Centre and Tjukurrpa, an Aboriginal Art Centre. Veronica first visited Wales in 2004 and now lives mainly in Wales (with lots of return trips home to Australia). Since moving to Wales, she has learnt to speak Welsh. She has recently been awarded the Joy Welch Research Grant to develop a new research project, We live with the land/The land as other (cyd-fywartir.com), which will interrogate Wales based artists' response to the collaborative action between language and land. In 2014, Veronica joined Aberystwyth Printmakers (a community group with an open access studio) and is now a director. In the same year, she received an A level in Welsh and established Stwdio Maelor in Corris – an artist in residence programme and a print studio for print retreats.
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Gini Wade worked as an illustrator for many years before completing an MA in printmaking in 2010 at the University of Aberystwyth. She is now an artist/printmaker, and writes occasional articles on printmaking. She was the lithography tutor at the Sidney Nolan Trust (Herefordshire) for seven years, and has run printmaking courses in Hong Kong, China, and Guatemala. She is also a director of Aberystwyth Printmakers. Veronica and Gini have curated several print shows together, the most recent being an exhibition of Aberystwyth Printmakers for Impact 11.
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FOOTNOTE

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

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IMAGE GALLERY

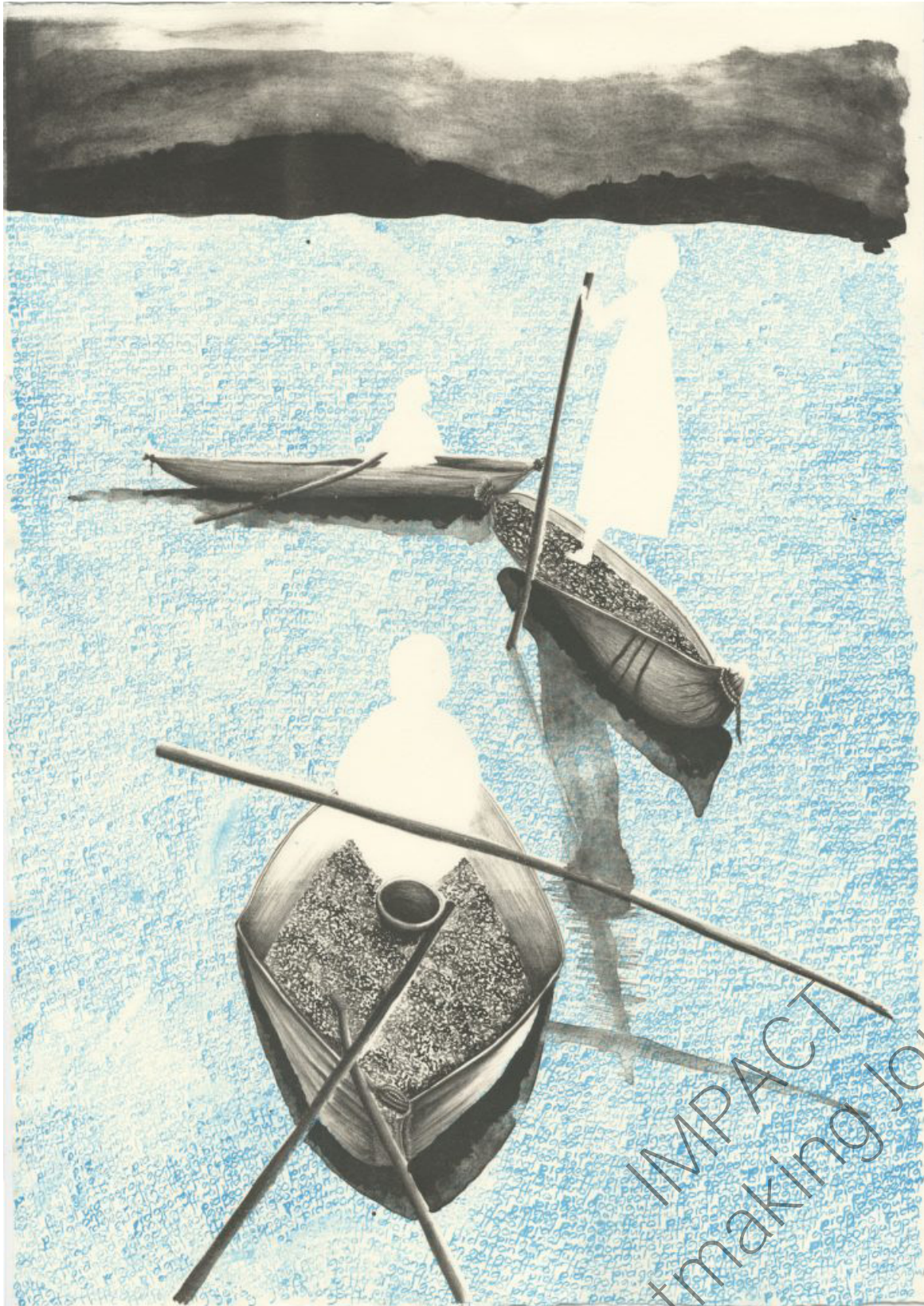


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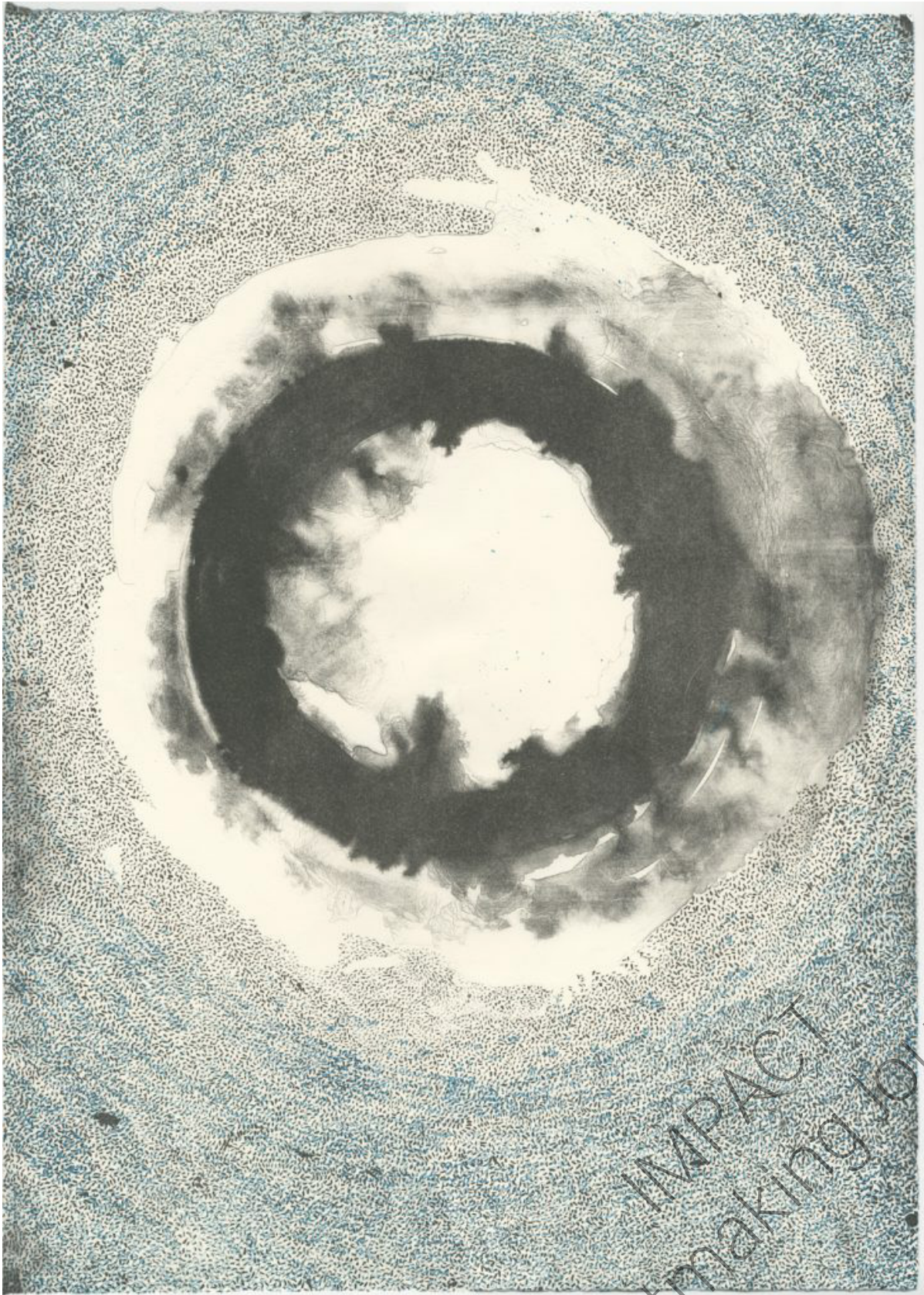


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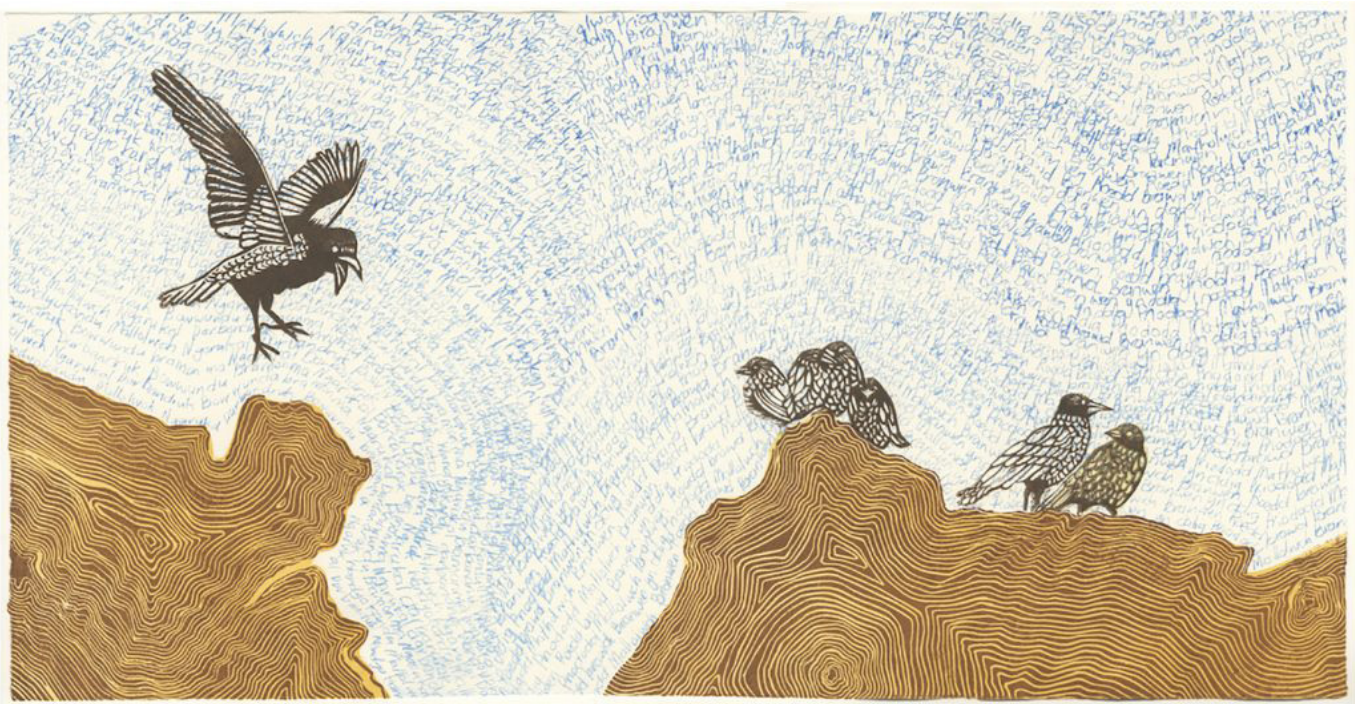


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