

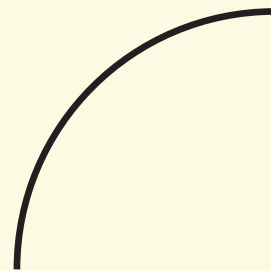


Void. Avoid. Voidance. Devoid.
Vacated. Unoccupied. Erasure.
Terra Nullius. Country.

Essay by Danièle Hromek for the **Void** Exhibition



The touring exhibition *Void* is curated by Emily McDaniel, in conjunction with UTS Gallery and Bathurst Regional Art Gallery and presented nationally by Museums & Galleries of NSW. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program.



Sometimes it is the spaces in between that mean the most. The unspoken word. The look that says everything. The pause amid beats of music. The darkness between celestial bodies.

These spaces, these pauses, these voids, however, are not empty. It is in these moments of seeming absence that presence exists. For some that presence is silence or nothingness. For First Peoples, that presence is Country.



¹ Collins, D 1798, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, Vol. 1, Project Gutenberg, viewed 19 February 2016, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12565/12565-h/12565-h.htm>>.

² Latham, R T cited by Reynolds, H 1987, *The Law of the Land*, 2nd edn, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, VIC, p.1.

³ Robbie Thorpe is from the from the Krautungalung people of the Gunnai nation.

⁴ The Juice Media 2008, 'Australia is a Crime Scene' - Robbie Thorpe, June 5 2008, University of Melbourne, Krautungalung/Gunnai, Youtube, viewed 1 November 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6V82LD51UA>>.



Australia is a Crime Scene

When non-Indigenous people first reached this land they noted 'the stillness of which had ... for the first time since the creation, been interrupted by the rude sound of the labourer's axe, and the downfall of its ancient inhabitants'.¹ At the same time, 'their invisible and inescapable cargo of English law fell from their shoulders and attached itself to the soil on which they stood'.² These images of colonial forces invisibling, silencing, vacating human habitation from the land through violence, law and language are striking. European colonisers came to 'discover' and claim the land, embedding transported laws, values and beliefs onto the land, and for this new imported society to thrive, it required those already living there to be erased.

Robbie Thorpe³ describes Australia as a crime scene⁴ on the basis of the legal and spatial fiction that is terra nullius; the foundations for the nation, its structures, institutions and constitutions. This foundational understanding, in which Indigenous spaces, lands, knowledges and languages were systematically removed through the processes of colonisation, places at its heart the idea that the land that came to be known as Australia was nobody's land. By default this implies nobody was here – or at least nobody recognised as having the rights of humans.

Terra nullius is both a legal term used by the British to justify settlement on Aboriginal peoples' lands and a spatial expression. Creating this

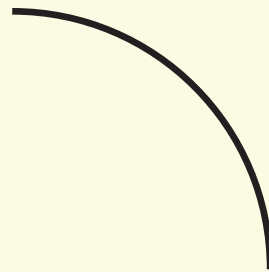
spatial narrative of emptiness or ‘un-belonging’ was essential to the British claim of the continent. From the first encounters between the British and the land, narratives of the void, vacuums, emptiness were sewn into the collective memories of the new arrivals coming to the land, creating what was to them a necessary untruth that enabled unfettered settlement – even when it became clear that the continent was indeed inhabited and had belonging.

Terra nullius as void describes not only the complete voidance or ghosting of Indigenous peoples in relation to land, but also the silencing of Indigenous voices in historical sources. Known as The Great Australian Silence,⁵ in which First Peoples were pushed to the margins of not only spaces but also historical records, the mistruth of terra nullius shaped the way history in now-Australia unfolded. It enabled a collective consciousness of denial; Australia became the ‘empty continent’, devoid of previous human presence – a void.

A void is defined as having no legal force or effect, ineffectual, without contents, an empty space, something experienced as a loss or privation, invalidated, nullified.⁶ As a spatial concept, a void implies nothingness, a space without spatiality, emptiness. Yet in actuality, a void is always filled with something else. For Indigenous peoples, that is Country.

⁵ Stanner, W E H 1968, *After the Dreaming: Black and white Australians--an anthropologist's view*, ABC, Sydney.

⁶ Oxford Dictionary 2017, *Define Void*, Oxford University Press, Oakland CA, viewed 4 April 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/void>.



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⁷ Oliver Costello is a Bundjalung man from northern New South Wales.

⁸ Costello, O cited by Hromek, D 2019, 'The (Re)Indigenisation of Space: Weaving narratives of resistance to embed Nura [Country] in design', Budawang/Yuin, PhD thesis, University of Technology Sydney, p.64.

⁹ Norm Sheehan is a Wiradjuri man born in Mudgee.

¹⁰ Sheehan, N W 2011, 'Indigenous Knowledge and Respectful Design: An Evidence-Based Approach', Wiradjuri, DesignIssues, vol. 27, no. 4 (Autumn), p. 76.



Country holds everything. Country holds land, site and space; it holds languages and culture. Country is the living library of knowledges and narratives, holding them safely in perpetuity. Oliver Costello⁷ says that space for Indigenous peoples has identity and is not empty, and it is important in cultural practice to have an understanding of space. He indicates that Indigenous space has protocols, rituals and practices that are based on spatial aspects and measurements which need to be managed respectfully.⁸ Norm Sheehan⁹ adds, 'The space we inhabit cannot be assumed to be the null void that was contrived as the background'. He describes beings, objects and the interactions and relations between them as generating social and natural spaces, and in this sense, 'space is alive and has a history and a feel that influences all inhabitants ... exercis[ing] a positioning power on us all'.¹⁰ With this understanding, the colonial assertion of terra nullius, an empty land, is the ultimate insult to Indigenous spaces, as they are actually full of Country. And so with Country as the grounding, despite this, despite the impacts of colonisation, despite violence and silencing, despite attempts of voidance, First Peoples resisted.

Acts of Creative Rebellion

Knowing Country as a living entity that holds memory, feelings and relationality provides a framework for maintaining culture and resisting forces that attempt to void. Despite colonial efforts to vacate First Peoples, they have applied millennium of learned resilience and continued to share knowledges, culture and practices. They have resisted and are still here. While culture may have been maintained in different, secret or hidden ways since colonisation commenced, cultural practices are in fact ‘acts of creative rebellion’.¹¹ ¹² Cultural practices incorporate any practice that Indigenous peoples carry out that connects them to their culture, Country and Dreaming. This may include weaving, carving, cultural burning or fishing, and cultural practitioners may be storytellers or musicians or artists. A cultural practice is not restricted to ‘traditional’ practices – indeed robotics or writing could be a cultural practice if they connect with culture and Country. Sandy O’Sullivan¹³ confirms this, indicating that technology is cultural practice and denying this buys into ‘primitivist ideas of Indigeneity and upholds the concept that Indigenous people are unable to participate in cultural ways in the modern world’.¹⁴

Despite the collective consciousness of denial facilitating the void of terra nullius in now-Australia, First Peoples also have access to ancestral memories to which their cultural practices are connected. According to Lionel Kinunwa,¹⁵ ancestral memories come from our molecular structure. He says, ‘Our ancestral memories are in your blood, they are in your muscles, they’re in your bones, they’re in your hair ... That is ... why when you hear someone speaking your language, your molecular structure picks up those vibrations, because each language has its own peculiar patterns, and you feel good that somebody is speaking your language’.¹⁶

¹¹ Sium, A & Ritskes, E 2013, ‘Speaking truth to power: Indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance’, *Tigrinya, Indigenous, Eritrean and African* (Sium), *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, p.V.

¹² Aman Sium sees himself as being simultaneously – and equally – Tigrinya, Indigenous, Eritrean and African.

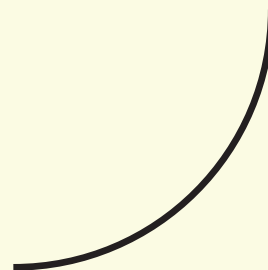
¹³ Sandy O’Sullivan is a Wiradjuri person.

¹⁴ O’Sullivan, S 2008, ‘Indigenous imprint: multimedia/ intermedia strategies as an Indigenous dissemination tool for practice-based research’, *Wiradjuri, Ngoonjook: a Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, no. 32, p. 53.

¹⁵ Lionel Kinunwa is an Elder of the Lakota nation.

¹⁶ Kinunwa, L cited in McIvor, O 2010, ‘I Am My Subject: Blending Indigenous Research Methodology and Autoethnography Through Integrity-based, Spirit-based Research’, *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, vol. 33, no. 1, p.143.

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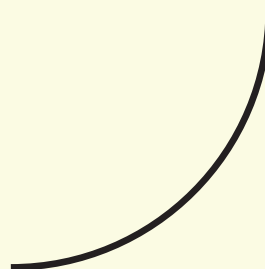




17 Ecocide is the wilful and permanent destruction of the environment.

18 Knoll, E & Nies McFadden, J 1970, 'Technology and American Power', paper presented to the War Crimes and the American Conscience, New York.

19 Poem # 1563 c.1883 by Dickinson, E 1970, The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, Faber, London.



Combined with Country, First Peoples' ancestral memories are strong forces of resistance to the colonial void. Collective ancestral memories become held in arts, designs and objects. They contain knowledges, histories, narratives and practices both about their creation and those who made them. They link First Peoples back to Ancestors and to the Dreaming. They enable those in the present to activate the bond between themselves and the creators of the objects. They collect with them stories of the past, and stories of change. Personal, collective, ancestral – and Country – memories locate First Peoples within the narratives of Ancestors, kin and family.

Regrettably, terra nullius has not stopped. The laws of the land continue to be violated. The ecocide^{17 18} of our mother, the earth, persists with a vengeance and First Peoples are still silenced. The concern is, ecocide is also crime against humanity, because as lands, air and waters are damaged so are our very means of existing. What

is the antidote to the void of terra nullius? Country. And the void need not be powerlessness. Rather it can be the 'force that renovates the world'.¹⁹ Indigenous peoples carry the voids of terra nullius, but they also carry Country within those voids. They carry long histories and narratives of change – and experience managing change. Through their millennia of cultural practices they know how to connect with Country and the knowledges it holds. First Peoples, like those in this exhibition, must be heard, privileged and foregrounded to ensure our mutual futures. Learning to listen in a different way is crucial. Learning to hear in a way that is not about responding or judging, but listening actively to what is being said or indeed not said. Seeking the moments in between, the silences, the quiet pauses is key, as it is often in those interstitial spaces that the real messages are sent. It is up to you to receive them.

Danièle Hromek (Budawang/Yuin)

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Dr Danièle Hromek (Ph.D) is a spatial designer, speculative designer and public artist, fusing design elements with installations, sculptural form and research. Danièle also works as a researcher, educator and cultural advisor considering how to Indigenise the built environment by creating spaces to substantially affect Indigenous rights and culture within an institution. She works at the intersection of architecture, interiors, urban design, performance design and fine arts. As an Aboriginal researcher and designer her work is grounded in her cultural and experiential heritage, often considering the urban Aboriginal condition, the Indigenous experience of country and contemporary Indigenous identities. Danièle is a Saltwater woman of the Budawang tribe of the Yuin nation, with French and Czech heritage.

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#VoidExhibition @mgnswn @uts_art
@bathurstregionalartgallery

Design: D.A.M

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Images

James Tylor, (Deleted Scenes)
From an Untouched Landscape #7
Knocklofty Reserve, West Hobart,
Palawa Land, 2013, Inkjet print
on hahnemühle paper with hole
removed to a black velvet void, 63
x 63 cm framed. Courtesy the artist
and UTS Art Collection

Void, curated by Emily McDaniel,
(installation view) UTS Gallery,
25 September—16 November
2018. Pictured: Hayley Millar-Baker,
Meeyn Meerreeng (Country at
Night), 2017. Courtesy the artist
and Vivien Anderson Gallery. Photo:
Jessica Maurer Photography

Andy Snelgar, *Shovel (BaBarr)*, 2017
and *Woomera (Muru)* 2017. Courtesy
the artist and UTS Art Collection.
Photo: Campbell Henderson.