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Contemporary Australia and Emerging Challenges

Introduction

Australia today is a nation in transition concerned with sustainability, justice, and the maintenance of cultural and linguistic diversity. As witnessed on other continents, Australia has to tackle wild bushfires, loss of biodiversity and water scarcity, which started with colonisation and aggravated by human-induced climate change.¹ We also observe justice issues throughout Australia's social structure, the marginalisation of Indigenous Peoples and the treatment of immigrants and refugees. Also, globalisation tied to economic development and rapid urbanisation continue to impact cultures and languages of this rich and very diverse land.

In this Special Issue we discuss some of the challenges that contemporary Australia encounters. We embrace themes ranging from the role of the English language in Australia-run detention centres, the importance of equitable communication, and cultural resilience to merging Indigenous and Western knowledges. The contributions include articles, short interviews, reflection papers and Indigenous perspectives offering insights that may challenge but also inspire the readers.

This Special Issue covers three thematic areas under the headings of *Justice, Accessibility, and Human Rights, Language, Culture, and Resilience*, and *Indigenous Knowledges, Worldviews, and Methodologies*. Given the interconnected and transdisciplinary nature of these themes, this Special Issue highlights the significance of showcasing and combining perspectives from diverse fields such as Cultural Studies, Linguistics, Literary Studies, Environmental Studies and Geography.

Justice, Accessibility, and Human Rights

In the initial paper,² Arianna Grasso reflects on social justice, the role of English and social media in the context of the Australian mandatory refugee detention system. After presenting Australia's controversial border policy, the linguistic reality of detention is briefly explored to show that, on the one hand, refugees gain linguistic agency by acquiring and using English with different actors while, on the other, the 'linguascape' of detention remains embedded in broader dynamics of oppression and subjugation. The article further discusses how refugees' digital counter-discursive practices enacted on social media concurrently aim at

1 Cf. e.g. Elmira R. Khairullina et al.: Global Climate Change; Anthony S. Kiem et al.: Natural Hazards in Australia.

2 This paper builds extensively on the findings presented in Arianna Grasso: Digital Media and Refugeehood in Contemporary Australia and id.: Refugee *Linguascapes*.

dismantling the dehumanising, exclusionary, and obliterating anti-refugee rhetoric that pervades political and media landscapes in contemporary Australia.

Heiyeon Myung and Meng Ji examine the challenges of accessibility in communicating environmental risks in culturally and linguistically diverse communities throughout Australia. In order to bridge language barriers in the nation, the provision of language services has received ample attention from scholars.³ However, different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are not the only contributing factors to a communication barrier; according to the 2011-2012 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), about 44 per cent of Australians are reported to have literacy level two and below. Against this backdrop, researchers, especially in the UK and Australasia, have recently shown an increased interest in accessible information.⁴ Accessible information, easy-to-read or easy-read are interchangeable terms commonly used to describe information specifically designed for people with literacy needs.⁵ This paper addresses these challenges in the context of fire risk management and reduction by measuring the level of accessibility of existing online fire and rescue information in NSW, collected in 2023, revising texts that do not score an ideal reading level and suggesting key strategies to improve the readability of information.

In their paper, Dany Adone and Anna Gosebrink in collaboration with David Newry, Agnes Armstrong, Glennis Galbat Newry, Jimmy Paddy, Julie Bilminga, Rozanne Bilminga, Bryan Gallagher, and Knut J. Olawsky from the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre argue that language maintenance and revitalisation are two examples of Linguistic Justice within an Environmental Justice framework. They discuss two projects in which a two-way collaboration approach was taken from the beginning and how this has shaped the journey and the outcome of the projects. The initiative to document the two languages, an Indigenous Sign Language and the use of a Creole language in an Aboriginal community, was a conscious decision taken by the community. Ground-up and community-led research is a vital first step in the implementation of Language documentation projects in which Indigenous methodologies (Yarning, Storytelling, among others) together with Western methodologies are applied. Language documentation has to be followed up by the appropriate programme (Maintenance, Revitalisation, Reclamation, Revival) driven by the community needs in order to achieve Linguistic Justice in the long run. Both projects discussed here illustrate these steps towards Linguistic Justice.

Language, Culture, and Resilience

Thomas Batchelor in collaboration with Jimmy Paddy and Bryan Gallagher from the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre examine

3 Cf. Claudia V. Angelelli: *Medical Interpreting and Cross-Cultural Communication*; Uldis Ozolins: *Communication Needs and Interpreting in Multilingual Settings*, p. 21.

4 Cf. Deborah Chinn, Claire Homeyard: *Easy Read and Accessible Information for People with Intellectual Disabilities*, pp. 1189-1200.

5 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 1189-1200.

the maintenance of cultural identity through language preservation in a context of language shift. Language shift has been a major feature associated with the linguistic history of Australia since European invasion, with catastrophic results for the linguistic ecology of the continent. Whilst language shift is often associated with the loss of traditional cultural, ecological and linguistic knowledge, there is still the potential for their transmission into the newly adopted language. The paper explores the potential for continuity of Miriwoong culture as the community has shifted towards Kununurra Kriol as their main language of everyday use, a Creole language that emerged in the community following the devastating impacts of colonisation and the subsequent decline and endangerment of the traditional Miriwoong language. The transmission of Miriwoong knowledge and culture is demonstrated through the use of code-switching and integration of Miriwoong loanwords into Kununurra Kriol, as well as the calquing of Miriwoong-language concepts into the new language. A strong Miriwoong identity is further reflected in individuals' conceptions of the new language. This paper shows that, whilst the effects of language shift are catastrophic, the culture remains a living one.

The interview with James Smith, also known as Uncle Jimmy, provides a personal perspective on Indigenous worldviews and resilience. He highlights the significance of Country as a source of nourishment and responsibility. By critically contemplating the colonial mindset based on dominance and the impacts on traditional lands, he emphasises the respect for nature, intergenerational knowledge and altruism. Nonetheless, Smith advocates for collaboration between Indigenous stakeholders and non-Indigenous communities and scholars in contexts such as fire management practices. This interview thus calls for mutual respect and the acknowledgement of Indigenous contributions to the various challenges faced by Australia.

Indigenous Knowledge, Worldviews, and Methodologies

The paper by Teresa Cochrane, Scott McManus, Peta Jeffries, Gaye L. Krebs, Alexandra Knight, Lee J. Baumgartner, Anjilkurri Rhonda Radley, Richard A. Dacker, Kara Westaway, Merinda Walters, and Scott Castle reflects on the academic and personal journey of Teresa Cochrane, a proud Dunghutti Gumbaynggirr woman with strong cultural connections to Birpai/Birripi and Bundjalung Country on the east coast of Australia. The paper examines how Indigenous and Western approaches can work together. Indigenous knowledges are and have been used to support Indigenous communities to sustainably exist with Australia's fragile ecology for thousands of years but are only recently being valued for their role in creating a sustainable future for Australian fauna. Indigenous Ecological Knowledges can play a vital role in the future management and recovery of Australian native species. But the value of this knowledge needs to be recognised by those in decision-making roles. The paper thus presents these concepts using

Cochrane's family totem, the Koala, as a case study for how these two knowledge systems can be merged.

In their paper, Bettina Burger and Lucas Mattila explore the potential of yarn-ing as a literary and educational method grounded in Indigenous theories of knowledge. This paper examines how Ambelin Kwaymullina explores alternative forms of postcolonial education i.e., through Aboriginal storytelling / yarn-ing. Drawing from 'Message From the Ngurra Palya' (2020) and 'Teacher / Decolonizer' (2024), as well as 'Catching Teller Crow' (2018), written with her brother Ezekiel, it is considered how the works mobilise yarn-ing to actively challenge hegemonic forms of education. The paper argues that yarn-ing carries great anti-colonial potential and can be identified as a formally distinct literary approach. Rooted in Indigenous Australian epistemologies, yarn-ing serves as both an educational method and a form of resistance to colonial narratives. Through close readings, the paper highlights its role in fostering connection, transmitting knowledge, and imagining decolonised futures, and calls for a broader engagement with yarn-ing as a transformative, decolonial practice, particularly in addressing pressing global challenges.

In the interview on mapping and land management, Rohan Fisher provides insights into his research on tropical savannas in Northern Australia, the globally most fire-prone ecosystems. Traditional Indigenous fire management historically maintains healthy landscapes by preventing large-scale bushfires. Fisher highlights that these practices are of immense importance when it comes to applying modern instruments for combatting uncontrolled wildfires, such as satellite mapping and new fire management technologies. Fisher's work emphasises the fruitful collaboration between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous scholars, but he also addresses challenges such as navigating bureaucracies and overcoming instances of miscommunication due to misconceptions about fire.

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