

Indigenous Futures Cluster Presents: Léuli Eshrāghi

**Léuli Eshrāghi**

“Indigenous diaspora + language monuments in the Great Ocean”

(transcript)

## **Indigenous Futures Cluster Presents**

hosted by Initiative for Indigenous Futures April 12, 2019  
Milieux Institute for Arts, Culture and Technology Concordia University (Montreal, QC)  
video available at <http://indigenousfutures.net/outputs/ifcp/#eshraghi>  
info@abtec.org

Indigenous Futures Cluster Presents

Léuli Eshrāghi

Multilingual Australian artist, curator and writer

Concordia University

12 April 2019

Produced by the Initiative for Indigenous Futures in collaboration with Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) [abtec.org/iif](http://abtec.org/iif).

**00:15 Jason Lewis:** Aloha everybody! Welcome! Happy to see you here this afternoon at the end of the semester. We appreciate you coming in and join us and to hear our speaker today. I'm Jason Lewis, I'm a professor in Design and Computation Arts here and the University Research Chair in Computational Media and the Indigenous Future Imaginary, and I co-direct the Indigenous Futures research cluster with Heather Igloliorte, who's one of our professors in Art History. And the Indigenous Futures research cluster is a part of the Milieux Institute for Art, Culture and Technology, up on the 10th and 11th floors there, which is an interdisciplinary institute, sort of bringing together arts and humanities and social sciences and engineering as well. And what we do in Indigenous Futures cluster is pretty much in the name. We conduct research and create a production around issues of Indigenous people in communities imagining what we want our futures to be like. So, this is part of our lecture series, and we're very happy to have Léuli with us today to tell us about his work. He has been a post-doc, he was our first Indigenous Futures post-doc. He joined us in January, but has had a crazy travel schedule, and others of us as well, that's also a part of it too.

**01:35 JL:** So, it's taken until now for us to host an event like this where he can introduce himself to the community and introduce his amazing research. So, I'm going to read the official biography now, okay. So, Dr. Léuli Eshrāghi is an Australian artist and curator of Sāmoan, Persian and other ancestries, and a Horizon/Indigenous Futures Postdoctoral Fellow, Concordia University. He creates performances, installations, writing and curatorial practice centered on embodied knowledges, ceremonial-political practices, language renewal, and hopeful futures throughout the Great Ocean. Léuli is part of the Indigenous curatorial collective the Visiting Curators working on exhibition platforms The Commute, Institute of Modern Art, Layover, Artspace Aotearoa, and Transits & Returns, Vancouver Art Gallery. His work has been presented at the Sharjah Biennial 14, Bathurst Regional Gallery, University of Tasmania Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart, Goldfields Arts Centre, Kalgoorlie, Cairns Regional Art Gallery, among many others.

**02:37 JL:** And most recently, Léuli was selected to participate in the 22nd Biennale of Sydney in 2020. So, he holds a PhD in Curatorial Practice from Monash University, a Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Arts Management from the University of Melbourne, and a Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous and Francophone Studies from the University of Queensland. He serves on the board of Indigenous arts advocacy organization, Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, on the advisory boards of PHOTO2020 photography biennial Australia and Melbourne Museum's Pacific Gallery Redevelopment Australia. Thank you very much for joining us today, Léuli.

[applause]

[background conversation]

[Sāmoan language]

**03:29 Léuli Eshrāghi:** I offer Fana‘afi o Fa‘amalama prayer votives to the ancestors, elders, plants, birds, animals, lands, waters and skies of Tiohtià:ke Mooniyang Montreal, where we meet. [03:39] Tulouna, tulouna, tulouna. I come from the Sāmoan archipelago, the [03:45] Pārs plateau and other ancestries including Guangdong. I'm a grateful visitor to this part of Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe territories today. I work as an artist, curator and researcher, as was mentioned, processing embodied shame, the potential for softening in the worlds that I move within. My artistic and curatorial practice is anchored in considering queer Indigenous ways of being, organizing, loving, world making and caring, that may predate and post-date Euro-American norms and knowledges. My main driving question presently is where our central languages and relational ways of being may take us, to which futures do Indigenous ceremonial political practices take us, which movements are necessary, and more than just Salvatore and the colonial capitalist present. With multi-generational diasporas of significantly dispersed communities across large geographies, what constitutes pre-colonial Indigenous nations that can be rendered again or generated differently now into futures of our own making.

[foreign language]

**04:55 LE:** Where did our shame come from? Who has belittled us so? For the last three years, I have been in mourning and been creating gestures for all that lies dormant in us. Sāmoan people, Indigenous peoples, marginalized and displaced peoples, for all that we do not currently remember how to make, live by, understand and transmit within and across to other human and beyond human communities. The position I am in, of deepening my Indigenous belonging whilst living and working on other Indigenous nations' territories is not uncommon. Alongside instruction in Sāmoan cultural practices, including gafa, genealogizing and [05:30] lāuga, oratory knowledges, I've received Indigenous teachings in Hawaii, Turtle Island, Aotearoa and particularly in Australia. This has often been and remains unavailable to me in most Sāmoan communities due to intergenerational traumas and the philosophical and political barriers created by continuing religious and sociopolitical colonization.

**05:51 LE:** Sāmoan scholar, Aiono Fana‘afi Le Tagaloa, corrected the colonial omissions in multiple Sāmoan-English dictionaries through her extensive archival research in Europe as well as in Samoa. Reduced to window or heathen customs by Europeans possessed by their colonial entitlement over our cultural practices in different dictionaries, the concept of "fa‘amalama" or of "fa‘amalalama" that I mentioned at the beginning is amongst the most significant in undoing enduring physical and spiritual violences. "Fa‘a" means continuous becoming or being. "Malama" or "malamalama" signifies sunlight, light, knowledge, understanding, consciousness, illumination, enlightenment, the act of seeing and also points to the moon in older references in the Sāmoan language.

**06:43 LE:** I honor and ask fa‘amalama in demystifying the two main precolonial spiritual practices, Fana‘afi o Fa‘amalama, that I mentioned at the beginning, fire votives performed with specific prayer chants in private at dawn and at dusk, and Alofisa, circles of offerings performed in public. Like deep listening in neighboring Indigenous cultures, Fa‘amalama is a form of Tapua‘iga,

ancestor veneration that activates the three elements of each living being, which she identifies as, Ola, the physical body that passes away, Aitu, the creative or cheeky essence of somebody, which is most often mistranslated as 'spirit', like a spirit moving around, and Maui, the intellect or psyche. The practice of Fa'amalama continues in Sāmoan communities at dawn and dusk today, but in a Christianized prayer circle form with very little reference to Tupu'aga, ancestors, Tapuafanua, guardian spirits, and Atua, gods. Instead widely understood and appearing in all Sāmoan dictionaries again as 'window'.

**07:49 LE:** Of course, this is a shared experience by Indigenous peoples around the world. In relation to his compelling body of work, Lay of the Land, Mi'kmaq artist, Logan MacDonald, discussed the tensions and specificities of his experiences across North America from his ancestral territory Ktaqamkuk on the Atlantic coast to the Great Ocean coast. He positions relationships as pivotal to the unfolding, measuring out, expanding experiences of Indigenous belonging and becoming with associated complexities in diaspora or displacement, whether these are geographic or generational.

**08:23 LE:** He says, "I hoped to visit communities, territories, reservations, and historic sites of Indigenous peoples across Canada, in an effort to engage, participate, learn and experience. I was lucky to make it coast to coast, but I'm also aware that there is much more to see and more people to meet. This work is the beginning. It is in progress. I am documenting movement. This work is poetic, this work is angry and happy and confused. This project avoids the depiction of others. You are allowed to see landscapes and landmarks, structures and signs. You are kept at a distance on purpose. Experiences are mediated through a lens or added layer. Intimacy is off in the horizon. I found these experiences challenging. I find these images political, I find collaboration near impossible."

**09:09 LE:** "I can't be a voice for anyone but myself. A great scholar said to me, 'All land is Indigenous land.' These are words to live by. Observing, engaging with land, allowing movement and personal exploration shapes this work. By asking endless unanswerable questions: What does it mean for a person to have Indigenous heritage but have no access to that specific culture? What if we want to reignite or spare our lost traditions? What if we want to develop a connection? Who do we go to to learn? Are we allowed to seek out experiences and knowledge from our cultural neighbours? Are we stranded on an island? Should our exploration be limited to reading the internet and visiting the library, reading the right books, not written by our ancestors? Just fill in the blanks. Are we asking too much? Has it too far gone? Do we allow ancestral culture to fade or do we attempt to revive it? If we let it fade, are we perpetuating colonial power?"

**10:02 LE:** These questions and statements resonate so profoundly with my experiences and those of many other Indigenous makers and organizers. Healing, mourning, building, connecting, harking back to our futures. Even if someone ostensibly brought up Sāmoan cultural practices since birth, like me. It is Western knowledge systems based on perceptions of extenuated deficit and accumulation of goods to the detriment of others, that bring us to the climate catastrophes and protracted dysfunctional social indicators of most Indigenous and non-European peoples in the world. It is not the critical abundance and sufficiency of fair share in engendered kinship of Indigenous knowledge systems that brought this world about. But these are the methods by which we will rebuild anew, make and keep hope, and go beyond such Eurocentric ungenerous doomsday perceptions as the Anthropocene and other untrained constructs of spiritually voided Western knowledge systems.

**10:58 LE:** Who are our teachers? What are our ancestral land, water and kinship-based practices that will take us into futures that are not colonized by despair and destruction? Colonial entitlement and fragility continue to negatively impact Indigenous resurgence and revival within and without territories and bodies. The structural problems of translation, what translation is or can be, and how we cumulatively undo the knowledge violenced out of our minds and hearts by colonial systems, bringing back our intellectual histories and caring for our relationships, are urgent reminders that things are often not what they seem to our eyes, minds, hearts and hearths wherever we are. In responding to Logan's works Squamish, Hul'q'umi'num, and Sahtu Dene artist and scholar, Camille Georgeson-Usher, continues the questioning of intention, the making and holding of space, and over-romanticized conceptions of home and return, as well as the affective labor of revival that we embody and carry on.

**11:56 LE:** She states, "I think that indigeneity means so much to so many different indigenous folks, and it can never exist as one thing, but to embrace one's individual indigeneity takes consistent intention, care, and work. Perhaps the most important component here. As we build our own indigeneities, is the intentional accountability we must practice in caring for our fellow indigenous peoples, communities, and lands. I also think that a lot of indigenous folks have a lot of questions, like I do, about who we are and what our identities are, especially learning about indigeneity on land that is not where we are from, but learning on someone else's land. What I want to ask you is where are the places you have made into your home? How have you created these spaces? Can you learn about who you are away from perceived notions of home? How do we form ourselves in our homes on someone else's land?"

**12:48 LE:** I want to make performances and create writing about not belonging too, feeling untethered, about aspirational use of my Sāmoan language, so it's not dead on my ears, to my heart, to my psyche and ancestors. I want to research the presence and power of indigenous languages and display territories in my home oceanic continent and here. I want to express about belonging to and living in the territory of the language whose lands, waters, and skies are rapidly shifting, with climatic, nuclear, military, capitalist, and agricultural interruptions from East Asia, Europe, and North America. Bodies that are moved elsewhere, displaced, still matter. I want us to innovate our languages with critical and poetic publications even though for myself, I can't yet assuredly express my genealogy or work in ancestral tones and cadences. Like Logan, we walk and visit as many shores, fields, valleys, mountains, archipelagos of the Great Ocean as possible, bringing the learning that only place brings. We walk in honor anew, the place of veneration of ancestral god Fe'e, somewhere in the mountains, near my clan territories.

**13:50 LE:** In the vast archives accumulated by Euro-American collectors of our cultural practices, in the endless documentations of indigenous land and life, there are the absences of engendered kinship waiting for later generations to ancestral belongings and remains to return, to activate, to make living again. In many senses we are yet to trace and retrace new paths and connections across this third of the Earth we call home. Using the "we" broadly. [chuckle] It's where I call home. We are born of Fanua, lands, placenta; of Moana, seas; of Lagi, skies; of Nu'u, young coconuts; of Talo, root vegetables; of all our Atua, gods, of all our Tupu'aga, ancestors, of all our kin.

[foreign language]

**14:47 LE:** Encompasses vast worlds of atoll and volcanic archipelagos, burden to arid lands and

fresh to salt waters; ancient and young. All connected through Vā, relational space, across thousands of years of customary exchange and elements who know no bounds. Thousands of peoples yet maintained central agricultural, ceremonial, political, and speculative practices in every part of this expansive Great Ocean. Not a small sea of violence, not a small Pacific Ocean. And far beyond through multiple intersecting diasporas. The many central marked and spoken languages being brought back from dormancy and infused with new fields of meaning, take us shore to shore, mountain to mountain, field to field; stream to stream.

**15:36 LE:** In this series, Sāmoan Japanese German artist and curator, Yuki Kihara as her persona Salome wearing the Victorian mourning dress stands in the aftermath of Cyclone Evan and other major climatic and sociopolitical developments in the Sāmoan archipelago. She questions current generations from a continuous temporal ancestral point across the archipelago about where we have come from, where we are going, and if we are holding ancestral practices or failing under today's pressures. These include the devastating cumulative impacts of extractive mining for guano, gold, copper, nickel, manganese, iron, petroleum, ancestors bones on Banaba, Nauru and elsewhere. Militarized occupation particularly in Hawai'i, West Papua, Kanaky New Caledonia, Australia, Guāhan, Bougainville, Tahiti, Okinawa. And nuclear testing to exhaustion on Moruroa, Fangataufa, Bikini, Enewetak, Amchitka, Malden, Christmas, Johnston and across [16:32] Kokatha and Nukunu Nations' territories.

**16:35 LE:** This was parallel to the kidnapping into slavery of more than 63,000 indigenous peoples from different archipelagos onto the cotton and sugar cane plantations of Eastern Australia, Queensland and New South Wales from 1863 to 1904. This devastation includes the widespread enslavement and unknown unpaid wages of most First Nations all across the patchwork of songlines [16:55] misnamed Australia in domestic servitude and sheep-shearing stations. It also includes the indentured plantation and mining work in slavery containment with peoples from Java, Vietnam, Guangdong, from Gujarat to Bengal, Madeira, Azores, Okinawa, Korea, Philippines, Algeria, Borinquen, Puerto Rico, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Uvea and Futuna, Tahiti and Vanuatu, in territories held by France, England, Spain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and Germany.

**17:28 LE:** The web of slave trading, commerce in sandalwood, Kauri pine, sugar cane, coffee, vanilla, copra, pearls, sea cucumbers, spices and minerals, continue to unfurled in its complexity, and disregard for human and kin suffering or broken ancestral connections continuing to haunt us. Once significant material gains were made through unpaid labor in harrowing conditions, the European colonial fiction of the Anglo-Celtic racially pure colony was reiterated through laws and policies in Australia and New Zealand specifically, and their colonial possessions throughout the region, South Asian and Chinese workers were similarly targeted in the first two laws passed by the first Settler Colonial Government of Australia in 1901.

**18:08 LE:** South Sea islanders from the plantations were deported by Caucasian settler colonists, even to the wrong place of origin after multiple generations. And many a lives were lost in the oversea passages. The families who remained and endured the following century, closely connected to First Nations communities along the eastern seaboard make up today's 30,000 strong community. Our archipelagos and shores across the [18:31] the Lalolagi have come under foreign control, nuclear and military testing, plantation and industrial exploitation, and our kin animals, mammals and birds have found habitats severely reduced or destroyed altogether. We have found the limitless undulating sacred relational space, the Great Ocean, that always links us in every direction and

across temporal realms to be constrained. We are displaced in search of monetized work, Western valued education, upward mobility, out of the contained reserves of lands and waters left to us.

**19:06 LE:** All these continuously unfolding colonial situations across the great ocean severely impute the capacity for indigenous languages to be practiced and enriched, valued and empowered in their homelands and in the displaced and diasporic parties we move within.

**19:20 LE:** The First Languages of the Collection project that I developed at Monash University Museum of Art, in Melbourne, in 2016, where I was undertaking my PhD, continued by Yorta Yorta and Wamba Wamba curator Belinda Briggs last year and Pakana curator Zoe Rimmer, this year, channeled the energy and experience I have in translation and interpreting between French and indigenous languages in a few archipelagos of Oceania into a new set of texts for digital and physical display, around university buildings and the art museum itself.

**19:52 LE:** Artworks by Tiriki Onus, Alick Tipoti, Lydia Balbal, Kitty Kantilla, Juan Davila, Judy Watson, and Yikartu Petersen held in the collection were the focus of the first writing commissions by Kimberley Moulton, Tahjee Moar, Cara Kirkwood, Clotilde Bullen, Pedro Wonaeamirri, Camila Marambio, and Freja Carmichael with translations into Tiwi language by Pedro Wonaeamirri, Martu language by Desmond Mitchell Taylor, Chilean Spanish, by Camilla Marambio, and Kala Lagaw Ya language by Alick Tipoti.

**20:20 LE:** Whilst being the first such project to my knowledge in Australia, the absolute exceptional contribution that this combining of relationships insured was the territorial acknowledgement of Kulin Nation Sovereignty by Monash University Museum of Art, itself. This is at the entrance that you're looking at.

**20:38 LE:** Having worked with Wurundjeri artist, dancer, knowledge keeper and Woiwurrung Language Translator, Mandy Nicholson on a previous project, Ua numi le fau at Gertrude Contemporary, as well as other projects, she knew me enough to trust this project and this institution's commitment. This extended to Boon Wurrung elder and translator N'Arweet Carolyn Briggs for the Boon Wurrung language translation, who I've known for years and have seen my projects develop.

**21:02 LE:** This territorial acknowledgement, shortened on the entrance wall and extended on the website, is perhaps the first of its kind is on permanent display, but also permanent invitation to accountability in a Western art museum in Australia.

**21:14 LE:** Whilst the material presence of Woiwurrung and Boon Wurrung languages at the entrance to the art museum may not seem that grand a gesture, it demonstrates the commitment by curators, artists, and communities to more than lip service performing respectability.

**21:27 LE:** I see this kind of gesture when part of ongoing working relationships between indigenous and settler communities as generative of more critically caring ways of being annoying, beyond the standard acknowledgement of country or territory here. This first languages of the collection project coincided with a crisis in me of the inaccessibility and pretence in Western art writing for my communities who are often underrepresented or disregarded as primary stakeholders.

**21:54 LE:** So I decided to stop using words that came out of my mouth with great difficulty. Not

because they were hard to pronounce or understand but because the distancing between speaker, speech, and audience in this kind of setup was counter to Vā or relational space understandings of how the world is ordered, and kinships maintained.

**22:12 LE:** Practically, this means that I strive to write more poetically, more honestly, whether writing about artists, exhibitions, performances, structural racism and hetero-patriarchy, intellectual histories, and indigenous resurgence into the future.

**22:27 LE:** My 92-year-old Tinā matua, grandma, [22:31] Manō Nātia Fa‘ase‘e Tautua has been an artist her whole life, independent of the gallery system, supporting our expansive family relationships across volcanic soils, saltwaters, damp airs, in a sovereignty that is care from the land, and a matriarchy that is love from the ancestors, in a binding of diasporic children that is making with the fruit of your labor. What has denied us in the capitalist system of our German, American, and British colonizers; who never leave our minds, spirits, bodies; our societies, politics, economies.

**22:58 LE:** The keys to our liberation are also found in the wisdom of the diaspora for all our people. To go out and learn important things that are later shared to and fro. Tinama tua reiterates her messages to me and my cousins in Sāmoan and English. I draw on her and other family members' daily artistic practice in producing [23:17] measin fine hand-made works from fala, pandanus, and u‘a, paper mulberry bark, which is not there.

[chuckle]

**23:28 LE:** Lalanga, the weaving of elements from finua, land, vai, water, langi, sky, with specific narration of histories, forms ancestral figurines... Or freaky dolls depending on how you look at it. Baskets, she has these... I'll bring one in, it's really scary. But it's cute too.

**23:49 LE:** Baskets, clothing, homewares, and utensils, our handmade goods, our understanding of our bodies in long lines of ancestry, our orated and tattooed literature bring us closer to indigenous futures to great ocean futures. Kanaka oiwi scholar and language keeper Brian Camali Kawada asserts that we need to, again, normalize indigenous languages in order to continuously generate indigenous worlds, speaking specifically of renormalizing Ooleva Hawaii to have a Hawaiian world.

**24:18 LE:** We've always lived in the future because genealogical time contains indigenous future focused ways of being. From my experience living in Yuwibara, Bundjalung, Yugambah, [24:28] Turrbal and Kulin territories as well as my own clan's territories, locating ourselves in ever expanding ways of knowing and being is vital. Vital to any sustainable negotiation by indigenous peoples on and off ancestral territories in Euro-American dominated settler colonial institutions and aesthetic spaces and into sovereign futures. Is to become water and central to become versed in indigenous practices of stewardship and kinship with lands and waters once more?

**24:58 LE:** How is this shift at all possible under continuing colonial capitalist flows? Water is our primary ancestor in the great ocean, which is a third of the Earth's surface, [25:07] Lalolagi, earth below the heavens, impacting all life on this planet because water knows no borders, yet underrepresented or erased from voicing perspectives in the majority of human-centric discourses and practices evolving out of an unenlightened empire hungry Europe.



**25:27 LE:** We are fluid beings physically, and philosophically, such that states of being in various indigenous languages relate us to water. A number of ceremonial political practices in Sāmoan, [25:38] Gunantuna, Hakō and Māori cultures, that I'm familiar with, center on the purifying use of fresh water, water with greater turmeric, water with salt, and coconut water to assemble ancestral beings in each context.

**25:52 LE:** [25:55] Tautuanaga 'o fa'āliga ata is a new term created with fellow Sāmoan knowledge holders, artists and curators. For our use, instead of curator, curating, and curator practice, meaning service or to serve display of images, likenesses, photographs, shadows, this is a more resonant conception of display practices. It is based on indigenous concepts of *sogi*, shared breath affirmation, [26:18] *soālaupule*, deliberative consultation of organizing for collective well-being, and illumination, and displays of cultural practice that heal and strengthen mutually beneficial exchanges of images, objects, performative states, and orature. This is not a translation of curator, curating, or curator practice as these are understood in European languages and knowledges with current star curators and powerful curator practice discourse operating in ways that are unaccountable, and illegible to indigenous communities often. Rather the future well-being of our communities, on and off ancestral territories, of all our non-human and human relations is our duty.

**26:57 LE:** Healing is not dissociated from what is understood as art practice. Cultural practice takes myriad forms in our diverse indigenous experiences and knowledges. What Sāmoan critic and curator Lana Lopesi calls artist investment, can be understood as critical care rather than self-propelled Western styles of creative ecologies. [27:17] Tautuanaga 'o fa'āliga ata is a practice-based in Sāmoan cultural values and histories, and the texts imprinted on bodies, lands, waters, digital files, and other formats are the latest manifestation of genealogical matter, and imperatives that direct our actions into the times to come. How then can display territories in indigenous central marked spoken languages affect the restoration of indigenous voices to all audiences and indigenous cultural continuity, from prior to colonial interruption? I'm invested in seeing whether this can really occur in the same spaces that have historically omitted and under-represented indigenous voices and practices.

**28:00 LE:** Of course, building our own spaces completely independently of existing spaces does not address colonial practices that control authenticity, whilst we are also doing this vital work. Some of these forms include architectural interventions such as the bark fibers that were strewn across the gallery floor in Ganybu in 2015 by Djapu Yolngu artist Marrnyula Mununggurr for her solo exhibition at Gertrude Contemporary, the entire country South of her territory. Though they were restricted into a cordoned corner when their works were acquired and displayed by the largest art museum in the country, the National Gallery Victoria, stopping the intervention as indigenous display territory of its power. Another includes the elder knowledge keepers who hosted visitors with story-telling and refreshments throughout the opening hours of the major exhibition *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years* in 2011, curated by Candace Hopkins, Steve Loft, Leanne Martin, and Jenny Western at plug-in ICA in Winnipeg.

**28:58 LE:** Central marked and spoken languages command multiple full registers of experience, particularly for indigenous makers, organizers, and communities who come as audiences. Lana Lopesi again, calls for the multilingual assertion of indigenous art practices within indigenous knowledge paradigms in these terms. She says, "In a way indigenous practice requires far more resources to receive an authentic understanding of practice. We need to produce multi-lingual interpretations, overcome cultural barriers, and educate as well as appreciate." What this does

though is establish laborious frameworks before the audience has even laid eyes on the art work. This experience of viewing furthers the us-them dichotomy by marginalizing the work as indigenous practice. Instead, what these practices deserve is an equal for treatment with an understanding of indigenous epistemologies and philosophies.

[pause]

**29:56 LE:** Re Formation Part 3 Dubbagullee by Quandamooka artist Megan Cope is her largest memorial installation created for the Australian Art biennial The National, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in Sydney in 2017. Megan is known for installation, moving image, and painting works that dissect and critique methods of colonization, mapping, and intimacies shared by place and people. With the European invasion of sovereign First Nations territories and that part of the great ocean came the political drive to eliminate indigenous governments, villages, knowledges, and peoples. These assimilation and disposition policies located in lands and waters ecologically altered through capitalist exploit for the benefit of the European diaspora majority, acutely inform reality today.

**30:46 LE:** Megan addresses the violence, seen and unseen, of colonization throughout vast territories. While smaller monuments have appeared almost directly out of the gallery floor and walls, this new one, Re Formation Part 3 Dubbagullee, echoes the grandeur and enormity of the vast shell ring structures that were shaped by thousands of years of ancestors fulfilling ceremonial practices. It is a haunting presence, created by slowly caring for the memory of ancestors and healing the multiple absences through the precise repetition and hand-making the layered forms of black sand, copper slag, and cement oyster shells, and echo on the wind.

**31:28 LE:** Cultural memory recalled into being, standing in the place of countless villages and ceremonial sites that were obliterated across coastal First Nations territories. These sacred sites of inter-generational histories reached far along Quandamooka shores and high into the skies. The deliberate burning of shell monuments thousands of years old holding in their structure, earth, shells, ancestors, and belongings cannot be understated as a repeated act of cultural genocide in Australia, as in Aotearoa, Hawai‘i, as in here and elsewhere. The same brutality lies in the forcible displacement of indigenous peoples put to work as underpaid, or unpaid labor in constructing Brisbane and other cities along the coast of Australia. In Gadigal country or Sydney, massive indigenous shell monuments and village sites were subsequently destroyed and built over by British colonists. The old Norse term "midden" refers to a dung heap, a refuse heap near a dwelling or pre-historic pile of bones and shells. Here is the radical difference in perspective.

**32:32 LE:** The rapid extensive removal of ancestors and belongings from villages and ceremonial sites through burning for lime was course the settler colonial myth making in normalizing a white Australia as a natural outpost of European knowledges and practices. Glistening in the light, Megan's Shell Monument draws the viewer into what can be described as non-colonial spaces of indigenous life, autonomous of western frameworks of being and knowing. Rather than presenting us with a performance of ongoing First Nations pain and trauma, she resists the narratives of manifest destiny, containment, terra nullius and Mare nullius. Here, indigenous sovereignty is actual healing, not a metaphorical return to customary concepts predating European invasion and genocide, but an intellectual, spiritual, linguistic and ceremonial political return to [33:24] marumba, well being, to jagan, to country. This is not to be confused with performances of reconciliation politics designed by the settler colonial state.

**33:33 LE:** Two, in Metis artist and scholar David Garneau's terms, settle settlers, with their heinous past and to distract from their heinous present, to have settlers feel at home on stolen lands. Megan's Shell Monument is a type of memorial to the healing properties of literal indigenous sovereignty, beyond the access and understanding of citizens of settler colonial states, uninitiated to these truths. Re Formation Part 3, Dubbagullee charts a restoration of land-based practices that will bring the right people to embody Australian First Nations' living practices in the present and future tenses. To see Quandamooka jagan marumba, to see Quandamooka country is beautiful again.

**34:13 LE:** With the widespread destruction of colossal shell monuments, the built environment echoes the intellectual environment across the Australian settler colony in its Eurocentric reflection. Again, we see a work mediate the cumulative absences, erasures, violences, and traumas on all living beings and territories, this time creating a physical and spiritual site, if temporary, with an exhibition context, from where to grow and to which we can address our learning and humility. The Shell Monuments by Megan are located in the same field of memorial and language attendant display territory as many other artists producing today, embedded in their specific indigenous histories and also keenly engaged in broader resistance to ongoing settler and missionary-colonial violences.

**34:58 LE:** The Shell Monuments are indeed compelling sculptural installations, the renewal of permanent indigenous aesthetic, intellectual, and ceremonial architectures through which earth-centred knowledges, relationships, and healing can be expressed once more. These works discuss today, in many ways, deployed as anchors, in display territories, with varying regimes of control and presence of indigenous and settler peoples, have been key to my developing understanding of mediation and meaning actualized today in order to hasten more hopeful futures. The untold centuries of settler colonial and militarist oppression and obfuscation on bodies, knowledges, and territories, lead us to this moment, to this precipice, before our recent futures. Languages are spoken and inscribed once more. The boundaries of what is taboo and what is secular are again shifting. The sands move slowly, but the waters know no bounds, rising and bringing urgent connections to the fore, across the great ocean and beyond.

[foreign language]

**36:03 LE:** Thank you for your support in this endeavour today.

[applause]

**36:10 LE:** Have a think and then if you wanna talk about it.

**36:15 S?:** Yeah, can I ask a question?

[laughter]

**36:18 LE:** Usually people don't understand me.

**36:22 S?:** So we have time for questions really early.

**36:29 LE:** That's where I was gonna sit down.

**36:31 S?:** Forgive me.

**36:33 S?:** Sure.

**36:34 S?:** I wanna see your grandma's scary dolls.

**36:38 LE:** I probably have one on Instagram.

[laughter]

**36:39 LE:** Found it. Found it. I've got one in here, I think.

**36:41 S?:** Is there a story of your family making these dolls?

**36:49 LE:** This is for a reference. They're probably in this bag, in that box, but I'm not sure, she kind of... I was recently in Sāmoa a few weeks ago, spending time with my grandma, and with my mum, and brother, and she was really frail, and just getting on, and I kind of had a moment where I realized that no one is a weaver since her, in the extended family. Lots of other Sāmoans are weavers, but everyone wants to live in town. You have a cash money job. And I think I can remember how to make one of these that I learned when I was a kid, but that was 20 years ago, so I was quite worried about that. And she makes the heads for the dolls out of Pandanus, so it's completely renewable, it grows behind the house, all this kind of materiality. But she'll get a cardboard box and then cheat the structure of the baskets, so that they stay as a rectangular thing. That's her cheeky innovation.

**38:01 S?:** Sorry, what is it, Léuli? You see these...

**38:03 LE:** I'm talking about these dolls that my grandma makes...

**38:05 S?:** Yes, yes, sorry.

**38:06 LE:** But these are baskets.

**38:06 S?:** What's the material?

**38:07 LE:** So this is Pandanus, it's related to the Harakeke Flax in New Zealand. I don't know, probably grows along the Mexican coast, but it's a weaving material. So just dry the leaves and then weave them, leaves them in the sun, put different dyes through them, for different colors. She also used to make [38:35] 'afa which has coconut husk in it and out of that do all these different designs on a couture model, like island couture pageant wear, for like the beauty pageants and stuff in the island.

**38:52 S?:** Could you talk about what... 'Cause you imply that Monash museum, Monash Art Museum made some sort of commitment, so were you maybe, I am assuming you were involved in some of those negotiations. But what else did they commit to, was it a quick programming? Did they commit like a funding amount?

**39:13 LE:** They... Good question, thanks. The time that, around the time that I started on that project, one of my friends was their first research curator. Specifically, on research program, all of the shows and what to collect into the collection and at her probation six-month period, she wanted to split her job and share it with me, but without asking me. So, she said that to the boss and I was like, "No way! I'm not from that territory, someone from the Southeast should be there first." And then the university didn't have enough money or whatever. However, their system works, but instead the director found some funds to put towards a project that the research curator and I could work on together. So that's what this ended up being, and then they've got funding from the Copyright Agency Limited and a few other sources.

**40:10 LE:** It's been continuing since. It's probably, I'm biased 'cause I studied there so I am more connected with that art museum's program, but it's one of the best programs in terms of exhibition making by University of Art Museum in Australia, and consistently has indigenous and racialized artists in the program and in the collection.

**40:34 LE:** So most of the libraries in Monash University have two main sites. They all went through renovation recently, and so like almost all of the work that's now in there are hugely conditions of work, by desert artists, different artists so, big deal. But in terms of staffing that hasn't really changed so that's very interesting to me too. But then the Art and Design and Architecture faculty where the control practice programs sits, is starting an indigenous research center and... So, they're about to... They've got like five new people who started this year in the grad programs. So, gone from like one, me, to five, it's pretty [chuckle] big, in like three years.

**41:19 S?:** Okay, thank you so much. I was wondering if you could elaborate a bit more on your criticisms of the Anthropocene?

**41:28 LE:** Yeah.

**41:28 S?:** That's interesting, yeah.

**41:34 LE:** Haven't thought about it at length besides...

**41:37 S?:** Yeah.

**41:38 LE:** The linearity of saying that we're... Of course, we have a huge impact on this planet as human beings, but... There's still, in most art schools in Australia, European pre-history is the framework so the majority of Aboriginal art histories in that context sit within the Paleolithic bla bla bla, or whatever those categories are. So, it's like really untenable to me, but then that continues into a "Oh, it's so bad! The world is dying," without having tried to look at the people besides Rancière and Foucault. All of these Francophile... All of these French male theorists in English translation, not on the original, and all of the racial kind of context to Cixous and Derrida being Africans first and then bleached as French people later.

**42:36 LE:** This kind of stuff that's... If that's such a wealth of ecological knowledge particularly, in Australia in the last few years. A book came out in 2015 called 'Dark Emu' by Uncle Bruce Pascoe and he's a Boonwurrung knowledge keeper and he's basically charting all of the different grain belts, and the different kinds of bread, the different kind of eel, agriculture sites, in the interior and on the coast, ceremonial sites that are thousands and thousands of years old. Most of them are off...

Have been destroyed by mining or whatever, but basing most of that on European colonial documents. And then corroborating that with elders' recollections and that kind of stuff. Yeah, I think if you read that book, the Anthropocene loses its argument. Of course, the world is in dire straits too, but to me, it's like it's just not enough to lose hope. If we're thinking, humans, active people with some agency, we have so much responsibility to right the balance.

**43:49 S?:** Thank you so much.

**43:51 LE:** [43:51]       .

**43:51 S?:** Yeah, yeah.

**43:54 S?:** Do you have any new work to show?

**44:00 LE:** Nope. [laughter]

**44:02 S?:** Absurd.

**44:05 LE:** Can you go on the internet?

**44:06 S?:** Yeah.

[background conversation]

**46:56 LE:** I'm in a collective called The Visiting Curators with Freja Carmichael who's a Quandamooka curator and writer based in Brisbane, Lana Lopesi who is a Sāmoan critic and curator based in Auckland, New Zealand, and Sarah Biscarra Dilley who is an artist and curator based in Oakland, California. And also Tara Hogue who is a curator and writer based at the Vancouver Art Gallery. So we've been working together for two years on a number of projects, looking at the connections between indigenous artists all across the great ocean. And like an expansive concept that's not the Pacific, that's not the small islands down in the South Sea, something like that. But more looking at either ancestral connections that are like whispers of what there was pre-500 years ago, pre-200 years ago in different communities and if not making new ones, 'cause the ocean's pretty cool.

**47:50 LE:** So the first project... And we also have a very specific working methodology. So in the first project called the Commute, we had one to two artists per curator and we had the same process in our second project, the Layover. So the Commute, you can go on this website and have a look. And it goes that's the reading room that we have with greetings in as many of the artists' and curators' languages as possible. And then you can go down and have a look at works by different artists. Carol McGregor who is part of the possum-skin cloak revival that's happening between a huge slab of Australia from Adelaide all the way to Brisbane. So this work is mapping the plants as they occur all across the greater Brisbane area, with a lot of consultation with communities there.

**48:46 LE:** But because of the nature of laws in Australia, you have to get pelts of possums that were introduced to New Zealand where it's a pest. So there's a lot of things going on there. It's really stunning work. Let's go through these eight artists and then I'll show you the website a bit more. This is Ahilapalapa Rands she's a Kanaka Maoli, iTaukei Viti, Pākehā artist. So she's looking at the

imposition of the telescopes on Mauna Kea, Mauna a Wakea on big island in Hawaii and through animation and with the sound-scape of the ipu drum. [49:23] the beat of [49:26] the hula's ipu drum, the way that people can imagine that [49:31] Pele is awakening and kicking the telescopes off the mountains.

**49:39 LE:** If you're aware of Wuikinuxv culture on west coast, this is Bracken Hanuse Corlett's work, which is the culmination of multiple eras of explorations to recreate the family crest which was lost during the processes of colonization in the Potlatch ban. Really incredible work with an animation on the backside of it as it hangs in the space. This is a fully functional wind turbine by Chantal Fraser and it's based on some of her experiences visiting some of the valleys in Central California and also as a racialized artist working in the euro-centric dominated art system in Australia, so she didn't want to make her work that had Sāmoan motifs, she wanted to resist that and instead has this really alluring beautiful wind turbine which is not connected to a power source but takes on energy from the audience.

**50:44 LE:** Here's some details. I work specifically with Lisa Hilli who is a Gunantuna artist. And she has a practice of working with museum collections, photography, video, and specifically reviving the [51:01] middi which is a ceremonial breastplate that has been out of use and unknown for more than a hundred years, from the German colonial period until now. So the eldest elders that she consulted with had never heard of it as well. So, it's a lot of process of reconstruction. In this work she's working at the Melbourne Museum in the Pacific Gallery Redevelopment team. And so she here is looking at the sisterhood lifeline, Sarah Ahmed's term around... When you're having a hard time and who you call on. So, in her understanding, it's women, non-binary folks, trans folks. In terms of who she calls on, including me. So, there's a recording in the office set up of quotes and warm things. Warm like little messages of advice. And so, this is two big wallpapers and an office divider in the middle of the gallery.

**52:03 LE:** This work by Hannah Brontë who... Her work consistently imagines futures where matriarchy has been restored and... Black and brown women run the world. Blak in Australia being synonymous with indigenous, B-L-A-K specifically is the really common spelling and understanding. This work by Natalie Ball, who some of you will know, she was here in the BACA [la Biennale d'art contemporain autochtone] a few years ago, before my time here. She looks at the presence of indigenous objects, museum collections, and how people have agency in Gallery settings as well. And T'uy'tanat Cease Wyss is Skwxwú7mesh, Stó:lō, Irish, Métis, Kanaka Maoli, and Swiss, and spending a lot of time learning VR techniques and learning from makers in Hawaii, as well as in Brisbane, and in her territories and in Coast Salish territories, she's been making tinctures and swabs from local herbs and the Cedar blanket, and you can see some of the video from her first foray into VR, which is part of the exhibition as well. And then lead... In this photograph leads into the reading room, in this space.

**53:24 S?:** It is up there.

**53:25 LE:** Yeah, so we've got, that project is up there, you can go on and have a look. Our second project, Layover, working with the artist collective BC, Before Columbus, Before Cook, which is a couple, Daniel Twiss, who's a Lakota artist and Cora-Allan Wickliffe who is Niuean and Maori, and then they were working also... So this is their work. She's the first Barkcloth maker in the Niuean community since the early 20th century, which is the second image you can see, with all of the dinner set on top of it. So she actually sources her Barkcloth in Samoa, from some of the Barkcloth

makers there. But we don't make... Sāmoan makers don't make things this big anymore either. If you have a need for a huge piece of Barkcloth you go and get it from the Tongans, it's... Everybody's got their role kind of set up. And then Edith Amituanai who is a Sāmoan artist looking at the domestic spaces of Sāmoan diaspora communities in Alaska, in Utah, and in New Zealand and Australia.

**54:27 LE:** So then our third project, Transits and Returns, brings these two sets of artists from Brisbane and Auckland, plus more artists from all across the region, our region being the great ocean, really expansive, at Vancouver Art Gallery, end of September. So you can go see it there, we're almost finished, all the cataloguing, that kind of stuff. And so I'm also an artist and I participated in the Sharjah Biennial a month ago with a performance installation titled tagatanu'ū which is a Sāmoan term, which means indigenous, means citizen, means people of the village, people of the land.

**55:08 LE:** And this is a photograph of an earlier version, which I performed in Victoria at open space, the first exhibition I had in Canada, and it has a 40-minute text that I wrote based on all of the communities that I visited and learned with in 2017. And it's kind of half-half in English and French to unsettle the English and also because I'm a francophone from Oceania. And I once did a version of this in Hong Kong and there was a Cantonese speaking person who was inter-playing with me as well. And the text is looking at plantation colonization nuclear catastrophe, the impact of missionary attitudes on changing genders and sexualities, that kind of thing. Yeah.

[foreign language]

**56:00 LE:** Anyone has any other burning questions?

**56:04 S?:** Lots of.

**56:05 LE:** Yeah.

**56:05 JL:** Can you talk a bit... I don't know if 'tension' is the right word, but relationship and intersection between what you're talking about with Monash and you being invited to... Or being asked to sort of take on some curatorial role there, but feeling like, "Okay, this isn't my territory..." That, and when you start off with and having this conversation as well, what does it mean to... If I understood it correctly, what does it mean to make culture when you're on somebody else's? What does it mean to make your culture when you're on somebody else's territory/when you're not on your territory? And how those two things like, if taking a position of like, "Well, I can't take this role in this territory." So what kind of roles can you take when you're not on your own territory?

**56:53 LE:** Yeah, good question. I always will frame what I'm doing as an international exchange, which it is, but also making sure that I'm not taking the place of somebody from that territory or an indigenous person from Australia, First Nations person from Australia. It doesn't really happen that I get offered things that are appropriate, but it's important to me that I respect those articles, some people don't, some people pretend to be who they are not, but I don't really... It's not mine to police. I just know that how volatile the politics are in Sāmoa, if somebody came in, started doing stuff there or in Sāmoan communities in general. Yeah, so I think it's about making space for others, but also making your own thing happen. So few years of a lot of hustle and actually being here has helped me to re-assess sort of my life in Australia. I lived in Melbourne for 10 years. So really, really involved in aboriginal communities and island communities, art world, whatever, and yeah,



it's good to have this kind of critical and geographic distance.

**58:26 JL:** Any final question? No? Okay, well, let's thank Dr. Eshrāghi for sharing with us today. Appreciate it.

[applause]