

Media Release

Living Language celebrated in landmark exhibition

12/7/2019

“Our languages didn’t just gently wander off into the Dreamtime; they were silenced, and Aboriginal people died trying to pass them on.” Damien Webb (Palawa)

To mark UNESCO International Year of Indigenous Languages, the State Library of NSW is staging a major exhibition to celebrate the strength, diversity and richness of Aboriginal languages in NSW, **opening tomorrow [Saturday 13 July]**.

Living Language: Country, Culture, Community features filmed conversations with Elders and language custodians on Country, as well as original documents from the State Library of NSW and international collections, to tell the rich and evolving story of language revival across NSW.

The free exhibition has been co-curated by the State Library’s Indigenous Engagement team with Aboriginal language speakers and Elders from the Central and North West Plains through to Coastal Sydney, who share compelling stories of joy, strength and survival.

“Going where the lingo is was vital to bringing this exhibition together,” according to the Library’s Damien Webb (Palawa), who felt “immense sense of pride at our ancestors and Elders who have held onto language and culture through some of the most brutal decades.”

Before 1788, around 250 languages were spoken in Australia (even more dialects), but now only about 20 are spoken comprehensively.

“Languages are core to our memories and culture, help us process our histories and imagine our futures,” said Damien. “Their destruction has had profound impacts on Aboriginal people to this day. It was a privilege to see the extraordinary work being done by communities to protect, promote and pass on their languages.”

Exhibition visitors will meet:

Ray Ingrej and Dharawal language custodians from La Perouse who re-interpret historical accounts of first contact where the words “Warra Warra Wai” were recorded by Sydney Parkinson on Cook’s voyage.

Diane McNaboe (Wiradjuri, Dubbo), Auntie Maureen Sulter (Gamilaraay, Coonabarabran) and Auntie Patsy Cohen (Anaiwan, Armidale) who talk about ‘secret language’ and their relations being punished for using language.

Ambēyan man Callum Clayton-Dixon who is spearheading the Anaiwan Language Revival Program in Armidale where word lists from the State Library’s collection are being used to help build and strengthen the local language.

Gumbaynggirr speaker Michael Jarrett (Miklo) sings and shares stories about the naming of his Country.

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According to Marika Duczynski (Gamilaraay) from the Indigenous Engagement team, “Country is where our languages come from, and where they are most alive.”

For the first time since it was written in the 1850s, a notebook documenting the Awabakal language (Newcastle) by American linguist Horatio Hale, is coming back to Australia (from Western University, Canada).

And on loan from the University of London are First Fleet officer William Dawes’ notebooks where he recorded conversations with young Aboriginal woman Patyegarang between 1788 and 1791 in exceptional detail. It was the earliest attempt to transcribe and understand the Sydney coastal language, to recognise the speaker’s intelligence, wit and humour.

“The notebooks are incredibly important to Aboriginal people because they retain the conversational context which is crucial for contemporary language work today,” said Damien.

Living Language is set against a background of extraordinary photographs and drone footage of coasts, plains and mountain ranges. At the heart of the exhibition is a yarning circle where visitors will hear a Gumbaynggirr creation story of the Southern Cross.

“This is a watershed moment for the State Library and I’m proud that we are leading the charge coming to terms with complex questions around first contact, language revival and renewal,” said State Librarian John Vallance.

“This exhibition is just one of the ways we’re inviting people to consider Aboriginal voices as living traditions, and more than collections of artefacts and documents. The authority held by Aboriginal Elders and language speakers comes through very strongly in what you will see when you come to visit.”

Living Language: Country, Culture, Community is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW, supported by the State Library Foundation. www.sl.nsw.gov.au/livinglanguage

For more information, interviews and images, please contact:

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