3CR Binary Busting Broadcast
Sunday 21 March 2021, 2-2.30pm

*Unpronounsable*

**MJ:** It's Unpronounsable.

**AC:** Unpronounsable.

**MJ:** Unpronounsable! Can you say it? Nah.

**AC:** Silence. Radio silence.

**MJ:** It's MJ and AC and Tilde.

**Tilde:** Hi, if you haven't had enough of me today.

**MJ:** Yeah, and baby Keren might chime in. We're here for the next half hour, just to yak about language, and expressing gender through language, and the issues with other structures such as grammar and people's shared understandings while navigating that. And it's pretty cool to be yakking about that after some great discussions about other pretty full-on oppressive systems, with the prison system and also the health system and people navigating through that. So it'll be a bit more light-hearted maybe, but still kind of on-theme. So yeah.

**AC:** Let's bust this binary broadcast. No wait, we're not a binary broadcast! We're the opposite of that.

**Tilde:** We're an analogue broadcast.

**AC:** It's very analogue.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** If anyone's been into the studio, it is a very analogue studio. We are not binary at all here.

**MJ:** 10110. So just to situate us, I don't know if people can imagine, but we've got – we're in a studio festooned by streamers. It's really beautiful, pink and blue and white.

**AC:** You have to kind of go through a rainbow shower to get into the studio.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** I feel like we've really taken over the space.

**Tilde:** Yeah, it's incredible.

**MJ:** So we were talking a bit about, I guess, how language works, maybe English and other languages, and also kind of creative languages as well, such as in fiction and so forth. But maybe I could kick over to you, AC, because you mentioned a couple of things you'd been reading?

**AC:** Yeah, I mean, when you first suggested this broadcast, it really struck for me, I think, a lot of my understandings and just how I interact with the world happens through fiction, and a lot of stuff that I consume, and a lot of stuff that I write and things. That's how I understand myself and how I relate to the world, and so yeah, I started thinking about fiction and gender. And so most recently it was reading this book called Gender Queer by – a comic book by Maia Kobabe, and in that book, it's a person's autobiographical journey to exploring their gender and coming to terms with being a genderqueer person, and they – e uses e/eir/em pronouns, and I like – I just – like, it really resonated for me. I think it's a great way to have that sort of agender, non-gendered approach to language, but I just never hear anyone using them.

**MJ:** Yeah. So maybe it'd be cool to have a round of what pronouns we use and how we came to choose them, if people want to talk about that?

**Tilde:** Sure, yeah, I'll go ahead. Yeah, so I use she/her pronouns, and I haven't been on a very long journey with that. I kinda went from he/him to, like, they/them for a while, and then I think I really settled in the she/her once I heard it a few times and just had, you know, gender euphoria. I was like, 'Oh, this feels fucking great.' Like, so yeah, that's kind of where I've landed. But yeah, I think using the they/them in the wild when I was, like, questioning my gender, and it's like, 'Oh, maybe I'm not entirely cisgender,' was really helpful in just giving me, like, the space to kind of say, like, 'maybe,' and there's some ambiguity there, and then, yeah, to start experimenting with things. I think, like, going through the they/them was a really useful thing in figuring out how I like to be referred to.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Yeah. Generally I use they/them pronouns, and I feel like that was – that's the kinda default as a nonbinary person. I think particularly in Naarm, in Melbourne, in this time, that's – if you're nonbinary, then – I mean, obviously there is also people who use she/her and he/him if they're nonbinary, but a lot of people use they/them. Yeah, and I'm just – yeah, as I say, there's this whole other world of more pronouns that are out there that I really want to explore, and yeah.

**Tilde:** It's kind of interesting how they/them is kind of turning into a noun sometimes. Like, you know, talking about 'the they/thems'.

**AC:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** Like, you know, 'they are a they/them'. You know, like, instead of saying 'a nonbinary person', it's kind of almost a gender in itself sometimes.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** And I'm glad you mentioned the location that we're discussing language within, because obviously we're broadcasting from Wurundjeri land, and that's another layer, you know, of colonial history on top, will be the language, the kind of colonisation of language, and I think, yeah, it is all in a context, isn't it? And this is the context that we're building our own language within.

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** The colonial context.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Yeah, and gender is just like, such this massive hammer that's used as part of colonisation to smash people's identity into shape, the shape that is expected of a, you know, English colony.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** Yeah. So, yeah, myself, I think I'm kind of still not – I don't know if I'll ever be settled. I don't know if anyone will be settled. You know, identity is fluid, I think, and we might have lots of different phases that we go through, but for myself, I've probably settled on 'any pronouns'. That's sort of what I'm at. Even my name, I'm kind of like, 'any name'. And I initially kind of – it's hard for me to tell, because I started off accepting she pronouns because I was born in a female body and people, you know, refer to 'she', and —

**AC:** 'Female body', quotation marks.

**MJ:** Yeah. I'm feeding a baby, couldn't even do the air quotes.

**AC:** I know. In a radio, they can't hear the quotes anyway, unfortunately.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Sorry to interrupt.

**MJ:** Yeah, sorry, no, no.

**AC:** You're doing an amazing job, yeah.

**MJ:** I don't know. But I think, yeah, it sort of heckled with me, you know, and then it was really interesting going through pregnancy and childbirth and that whole, like, new parenthood, with, like, you know, moms groups and like – I don't know why I did an American accent there, but it always becomes an 'o', you know? In those sort of contexts, like, 'soccer moms', you know, you're not gonna say 'mum'. But yeah, like, you know, everything starts with 'm', it seems like. You know, 'maternity' and 'motherhood' and all of these things which didn't make sense to me, and I think the word – like, the pronoun 'she' also didn't really fit. So I think there was a period where I was like, 'Oh, they,' you know, as in, like, the thought that, sort of, more fit within my experience as nonbinary and not really feeling the distinction, you know, between either male, female, kind of distinction. But yeah, even that, like, it's like, it didn't seem like I wanted to decide that either. It didn't really make the whole – the whole spectrum of the options just seemed limiting.

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** But I'm curious why eir/em/er pronouns kinda appeals to you, AC.

**AC:** Well, e/em/eir.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Because it's just like cutting off the first letter or second – first and second letter of he/him, she/her, et cetera, et cetera.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Well, even they/them, blah blah blah. It's just cutting it off and it's getting rid of it.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** And when I think about it, I think they/them, and it may be the same for you, it really worked for me when I was questioning stuff, and this is for me. It's like, they/them is what you use when you don't know somebody's gender. If you're like, 'Oh, I found their wallet on the ground. I'll have to try and get hold of them,' et cetera, et cetera. That's a way of saying, 'I don't know what the gender is.' And I think for me it's like I'm just moving to this place where it's like, no, I really – like, this isn't me going through a phase, I'm not questioning stuff, it's like, I'm very settled in being a nonbinary person. And that's brought me into the sort of, yeah, thinking about e/er – I'll have to work on it though. E/er/em.

**MJ:** Yeah, yeah.

**AC:** But yeah, definitely it just struck me that we just – we're moving from the two binaries, you know, systems of pronouns to, like, a third one, which feels amazing and liberating, but, like, how – it would be awesome to be able to really expand that to, yeah, the whole world of gender pronouns.

**Tilde:** I think that's a really good point. Like, we don't just want to establish, like, a tertiary system instead of a binary system and just have, like, okay, now we have a third gender with, like, establishing yet another strict gender role —

**MJ:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** — that needs to be overcome by another set of people.' Like, yeah.

**MJ:** Mm. It almost – I also wondered whether, it's the sort of difference between, like, 'gender' – this is air quotes – 'neutral', as in, sort of, neutralising, almost invisibilising the gender, versus, like, gender creation. Is that kind of what you're getting at? As in, sort of, creating more within the spectrum of gender with our language, rather than making it kind of a blank?

**AC:** I think it's like, creating language to better reflect gender.

**MJ:** Yeah, yeah.

**AC:** Because I think the gender just, I don't know. It's just out there. Like, there's so much gender in the world! And there's also, like, agender as well, which I feel also a – what's the word?

**MJ:** Affinity with?

**AC:** Affinity with, yeah, at times more strongly and less at other times. And it's like, there's just so much gender out there that, yeah, going from binary to tertiary, as you say, it's just not gonna cut it. We need to just, like —

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Let's blow this thing up. But we talked about – in the lead-up to this, you were talking a bit about gendered language over different languages.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** And I'm really keen to hear more about that.

**MJ:** Yeah, so English is the language I grew up speaking. Both of my parents, English is their common language, but I've always been fascinated by languages other than English, and I've learned a bunch, and my cultural history has a couple of languages in it as well, Tamil and Sinhala, which I speak to lesser extents, but even in my family there's other languages in my home family as well. And I've experienced just, like, moments of 'oh!' with learning the differences between English and other languages, so I'll just give you a couple examples, and maybe you can bounce off those.

So for example, with pronouns, I mean, we're talking about the tertiary in English. Well, there's other languages that already have a tertiary sort of system, potentially, and then others that don't – have sort of a gender-neutral language. So, you know, Mandarin would have 'tā' (他) for both. They don't – they just have one personal pronoun for the secondary person. You refer to, like, them. There's no other word. I'm struggling with translation. It's already hard.

But yeah, I'll give a personal experience from when I travelled to meet my mates in Croatia, and I met a bunch of their friends, and I had a baby with me then, and everyone asked me, you know, 'Oh, what's her name?' Because the word 'baby', the noun 'baby' has a feminine form in Croatian, and so that's – and people just could ask, you know, 'What's her name?' They didn't mean anything about the gender of the child. It was a sentence that they could just say, whereas in English we don't have that sentence. You can just say – people often find themselves having to say, 'Oh, what – is your baby a boy or a girl?' And I think partly because they then what to say, 'What is his name?' or 'What is her name?' And I feel like that gender-neutral language is quite powerful, because it allows people to not really fixate on gender identity with all their interactions. They can just go, 'Oh, what's their name?' You know, and if that's, like, in the common parlance, I think that would be really cool if people just had that off the tip of their tongue, the way, like, in Croatia they'd say, you know, 'What's her name?' Like, they don't really mean anything about the gender of the a child, and that seemed kind of empowering.

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** Mm. But then, yeah, it also led me thinking, like, the language that I am familiar with, say. Because I was thinking about Mandarin a lot, and then I realised, hang on: Sinhala, which I'm more familiar with, has the same kind of neutral thing. You can say 'mama' (මම), 'oya' (ඇය), 'aya' (එය) – like, 'them', you know, whoever. And I was like, hang on, that doesn't really free you at all. Like, it's the gender constructs. Even the language is part of it. Like, there's more to – it's a social structures that kind of bind.

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** But then, if the language has those social structures embedded in in it, then you have to, like, break the language to have the language work for you.

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** Does that make sense?

**AC:** Yeah. And before we were talking about breaking language, and that idea of being like, 'Yeah, my pronouns.' There was a while when I was like – people were like, 'What gender are you?' Like, I would have these discussions with people, and I'd be like, 'I really – like, my gender is tofu' for a while, and my gender was, like, my flannel shirt.

**Tilde:** That's a strong gender, I think.

**AC:** I think so too, yeah.

**Tilde:** Yeah, flannel.

**AC:** I liked – I really like the – I reckon tofu's really nonbinary. Like, it can be sweet, it can be sour, you can change the texture. It's just all kinds of things. And that was that real sense of just, like, dressing in gender every day. Yeah, but not – if somebody off the street said to me what your gender is, and I said 'tofu', it might not make sense without me having a 40-minute conversation with them. So I think, yeah, we talked about breaking – talking about it as a collective is how we use language in different creative ways.

**MJ:** Yeah, and I guess, like, the tofu gender is a really good example, because, like, sometimes you might even have to discuss what is meant by gender to start off with, let alone what tofu means, you know?

**Tilde:** I mean, like, 'gender' is a word we've borrowed from French, right? And it kind of just means 'genre' as well.

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** Mm!

**Tilde:** Like, it's just a type of thing, like a horror movie or an action movie or a bio-drama or whatever.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** So already it's started to describe a whole range of different characters and flavours, and it's kind of just been boiled down to just these two, you know, supposedly sex-based categories.

**AC:** Yeah, and it was so interesting when you were talking about having that language with a kid and then not having to, like, think about – like, gender not having to come into the conversation. It's almost like we get to this point, and then you can't go any further until you know the gender of the person in order to continue speaking.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** It's really, like, yeah.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** It has a hold of the language.

**MJ:** Yeah, it's just like pronouns, and there's a pragmatism about it as well. Like, if you decide to kind of go, 'Okay, let's not use pronouns,' which we can – we can just, you know, have – and some people prefer no pronouns, right? So you'd be AC, and you'd always be AC in the sentences. You'd be – your name would be – there'd be nothing, I mean, standing in the place of your name, which is what a pronoun is. It's something that stands in the place. So 'this is my cup, I'm gonna lift it to my lips,' you know?

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** And I don't know about Australian sign language, but the little I know about New Zealand sign language is that pronouns are locations within space. So if you would say, you know, 'my friend', and you just point, and there's six potential spots outside your, sort of, the square of your face, like, up to the left, or up to the side, or down to the left, and that would be the spot. And it's actually really efficient! And that's what we're trying to do with pronouns: to go, okay, this person or this concept I'm talking about – *bloop* – then we blop it in there. You know? I'll blop it in now when I say 'it' or whatever, or the topic or whatever, then you know what the thing is, you know? And that's how we kind of build up language, and that's really useful as well, you know?

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** And having that ability to use pronouns is super useful. I don't know why I'm suddenly a big pronoun advocate, but —

**AC:** You're very pro-pronouns.

**MJ:** Pro-pronouns. Any anti-noun? Anti-anti-noun? Well, yeah, I dunno. It's sort of – there's this thing between, you know, expression, self-expression, and then, like, similar to clothing. You know, how do you express within language, and then how are you read, and then what are the practical things? Like, if I wanted to wear, like, a massive – you know, if I was a peacock, that would be difficult if I'm also trying to get through a small door. You know?

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** It's just what I'm wearing might actually have practical impacts on what I'm able to do or how I'm able to move, and I think language has those things as well. So it's the politics and the practicality.

**AC:** Do you think in that analogy —

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** — so your costume is your pronoun, or potentially your gender, and is the door, like, what society constructs for us to walk through?

**MJ:** Yeah!

**AC:** Especially to get places.

**MJ:** Exactly. I'll give an example. Like, there's a trend now and an expectation, I think for a lot of organisations that they would ask all staff to put pronouns at the bottom of their signatures, which is really cool on one side, but the other side is, like, still very hard, because for some people you might not have a fixed sense, or you might have something that takes a bit more explanation, or you have to now choose something and declare it.

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** You know? And what's the effect of choosing and declaring on the workplaces you work with, and, like, do we now have to become, like, bastions of, like, educational sources for workplaces that might not be —

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** Like, they might have had some growth, but not enough to safely support the workers —

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** — who are being asked to essentially out themselves.

**Tilde:** Totally.

**MJ:** Or hide further. You know, and that's kinda interesting to sort of talk about the implications of, yeah.

**AC:** Yeah. Can we just do a public service announcement to —

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** — all those wonderful cis allies out there who started off with, 'And now we're gonna have a pronoun round.' Especially in a group of strangers, it just blows my mind the number of times where I walk into a group of, like, dozens of people who I don't know, and they're like, 'We're gonna do a pronoun round,' and I sit there and I think, 'Cool, I'm either going to have to out myself as nonbinary in this group, not knowing whether there's any other trans or nonbinary people in the group, or I'm gonna have to pretend to be cis.' Like, you're just making me make a decision on the spot, and it's – yeah, it can be terrifying, and it can just put you off-balance for – yeah.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** It's not a great time. Like, my preference is to be like, 'Let's do an introductory round and share what you want to about yourself,' and then for me I can – I'm reading the group, and I can decide to say my pronouns or not.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** I think so. Like, a lot of people say, like, 'Share, you know, anything you think relevant.'

**AC:** Mm.

**Tilde:** It might be your pronouns, or where you work, or whatever it is.

**AC:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** But, like, you give people some options. You know, like, I think it is important to normalise the process of saying 'these are my pronouns', because, you know, there's a lot of cis people who just have no idea what it even is. They've forgotten —

**MJ:** They don't even know they're cis yet.

**Tilde:** Yeah. Yeah, right, so, but there is this extraordinary burden on trans people in organisations to do this, like, educational labour. You know, and it's for our own wellbeing, but it's often just because no-one else is gonna do it for us.

**AC:** Yeah.

**MJ:** So can I ask you more, AC, on that topic?

**AC:** Okay, sure.

**MJ:** Of, like, thinking of group situations, and thinking about – you're considering e/em/eir?

**AC:** Yes.

**MJ:** I mean, I don't know how far along it is progressed.

**AC:** It's literally, like, last week, but yeah.

**MJ:** All right, yeah.

**AC:** Okay, cool, let's go with it.

**MJ:** No, like, but imagine in – like, do you think about those spaces when you consider your own pronoun choices?

**AC:** Yeah. Well, I think there is – and I think there is something that is happening a lot more, which is great, is people having, like, multiple pronouns. Like, you say 'any pronoun', and you also have people who are like, 'yeah, they/them or he/him' or whatever, and I think that's great. Like, and maybe that's where I'll take it. Maybe it's like, 'they/them or e/er/em,' whichever you are comfortable with using.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Yeah, maybe that's where it's going.

**MJ:** That's interesting. So, sort of, the fact that a choice of pronouns is becoming more common, is creating that space for less common pronouns to kind of get eased in by people who might want to try or might want to transition to a different pronoun, and you're just sort of creating that conceptual space for that to happen in society?

**AC:** Mm, yeah. Yeah, it's good. It feels good, and I think, yeah – yes.

**Tilde:** I mean, that's something I've seen some really poor discourse on the internet about, is like about, you know, 'cis people, should they be allowed to use they/them pronouns' or whatever, and I think, like, absolutely. Everyone should have the opportunity to experiment like that, and make it very normal that, like, 'I have different pronouns now. You know, I'm trying something out.' You know, not only because that gives people the room to do the experimentation they do need to do to, like, potentially come out or whatever, but also, like, I think it's just a really fundamental part of breaking down really strict gender roles. It's like, it's okay, you know, if you're a cis guy and you want to be called they/them this week. That's absolutely fine, because we hate strict gender roles and we do not wish to uphold them.

**AC:** Mm.

**Tilde:** Yeah, and it feels weird that that's, like, a point that needs to be strenuously made sometimes.

**MJ:** Well, that's the whole interesting thing about language, right? Like, because language has power, and it is a tool, and so there can be discussion of what should we use this language for. So you'd be advocating for they/them perhaps to be used to bust the binary.

**Tilde:** Mm.

**MJ:** You know, and bust traditional binary concepts of gender. Whereas others might say that they/them language might actually – the tool for that language, that purpose should be to make a safe space for people to express their nonbinary, you know, and that's – those are two quite different purposes, and maybe oppositional.

**Tilde:** Mm.

**MJ:** And that's kind of the thing about language, is often we do kind of have these sort of unarticulated debates with how we use language. Because, you know, we all use the language that we choose for the purposes, whether we know it or not, for our own purposes, and we're kind of, like, trying to have this negotiation of – it can sometimes feel like, 'which one's winning', you know?

**Tilde:** Yeah.

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** And maybe it doesn't matter because – well, it's harder in the internet – context of the internet, because it's global, you know? Whereas if you have, like, smaller communities of language, there's not a sense – like, you could kind of accommodate a plurality of purposes for our words, whereas, like, sometimes on the internet it feels like you have to choose. What are we gonna use this language for? We've gotta have this consensus.

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** A global consensus on the language.

**Tilde:** Which itself is a reproduction of, like, binarism, right?

**MJ:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** It's like, it's either this or it's this, and it can't be a quantum both kind of situation.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Mm.

**Tilde:** You know, and I think, like the interview we had earlier today with Keith Quayle, he was talking about how, like, in prison, you know, colonially the division of gender is there to create, you know, like all of what colonial thought does, is like strict categories to then rank in a hierarchy, you know?

**AC:** Mm.

**Tilde:** And so, yeah, all the more for this kind of quantum both/and kind of approach, I think.

**AC:** Schrödinger's gender.

**MJ:** I like it, yeah!

**AC:** Yeah, yeah.

**MJ:** For a gender.

**Tilde:** Gender is possibly dead.

**AC:** Yeah!

**MJ:** We start talking about gender and we can learn about gender.

**Tilde:** Yeah, I guess we don't want to observe gender to find out? I dunno.

**AC:** But it's really beautiful to be back at 3CR and to have this space and to be around people. I just met Tilde today, who's an amazing human being.

**MJ:** Yeah.

**AC:** Done an incredible job on today's broadcast.

**MJ:** Yeah, she's festooned the station.

**AC:** Yeah, what a heroine.

**Tilde:** Oh, no, I didn't actually! I came in and it was like this.

**MJ:** Oh, okay. Well, she caused it to be —

**AC:** I think it was Sassy from the —

**MJ:** Oh, really?

**AC:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** Yeah, Sassy from Behind Closed Doors —

**AC:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** — but also Karina as well.

**AC:** Yeah, yeah.

**Tilde:** Just running around, so thanks.

**AC:** But at least just do it for 3CR. Like, we can broadcast. Let's create a community of language which is just, like, screwing over colonial constructs and categories and the idea that you have to have a category that you tick, yeah?

*[Baby Keren blowing raspberries]*

**AC:** Yeah!

**MJ:** Yeah.

**Tilde:** Yeah.

**AC:** Nice.

**MJ:** Well, I think that's a really good note to end on, because this is the formation of language, right? It happens with the formation of ideas, and I reckon if you sort of hang out with kids, which I happen to do a lot at the moment, having three at home, you kind of – you can really see how society shapes ideas and how our environment shapes language, and from our basic kind of sense.

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** So yeah, I think having that sort of experience that we can tap into that build different communities of language and thoughts, it's good.

**AC:** Mm.

**MJ:** Shout-out to 3CR. I think it's time to wrap up.

**AC:** Oh, no!

**MJ:** Let's do a little end song. It's over! Yay!

**Tilde:** That's was Unpronounsable!

**AC:** Unpronouns, pronounsable!

**MJ:** Pronounsable!