



# SPACE SAND LIGHT

Felicity Castagna, Eda Gunaydin,  
Sheila Ngoc Pham and Marian Abboud



# SPACE AND LIGHT

Creative Responses  
to Architecture, Libraries  
and UTS

Felicity Castagna, Eda Gunaydin  
and Sheila Ngoc Phạm

Cover photo by Marian Abboud in  
collaboration with Vicki Van Hout



Library



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## About Space and Light Felicity Castagna and Marian Abboud

Over and between many lockdowns from 2021-2022 visual artist Marian Abboud and writers Felicity Castagna, Eda Gunaydin and Sheila Ngoc Phạm set out to create a unique, collaborative response to the architecture and space of the UTS Library as part of the Creative in Residence program.

Abboud is a multi-disciplinary artist who works across various technologies to create projected images that feed into performance, installation and site-specific works. Castagna, Gunaydin and Phạm are award-winning writers from a writing collective focused on cross-disciplinary art called The Finishing School. The Finishing School and Abboud have previously collaborated on research-led installations that are playful, complex and invite audiences to participate in thoughtful and meaningful interactions with art.

During the residency, **Space and Light** engaged with students to respond to Library spaces through creative writing workshops. There was also a series of live ‘performances’ which involved Phạm, Castagna and Gunaydin projecting their research and writing process onto large screens as they each wrote an original piece of Creative Nonfiction exploring their response to both being in the place and researching the history of libraries and urban architecture.

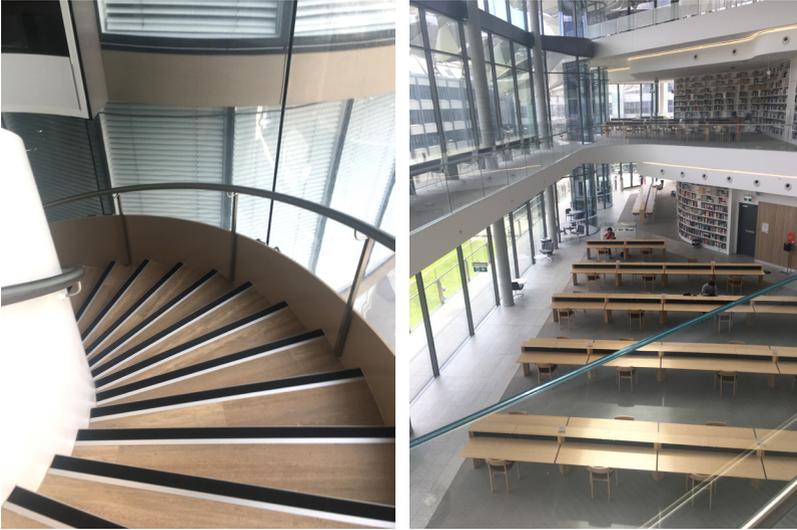


Image 1.1 & 1.2 The Attila Brungs Reading Room (Images by Marian Abboud)

At the same time, Abboud experimented with ways of representing the essays both literally and in their subjects and themes through a variety of visual formats. Abboud has long been known for her extraordinary work in film, multimedia and projection, which were the mediums she originally intended to work in for this project. Abboud spent many hours projecting images and text onto various fabrics and walls throughout the Library and even within its basement. Unfortunately, the UTS building is too filled with space and light! Projection just does not show up well in well-lit spaces so Abboud needed to develop other ways of moving forward which drew on both methodologies she had used before and new ways of thinking about installation and text.

This led to Abboud working with her long-time collaborator, choreographer and dancer Vicki Van Hout. A graduate of NAISDA Dance College and the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York, Van Hout has performed with major Indigenous dance companies, Bangarra Dance Theatre and the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, later joining forces with Marilyn Miller as a founding member of Fresh Dancers. For this project Van Hout read the essays and experienced the unique architecture and feel of the building for herself. Her response to



Image 1.3, 1.4 & 1.5 Experiments with the Library space (by Marian Abboud)

this was through her body, by dancing and moving within the space. Marian photographed these movements and these images became the basis for both the lenticular postcard that accompanies the work and one layer of the banner which now sits within the helix staircase.

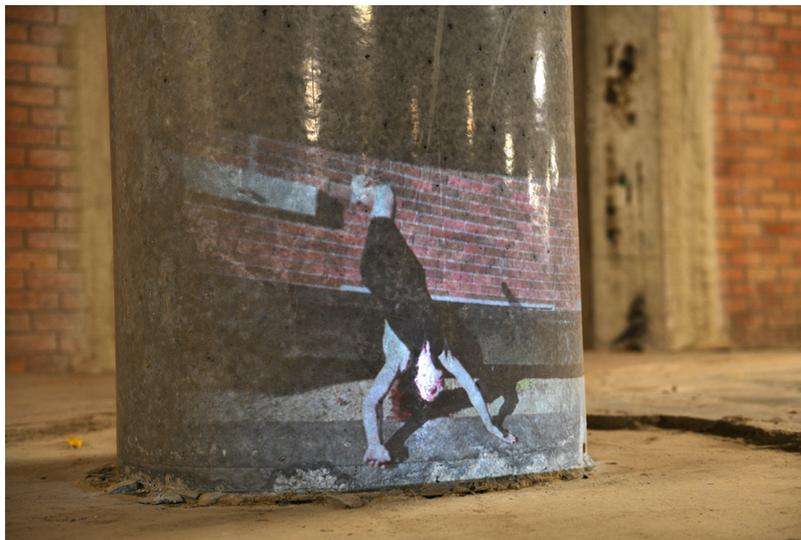


Image 1.6 & 1.7 Projections of Vicki Van Hout (images by Marian Abboud)

After engaging with many other ways of representing the text, Abboud decided the best way to do so was to find the right materials to adhere sentences and fragments of the essays to spaces throughout the Library in playful ways. In consultation with the writers, sections from the essays of Castagna, Gunaydin and Pham were printed on fabric and designed into an installation which saw sentences climb up the large spiralling staircase; sewn into fabrics that fell dramatically between the floors of the UTS Library; and which appeared in smaller form around seats, windows, tables and shelves around the Library. In this way Abboud, Castagna, Pham and Gunaydin sought to create a work which both contained more dramatic moments which occupied large space and quieter bits of text which could be sought out and discovered throughout the Library.

The largest piece of text represented in this artwork was hand sewn onto fabric and is part of the multilayered installation which appears in the centre of the double helix. This text was hand sewn onto fabric by Afrah Al-hakeem *ميكحلا حارفا*, Intesar AL-Zuhairi *يريزلا راصتن* and Lka Aafi *اقلا عافو* and Rafa Radhi *اراضار* from The Seed of Hope Collective. Meeting at Lost in Books/Think+Do Tank in Fairfield, the women discussed the words and their meanings and the design with Abboud over several mornings.



**Image 1.8** The Seed of Hope Collective making the fabric installation (image by Marian Abboud)



Image 1.9 & 1.10 The Seed of Hope Collective making the fabric installation (images by Marian Abboud)

Limited edition lenticular postcards were also printed as part of the project. These postcards feature images of Van Hout on the front side. The back side of the postcard features a wayfinding map which encourages anyone entering the space to navigate it by finding our words and sentences over several floors and in unexpected places.

The results of the investigative and interactive process undertaken to make **Space and Light** produced a site-specific installation which invites consideration of library spaces and the stories from the individuals and communities that inhabit them.

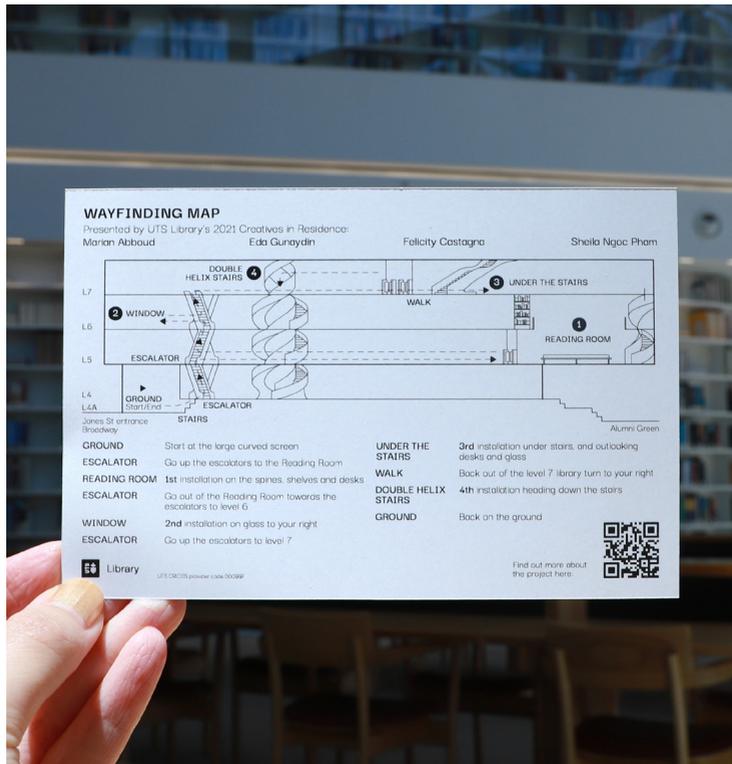


Image 1.11 Postcard back designed by Megan Wong (image by UTS Library)



Image 1.12 Fragments of essays featured as text installations in UTS Library spaces (image by UTS Library)



Image 1.13 Fragments of essays featured as text installations in UTS Library spaces (image by UTS Library)





Image 1.15 Fragments of essays featured as text installations in UTS Library spaces (image by UTS Library)



Image 1.16 Fragments of essays featured as text installations in UTS Library spaces (image by UTS Library)



Image 1.17 Fragments of essays featured as text installations in UTS Library spaces (image by UTS Library)



Image 1.18 Fragments of essays featured as text installations in UTS Library spaces (image by UTS Library)



Image 1.19 & 1.20 Fragments of essays featured as text installations in UTS Library spaces (image by UTS Library)



Image 1.21 Fabric installation by The Seed of Hope Collective hanging in the double helix staircase (image by UTS Library)

## Fragments Towards an Essay

### Felicity Castagna

I'm interested in structure – the structure of a building but also the structure of an essay and the structure of a story too. I wonder how a building can be a story and a story can be a kind of a building. I want to build a story that's physical and I want to climb up its stairs and sit inside.

#### **I Am A Building**

This building, this library, is a half natural/half artificial landform. Inside here we are half wild/half locked in. Seated. But also suspended in outer space: In a building. Many metres up in the sky staring out a window that both blocks us from the world and is our entry into it. We can be on the inside and the outside simultaneously. The structure of this building, the windows that draw our attention to the city beyond and outside make us aware of our place as the city is forced into our sight: We are above the city, beyond it and also a part of it.

Those green spaces, manicured to make them look wild and untamed, are a memory, an anecdote, a trick: They put us in the place we were before structure - out in the wilderness. They say: Look. A bird, a beehive, a pool of running water, a tree. You are not here. Not stuck. You've walked into your imagination. You are free.

#### **Light, Light, Light!**

All this light recalls a memory: Something about searching for a window to read a book next to in a library whose walls were much older than this. Contemporary architectural technology makes

an unlimited number of windows possible. So many windows we are permanently bathed in light. I wonder how that light can be a force, can be a change in our way of thinking. A window is a disruption in reinforced concrete: In this library it is a disruption across our screens; something that disfigures a man over there whose face is half in the dark, an interruption to someone's thoughts as I watch them look up and their thoughts get sucked into the light and refracted.

The light is a net that catches everyone in this space and holds them all together. But those windows, this light, they leave nowhere to hide. There is less space to find protection, to hide. And light can be violent. It can displace and disfigure. I watch a woman look through the window and squint, her face turns into something like fabric, an infinitely lined piece of fabric that has been screwed up and shoved in the back of a drawer.

Light can be violent. It can displace and disfigure. It can blind.

## Voice

The Architect Frank Gehry called a building a polyphonous space – a site for many voices speaking at the same time. Every architectural choice in this building is intense and specific. It has something different to say. In this place metal speaks to concrete, speaks to glass and glass and glass: A row of desks sits in the reading room, framed by light and says stop and think for a while. On the rooftop a bench points towards the city beyond where people's lives are written into the squares of endless apartments and says look...look the past and the present and future are here and you're a part of that.

This staircase starts a conversation about aspiration. It says dream big:



Image 2.1 Helix stairs taken (image by Felicity Castagna)

That conversation is interrupted by the vast emptiness of another space which reminds you that you are small after all. I catch two people holding hands discreetly across a table. Someone else scrolls down their computer screen, not reading the words that pop up, a girl who looks too young to be here pulls chunks out of her hair, a man in headphones walks by and shouts wow! to no one. There is so much here, so much happening all the time. It's hard to make sense of how we all connect to this space we are sharing.

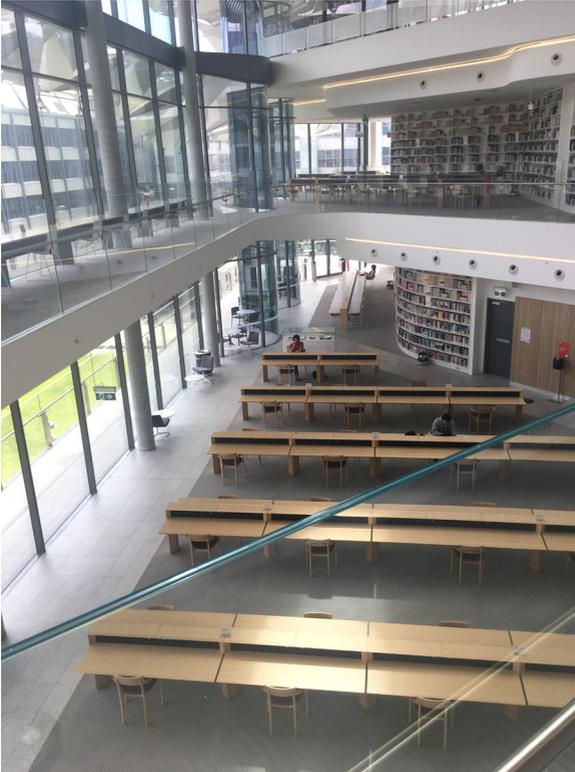


Image 2.2 Level four quiet space (image by Felicity Castagna)

The building tells one story, the students tell another. Everyone here is busy but the building, with all this stark white and silent air is designed to make time slow down. What are the students in these spaces actually doing? I imagine this: Someone travels up the escalators into a brilliant white and all the business of the outside world becomes a dull hum, another person rips open a book, another is lost because they want to be, someone hides in a corner, lets out a breath they've been holding onto for too long today and this space becomes a place where the imaginary, memory and aspiration collide.

## Hostile Architecture

### Eda Gunaydin

The best and easiest way to get off the phone when you don't want to keep speaking is to remark, *Sorry, I'm actually just in a library right now*. The discipline it imposes must be respected.

There are only two places on earth where it is valid to tell someone to shut the fuck up and come off looking like a good guy, and that is in the quiet carriage of a train, or in the library. These are spaces that turn us all into police, but the order we are endeavouring to maintain is silence, and the peace we are endeavouring to maintain is silence.

In my most stressed moments, some of which have been spent in libraries – I wrote my honours thesis on Level 7 of the University of Sydney's Fisher Library, for example, across the course of two of the most unpleasant months of my life – I would be willing to happily pick up a night-stick and bludgeon to death anyone who dared raise their voice above a whisper. *Take your phone call in the stairwell, you little cunt*, I would think to myself, peeling a mandarin with tiny, furtive little movements, meant to convey my fury. Were you raised by wild animals? But of course I have been shushed many times, once had a complaint lodged against me and was told off by a librarian for speaking too animatedly with a peer. Possibly the issue with libraries is that they make us believe that we are the only people to exist: sometimes they work against sociality.

A line from the University of Sydney's student newspaper *Honi Soit* reads: "Fisher Library guards to be armed with military surplus weapons," a reference to the over-zealous way that access to the library is regulated by security personnel who check everybody's

student cards to ensure that no ordinary person is lurking about. A public research institution that works against the public: preventing one from using a library the way they were intended to be used, as places to look things up, prepare and certify documents, access knowledge, information about current and recent events.

*You don't need to install spikes, I've already got a stick up my arse.*  
*You don't need to install spikes, I'm already doubled over.*  
*You don't need to install spikes, you've already driven us away.*

I'll just book a desk for the year 2069, and await your further instruction. There are limits on the occupancy of meeting rooms lately: one. We never disagree.

The following appeared in the Northern Star newspaper in 1844:

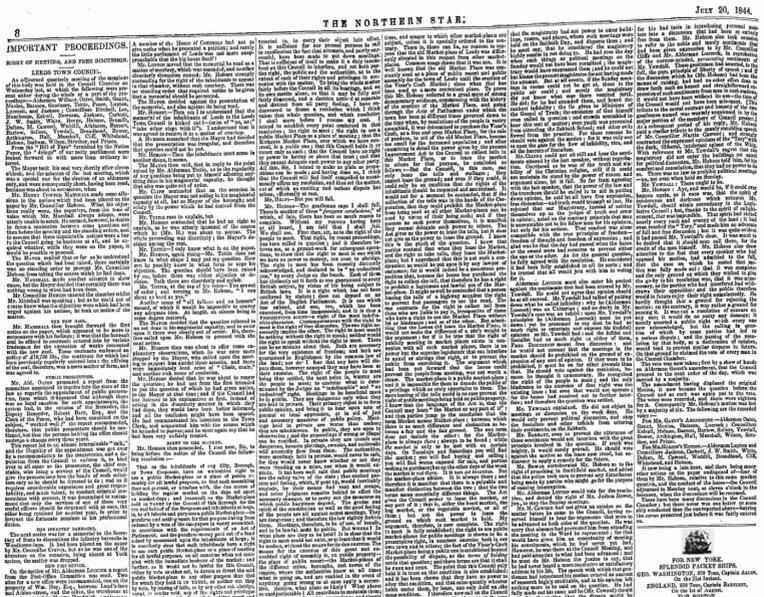


Image 3.1 The Northern Star 1844 (image by Eda Gunaydin)

Contemporaneous with the right to meet is the right of free discussion. The one right necessarily implies the other. The right to meet would be nothing without the right to speak; neither would the right to speak without the right to meet.

Sometimes spaces silence us: obstructions come in every form. In a particular kind of room it can feel impossible to speak. One feels over-exposed: violently lit up. *Keep your voice down. Use your indoor voice. You want to be very careful about what you say to me right now.* These are the types of statements that are very hard to take back. In such spaces one becomes accustomed to complaints falling on deaf ears – but no one would yell if they were heard at speaking volume.

Much of this knowledge here feels unwanted: I must learn it so I learn it. The spaces we wish to act on act on us. At most I could change something by breaking something. Gus Guthrie said in a speech to students in 1986, of the UTS Tower, that “we have a tower, but no one could claim it is an ivory one.”

Here is a list of libraries that put Stuttgart to shame: The Old Horseman, Sandy Lane, Royton, Oldham, UK, where a Jacobin library once stood and was almost demolished by loyalists in 1794.

The Bibliosol Library started in 2011 during the Occupy Madrid movement.



Image 3.2

Freedom Square Library, Chicago



Image 3.3

## Gezi Park Library



Image 3.4

## Circles

Sara Ahmed writes: “hearing life go on can be a reminder that life goes on.” Go on, then. No, after you. Going up? Yeah. In libraries we are forced to consider others in how we use space, and surrounded by our peers who might otherwise have remained latent and invisibilised: given a sense of the true size of our cohort. Class consciousness, haha. We exist in our own worlds here, but they brush up against each other, create circles that overlap: I wanted to borrow that book, too. How odd that someone else is interested in the same thing as me.

Held up by the fantasy of our own aloneness and of our own privacy. As if no one else exists, students get off in the stacks, get off under and above tables, as if they are the first one(s) to have ever come in a library before. If I pointed a blacklight at any piece of fabric furniture I would learn more than I ever wanted to. That we’re all just one more example of the same oozing teeming thinking flesh; that we all know, or could know, the same things, and want the same things: the selfsame well-lit, quiet space.

## Structure, Grammar, Light Sound

### Sheila Ngọc Phạm

Our history, culture and traditions are expressed by and in our buildings. John Ruskin theorised that architecture stood for memory; we could not remember without it, even if we could still live and worship. We can read our buildings the way we read books. They are a record of the past through its inscriptions, as a recall of the past by its style or character.

So what memories are held by a building such as this, constructed of “glass, bright metal and light?” The building which houses this library follows a way of thinking which spans only a century. During the 1920s in Europe there was an urge to break from the past, a desire for modernism.

The architectural mix in Sydney is more heterogeneous than just about anywhere else. We are continually mourning the destruction of old buildings. We lament the constant change. But this is who we are: we live in a society of willful erasure. Our new buildings distract us from the past which is felt to be shameful (because it is).

Our buildings do not invoke memories. They dazzle us when they are first erected exactly because of this newness, we gasp with delight—and then we never look at them again because there is no provenance, no compelling story (see: capitalism). The buildings come from nowhere, at odds with the natural environment, what we might try to describe as our collective heritage.

In Australia we do not revive the past because we are embarrassed by it. Sometimes migrants – we’re mostly migrants – add neo-gothic and neo-classical touches to their homes, plus other

remnants of the past like our lacquerware and sculptures. But it's seen as poor taste because it is not curated. The ruling classes of Australia would prefer to pretend we were always modern. Our buildings connect us to the history of Western culture, which remains a profound influence in our settler-colonial society.

We can just about ignore all of this as we sit at our black desk typing essays inside the university library we are in residence of, where the natural light does not reach.

Frank Lloyd Wright pushed for freedom through architecture, wondering why we clung "to the grammatical phrases of those ancient methods of construction". If a Roman stone arch and a Greek stone beam are 'grammatical phrases', what are the phrases that make up this building? The narrative which all of these phrases speak to: the idea, again, of how we are breaking from the past. But is this possible? Or even desirable? What is the cost of moving away from the past when we don't know what we are moving towards?

In ancient Baghdad, the famous House of Wisdom contained the world's largest library and brought together scholarship from near and not too far: Islamic, Persian, Greek and Christian scholarship.

Meanwhile, Robert K Logan and Marshall McLuhan, felt that "the library is a physical extension of man's memory, a tool, a medium, and a technology that can be studied like all the other extensions of man's body and psyche." The traditional library, to them, was "a monument to hardware", and we were now in an age of software. This is true. They also suggested, rightly, that the content of a library is not its books but its users. So what will this library become through its use?

This library is always busy. There are always people here. More people than ever are reading and in communication otherwise, even if it's through screens.

We used to joke about killing forests when we photocopied on reams of paper, because we had enough environmental consciousness to know that what we were doing involved the felling of trees and that this was a problem, but we still did it. This 'forest' of books lives inside glass, steel and concrete, the way objects in a museum are displayed and perfectly

preserved inside glass and protected from the glare of natural light. Even though the future of books is uncertain, they are the one part of the building which preserves our connection to memory and history—which is where the answers to the future also lay.

In 'Indigenous Architecture for Tribal Cultural Centers', Sam Olbekson suggests that "libraries cannot replace our storytellers and museums cannot replace our elders for keeping our traditions alive. We should focus less on memorizing our traditions than fully immersing ourselves into and actually living out our culture." I think about this all the time as I try to read to my daughter from bilingual books, but don't speak enough language in our day-to-day life.

Each of us inside the library right at this moment embodies memories as well. We are built as a library is, with grammar and structure and sound and light.

## Marian Abboud



Marian Abboud is a multi-disciplinary Western Sydney-based artist. She works across various technologies to create projected images that feed into performance, installation and site-specific works. Marian creates complex narratives from engaging with the community or artists to build multi-layered works.

Marian graduated from the University of Western Sydney with a Bachelor of Visual Communication in 2002. She has exhibited extensively locally and nationally and has collaborated on many dance and performance based projects. She is currently working on various projects across a broad range of disciplines including photography, film, performance, dance and public art. Marian is currently working as an artist educator at the Art Gallery of NSW.

Marian has a research-based practice that explores sites in Western Sydney. Her investigation is one of challenging perceptions of land in which we inhabit, complex historical/cultural narratives and social changes continue to form the basis of her research.

## Felicity Castagna



Felicity Castagna has published four novels for adults and young adults including her most recent book, *Girls In Boys' Cars* (2021, Pan Macmillan) which received The Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Writing for Young Adults and is now being adapted for stage and screen. Her previous novel, *No More Boats* (2017, Giramondo) was a finalist in the 2018 Miles Franklin Literary Awards and is published internationally by Europa. Her novel, *The Incredible Here and Now* (2014, Giramondo), received The Prime Minister's Award for Young Adult Literature as well as the IBBY Award, and was a finalist in several other awards including the CBCA Book of the Year Award.

She has worked with artists in many different fields to produce cross-artform collaborations for Sydney Festival, The National Theatre of Parramatta, The Four Winds Festival, Sydney Opera House and many other places as well as with The Finishing School. Her creative non-fiction and critical responses to literature and art are published both in Australia and internationally on platforms such as *Sydney Review of Books*, *Electric Literature*, *LitHub*, *Griffith Review* and ABC radio and television. You can find her at [www.felicitycastagna.com](http://www.felicitycastagna.com)

## Eda Gunaydin



Eda Gunaydin is a Turkish-Australian essayist whose writing explores class, race, diaspora and Western Sydney. She has been a finalist for a Queensland Literary Award and the Scribe Non-Fiction Prize. Her debut essay collection *Root & Branch* (2022) is out with NewSouth Publishing. She has obtained numerous shortlistings, awards and fellowships, and was the 2018-2019 Dinny O’Hearn fellow with the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne.

## Sheila Ngọc Phạm



Sheila Ngọc Phạm is a writer, editor and radio producer working across public health, media and the arts. She has written for a wide range of literary and mainstream publications such as *The Guardian*, *Griffith Review* and *The New York Times*. She was a finalist for the 2021 Pascall Prize for Arts Criticism with her essay, 'Coming of Age in Cabramatta'. Her most recent essay 'Western Sydney is dead, long live Western Sydney!' was commissioned by Urban Theatre Projects and published on *Sydney Review of Books*. She is currently Contributing Editor for *diaCRITICS*, the journal of the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network, a US-based non-profit.

Sheila has previously held digital and editorial roles at the ABC, as well as producing features and stories for ABC Radio National. She co-produced *Tongue Tied and Fluent*, a five-part series exploring multilingualism in Australia, which was awarded an ABU-UNESCO Together for Peace Media Award 2021. Her most recent audio co-production is the *My Bilingual Family* podcast for SBS, which launched on International Mother Language Day 2022.

Sheila lives on Dharug land with her husband and two children.

## About The Finishing School

The Finishing School is a collective of women writers dedicated to creative excellence and exploration. We are inspired by and responsive to the communities and concerns of western Sydney, where we are based, but our gaze extends far beyond its psychogeographic boundaries. We have a radical commitment to making honest work. We individually pursue our own projects as well as collaborate with other writers and artists on literary projects, cross-artform installations and performances. Our work is guided by curiosity and informed by the complex and multifaceted world we live in. We value self-reflection and critique, as well as deep listening to our contemporaries and our elders. We value process and not just product, and believe experimentation is valuable in itself to work out how to express our concerns. We are driven to tell stories which create connections, propel conversations and encourage reflection. We believe ongoing engagement with our communities keeps us accountable and makes us better at what we do. Over the years western Sydney as an idea has become shorthand for many issues in the arts, and literature specifically; as a site it has become a focus for artistic support and amplification. We aim to build on this valuable work by promoting a plurality of voices. Previously we have functioned as a highly successful mentorship program before moving towards being a cross-disciplinary arts collective. You can find us at [www.finishingschoolcollective.com](http://www.finishingschoolcollective.com)



Image 4.1 Fabric installation by The Seed of Hope Collective hanging in the double helix staircase (image by UTS Library)

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For more information about the Creative in Residence program, please visit [lib.uts.edu.au](http://lib.uts.edu.au)



Library



