



The Language of Life

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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

Sarah Maple's 20/20 residency at Bradford Museums and Galleries has led to the production of two new commissions. These bodies of work form a continuation of Maple's motivation to draw from her own family history to convey the experience of immigrant communities who have made a substantial contribution to multicultural Britain since the end of the Second World War. They also respond to the collections and the buildings of Bradford Museums and Galleries, offering a dialogue with items and objects that represent the past and histories that have remained silent or been understood within a defined narrative.

'Mother Tongue' (2024) is a short film that exposes the impact and sense of disconnection that can be felt by second- and later-generation immigrants to Britain who have not learned the language of their parents. Informed by Maple's own personal experience as a woman with Indian heritage from the Punjab, the film also incorporates the stories of people whose parents, grandparents or relatives before them had settled in Bradford. Putting a call out on Bradford Museums and Galleries' social media channels, Maple asked if people would be interested to speak to her about their relationship with their mother tongue or of not learning to speak it and so struggling to communicate with their parents' families. These initial connections made with Bradford residents led to a series of interviews with individuals who shared Maple's experience, and their anecdotes fed into the narrative of 'Mother Tongue'.

The film engages with the history of Bradford's diverse communities and their documentation, through the Belle Vue Studio archive collection, as migrants to the city in the twentieth century. This is an archive that comprises approximately 17,000 glass negatives and prints made between 1902, when the photographic studio was opened, and 1975, when the business closed. Ten years later the studio was cleared and the archive acquired by Bradford Museums and Galleries. While these portraits show citizens of this particular district in West Yorkshire, taken for passports or to send back to their families overseas, they reflect the developing populations of many other cities in twentieth-century Britain. The nation was changing through migration and the establishment of communities, many of whom were invited from countries that had formerly been ruled by Britain. The 1948 British Nationality Act declared that all Commonwealth citizens could have British passports to work in the UK. The aim was to address a severe post-war labour shortage: the transport network and the National Health Service needed to make substantial increases in their workforces, and the destruction of large areas of major cities resulting from aerial bombing also required

construction workers. In Bradford, as with other northern towns across Yorkshire and Lancashire, mill owners and managers began to look to the Indian sub-continent to meet the local shortfall in textile workers. Many migrants to Britain in the 1950s to 1970s struggled against behaviour from those who believed they did not belong and, for some, striving to fit in led to a disconnect from their family heritage.

'Mother Tongue' takes the format of a Punjabi language resource, focusing on phrases that a visitor to Punjab may need. In the Punjab region of India, Gurmukhi is the official script for written Punjabi. It is commonly regarded as a Sikh script even though Punjab is home to other religious groups, with Sikhs comprising just over 50% of the region's population. In 'Mother Tongue', rather than presenting the letter forms that make up the Gurmukhi script, the Punjabi words appear on the screen using the Roman letter form so that an English reader can understand the sound of the Punjabi phrases as they are spoken and repeated after hearing them in English first.

In places, 'Mother Tongue' reconstructs the formal portraits from the Belle Vue archive in style. Divided into seven sections, the language class is interrupted by scenes featuring a curtain backdrop, similar to many of the archive photos. The words spoken in Punjabi seem to excavate memories and feelings from within a participant named Sarah as she recalls dreams and nightmares. Following Sarah's line of concentration, we become aware of how her thoughts trail away from the subjects of the language class, its phrases exchanged for personal recollections. The words 'I didn't like it when you called the house' appear on the screen. They are followed by the first visual departure from the class in which a brown rotary dial telephone is seen. The classic telephone ring, signalling an incoming call, evokes the mid-to-late twentieth century, as does the domestic appearance of the telephone placed upon a doily on a small wooden table. Next, an arm enters the frame, hesitantly moving towards the receiver and lifting it. We hear a woman's voice, speaking in Punjabi, greeting Sarah with a phrase heard earlier in the language class. Next, there are sentences that only a Punjabi speaker would understand, possibly questions to Sarah who does not answer. The caller is cut off as the receiver is gently replaced. As the arm creeps away from the phone there is a sense of Sarah's discomfort in her inability to respond to the caller in Punjabi.

Returning to the language class for a few pleasant exchanges, Sarah's feeling of remorse is apparent in the words 'I have so many regrets'. The next scene offers an explanation for Sarah's Maple's silence during the phone call, as we see Maple slowly sticking out her tongue and then bending forward to catch it as it falls from her mouth. Her severed tongue, cut off with a sharp edge, lies in her hand. Blood drips from it and from her mouth as she moves her hand to where her tongue is missing. This violent episode, in which Maple is rendered speechless, is a metaphor for what occurs each time she cannot engage in Punjabi conversation. There is a growing sense, at this stage in the narrative, that what has occurred is beyond Maple's control.

The words 'I wish I had learned Punjabi when you were alive' are the next point of departure, following phrases in the Punjabi class about money exchange. Here, Maple's internal dialogue is with her maternal grandmother. She is learning Punjabi now, as an adult, but her grandmother has passed away. The scene that follows depicts Maple's naked feet. Her left foot and ankle are ornately decorated with henna while her right foot is not, but the henna fades until the right foot appears the same as the left. Here Maple makes reference to her dual heritage, half-British and half-Indian Punjabi, representing her feeling that over the years she has lost connection with her Asian side. Maple also contemplates whether that bond to her Indian culture would have been stronger if she had been able to speak Punjabi fluently from childhood, when her grandmother was still alive.

The film returns to the language class with the phrase 'I was born in England' and the question 'Do you speak English?' but this only provokes sadness and leads to Maple's thought that 'Things could have been so different'. In the next interlude from the language class, Maple and her mother walk towards each other and clasp hands. The film captures genuine intimacy between a mother and daughter, revealing the connection between Maple and her mother. Maple's deep love for what her mother has given and passed down to her emphasise her mother as the link to her mother-tongue and to the mother-land that her family left.

The next language class provides phrases about transport that give way to Maple's reminiscence from childhood: 'You were so happy when I asked you about your teeth'. In this peculiar statement, Maple recalls her uncle teaching her how to enquire in Punjabi about her grandmother's toothache. Maple's lasting memory is of the overwhelming sense of delight in her grandmother hearing her speak in Punjabi. In the next two scenes, Maple makes direct reference to the Belle Vue Studio photographs, setting up portraits of herself and her family.

In a scene where she stands alone, Maple wears a red dress and her hair forms an extended plait. Here, Maple is relating to the women in the studio photos and also to her grandmother, wearing some of her grandmother's jewellery. The exaggerated plait forms a circle round her on the floor and then winds up the furniture – a small table bearing a vase depicting peacocks, the national bird of India. The plait is a reference to Maple's memory of how her grandmother wore her hair and that of other female relatives whose long beautiful tresses were neatly plaited. Maple's choice of a fitted contemporary Punjabi outfit allows her to reveal her pregnancy while adding a twenty-first-century element to this fictional portrait.

'I miss you' are the words preceding the next portrait scene in which Maple and her mother are seated either side of the small table that holds the peacock vase and a framed portrait of Maple's grandmother. Maple's daughter is seated on her lap. The portrait depicts four generations of females in Maple's family. Here the group wear matching plain black suits with white shirts, this time referencing the formal garments worn by men in many of the Belle Vue portraits, as well as Maple's own British paternal grandfather. This scene generates a dislocation in time and place. The use of slow-motion conveys stillness while the soundtrack of a distant call to prayer in a busy urban environment offers partial transition to the family's ancestral homeland while underscoring Maple's Muslim heritage.

The Punjabi language class draws to a close with translations for being unable to understand and a request to speak more slowly. The final scene is preceded with the words 'I am ashamed'. We then see Maple wearing the red dress from earlier in the film and a red hijab. This is the first time we hear Maple speaking in the film. She talks in Punjabi accompanied with English subtitles but admits that she wrote her speech in English and had it translated into Punjabi before learning and memorising the statement. This confession, alongside the revelation of her dreams and fantasy of interacting with her grandmother in a way she was never able to, are unique to her personal experience. They stem, however, from the visceral, emphasising how the sense of alienation is so deeply rooted in language and identity, but shown here in reverse to feeling unfamiliar in a foreign land, and instead amongst one's own.

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