



**Functures**  
The Journal for Thematic Dialogue

**24: network**

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*Junctures* encourages discussion across boundaries, whether these are disciplinary, geographic, cultural, social or economic. *Junctures* embraces the long established fields of the humanities, arts, science, law, medicine and philosophy, as well as engaging with the challenges of more recent disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields. Each issue of *Junctures* is organised as a site of encounter around a theme. This allows us to highlight the resonances and disturbances of dialogue. With New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region as a backdrop, but not its only stage, *Junctures* seeks to address the matters which concern us all as we negotiate the contemporary environment.

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Scarlet MacDonald, *Conscious Field*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 1270x1600 mm.

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Scarlet MacDonald, *Conscious Field*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 1270x1600 mm.

Sometimes I step back from my work as if I were you and ask "What is this about, this seemingly incomprehensible flat painted surface?" The answer to me appears vividly clear, but that is because I have been the ever-conscious presence at the end of my brush that has evolved the painting into being. I cannot take you along a simple route, a road toward an answer; no simple sentence would encapsulate the interests that I embody in my paintings. I attempt to capture the unseen world with the movement of one hand through the visual absorption of life through my eyes. We are surrounded by unseen things that are too fast, too slow or too small to notice yet are right in front of our eyes. I am interested in the delicate balance between the mechanical and biological; invisible yet essential systems that bind us to earth; grounding abstract ideas in the physical world; creating figurative hybrids that embody our shared existence. By the time of its completion, the image looks entirely purposeful. Because it always was.

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EDWARD HANFLING AND SCOTT KLENNER

## Editorial: 'network'

The theme, 'network,' speaks to the idea that relationships between phenomena are more important than—and indeed produce or perform—things and beings themselves. Some such things and beings might typically be regarded as relatively proximate, the connections well-known and reiterated; others more distant and the act of connecting them daring, difficult or speculative. These latter relationships often depend on a willingness to traverse multiple areas of knowledge or disciplines, which is precisely what this journal, *The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, encourages. In recent decades, there has been much 'thematic dialogue' about the place of human beings in the greater scheme of things. Contrary to dominant tendencies in Western thought since the Enlightenment, a 'networked' perspective suggests that the putative intelligence of people does not make them separate from everything else on the planet; but, at the same time, this same intelligence, or an assumption of its distinctiveness and superiority, has succeeded in having an exceptional—to the point of catastrophic—impact on the planet's ecosystem. If there is any way out of this pickle, or at least of surviving in the midst of it a little while longer, it would seem propitious to regard human beings merely as constituent factors in a much vaster and multitudinous assemblage, constellation or ecology, not as the centre around which everything else revolves, while, at the same time, recognising that this puts us in a place of responsibility—to care for everything else we connect with, for the sake of sustaining the wider network and by extension our place within it.

Much recent thematic dialogue—actor-network theory, post-humanism, object-oriented ontology, new materialism—construes this dual action as a turn away from the binary oppositions of post-Enlightenment thought, which serve only to divide and to perpetuate unequal power relationships, and as an attempt to open up new relationships, which identify paths between seemingly distant points in the network. Notions of distance or proximity are, however, relative. What seems new or surprising, or even beyond comprehension, for one group of people may well have been common knowledge for another group. Indigenous cultures have, as anthropologist Zoe Todd (Métis) describes, "millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and *all relations*."<sup>1</sup> Within *te ao Māori* (Māori world view), the concept of *mātauraka* or *mātauranga* encompasses forms of knowledge

that within Western educational and societal frameworks have been routinely channelled into oppositions and disciplines that distinguish the scientific from the spiritual, while *whakapapa* is a genealogy of ancestors who are variously human and non-human. Rangihiroa Panoho, in forming a model of *toi tahuu* (Māori art history) that establishes powerful connections between artists and artworks across time and space, has illuminated the notion of *whakawhānaukataka* or *whakawhānaukatanga* in terms of “embracing that which is different, or distant, or conflicting and including it as more comfortably local.”<sup>2</sup>

Four decades ago, Donna Haraway’s essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” intimated the potential for a world of post-gender hybrid beings-things that would break down the patriarchal “antagonistic dualisms” (human/non-human, culture/nature, man/woman, self/other) of Western post-Enlightenment societies.<sup>3</sup> In their article “Hyphae Networks of Queer Love,” Ishita Bajpai, Jayatee Bhattacharya and Hampamma Gongadi write about a similar vision captured in a recent Danmei novel—a genre of Chinese fiction in which romance between men is a staple theme and heterosexual women make up the main readership. In *Little Mushroom*, the two main characters are a mushroom who takes on human attributes and a man; their relationship becomes exemplary in a sci-fi world where queer love is normalised rather than demonised or rendered deviant. Bajpai et al. describe a transition that takes place over the course of the narrative from a widespread fear of interspecies connection and mutation from the “natural” state of humanity to seeing the diverse agencies of “nature” as intertwined with the human. They ask us to reconsider qualities stereotypically perceived as masculine or feminine, arguing that love and care are both central to the story and to the achievements of its male-identifying characters or identities. Interestingly, Bajpai et al. describe the conclusion of *Little Mushroom* in terms of a situation that is “happy” and “stable,” whereas instability and flux accompany the characters in the narrative’s earlier moments. One wonders if the happy ending should be seen as an objective, an ideal or indeed a conceit, keeping in mind too that what power or strength or critical purchase there is in queerness in the present moment still resides in embracing its non-normative or ‘deviant’ status. The authors see the character of An Zhe as *both* a stabilising and chaotic influence, while maintaining, in the spirit of Haraway, that the figure of the cyborg “destabilises all traditional boundaries.”

An ethos of care rather than competition is also at the heart of the notion of *whakawhānaukataka* advocated by Marcus Campbell, Nick Parata, Connor Eastwood and Jeremy Hapeta, in this case in the context of physical education. The crux of their study is a shift in mindset from seeing games or physical activity as a means to wellbeing and enjoyment to instead seeing wellbeing and enjoyment as prerequisites for participating in such games or activities. This insight could in fact be extended to learning in general, in any field or discipline, where the capacity to learn depends on one’s existing wellbeing. Currently, New Zealand’s right-wing coalition government is turning back the clock, compartmentalising learning in schools by emphasising traditional Western disciplines and skills and prioritising test results—arbitrary measurements of ‘achievement’ or ‘success.’ It seems timely, then, that Campbell et al. have outlined a holistic approach that integrates learning and wellbeing, rather than construing learning as a mechanistic process of obtaining and possessing knowledge. They are eager for everybody to be involved in healthy forms of physical activity that are mentally and spiritually rewarding, as opposed to specific Western sporting codes with a basis in competition. In this respect, based on surveys that gauge student wellbeing and spiritual awareness, they claim some success with their Teaching Games for *Whakawhānaukataka* model. But perhaps the larger achievement of their research lies in its offering a path towards decolonising

the New Zealand education system or at least creating room within it for Māori ways of being and knowing. Given the isolating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic—and indeed of Western capitalism and the culture that it engrains in young people—it is also important to note that the research is based on a sense of relationality that encourages social connection, rather than individualistic measures of achievement, including relationships with whānau, hapū, iwi, whenua and whakapapa.

Kat Wehrheim also draws attention to the interwoven, networked nature of knowledge and reality in Indigenous cultures—but perhaps too in pre-Enlightenment Western cultures and in any situation where one finds a way beyond the prevailing paradigm. The catalyst for the article is the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) ratified in 2007. The principles of that document, well-intentioned and worthy as they might be, covertly or tacitly render invisible the very act (of making invisible the world views of Indigenous cultures) they were scripted to counteract—the heavy hand of colonisation they were designed to atone for. Particularly striking, Wehrheim demonstrates, are sections 12 and 20. On their own, they make perfect sense, recognising, respectively, the right to protection of spiritual beliefs and the right to subsistence. What happens, however, when both are invoked by the same matter, such as Indigenous whaling practices that are underpinned by spiritual connection (a reciprocal process whereby whales 'call' to people to be hunted and people 'call' to whales through dance and drumming)? Do such practices meet the criteria for 'subsistence'? Similarly, do the UNDRIP principles operate sufficiently holistically to accommodate the right of Indigenous people to have a relationship with land even when they are not in legal ownership of it? Wehrheim's point is that we should always be thinking through issues in relation; the compartmentalised principles of UNDRIP reflect a constraining Western framework. Wehrheim maintains that Western institutions need to meet Indigenous paradigms (notably Leroy Little Bear's philosophical principles) 'halfway' (channelling Karen Barad)—indeed, to go beyond mere "stepping stones" towards taking indigenous belief systems "on their own terms." In light of this, the call for 'decency' and 'neighbourliness' (terms used to drive the article's argument) could be considered both diffident and provocative, particularly in places where the colonisers are now the dominant landowners and the colonised have been dispossessed.

Tarunna Sebastian and Angela Giovanangeli highlight precisely how land is inseparable from the broader network of factors that sustain the ongoing vitality of Aboriginal cultures and resistance to colonial injustices in Australia. Consistent with the critique of Western disciplinary knowledge that underpins other contributions to this issue, Sebastian and Giovanangeli emphasise a relational structure to Indigenous identity and knowledge, which cannot be broken down or the constituent parts separated out or compartmentalised—a structure captured by the concept of Kinship: "Aboriginal Kinship systems represent a complex and interconnected web of relationships that not only connect individuals, families and communities, but also include deep ties to place, to Country (Land, water and sky), to the inanimate and to the more-than-human world including animals, plants and spirits." It is significant that the article represents the lived experiences and spoken words of Aboriginal activists, from three different Aboriginal nations, who continue to resist the ways in which they have been represented by colonial narratives—the epistemic violence of a Eurocentric world view. Perhaps an especially salient point here is that Kinship remains vital, has never been lost; that Aboriginal Australians remain determinedly plugged into that network; and that a contemporary non-Indigenous refrain of lament that colonisation has produced a disconnection of Indigenous peoples from their Kinship networks is as false and damaging as historical forms of colonial oppression.

Oral language is an even more prominent feature of the final article in this issue, a conversation between Joe Citizen, Toni Herangi and Hollie Tawhiao that, in its form as much as its content, challenges Eurocentric academic convention. The authors—or protagonists—are vehement in their resistance to the absorption of Māori knowledge and taonga (treasures) into the global network of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which they see as a perpetuation of colonisation and capitalism. What is especially striking is Toni Herangi's assertion towards the end of the conversation that Māori already have the mental capacity—and have demonstrated this capacity for countless generations—to hold vast amounts of 'data' or knowledge and to disseminate it, judiciously rather than profligately. It may nevertheless be worth considering whether the perspective on AI discussed here is overly pessimistic or, indeed, generalised—comparable to a blanket dismissal of the World Wide Web in its earliest manifestation. Of course, arguably, the internet has not turned out altogether well, but it cannot be categorically deemed 'bad' either. It just is. And AI too will be—no criticism will change that and Māori, along with everyone else, will find ways of both working with and resisting it. There is already a willing and potentially beneficial Indigenous uptake of the technology, such as Te Hiku Media's 'Papa Reo' platform for fostering learning of te reo (Māori language). AI does, however, present a number of troubling ramifications, including the perpetuation of a system of competing truth-claims, a regime of fragmentation and uncertainty, which disregards the presence of correct *tikaka* or *tikanga* (protocols, lore or custom) and conceals the actual sites of corporate and political power within global capitalism. Joe Citizen maintains that AI, far from democratising knowledge, is a mechanism for control: "It's claiming something which wasn't theirs to claim. During the Enlightenment the belief emerged that knowledge should be universally accessible; for western culture that was emancipatory—there is a cultural assumption that it would be emancipatory for everybody."

When we proposed 'network' as the theme for this issue of *Junctures*, we envisaged multiple avenues of inquiry, some of which have transpired, but we also had at the forefront of our minds (just as it is on many people's minds) the ever-expanding assemblages of online data processes proliferating through AI. AI is a network that affords couplings and combinations that are in some sense predictable, because they already exist and reflect globally calibrated values and conventions, but are also sometimes surprising, because the relationships forged in the almost instantaneous process of producing new data out of the old stem from knowledge fragments that may be disparate in space and time. The relationships, however, are fleeting and invisible and to all intents and purposes meaningless, because AI is based on input and output rather than the significance of what happens in between, in the process of getting from one to the other. This is one reason for feeling uncertain about the value of AI. There is evidence to suggest it may be useful, because it can so promptly spit out something that an individual human being does not have the capacity to produce themselves (at least, not without considerably more time and effort). But it is the usefulness of things, or the tendency of Western post-enlightenment thought and capitalism, to make things useful and to conceive of them primarily in terms of what they can materially produce for us (instrumentalism), that has got us into a good deal of trouble that threatens not only ourselves but other beings and the larger ecosystem. We might look upon AI beneficently as a wonderfully expansive and inclusive technology that produces collaboration or sharing, whereby everything that anyone has done gets thrown into the mix and has a role to play in generating or perpetuating a human culture. Or we might reverse the terms and suggest that this assemblage is not attributable to the technology but to the culture—the human dispositions and aspirations—that constituted the conditions for such a technology to be conceived and created. The latter position

would suggest that it is pointless to debate the pros and cons of AI itself; what is at issue is the perpetuation of ideologies of economic and material 'progress' and the ongoing colonisation of diverse cultural traditions by the cultural values of those who own and control the technology and wield the political power. Collaboration and sharing might be in there somewhere, but the arena in which that takes place is by no means flat, nor the social conditions egalitarian. We might look upon AI in the future as we do the internet now. It is extraordinary, it has changed the way we access information and the quantities of information accessed, but it has not changed the world economically or politically, nor should it be expected to do so, given that it is merely a reflection of the profoundly unequal, oppressive and hegemonic culture out of which it arose.

Where, then, does this leave Panoho's understanding of whakawhānaukataka—that desire to embrace the “different, or distant, or conflicting and including it as more comfortably local” —that potential for unexpected connections and surprise? Currently, perhaps, it is difficult to reconcile the confounding fabrications and weirdnesses that AI throws up at the click of a mouse (in the face of which the most eccentric statements or positions or creations arising from non-AI-assisted human endeavour pale in comparison) with its equal propensity for the production of somewhat bland or generic kinds of outputs. It seems possible that whatever we now regard as eccentric will very rapidly *become* bland and generic at the hands of AI—not merely in the way that, say, surrealism became popular and widespread decades after the shock of its avant-garde origins, but in the sense that a sheer excess of eccentricity renders the concept of eccentricity meaningless. There can be no 'outside' a system that is all-encompassing. This is a network within which the relationships are so easily, or indeed arbitrarily or algorithmically, made that ultimately there can be no surprise in them—no frisson of unfamiliarity. It is a very different beast to what the Actor-Network and post-humanist and new materialist theorists have been hankering for in recent decades; there will be no daring and caring leaps that transcend prevailing human systems and ideologies, as long as the entire network is so determinedly human in its biases and so rigorously regulated by the systems of power and wealth that sustain it. Perhaps, though, this bleak overall assessment risks downplaying or undermining the agency—and activism—of those who continue to resist these systems and to assert and maintain distinct enclaves of identity and knowledge. It is worth heeding the words of Monica who, in Sebastian and Giovanangeli's article, debunks the assumption that colonisation has resulted in the disconnection of Aboriginal people from Kinship systems: “No, sorry. And I've said this to all local communities when I go there. But I'm sorry, but the government law and policies need to realise that we've never been disconnected.” To construe colonisation—whether by national or corporate entities—only as something that happens to a people or culture is to render that group passive and to diminish what they do, say, make or modify. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori continue to assert the right to *tino rangatiratanga* or self-determination, and the 'Papa Reo' project referred to earlier might be taken as representative of how AI technology might be co-opted, harnessed and directed into localised contexts and communities which both maintain control and protection of knowledge and foster new transformations of the network.

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1. Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism (Urbane Adventurer: Amiskwacī)," *Uma (in)certa antropología/An (un)certain anthropology* (26 October 2014), <https://umaincertaantropologia.org/2014/10/26/an-indigenous-feminists-take-on-the-ontological-turn-ontology-is-just-another-word-for-colonialism-urbane-adventurer-amiskwaci/>.
2. Rangihira Panoho, *Māori Art: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory* (Auckland: Bateman, 2015), 27–29.
3. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism for the 1980s," *Socialist Review* no. 80 (March–April 1985): 65–107; republished as "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.

ISHITA BAJPAI, JAYATEE BHATTACHARYA  
AND HAMPAMMA GONGADI

**HYPHAE NETWORKS OF QUEER LOVE:  
ERASING BINARIES AND EXPANDING MASCULINITIES  
THROUGH THE DANMEI NOVEL  
*LITTLE MUSHROOM* BY SHISI**

## INTRODUCTION

Set against the backdrop of a post-apocalyptic future where, as a result of infections due to rapid mutations in most earthly organisms, human civilisation has significantly declined, the “Danmei” novel *Little Mushroom*, by Yi Shisi Zhou, narrates the tale of a mushroom on a quest to recover his spore that was stolen by humans.<sup>1</sup> At the novel’s beginning, the mushroom unsuccessfully attempts to save the life of an injured human. However, in the process, it absorbs their genes and memories and shapeshifts into a human form called An Zhe. He sets out to find a centre of human civilisation, where he encounters a human, Lu Feng, the novel’s second protagonist.

This paper examines how this work of speculative science fiction embodies the concepts of post-humanism and queer masculinity and rejects the narratives of strict binaries and the superiority of the human race over others. It highlights the author’s attempt to move away from anthropocentric and heteronormative thinking as the novel engages in narratives that showcase queer love and queer masculinities in a positive way—a way that does not conform to or restrict itself to the boundaries set up by a backward society.

The connection formed between An Zhe and Lu Feng evolves into a more intense form of love which is conveyed to readers as unconventional and forbidden, as they belong to different species. Moreover, Lu Feng’s status as a Judge in this fictional world, a position that requires him to immediately expel and kill any human being who has undergone any form of mutation, creates further barriers to their relationship. Nevertheless, the novel emphasises how this unusual connection is strong enough to withstand such obstacles. Lu Feng’s long-held fears and preconceived notions about non-human species are also challenged and uprooted.

The authors analyse how the novel situates queer masculinity through the behaviour and character of An Zhe, whose innocence, vulnerability and emotional responses clash with the idea of traditional hegemonic masculinity. As a mushroom, An Zhe is unacquainted with the orthodox ideas imposed by human beings on masculinity, including emotional rigidity and stoicism as indicators of strength. Though initially perplexed by the development of personal feelings, An Zhe welcomes all manifestations of emotion. We show how An Zhe's physical body and ability to shapeshift and protrude hyphae is a physical metaphor for gender fluidity. The paper interprets the hyphae as indications of flexibility in relations to bodies of any kind, mutated or otherwise, and affirms their right to exist. The hyphae that aid An Zhe in numerous ways are a manifestation of the network, a concept which blurs the boundaries of human embodiment and human limitation, along with sexual and non-sexual expressions of personhood.

Because nature and its constituents have been visualised and realised as dynamic and contingent in Shisi's fictional world, the novel exemplifies Donna Haraway's critique of the essentialist and harmonious natural order. An Zhe and other xenogenic characters symbolise the constantly changing and evolving aspect of nature as propounded by Haraway. Thus, the novel's narrative disrupts dominant power relations and ideological structures. It constructs new forms of solidarity between humans and non-human entities and promotes an inclusive narrative of queer masculinities and queer love.

Lastly, this paper also calls attention to the way that *Little Mushroom* contributes to the canon of queer ecologies by its queering of nature, interlinking queer desire and invoking parallels from the real world in relation to gender expectations, heteronormativity and human-centeredness.

### LITTLE MUSHROOM

The novel is categorised as a Danmei novel, an informal Chinese term given to works belonging to the Boys' Love (BL) genre, which features romantic relationships between two male characters. The term *Danmei* means "indulging beauty."<sup>2</sup> It is derived from the Japanese word *tanbi*, meaning "aestheticism." The term became popular in China in the 1990s as Chinese BL fans began to use it to refer to stories that featured male same-sex romance. Fans also founded several online Danmei forums, increasing the genre's popularity. Chinese readers often use the terms BL and Danmei interchangeably. Aiqing Wang refers to the genre as marginalised, while simultaneously reflecting an increasingly visible and popular subculture.<sup>3</sup> In a discussion of Xianqing, a popular online forum in China, Yang and Xu state that owing to the widespread presence of Danmei fiction, this online space has become a significant queer public sphere that defies strict classification and offers pleasure and meaning to its users.<sup>4</sup>

An original work of science fiction, Shisi's (a pseudonym used by the author) *Little Mushroom* was translated by Xiao from the original Chinese and published in English in 2022. The novel probes the limits of dystopian fiction as it imagines a harsh world where, in 2020, the Earth's magnetic field begins to disappear, allowing cosmic radiation to create widespread destruction and almost obliterate the human species. As the story progresses, the precarious existence carved out by the surviving human populations over the following century through creating artificial magnetic poles also comes under threat. The titular mushroom lives inside a cave in the Abyss, a place humans deem extremely dangerous due to the fearsome organisms and mutated entities that inhabit it.

While trying to save the life of a human named An Ze, the mushroom inadvertently absorbs his human genes, shapeshifts into An Ze's likeness and ventures out from the Abyss towards the human Base in a quest to recover his lost spore, something the mushroom considers a crucial part of itself and their life's purpose. The novel centres on this now part-human mushroom who refers to himself as "An Zhe." This new name suggests a new identity derived from the human An Ze, and points towards the concept of fluid boundaries between humans and non-humans as developed by Haraway.<sup>5</sup>

Haraway's famous essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" was written as a response to the essentialist social binaries prevalent in Western culture in the 1980s. Instead of viewing technological advancements as inimical to feminism, she proposed that technology be developed into a tool to advance feminism and enhance gender relations and expressions of gender fluidity. "So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the figure of the cyborg offers an alternative to the conventional dichotomous manner of representing bodies, while opening up a realm of experimental, perhaps hazardous, new amalgamations and alliances. "From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."<sup>7</sup> Such joint kinship, as proposed by Haraway, is emphasised in the novel as the only way forward for humanity, a situation where mutations are accepted and the faculties and skills of different organisms are used to make a new world.

For Haraway, the cyborg is a hybrid being, which, due to its contested identity as not fully human, but also not a machine or an animal, serves as an incarnation of complex mixed identities. Simply put, a cyborg corrodes and destabilises all traditional boundaries. In place of a unified monolithic identity, in her essay she champions fragmented, multifaceted and interlinked identities.

As a sentient mushroom, An Zhe fulfils Haraway's criteria for a cyborg. In the novel, An Zhe shifts into his hyphae form whenever convenient. Hypha or hyphae are delicate filaments found in fungi, forming either a loose network called mycelium or a tightly packed interwoven mass of pseudoparenchyma, a term used for the fruiting body of mushrooms.<sup>8</sup> An Zhe displays these scientific characteristics of mushrooms and hyphae while also being able to transform himself and display human form and behaviour, suggesting parallels with Haraway's cyborg. As the novel progresses, the world of *Little Mushroom* becomes increasingly cyborg-like. Further forms of hybridisation and amalgamated individuals make appearances and, in the end, this reassembled, chimaera-like world becomes the new reality that humanity accepts.

This paper focuses on the strength of queer love, alternative masculinities and the unexpected connection between two dissimilar species represented by An Zhe and Lu Feng. Lu Feng, the second protagonist, is a human whose professional title is an Arbiter, a figure with the final authority to strike down anyone he suspects of harbouring infection-causing mutated genes. Anchored by concepts of the cyborg and non-binariness, queer masculinity and gender performativity, queer ecologies and non-anthropocentrism, the authors examine how the novel critiques essentialism and heteronormativity and instead champions same-sex love and equality between all beings that inhabit the Earth.

## AN ZHE'S MASCULINITY AND QUEER CONNECTION

Having spent most of his life in the Abyss, An Zhe is unfamiliar with the norms that regulate, govern and restrict humankind. Consequently, the rules of hegemonic masculinity do not impede him. Connell situates queerness in the ideology of hegemonic masculinity as follows: "Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is a repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure. Hence, from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity—gayness is easily assimilated to femininity."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the novel, several characters remark on An Zhe's ability to appear soft and demure, especially in the face of calamity. An Zhe offers the reader a subdued yet palpable form of resilient masculinity, one signifying resistance without aggression and impassiveness, as the male protagonist never succumbs to violence and its demonstrative, anger-filled signs, even when dealing with injustice and cruelty. The calm and serenity that permeates his character, often assigned as elements of femininity, is not a sign of weakness, but rather a unique form of strength that does not rely on disturbing, dominating, agitating or frightening others.

As the novel explains, a powerful extraterrestrial pulse is causing genetic mutation and fusion in organisms. As the situation worsens on Earth, this pulse triggers the fusion of non-living elements, unleashing permanent anarchy as the ever-changing composition of all things, material and immaterial, threatens to collapse all civilisations and infrastructures, with little hope of restoration. In this environment, Zhe becomes an anomaly when it is discovered that his genes and constituent elements resist the mutation caused by the pulse. In human social contexts, gender fluidity is often considered a destabilising force against biological determinism. This attitude often elicits fear and apprehension from the proponents of stability. From this perspective, the author has created a masterful characterisation of the paradoxical An Zhe: it is An Zhe's queer gender fluidity that provides stability in the chaotic world of the novel. By embodying both stable and chaotic elements within himself, An Zhe symbolises an equilibrium that requires the presence of both components for the functioning of the world. The novel lays out the desirability and efficacy of such an alternate queer form of masculinity through Shisi's delineation of An Zhe.

For Siedler, authentically alternative masculinities are those that promote and embody egalitarianism in all forms.<sup>10</sup> Surveying masculinities in literature, Hobbs notes that there is still a need to identify themes relating to men's daily lives that can highlight alternative masculinities and their practices.<sup>11</sup> Zhe's practices, such as politeness, open-mindedness, emotional availability, anti-machismo behaviour and body positivity, situate him firmly in the realm of queer masculinities.

The novel draws attention to An Zhe's habit of wrapping his hyphae around the wounds of xenogenics and other massive organisms that are potentially dangerous to him. Feeling empathy towards all beings, he would bring the wounded creatures back to his cave to give them a chance to recover and heal. He is also confident in the abilities of his shapeshifting body and does not detest any part of it, even though others often tell him that he looks fragile.

The author signifies the connection between An Zhe and Lu Feng in almost reverential terms. The highest authority in the Trial Court, Lu Feng is referred to as the Arbiter, issuing orders to all the other Judges of the court. He holds the record for the highest precision and accuracy when identifying xenogenics—a term humans use to refer to individuals who have become infected due

to mutations between human genes and other organisms, rendering their state animalistic and dangerous. However, even Lu Feng cannot confirm An Zhe's status as either human or xenogenic.

Exploring the network of events that brought these two characters together, the path can be traced back to Lu Feng's obligation as a Judge of the Trial Court to spend at least six months every year in the Abyss. This duty is enforced so that Judges can become familiar with xenogenics, identify the characteristics of infected beings, and collect samples of different bio-organisms for research purposes.

We learn that it was, in fact, Lu Feng who took An Zhe's spore as part of his sample-collecting task, thus setting off the series of events that led to An Zhe coming to the human Base. Additionally, An Zhe and his spore become the primary factors preventing a total human extinction, because his genetic composition stays inert and hence is immune to infection. The contradiction implied by a masculinist and anthropocentric task becoming the genesis point of queer ecocentrism, queer interaction and the subsequent intense bond between the two protagonists is noteworthy. It is implied that Lu Feng, who has been on many dangerous missions, including volunteering at the Underground City Base to restore the artificial magnetic frequency, has remained unscathed by mutation and infection due to having spent a significant amount of time in close proximity to An Zhe.

Zhe's hyphae also exhibit a strange affinity for Lu Feng. In their book *Intimacies*, Frank, Clough and Seidman examine the nature of such hybrid intimacies and their unexpected qualities, exploring their unsettling effects as agentic possibilities affecting the politics of control and exclusion in the real world. Emotional texture, a sense of the agency of the complicated, multilayered self, lends meaning to these interactions.<sup>12</sup> This emotional texture is perceived in the novel because of the perplexities that the two protagonists face as a result of the pronounced differences between their respective species and genetics. For example, a significant confrontation occurs when Lu Feng finds An Zhe, who had left the human Base after finding and taking back his spore, for a second time. The tension reaches a point where Lu Feng points his gun at An Zhe. Nevertheless, even during such a critical situation, their underlying attraction is intermingled with the signs of conflict, aptly conveyed in the narrator's words, "The muzzle of the gun suddenly trembled."<sup>13</sup>

Connell's views on masculinity are relevant here, as emotion constitutes a core component when considering diverse masculinities. Connell, discussing people whose behaviour is considered unmanly and non-masculine, states: "In its modern usage the term [masculine] assumes that one's behaviour results from the type of person one is. That is to say, an unmasculine person would behave differently, being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth."<sup>14</sup>

These qualities of an "unmasculine" person resonate with what we observe of An Zhe's character in the book. Violence and dominance are of little interest to him even when he finds himself in extreme circumstances, such as his spore getting stolen, becoming the subject of experimentation or being tortured for information. In such circumstances, he does not resort to the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity. His thinking is never determined by the primitive analogy of what men ought to do.

Connell argues that masculinity has been defined primarily by contrasting it with femininity. However, such a contrast between masculinity and femininity cannot be found in An Zhe. As Lu Feng's thoughts about him illustrate, he exhibits the traits of innocence, nurturing and compassion,

typically associated with women: “He looked like he had no aggressiveness whatsoever nor any vigilance or caution against everything outside, just like a child who had not grown up.”<sup>15</sup> However, An Zhe’s courage in navigating the unfamiliar world of the human Base and bravely facing its dangers are traits associated with normative masculinity.

## A QUEER, GENDER-FLUID MUSHROOM

Gender—a social construct, as Judith Butler explains—is an all-influencing structure that An Zhe escapes because he is a non-human entity, a little mushroom. According to Butler, gender identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.<sup>16</sup> Although An Zhe takes on the shape of a male, having absorbed the genes of a biological male, he does not adhere to the performative elements dictated by the male gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler states: “That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.”<sup>17</sup>

Butler’s concept of gender performativity dismantles the notions of true or inherent masculinity while also creating a framework for expressing different forms of queer identities. The novel effectively exemplifies the bearer of such a role as An Zhe who, born in the Abyss, has no prior experience of learned male behaviour due to societal conditioning. Behaviourally, emotionally and even via physical manifestations, An Zhe consistently subverts masculine norms, both consciously and unconsciously. Such physical demonstration of the decentring of biological elements, so that it is no longer possible to identify the birth sex of individuals accurately, is a concept also explored in Samuel R Delany’s short story “Aye, and Gomorrah.”<sup>18</sup> These science fiction works may be regarded as establishing and expanding a new canon that focuses on creating networks composed of egalitarian elements derived from the deviant and the queer.

One of the most visible and physically evident ways that gender non-conformity is portrayed in the novel is through An Zhe’s biological process of giving birth to his spore. Moreover, once he recovers his spore, he nourishes it inside his body. An Zhe’s hyphae are intertwined with the tiny hyphae of the spores and, subsequently, this sincere and passionate act of reproduction and nurturing—traditionally regarded as the essential responsibility and purpose of women—traverses the boundaries of male and female at a psychological and physical level. It is an exemplary literary instance that evokes and celebrates Haraway’s suggestion of transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

While reflecting on the phenomenon of gender fluidity, Coney developed the idea that it is the feelings associated with gender that influence people’s perception of their bodies, and fluidity in gender is determined by the constant yet inconsistent fluctuation of these feelings.<sup>20</sup> Such a fluctuation may be observed in An Zhe when he is hyper-focused on retaining and taking care of his spore as part of his mushroom identity, while simultaneously showing anxiety about his human companions, especially Lu Feng.

The physical characteristics of hyphae, which are thin and delicate yet exhibit resilience, provide a powerful rhetorical and metaphorical underpinning for non-dualism and non-binarism. These

hyphae aid An Zhe in covertly seeking out his spore through the vents in the human Base. Here hyphae can be viewed as a metaphor for camouflage, an action that resonates with queerness. Until they feel safe enough to come out, community members may cherish some sort of camouflage as it offers them a temporary shield against threat. Hyphae, a product of nature, are rendered queer and non-heterosexual because of their peculiar forms and quality of non-adherence. These queer hyphae protect An Zhe in escaping the threat of sexual assault by a human and indeed from any attacks on his person.

This quality of queerness is further enhanced when Lu Feng, the embodiment of human essentiality and anthropocentricity, falls in love with An Zhe after the latter shows him compassion, emotional availability and genuine interest. In fact, it is the stoic and emotionally rigid Lu Feng who initiates closeness and physical contact even after learning An Zhe's true identity: "In the silence, it was unclear if Lu Feng was driven by some emotion or it was just a subconscious action when he hugged An Zhe from behind."<sup>21</sup>

Chapter 23 of the novel explicates Lu Feng's point of view. It highlights how this tangible and all-encompassing connection challenges conventional labels and boundaries and encourages ambiguous relations between humans and non-humans. This romantic queer connection leads Lu Feng to deviate from his established code of behaviour, the mores which used to govern his actions. "There was only grief. Yet within the grief was an innocent calm, as if, so long as Lu Feng gave a reason, he would accept anything and forgive anything."<sup>22</sup>

Lu Feng and An Zhe act as queer, non-normative parents to An Zhe's spore. Here again, we find a blurring of physical and emotional boundaries and the welcoming of a post-gender world. The couple serve as a positive representation of parenthood for marginalised gay couples who face derision and lack of trust from the mainstream dominant society that seeks to exclude them, based on misjudgements of their ability to act as good parents. Zhang and Chen note that by challenging heterosexual assumptions about how to 'do' family, gay parents are reconstructing the definition of an ideal family.<sup>23</sup> In the novel, such re-imagining of family spaces as queer offers a counternarrative to encourage marginalised communities. The Danmei series, *The Disabled Tyrant's Beloved Pet Fish* by Xue Shan Fei Hu (a pseudonym), similarly portrays non-conventional queer parenting, the progeny of which also defy strict classification.<sup>24</sup>

It is in the depths of nature that An Zhe and Lu Feng finally yield to their mutual queer love and attraction and share their first kiss. Nature here is a refuge, a place of free indulgence of their desires, exemplifying the dynamism and diversity of nature itself. Earlier in the novel, it was established that the Abyss, populated by xenogenics, mutated plants and other organisms, is a highly dangerous place for humans. However, the protagonists' time there makes the readers perceive nature in a different light and lays bare its fruitful multiplicity. Nature becomes a healing space, while simultaneously brimming with danger:

Here, there was no trace of human existence, only open country all around and unbroken desert that connected directly to the night sky.

Just like humankind had never existed. No humans, no human culture, and no human base. All of the—all of the exhausting entanglements and all of the painful struggles disappeared along with the signal, suddenly dissipating like ashes and smoke.<sup>25</sup>

Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson discuss the delegitimation of binary constructions of sexuality and animality that have informed scientific and cultural discussions of sex.<sup>26</sup> They catalogue a number of non-human, non-heterogeneous sexual acts that have been witnessed between animals which suggest the fallacy of separating nature and culture and categorising same-sex acts as unnatural. Literary works such as *Little Mushroom* contribute to breaking down these binary hierarchical structures and interlinking nature and queerness. A further example of the theme of queering nature is the torture of An Zhe's spore through experiments carried out by human scientists in the cause of humanity. Such legally sponsored torture echoes the torment suffered by nature in the real world due to the exploitation of its resources and human actions that Other and subordinate nature.

## XENOGENICS, NATURE AND DISTORTIONS

The hybridity of everything—a focal theme of Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*—is woven into every aspect of Shisi's speculative fiction. An Zhe and his ability to shapeshift between a mushroom and a human being—a phenomenon that resists the labelling and compartmentalising of entities, as well as the existence of xenogenics, with the complicated discourse that surrounds them—echo Haraway's notions of partiality and perversity.<sup>27</sup>

In the novel, the discovery that it is not only the biological genes of various organisms that are mutating sparks the existential crisis of human beings. Instead, the scope of the process was much larger. An amalgamation, involving every minuscule particle that constitutes the Earth, was taking place. Such a fearsome process would ultimately halt and dismantle all forms of infrastructure, all human processes and culture. Instead of a disclosure by a human, it is through An Zhe, a fungus, that the discovery of contamination involving all living things is first stated:

If, if something like mutual contamination could occur, if a living creature's qualities could instantly change, why couldn't other things do the same? And what was the difference between the bodies of living things—those DNA helices—and the world's other inanimate materials?

Therefore, paper and wood would also contaminate each other, and steel and plastic would as well.<sup>28</sup>

*Distortion* is the name given to this phenomenon. However, it is this distortion that causes human beings to view things and their existence in the world from a less human-centred point of view and to learn to tolerate and share space with xenogenics. The stability of composition of all tangible objects achieved at the end of the novel, albeit with high cost to the human species, yields a world where a system of strict polarities is rethought and revamped.

The gene fusion and mutations between humans and monsters comes at a stage where such an amalgamation is deemed to be peaceful, as no one entity's genes dominates another's. The welfare of humankind is enhanced as the strength of xenogenics is preferred over human-made weapons and equipment. Many humans leave the cooped-up Base and return to the ruined cities overtaken by wilderness to form small settlements there. The surviving people in this post-apocalyptic fictional world are now less human-centric—a community that is more integrated with their environment. Emerging from the remains of the old order, this new world envisioned by the author is described thus:

The monsters of the external world who needed food still eyed them greedily, but they no longer coveted human genes, or to put it another way, most of the monsters who survived up until now had already obtained human genes. Viewed from a different angle, under that all-encompassing frequency, both humans and monsters had achieved stability. It was an undeniable fact that humankind's intellectual superiority had come to an end long ago.<sup>29</sup>

This post-human world also realises the vision of a post-gender world as biological boundaries, which often restrict people into specific gender roles, are diluted and erased. It can be compared to Octavia E Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, which focuses on the genetic merging of human genes with those of the Oankali, an alien race.<sup>30</sup> According to Hadsell, "a post-human cyborg is presented as a more peaceful solution to the binary opposition that requires a physical, moral, and cultural evolution of humanity to a state of post-humanism in Octavia Butler's work."<sup>31</sup> Octavia Butler evokes sentiments that oppose the Self/Other dichotomy. Shisi's work may be considered a step further in this direction, given the way she has interwoven the themes of non-conformity in queer expressionism and gleefully embraced the idea of non-discrimination between different bodies.

In the end, Lu Feng and An Zhe inhabit a world that is brimming with queer post-gender bodies, where people no longer show disdain when it comes to relationships that are not strictly between cis-heterosexual male and female bodies. The progenies and families of these post-gender beings are also gender- and form-fluid, heralding a new biological era.

## THE FUSION FACTION AND THE TRIAL COURT

The Fusion Faction and the Trial Court are the two significant organisations in the novel that serve to drive the plot and shape the chronicles of this fictional world. The Trial Court, introduced in the novel's early chapters, leaves an immediate impact due to the brutality that is practised by its members and visited on anyone who comes into its purview, most often unwillingly. The unmitigated power of its Judges, who may have good intentions, is critiqued, and the bloodshed unleashed by them is a recurring motif in the novel. The horrifying discovery that their judgments are only about eighty per cent accurate, and that they are unable to detect infections in women, underlines the urgent need to limit their operations. However, any hope of dismantling the Trial Court is a phantom, and only becomes possible once the threat of xenogenics is diminished.

Introduced as a somewhat eccentric and radical organisation, the Fusion Faction's quest to negotiate between xenogenics and humans appears unsettling and unfeasible to humans on the Base. Ultimately, the organisation is responsible for unveiling the mystery behind genetic mutations and the unearthly pulses that distort all the frequencies on Earth. With the help of An Zhe, the Fusion Faction is able to determine the configurations of an inert frequency that can counter the pulse, a discovery which solves the problems relating to the frequencies of artificial magnetic poles. This discovery keeps the xenogenics at bay but also carves out a new way of existence, facilitating new human settlements that create open sharing spaces and social bonds with the xenogenics.

The existence of a convoluted network linking the history and agency of both these organisations is a significant revelation in the book—the author drives home the messiness, strangeness and chaos that this network throws up in readers' minds. Pauli Jones, the leader of the Fusion Faction, is revealed to also be the first Arbiter of the Trial Court. Jones experiences insurmountable guilt

as a result of being responsible for the taking of hundreds of human lives. As head of the Fusion Faction, he had striven to create a world where xenogenics were not simply labelled as monsters, disregarded and killed, one where co-existence between humans and xenogenics is a hopeful possibility for the future. His experiment involving a xenogenic ends up exposing the entire Base to genetic infection. As a punishment, he is tasked with examining and killing anyone who has been infected, an event referred to as the first Judgement Day.

Following this traumatic episode, the Trial Court was created, with the researchers from the Fusion Faction serving as its first members—at the time, they had more experience than anyone in identifying mutations. Later, the military took over. Remorse for his actions as Arbiter of the Trial Court prompts Jones to leave the human Base and relocate near the Abyss. He established the Highland Research Institute there, with xenogenics serving as members. This baffling connection between the two organisations underscores a vital tension that the author asks readers to accept—strange interlinked occurrences in the network of fictional history that emulate their real-world counterparts.

The Trial Court is a representation of traditional and hegemonic masculinity, forever linked with oppression and suffering, while the Fusion Faction is perhaps symbolic of alternative, queer forms of masculinities which are open to new possibilities and forms of existence. According to Judith Butler, “[p]ossibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.”<sup>32</sup> The Fusion Faction, with their willingness to deregulate the process of Othering in relation to xenogenics, supports Butler’s argument about the need to accept a variety of gender possibilities. Butler’s idea of performativity is also relevant here as Fusion Faction members refuse to align their beliefs with the dominant discourse on the Base. They subvert the expectations and disparage the rules followed by their fellow community members and, despite objections, continue to assert their views.

## THE FRAGILITY OF HUMANKIND

Humankind’s interest takes precedence over all else. This motto, promulgated by the human Base, is denigrated throughout the novel as the survival of the humans leads to actions that result in the deaths of many other beings. Researchers, children, fertile women and military personnel are deemed more important than the others. To secure these superior lives, the lives of other human beings are sacrificed, rendering the Base motto hauntingly ironic and indeed false. Madam Lu, a woman and a researcher who has dedicated her life to increasing the reproduction rate at the Northern human Base, gives voice to her disillusionment with humans:

We resist monsters and xenogenics along with the contamination of human genes by foreign genes for the sake of preserving the will that is specific to humans and avoid being ruled by animal natures ... But to achieve this goal, all of our actions run counter to the norms of human nature. And the community we collectively form—all of the things it does, such as obtaining resources, strengthening itself, and producing offspring—can only embody the nature of animals. In fact, humans are no different from the monsters of the outside world. It’s just that because of the brain’s flexibility, they give their various actions self-deluding meanings. Humans are just one kind of ordinary animal. They are born like all other lives, and they are also on the cusp of extinction just like all other lives.<sup>33</sup>

An Zhe also repeatedly reflects on the fragility and weakness of the human species, whether it be their biological or genetic composition, which is highly susceptible to mutation, or their intellectual prowess. Human intellect is regarded as weak as it cannot find the causes of the infections and the measures that might aid in deflecting them. Furthermore, the creatures living in the Abyss are also gifted with intellect—it is not a feature unique to humans.

In his critique of the Anthropocene, Bauman argues for reconfiguring agency across the planet to deal with our uncertain future.<sup>34</sup> The novel supports this sentiment of resolving “climate weirding” and the climate crisis through non-human interventions; this is especially seen in the ending, where An Zhe’s self-sacrifice helps humans discover the frequency that corresponds to absolute inertia. In this way, An Zhe restricts the ongoing degradation of the planet and limits the attacks carried out by xenogenics.

## CONCLUSION

The science fiction genre was a significant contributor to Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* and, nearly four decades later, we continue to appreciate the genre’s impact in generating new ideas, spawning new literary theories and exemplifying them in fictional form. Shisi’s *Little Mushroom*, through its representative sentient mushroom An Zhe, conjures up a powerful image of gender morphism, hybridity and queer assemblages. Similar to the cyborg, the mushroom and their associated hyphae speak to the possibilities of identities, sexualities, networks and associations beyond what is recognised in the dominant popular narratives of anthropocentrism, cis-heterosexuality, traditional hegemonic masculinity and the Othering of non-humans.

The article has discussed how through the character of An Zhe, Shisi promotes the idea of queer masculinity and explores how a queer network might be structured on the foundations of inclusivity, open-mindedness and empathy. The novel is a crucial work of literature that demonstrates queer resistance and perseverance, as well as the power of queer non-conforming love. Moreover, the article outlines how the book opposes human-centredness.

Shisi’s compelling narrative provides new perspectives that raises the profile of queer individuals and is sympathetic to their struggles, desires, attitudes and beliefs. Albrecht and Van Horn’s essay on the Anthropocene defines a new phenomenon, “sumbiophilia” —the experience of love that flows from living together in harmony with all the other beings that exist in our vast ecological matrix.<sup>35</sup> Our article has underlined how this respect and affection for all beings is emphasised in the novel, while promoting an ethic of sustainable co-existence.

Through detailed analysis of Shisi’s novel, the authors have argued for a more nuanced outlook regarding interactions between entities such as humans, xenogenics, animals, plants and fungi. The article recognises the interlinkages between queerness, desire and form, fluidity and nature. Lastly, our study delineates the emotionally charged queer network created by the non-human An Zhe, especially with the human Lu Feng, using the building blocks of empathy, deviance, desire and love.

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MARCUS CAMPBELL, NICK PARATA,  
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**TEACHING GAMES FOR WHAKAWHĀNAUKATAKA:  
DOUBLING DOWN ON ‘UNDERSTANDING’  
THAT KĪ-O-RAHI IS MORE THAN JUST A GAME –  
EMPHASISING WHAKAWHĀNAUKATAKA TO PROMOTE  
THE IMPORTANCE OF HAUORA (WELLBEING)**

## INTRODUCTION

This article addresses relationality or whakawhānaukataka (herein we use the dialect of Kāi Tahu, a prominent South Island iwi, or tribe) and developing connections between people. We focus on these networks from a Māori (Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand) perspective including the process of networking to find kin, establish connections and form positive relationships with people (and place)—something that appears to be elusive in modern, dis-connected, society. Indeed, the following literature review draws on research from New Zealand and internationally to highlight the steady decline of hauora (wellbeing), especially for rakatahi (youth), in turn creating concern for whānau (family) support networks like iwi (tribe), hapū (sub-tribes) schools and health authorities in New Zealand.<sup>1,2</sup>

The following review covers key health and wellbeing literature, developments in physical education (PE) and the use of a popularised model. Next, we briefly explain our proposed Teaching Games for Whakawhānaukataka (TG4W) intervention before we outline the study’s Kaupapa Māori Theory (KMT) methodology and methods. The results and discussion of findings present the key themes that emerged from our analysis. Finally, we conclude by suggesting that our proposed TG4W model could be a way for rakatahi to reconnect with others, enhancing social relations and leading to better wellbeing outcomes, while also raising their heart rates through physical activity (PA) at the same time.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, one network of which New Zealand is a part is the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which promotes policies to improve both the social and economic wellbeing of people worldwide. The OECD is a forum where governments work together to find solutions to social, economic and governance issues. Across the OECD's members (primarily Global North countries), the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students across science, mathematics and reading subject areas.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, PISA tests how well students can problem-solve, think critically and communicate their ideas effectively, providing insights into how well education systems in OECD countries are preparing students for real-life challenges and future success.

New Zealand has participated in PISA testing since 2000 and, by cross-comparing results globally, for instance, policymakers can learn vicariously from other countries' experiences.<sup>4</sup> In addition to science, mathematics and reading, the 2022 PISA facts sheets for New Zealand reported other indicators.<sup>5</sup> For example, responses to the question of "how school life was experienced for 15-year-old students in NZ schools" were published. Results suggested that New Zealand students' sense of belonging at school and overall satisfaction with life were alarmingly negative. Other reports indicate that bullying in New Zealand schools is rising.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in 2018 New Zealand was rated the second-worst in the OECD for bullying.<sup>7</sup> Since then, we have moved into first place as the worst country in the OECD for bullying.<sup>8</sup> In fact, post-COVID-19, New Zealand scored worse in 2022 (compared with 2018 results) in terms of students' feelings of loneliness (21%; up 3%) and awkwardness, or feeling "out of place" at school (28%; up 4%). These results are consistent with the national youth health and wellbeing survey 'What about Me?,' which showed that only 47% of the 7209 youth (Years 9–13) surveyed had helped others in their school or community within the past year.<sup>9</sup> Based on this body of evidence, there is an urgent need to explicitly address whakawhānaukataka (social wellbeing) within New Zealand's education system.<sup>10</sup>

In 2022, "feeling safe at and around the school" was another PISA indicator test used to gauge how safe school life was for students. Overall, fewer OECD students reported bullying in 2022, compared to 2018. Only 7% of students, for example, said that other students spread nasty rumours about them in 2022, compared to 11% in 2018. However, the New Zealand results demonstrated that 25% of girls (1 in every 4) and 32% of boys (1 in every 3) at school reported being the victim of bullying acts at least a few times a month.<sup>11</sup> For all others, the OECD average was 20% for girls (-5%) and 21% for boys (-11%). In New Zealand, 6% of students did not feel safe on the way to school; a further 6% reported not feeling safe in their classrooms at school, and 13% did not feel safe at other places at school (e.g., hallway, cafeteria, restroom)—3% higher than the OECD's (2023) average of 10%. Clearly, an issue exists with students feeling safe at New Zealand schools.<sup>12</sup>

As Jenkins (2021) argues, the decline of rakatahi hauora (youth wellbeing) accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, in response to COVID-19, people were forced to stay indoors, isolated from whānau (family) and other social networks to ensure their safety. Despite successful COVID-19 isolation measures in New Zealand, an unintended outcome was an increase in perceptions of loneliness and the deterioration of mental health.<sup>13</sup> Young people, arguably, failed to manage with the severity of these isolation measures, many ending up unable to cope with the constraints that ensured safety amongst wider society.<sup>14</sup> While Te Momo (2022) argued that Māori were

nobly “resilient” (p. 74) in response to COVID-19, teachers trying to promote hauora, using Durie’s (1985) Te Whare Tapa Wha (TWTW) model, faced challenges and difficulties including teaching taha tinana (physical wellbeing) and taha whānau (social wellbeing) concepts to students virtually.

The 2023 Voice of Rakatahi Sport NZ (2024) report, which captured the experiences of 20,000+ youth across 105 schools and 15 Regional Sports Trust areas, concurs with these findings. Indeed, results revealed that only 36% of rakatahi were “highly satisfied” with their in-school physical activity (PA) experiences. Further, of the PA types measured, both formal and informal, overall satisfaction was reportedly highest for “competitive sport” experiences at school and lowest for “PE classes.”<sup>15</sup>

The implication is that something is happening in health promotion and PE classes at school that fails to connect with or engage youth. The top four areas for improvement that rakatahi raised in the Voice of Rakatahi (2023) survey included: a greater variety of activities on offer (29%); improved playing and training venues (28%); more accessible changing rooms and toilet facilities (26%); and better PE or sports uniforms (25%).<sup>16</sup> Further, almost two thirds (63%) wanted to be more physically active at school and those dissatisfied with their present experiences wished to “have more fun.”<sup>17</sup> Obviously, work remains to be done to better cater to the needs of students in PE.

Given these issues, we wondered what solutions were possible to address whānaukataka (social wellbeing) more explicitly within New Zealand’s PE education system, using Kī-o-Rahi as a tool. Traditionally, teaching and learning styles have evolved following changes in philosophy, psychology and the development of student-centered approaches. As Griffin and Butler argued, “new teaching–learning approaches have emerged to develop students’ autonomy of thought and problem-solving skills.”<sup>18</sup> In relation to online learning changes and how PE and health teachers have traditionally taught students, the challenges of COVID-19 required practitioners to pivot.<sup>19</sup> Given these complexities, we hypothesised that Bunker and Thorpe’s Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model might provide a potential framework which, if adapted, would allow for greater depth of knowledge (rather than understanding ‘why or how’ to play games).<sup>20</sup> In response, we conceptualised an explicit TG4W model intended to ‘double down’ on students’ understanding of the importance of be(com)ing more relational.

Therefore, our focus now turns to the literature that analyses Western and Māori perspectives on health and wellbeing; and evolutions in PE including TGfU and kā taoka tākaro (Traditional Indigenous Games or TIGs).

## WESTERN HEALTH PERSPECTIVES

Defining health is contested among academics, organisations and professionals worldwide.<sup>21</sup> The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”<sup>22</sup> Although this view considers holistic aspects, it also focuses on microscopic variables, or those viewable to the “naked eye.” A criticism of this lens is that health is “illusionary,” insofar as the majority of the world’s population are categorised as “unhealthy.”<sup>23</sup> Further, biomedical perspectives do not fully consider Indigenous views, in particular failing to recognise the intangible aspects of health such as wairua (spirituality) and relationships that Māori have with whakapapa (genealogy) and whenua (land).<sup>24</sup>

Currently, health indicators are defined by biopsychosocial metrics comprising three areas: 1) biological—physical health, genetics and disability; 2) social – living circumstances, education and relationships; and 3) psychological – self-esteem, social and coping skills.<sup>25</sup> While social wellbeing aspects are acknowledged, there is no apparent spiritual connection to health. Durie argues that, for Māori, this is the most fundamental dimension due to the unique relationships they have with whenua (land), whakapapa (ancestry) and people.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Panelli and Tipa concur that health is not merely “physical, and mental,” but that there are many interconnected layers including experiencing the natural world, spiritual wellbeing and cultural identity.<sup>27</sup> In New Zealand, definitions of holistic health cannot ignore these (neglected) elements that shape wellbeing, alongside more ‘objective’ health indicators. Thus, next we briefly outline how Māori conceive of wellbeing.

## MĀORI PERSPECTIVES ON HEALTH

Arguably, Māori conceptions of health and wellbeing are more holistic compared to the WHO definition above. These debates are covered by prominent Māori health figures, including Professors Durie, Pitama and Baxter.<sup>28</sup> In the relevant literature, wellbeing comprises three consistent elements: 1) it is multi-dimensional; 2) whānaukataka (connections) leads to whakawhānaukataka (being relational); and 3) socio-political contexts—such as colonisation, racism and marginalisation or CRUMBS<sup>29</sup>—are also influential.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to Western ideas, Māori (and non-Māori, including New Zealand’s Ministries of Health and Education) embrace and promote the Te Whare Tapa Whā (TWTW) model. Durie formulated this concept, which brings together wairua (spirituality), whānau (social wellbeing), hinengaro (mental and emotional wellbeing) and tinana (physical wellbeing), while acknowledging that connection to the whenua (land) is foundational (see Figure 1).<sup>31</sup>

Key to TWTW is spirituality (identity, belief systems and values), considered integral to cultural continuity practices and rituals—which McHugh and colleagues (2019) state are fundamental for Indigenous peoples’ perspectives on holistic wellbeing globally.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as Durie suggests, if wairua (spirituality) is lacking, then people are thought to lack “wellbeing and [are] more prone to disability or misfortune.”<sup>33</sup> However, wairua (spirituality) is the dimension that is missing in the WHO’s definition. While there are commonalities between these distinctive viewpoints, there are also nuances that are neglected. The following section speaks briefly to one distinct difference—specifically, how Māori are stigmatised within wider New Zealand society and the subsequent impacts on their wellbeing.

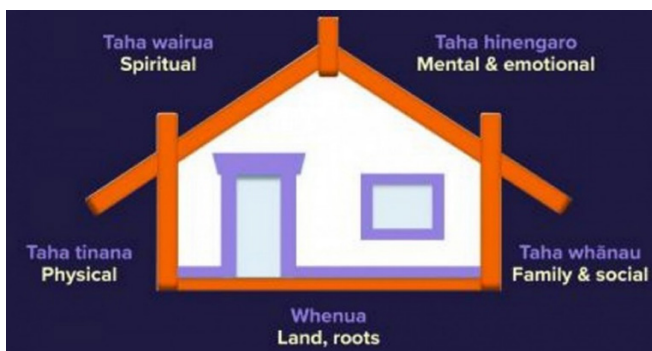


Figure 1. Durie’s Te Whare Tapa Whā (TWTW) model of holistic wellbeing (1984). Model used with permission from the Mental Health Foundation.

## SOCIETAL STIGMA: ANTI-WHAKAWHĀNAUKATAKA

Māori represent 17% per cent of the total New Zealand population.<sup>34</sup> In postcolonial New Zealand, ‘casual’ racism occurs often, whether directed towards entire sub-groups or members within a sub-group; societal attitudes are dominated by a majority.<sup>35</sup> Deeply discriminating, social stigmas reduce people from a “usual person to a tainted, discounted one,” revealing a “deviant condition identified by society that might define the individual as flawed or spoiled.”<sup>36</sup> New Zealand-based research has revealed that Māori are exposed to “day-to-day” forms of institutional racism through stereotypes and media portrayals, causing them to feel anxious, ashamed and embarrassed to be Māori.<sup>37</sup> Trauma stemming from this stigma is not something new; it is inter-generational. In the early 1900s, for example, teachers at Native schools were strongly advised to discipline all children who spoke te reo Māori, leading to psychological deterioration in their sense of identity and self-worth.<sup>38</sup> As Ka’ai-Mahuta articulates, a

child’s native language [te reo Māori] is the primary form of expression of that child’s thoughts and feelings. Therefore, language provides empowerment for a child. Language is the lifeline and sustenance of a culture. It provides the tentacles that can enable a child to link up with everything in his or her world. It is one of the most important forms of empowerment that a child can have.<sup>39</sup>

This demonstrates how impactful language is for rakatahi Māori. Classroom practices can actively encourage te reo Māori by using simple introductions and greetings, advancing to more complex expressions such as pepehā or mihimihi (formal introductions), promoting inclusive learning spaces that value diversity and showing others that New Zealand’s Indigenous language matters.<sup>40</sup> Racism, expressed as verbal antagonism or physical aggression, transcends individuals and also affects institutions.<sup>41</sup> Thus, inter-generational trauma is repeated, reinforced and perpetuated by society’s institutions—harnessing the distrust of some societal groups, which manifests in their children affecting taha whānau or social cohesion.<sup>42</sup>

For Māori to counteract the systemic institutional racism, stigma and stereotypes that suppress their educational achievement, the entire sector must evolve and uplift the mana of Māori by increasing their visibility and participation within schools and specifically in the classroom content that is being taught.<sup>43</sup> The following section shines light on how this can be achieved, using an example from a Kī-o-Rahi unit of work which aims to encourage holistic understandings of social, spiritual, mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

## EVOLUTION IN PE PEDAGOGY

Developments in PE have seen educators and academics acknowledge that quality PE programmes can enhance PA, movement skills and enjoyment of life, and engender socialisation and social cohesion.<sup>44</sup> Increasingly, researchers are concerned with how PE is taught to students, with shifts away from teacher-centric approaches (TCA) to student-centered approaches (SCA).<sup>45</sup> This movement has shifted the focus away from content-focused styles that facilitated learning about ‘why’ and ‘how’ to play games, but not about who to play for and what to play for—an attempt to counter the argument that PE programmes are overly simplistic. As Cothran (2001) argued, physical educators know more about the factors that impede positive change, rather than those that promote it.<sup>46</sup> Inspired by previous PE (r)evolutions, we considered that the TGfU model could be modified to realise the present study’s aims and objectives.

## TEACHING GAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING: MERELY UNDERSTANDING GAMES

Bunker and Thorpe's original TGfU model was considered an "evolutionary" approach.<sup>47</sup> For them, the "primary purpose of teaching any game should be to improve students' game performance and to advance their enjoyment and participation in games, which might lead to a healthier lifestyle."<sup>48</sup> However, a kaupapa Māori theoretical position might contest this order. Thus, we have adapted their model to assert a TG4W pedagogy that elevates healthy lifestyles, first and foremost, via participation and enjoyment in games (e.g., Ki-o-Rahi), an approach that might then lead to "improved game performance" in the future. Ultimately, in contrast to Bunker and Thorpe's TGfU model, our modified TG4W model prioritises whakawhānaukataka over performance measures, and does not leave healthy lifestyles to chance. Indeed, we doubled down on 'understanding'—rather than just asking 'why or how' to play games better and improve students' game performance. This is not an holistic approach.

Another narrow intention of the TGfU model was to implement an approach that: 1) increased physical activity levels to enhance physical wellbeing; 2) improved game performance; and 3) made PE enjoyable.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, two of these outcomes relate to tinana –enhancing physical wellbeing and making games (PE) more fun and enjoyable. Meanwhile, TWTW's other dimensions are neglected or outright dismissed.

## TEACHING GAMES 4 WHAKAWHĀNAUKATAKA (TG4W): DOUBLING DOWN ON UNDERSTANDING

Pedagogically, the TGfU model is founded on the four REST principles of games: representation (simpler game forms that 'represent' elements of the real game); exaggeration (manipulating game rules to over-exaggerate particular strategies or skills); sampling (trying different game forms with similar strategies); and tactical complexity (incremental shifts from simpler game forms to more complex tactics).<sup>50</sup> By contrast, our Māori-fied TG4W model is founded on the four pedagogical principles found in Ngā Hau e Whā o Tāwhirimātea (NHWT).<sup>51</sup>

Translated, NHWT means the "four winds of Tāwhirimātea." A culturally responsive framework, it was developed for the tertiary education sector, integrating strategies to assist educators in becoming culturally competent practitioners. The NHWT four-winds principles are: whānaukataka (relationships); manaakitaka (an uplifting ethic of care); kotahitaka (unity); and raketirataka (student agency and leadership). They encourage educators to rethink their approaches when engaging Māori learners, to revise and modify teaching strategies and, when required, to question their own assumptions and dispositions.<sup>52</sup> They are designed to empower and inspire educators to be flexible and to broaden and deepen their culture of care in educational settings. At NHWT's core is the aspiration for improved *oranga* (health, wellbeing). So, we adopted this methodology.

First, whānaukataka is about being relational and developing close connections between people. The root of whānaukataka is whānau (family, kin), or close friends considered as family. Educators enhance this cultural value by creating and supporting a greater sense of belonging through nurturing collective, shared values among learners. An important consideration in achieving this aim is recognising all learners' cultural and personal identities. Second, manaakitaka (ethic of

care) embraces hospitality, kindness, generosity and support in learning settings. For Māori, manaakitaka is characterised by expressing generosity and showing respect for others.

Kotahitaka (unity) is about creating cohesion, solidarity, togetherness and collective social action—for example, when learners feel that they belong to something bigger than themselves. Strategies to achieve this include integrating waiata (songs) and karakia (prayer) into learning or developing a shared group (team) narrative. Often these experiences help learners understand and consider team dynamics and wider societal issues. Rakatirataka (agency and leadership) requires educators to facilitate autonomous settings where learners are self-determined to take ownership and self-manage their learning priorities. Coaches, for instance, create opportunities for players to assume leadership roles within teams, developing their agency, which is key to creating unity. Like teachers, learners should regularly evaluate themselves, their educators (coaches) and peers (teammates), and have a say in shaping their next ‘work on’ areas.

These NHWT principles are interrelated because the four winds are co-dependent and, unlike the TGfU model, they do not imply a linear sequence; they all contribute equally to creating balance, a holistic approach, towards culturally responsive teaching and learning.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, from a kaupapa Māori position, it made sense to employ these principles in our Māori-fied TG4W model and in our Kī-o-Rahi unit of work as an intervention, as we explain below.

## KĀ TAOKA TĀKARO AND NHWT

Kā taoka tākaro (treasured games) is a term for traditional Māori games, handed down from our tīpuna (ancestors). Brown argues that taoka tākaro can enhance wellbeing by virtue of the physiological demands required to play high-intensity games.<sup>54</sup> However, what makes TIGs distinctive, compared to other games, is that they also prioritise sociological and philosophical ideas. In these traditional games, interconnections between performers and tīpuna, cultural values and norms are required to play, and values like whakawhānaukataka and kaitiakitaka (guardianship) are taught explicitly through the accompanying pūrākau (narratives).

Our tīpuna used pūrākau to deepen our understandings of knowledge about creation, the universe and our place within it. However, due to colonisation, this depth of knowledge deteriorated as its mana (prestige) was diminished.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, assimilation policies ensured that Māori TIGs such as Kī-o-Rahi were actively discouraged, and Māori were introduced to colonial games like rugby and cricket. As researchers, we taught Kī-o-Rahi the same way our tīpuna would have, using pūrākau, showing that they are more than mere myths—they are an exchange of mātauraka Māori (traditional Māori knowledge) across the generations.<sup>56</sup>

Despite its revitalisation, there are few peer-reviewed, published studies of Kī-o-Rahi. There are some books and a few journal articles, most authored by Kī-o-Rahi expert Harko Brown.<sup>57</sup> While some of the literature is “grey,”<sup>58</sup> other studies are emerging.<sup>59</sup> However, this research is related to the physiological demands of Kī-o-Rahi on high school players, suggesting that the game has similar physiological demands to sports like rugby 7s. As with majority research, there is a focus on the physical elements of the game. Again, wider conversations about the potential for Kī-o-Rahi and other TIGs to deliver additional outcomes, such as social wellbeing and other holistic benefits, is not comprehensively covered in the literature. This study contributes to filling this knowledge gap.

## METHODOLOGY

Kaupapa Māori research affirms Māori knowledge, philosophies and practices as valid and legitimate.<sup>60</sup> Pihama et al. state that Kaupapa Māori theory provides a platform for Māori to be unapologetically Māori by developing and sustaining educational outcomes while living in a colonial society.<sup>61</sup> In designing the present study, it was important to consider cultural diversity and to assess how students worked together, encouraging them to think, understand and communicate in their class and school settings. As a result, this research employed kaupapa Māori to inform our study's theoretical framework, to implement cultural practices (TG4W) and teachings (NHWT) developed by Māori (researchers) *for* and *with* participants, including Māori, to promote hauora (TWTW), applying Māori values such as whakawhānaukataka (relationality) and manaakitaka (hospitality).<sup>62</sup>

### Research objectives

The following section presents the study's aim and objectives, providing insight into the selection of methods, including the pūrākau from which Kī-o-Rahi originates. Fundamentally, this study aimed to: 1) develop deeper understandings of Kī-o-Rahi; 2) use Kī-o-Rahi to enhance rakatahi understandings of hauora, using TWTW; 3) identify the wellbeing needs for rakatahi Māori to thrive in education settings; and 4) gather accurate information to determine whether Kī-o-Rahi (taught via the TG4W model) is an effective way to teach/improve rakatahi hauora.

### Research aims

Our research sought to identify: 1) how PE/ PA pedagogy can be modified to better cater to Māori; 2) if a modified 'TGfU' model, which incorporated Māori pedagogical principles (i.e., TG4W), promoted social wellbeing and hauora more explicitly; and finally, 3) if Kī-o-Rahi was useful in helping rakatahi to better understand hauora (TWTW) more broadly and improve their holistic wellbeing.

### Study Design methods

Ultimately, to meet these aims and objectives we designed a Kī-o-Rahi four week unit to teach rakatahi about social wellbeing (to be followed by TWTW's three other hauora dimensions). The study mixed our qualitative participant-observation reflections with quantitative data. The qualitative data was gathered by all four of the authors who, as "participant-observers," reflected deeply after each lesson that they delivered. The WHO-5 survey responses represented the quantitative data, which was collected by only one of the classroom teachers both before and after their four Kī-o-Rahi lessons. Each lesson emphasised a TWTW cornerstone, beginning with whakawhānaukataka (social wellbeing) to build rapport between the researchers (participant-observers) and the participants (students).

### Participants

The researchers (N = 4) debriefed by reflecting deeply after each of their four Kī-o-Rahi sessions across the three classes; these comprised a primary school with a group of Year 6 students (N = 25; 10-11-year-olds); and a college with a Year 7 class (N = 25; 12-13 year-olds) and a Year 10 class (N = 20; 15-16-year-olds, in a bilingual te reo unit). Only the Year 7 classroom teacher completed the pre- and post-unit WHO-5 questionnaire with their class, because it was built in as a

part of their health unit for the term (N = 21). However, all qualitative data were gathered through our recorded participant-observations made across the 12 Kī-o-Rahi lessons. Overall, this study engaged over 70 participants and included a dozen deep debriefing reflections.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The Year 7 teacher administered the WHO-5 survey with students before our first Kī-o-Rahi lesson and again after the last lesson. According to Topp et al. (2015), the WHO-5 is a validated short questionnaire with a highly applicable generic scale comprising of five simple, non-invasive questions measuring the subjective wellbeing of respondents. The WHO-5 considers positive wellbeing items including the following statements: (1) “I have felt cheerful and in good spirits;” (2) “I have felt calm and relaxed;” (3) “I have felt active and vigorous;” (4) “I woke up feeling fresh and rested;” and (5) “my daily life has been filled with things that interest me.” Respondents are asked to rate each statement from 0 (at no time) to 5 (all of the time). Raw scores (up to 25) are multiplied by 4 to total out of 100. For ethical purposes, the authors did not gather this data. Later, however, we were granted access to an anonymised data set to assess whether the lessons (intervention) delivered had led to any tangible changes in the students’ social, spiritual, mental/emotional and/ or physical wellbeing.

This quantitative data was analyzed using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to offer descriptive (as opposed to statistically significant) results, which are presented in the following section in Tables 1 and 2. Both quantitative (WHO-5 survey) and qualitative (participant-observer reflections) data were analysed separately as sub-groups and then later compared and contrasted. Together, we reflected collectively and deeply upon the observations that we made across the 12 sessions in total (i.e., four Kī-o-Rahi lessons at three different Year levels in two schools).

### **Protocol and intervention procedure**

The first Kī-o-Rahi lesson started with whakawhānaukataka (relationship building) to facilitate trust and rapport with the students. Thereafter, each session reviewed the previous week’s teachings to reinforce learning. Questions included “which aspect of hauora was last week’s focus; in what way did last week’s learnings help you this week?” and “how are you feeling today?” These prompts were intended to gauge how well the students understood and/or had applied the TWTW focus over the past week.

As participant-observers, we paid close attention to see if the students not only enjoyed the games, but were able to apply the TWTW learning focus. As deliverers of hauora learnings via four one-hour Kī-o-Rahi sessions (covering social, spiritual, mental/emotional and lastly physical wellbeing) we achieved two vital goals. Firstly, through the preview-review process with students, we could determine the depth of their hauora understandings and assess if they perceived TWTW as a multi-dimension construct. Secondly, we were also able to assess, via our ‘cultural insider’ participant-observer reflections, whether the students’ involvement in playing Kī-o-Rahi solidified their understanding and appreciation of mātauraka Māori (traditional Indigenous knowledge) and manifested as specific TWTW-dimensional behaviours.<sup>63</sup> In reviewing each lesson, the students were asked to express their ideas with us about what they thought could happen if any of these elements were neglected. Their insights were also recorded in ‘hindsight’ by the research team during our own, separate debriefing reflections and in-depth discussions.

## Results

The pre-test results in Table 1 show that under a quarter (5/21) of students (24%) reported feeling “cheerful and in good spirits” all the time. Over half (57%) felt this way “most of the time” though. However, this ‘trend left’ (all/most of the time) was not repeated in their self-reported states of feeling “calm and relaxed,” where a third (7/21) felt this way. The majority (43%) felt this way over half the time, while 24% (5/21) said they felt calm and relaxed less than half the time. Unsurprisingly, given the physical nature of the intervention, the majority (76%) trended left and felt “active and vigorous” most (7/21) if not all of the time (9/21). Under half (47%) said they woke feeling “fresh and rested” all or most of the time, while 57% said that their “lives were filled” with interesting things “most” or “all of the time” at the pre-test juncture.

The post-test results in Table 2 show a marked ‘trend left’ across all WHO-5 questions. Indeed, 85% of students felt “cheerful and in good spirits” all or most of the time. Similarly, the incidence of “feeling calm and relaxed” almost doubled, to 62%. Again, the ‘active’ nature of our intervention saw high scores (85%) reported by students, up 9% from 76%. States of feeling “fresh and rested” increased from under half up to almost two thirds (62%). Finally, over three quarters (76%) reported that their life, post-intervention, was “filled with things that interest me” “most” or “all of the time” at that juncture.

When we analysed their WHO-5 scores collectively, the pre-test mean average was 57% across the 21 students. The range was from 28% (lowest score) to 77% (highest score), a difference of 49%. Four weeks later, the WHO-5 post-test mean average was 83%, a noticeable increase. Again, when we considered the range, the lowest WHO-5 score was 60% and the highest was 100%, still a 40% difference between these outliers. Individually, results showed an increase ranging from 4% (lowest) to 48% (highest) and an overall average of 28% growth.

Likert scale	All the time	Most of the time	More than half the time	Less than half the time	Some of the time	At no time
‘Raw’ scores from 5 (highest) to 0 (lowest)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)	(0)
Q1. I felt cheerful and in good spirits	5	12	3	1		
Q2. I have felt calm and relaxed	3	4	9	5		
Q3. I have felt active and vigorous	9	7	3	1	1	
Q4. I woke up feeling fresh and rested	7	3	7	2	1	1
Q5. My daily life has been filled with things that interest me	6	6	6	3		

Table 1. WHO-5: Number of students’ responses before the Kī-o-Rahi sessions (pre-test).

## Discussion

Our study aimed to assess whether PE pedagogy could evolve to better cater to the needs of Māori students. We investigated whether a modified TGfU model, employing Māori pedagogical principles (NHWT), promoted whānaukataka (social wellbeing) explicitly. Overall, our objective was to see if Kī-o-Rahi (using TG4W) was a useful way to help rakatahi understand hauora more deeply, leading to improved, albeit self-reported (WHO-5), outcomes in holistic wellbeing. This section discusses our findings in relation to these aims.

Likert scale	All the time	Most of the time	More than half the time	Less than half the time	Some of the time	At no time
'Raw' scores from 5 (highest) to 0 (lowest)	(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)	(0)
Q1. I have felt cheerful and in good spirits	10	8	3			
Q2. I have felt calm and relaxed	6	7	6	1		1
Q3. I have felt active and vigorous	13	5	3			
Q4. I woke up feeling fresh and rested	7	6	6	2		
Q5. My daily life has been filled with things that interest me	7	9	4	1		

Table 2. WHO-5: Number of students' responses after the Kī-o-Rahi sessions (post-test).

As Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, despite our limited quantitative results (N = 21 students who completed both pre- and post-tests, taking account of absences), there was an obvious shift in terms of their self-reported feelings across all five WHO-5 questions. While the number of participants (N = 21) and self-reporting are limitations, which we acknowledge, our qualitative reflections based on our triangulated (across three sites) participant-observations concurred with these quantifiable results. In reflecting on the study results, we observed similar shifts and trends across the entire cohort of 70+ students who participated in our intervention. Our collective experiences working with and speaking to rakatahi about their past experiences in schools with learning about hauora (TWTW pre-intervention) was rich and revealing. For example, some schools had outsourced this learning to high-profile local athletes and other external providers. When we asked students "what key points do you remember?," little information was recalled regarding TWTW or the deeper meanings of hauora. Interestingly, they only recounted the activities that they had competed in or had completed, rather than the actual hauora concepts that were taught. These findings reinforced the view that their (past) practices were not fully engaging or connecting with the students.

Given this background, we drew on the 'evolutionary' TGfU model, as it had recognised deficiencies in pedagogy previously and encouraged a shift towards understanding and appreciating the 'why' and 'how' of playing games.<sup>64</sup> Initially, we hypothesised that a TG4W approach could promote hauora for all students, and in fact 'double down' on understanding more than just the game. TGfU develops a lineated, 'logical' sequence of understanding games.<sup>65</sup> However, we wanted students to learn more than just 'why' or 'how' to perform better in games. Thus, we found that our TG4W (Māori-fied) model provided an enriching and engaging way for students to better understand and enhance their hauora throughout our Kī-o-Rahi intervention.

As participant-observers and Kī-o-Rahi educators, we developed learning experiences and adapted PE models (TG4W) that made abstract concepts (TWTW) more accessible. Underpinned by the NHWT pedagogical principles, our Māori-fied TG4W model allowed students in their neural plasticity prime to better understand, appreciate and absorb some relatively old, yet nuanced concepts. Based on our findings, we encourage educators, as agents of social and cultural change in health and education outcomes, to create similar opportunities that will permanently impact rakatahi hauora in New Zealand. Innovations like our Kī-o-Rahi unit and TG4W model helped students absorb and retain abstract concepts, underlining that we must take advantage of this pivotal time in their lives to influence and enhance their hauora.

Within PE contexts, using te reo Māori is easily achieved by introducing initiatives like the Kī-o-Rahi unit into the mainstream content, where playing positions and equipment have te reo Māori names and meanings. The use of Kī-o-Rahi and sharing pūrākau acts as a vehicle to promote inclusion, diversity and appreciation of the cultural identity of ethnic minorities. Dominant majority groups can play their part to facilitate improved social cohesion, with the aim of achieving a common goal towards unifying both worldviews. Oranga (wellbeing) can be enhanced—not only by scoring points or hitting the tupu (target), but also through whānaukataka as well as teamwork. Based on our exploratory findings, the intervention provided rakatahi with the tools to better understand hauora (TWTW), improving their social connectedness.

## CONCLUSIONS

Rakatahi Māori still experience inter-generational trauma daily, among many other impacts of colonisation, despite the promise of "partnership, protection and participation" made in Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 1840. These issues, including the ensuing stigma, day-to-day racism and stereotypical assumptions, have detrimentally affected their hopes and aspirations, including lower academic achievement for some Māori. In addition, higher unemployment, poorer health outcomes and overrepresentation in imprisonment statistics all serve to further undermine our bodies of knowledge and cause us to remain diminished or disregarded by the mainstream. Clearly methods used in mainstream PE and health settings, especially for teaching hauora, are not working. Indeed, as we found, in the pre-intervention phase of our study the students failed to articulate the deeper or sometimes even superficial meanings of TWTW.<sup>66</sup>

By modifying the popularised TGfU model, we developed a TG4W adaptation which allowed a fresh way to learn "more than just the game." Getting outside the gymnasium walls and playing Kī-o-Rahi in and around green and blue spaces demonstrated improvements in students' whānaukataka and overall hauora across the four weeks. Indeed, the study's results revealed that Kī-o-Rahi and

a TG4W approach enhanced students' hauora through socially inclusive settings where Māori and non-Māori learners fully flourished in their interactions with each other. Implementing TG4W into PE practice forms a symbolic partnership and, by doing so, enables mātauraka Māori to take a strong role and PE to have greater cultural responsiveness, as well as providing protection in schools and classrooms, together inspiring innovation and creativity.

While the application of the NHWT principles that underpinned TG4W worked favourably on this occasion, more evidence is required to demonstrate that they can be successfully applied in different educational contexts. Future research directions could consider multiple pathways—for instance, applying the NHWT principles in other curriculum areas, or further studies employing and testing the TG4W model in PE and sport settings.

For this study, however, it is possible to say that TG4W helped all learners, regardless of their ethnicity, to thrive as the new (old) innovations employed move beyond simply learning the 'why' and 'how' to play a game better. Thus, in 'doubling down' on this 'understanding,' we argue that students' hauora should not be left to chance, at the expense of performing better in games. Indeed, quite the reverse; social cohesion, spiritual awareness, cognitive understandings, appreciation of feelings and emotions and improving on the physical requirements of the game (in that order) together lead to enhanced wellbeing. As for playing the game better? We believe that if all these other outcomes are prioritised, then that one will take care of itself.

Supervised by Assoc. Prof. Jeremy Hapeta, **Marcus Campbell** (Te Atiawa, Ngāti Māru) was awarded a He Ngaru Paewhenua summer internship after completing a degree in sport and exercise sciences, where he combined his passions for exercise physiology, hauora Māori and academic research. Now a second-year medical student at the University of Otago's School of Medicine, he continues to apply his knowledge in his medical training, with the ambition of improving health outcomes throughout Aotearoa. His leadership has been recognised through his presidency of the Otago Medical Students' Association as well as the Pūtahi Manawa, Arthritis NZ, and Division of Health Sciences Excellence scholarships.

**Nick Parata** (Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Toarangatira, Te Atiawa) holds degrees from the Centre of Indigenous Science and School of Physical Education, sport and exercise sciences at the University of Otago. His undergraduate degree led him towards postgraduate Honours, supervised by Dr Chanel Phillips and Professor Jim Cotter, which focussed on Kī o Rahi as a tool to assess components of fitness. He later undertook a Ngā Pae o te Maramatanga funded summer internship, supervised by Assoc. Prof. Hapeta, that focussed on flourishing mental wellbeing for rakatahi Māori. His passion for this subject stems from his own immersive experiences playing Māori hockey, including in the New Zealand senior Māori and junior Tāne hockey teams.

**Connor Eastwood** (Ngāti Raukawa) is an undergraduate researcher studying for a Bachelor of Science at the University of Otago. Prior to completing his degree in sport and exercise science, he was awarded a He Ngaru Paewhenua internship, supervised by Dr Hapeta. Connor is interested in improving youth knowledge of Māori health through traditional Māori sports. His passions, which include developing Māori culture through youth, have led him to a position in Physical Education New Zealand's rakatahi leadership group, where he focuses on the importance of physical education participation for youth in Aotearoa. He aims to pursue a future where the health of Māori youth in particular is upheld through active exposure to taoka tākaro.

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## **NEIGHBOURLY NETWORKS: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO RELATIONAL BALANCES OF SHARED BECOMING**

### INTRODUCTION

Indigenous communities continue to encounter barriers to actualising their worldviews. Implementation of existing legislation alone (for example, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in its current form) is insufficient when subtle forms of subjugation arise from incommensurabilities between paradigms. Legislative processes are going to require additional philosophical debate and creativity. In fact, the very concept of “Neighbourly Networks” requires discussion in contexts without a level playing field for these.

This article argues that part of the trouble relates to contemporary Western difficulties in engaging with Indigenous conceptions of agency in relationship. It first summarises some relevant shared ground between Indigenous worldviews and contemporary Western science and philosophy identified by others. It then offers some additional Western stepping stones to support understanding, while stressing that familiar ground can only be helpful as a starting point. The article therefore increasingly engages with Indigenous conceptions of agency in relationship on their own terms.

Through a discussion of Indigenous conceptions of shared learning and creation in a participationalist paradigm, two motivations for change are able to merge into one: empowering Indigenous worldviews to thrive on their own terms is first and foremost a matter of decency, and this is reason enough to pursue it. The term “decency,” along with “common humanity,” is used here in accordance with Raimond Gaita’s critique of a tendency in contemporary Western philosophy to refer to an individual’s dignity in terms which lack the depth of emotional and embodied realities (terms such as, for example, “inalienable rights,” “justice,” or “fairness”).<sup>1</sup> Intertwined with this is an opportunity for the contemporary West to learn how to take our own steps to regenerate our capacity for mutually responsive, interspecies kinship relationships in our own localities. The latter applies particularly—but not only—to the UK and to wider Europe, where interspecies networking has been neglected under the influence of Cartesian thought.

## COLONISATION: “HAVE THEY LEFT?”

### 1.a) Motivation

Continued colonial injustice remains a postcolonial concern despite numerous legislative attempts to overcome it.<sup>2</sup> This article is going to argue that far from simply being a case of patchy implementation of existing legislation, the issue is complex. At least some existing legislation remains incapable of adequately relating to Indigenous experience due to incommensurabilities between paradigms. This means that consistent application of the existing legislation cannot always solve the problem. Indigenous philosophical thought will need to be at the core of legislative processes, alongside contemporary Western paradigms, in order for liveable ways forward to be found.

The United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples<sup>3</sup> is a case in point. At first glance, it makes for encouraging reading in its attempt to move away from attitudes and behaviours associated with colonial subjugation. At second glance, questions arise. Well over a decade after the declaration was passed, and despite its widespread adoption,<sup>4</sup> an Indigenous worldview’s ability to be actualised and to thrive continues to be anything but a given.<sup>4</sup> It would be tempting to assume that it is solely patchy implementation which is to blame. However, it is going to become clear that more fundamental issues are at stake: some aspects of the declaration itself (irrespective of questions of implementation) are likely to require additional debate and creativity.

Incommensurabilities between paradigms may lie hidden in plain sight, and subtle forms of subjugation may arise where one paradigm’s assumptions render another paradigm’s concepts invisible. Indigenous ways of being in the world do not readily reduce to the categories provided by Enlightenment Western thought.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, Enlightenment Western paradigms frequently continue to work on an assumption of their own universalisability.<sup>7</sup> Where Western paradigms are in a dominant position in discourse, aspects of Indigenous experience may be rendered invisible by the debate’s overreliance on concepts previously familiar to the West. One example of this invisibility appears in Keith Richotte’s work: Richotte asserts that no mutual understanding is achievable between Indigenous and settler populations in relation to legislative processes (in Richotte’s case, in Canada) unless settler populations learn to engage with the dynamics of Indigenous story.<sup>8</sup> Richotte’s point is relevant to this article’s discussion of agency being capable of residing in relationship—most notably, to co-creative relationships of interspecies kinship where the sacred may be experienced as part of the material—and thus to questions relevant to UNDRIP.

Section 2 of this article explores two case studies to illustrate some of the dynamics that may be involved. Section 3—taking Raimond Gaita’s thoughts on dignity empowering unique contribution as a starting point, and moving on to engage with Indigenous performative knowledge processes on their own terms—discusses some patterns of interaction which may contribute to our co-creating liveable, interspecies ways forward. The discussion is offered in a spirit of respectful neighbourliness in our shared, co-creative network of the universe.<sup>9</sup> It is from this very respect for neighbourly difference that the need arises for the West to learn from and with Indigenous paradigms, and to do so in a spirit of attuning to the dynamics of a previously unfamiliar paradigm, rather than of appropriating its tangible manifestations.

## **1.b) Preliminary notes on the paradigms involved**

### *1.b.1. Indigenous philosophies cannot be a monolith, but shared conceptual ground exists*

Indigenous worldviews cannot all, of course, be tarred with one brush: the dynamic of their arising from locality means they are necessarily diverse.<sup>10</sup> Shared conceptual ground, however, does exist. Leroy Little Bear, for example, asserted three interwoven elements of philosophical unity-in-diversity between Indigenous worldviews in the context of a ten-year series of transdisciplinary academic conferences now known as the Dialogues.<sup>11</sup> While this approach cannot do justice to each individual dynamic of each particular society's relationships on and with their land,<sup>12</sup> it does offer a starting point for philosophising between Indigenous and non-Indigenous paradigms.<sup>13</sup>

Little Bear's three elements speak to the following concerns: firstly, of the universe being alive and imbued with spirit; secondly, of human co-participation in an ongoing creation that shows patterns as opposed to obeying laws; and thirdly, of there being a 'manifesting' alongside a 'manifest' in this world, with the manifesting also being referred to as the spiritual and the manifest as the physical.<sup>14</sup> Little Bear's later work shows the three to be inextricably intertwined, and their separation only having been a tool for initial knowledge transfer between paradigms.<sup>15</sup> Not stated explicitly in Little Bear's three elements, but emergent between the lines, is a tendency for Indigenous worldviews to conceive of dualisms as not necessarily involving mutual exclusion.<sup>16</sup>

In this article, Little Bear's elements of philosophical unity-in-diversity are on the one hand referenced in the generalised form in which he proposed them, while on other occasions exemplified by the philosophical understandings of individual Indigenous societies, as appropriate.

### *1.b.2. Contemporary Western nuance, and its limited impact on the mainstream*

Despite the above-mentioned tendency for contemporary Western worldviews to universalise, this tendency itself, of course, cannot entirely be universalised: Western scientific involvement in Little Bear's and his colleagues' ten-year series of conferences alone is testament to the West, too, being capable of nuance. Contemporary Western science's own recent insight, through its discoveries in relation to quantum theory, plays a part: the clockwork of Newtonian physics was found only to be explanatory of a subset of the world,<sup>17</sup> and this insight featured prominently at the Dialogues. Related work by Karen Barad at the intersection of quantum physics and philosophy, culminating in her proposal of her theory of agential realism, is referenced below, alongside its kinship with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy, as discussed in his Collège de France lectures.<sup>18</sup>

Two important caveats must be noted here. Firstly, the above Western examples of glimpses beyond Enlightenment Western comfort zones—although they provide helpful stepping stones on a journey towards engagement with Indigenous concepts—cannot carry us all the way to these concepts. The thrust of this article's argument will become increasingly evident in the following sections: stepping stones notwithstanding, there remains a point beyond which Indigenous worldviews can only be approached on their own terms, and these terms will require their own space to shine through. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work in relation to methodology, alongside aspects of Krushil Watene's work referenced below, are relevant to this first caveat.

Secondly, the above Western examples of glimpses beyond Enlightenment Western comfort zones do not appear to have resulted in a mainstream Western paradigm shift.<sup>19</sup> Cartesian conceptions of the physical world as an automaton enable an economically useful (at least in the short term) option of objectifying non-human nature:<sup>20</sup> the contemporary West can tend to concentrate on interacting with those aspects of the natural world seemingly reducible to reliable predictability, and then to apply overly restrictive forms of logic<sup>21</sup> to empirical observations of a nature placed upon Bacon's rack and largely confined to Boyle's laboratory conditions.<sup>22</sup> As a corollary, we not only continue to be more accustomed to learning *about* non-human nature than we are to learning *from* it,<sup>23</sup> we also rarely expect to engage in processes of shared learning and creation *with* non-human nature, in the sense of agency being granted space to develop in interspecies relationship and to thrive from there.<sup>24</sup> Rather, we tend to find ourselves surprised when others do.<sup>25</sup> We are, in other words, persisting in our reluctance to take seriously types of engagement lying beyond the edges of a comfort zone which is a mere 500 years old, and whose delimitations are by no means a given.<sup>26</sup>

### *1.c) Two reasons for change, and a glimpse of their merging into one*

At the beginning of this article, the need to challenge the current dominance of Enlightenment Western paradigms was presented as a matter of decency towards Indigenous societies (which would already be reason enough to pursue it). Based on what has been said since, this matter of decency is now also turning out to be one of rigour. Enlightenment Western societies have, on the one hand, excelled at leading the way with regards to much-needed scientific innovations such as vaccination programmes.<sup>27</sup> On the other, we have allowed our comfort zone to contract by allowing a tendency to reduce science to scientism to limit the scope of our learning.

To stretch ourselves in this regard is not usually viewed as a matter of scientific rigour, and may even give rise to accusations of its lack.<sup>28</sup> However, if science is to be conceived as a path to understanding the natural world, then rigour demands the inclusion of those experiences which initially do not appear to sit well with our existing expectations.<sup>29</sup> Under an Indigenous, richer understanding of science as relating to "systems of relationships and their application to the life of the community,"<sup>30</sup> an attitude of welcoming the unexpected will be conducive to shared innovation and becoming outside the laboratory, too.

This article is going to explore our widespread contemporary Western failure to engage with Indigenous conceptions of agency in relationship on their own terms (as, for example, in Richotte's comment regarding story) as an example of why it is important to challenge the current philosophical dominance of Enlightenment Western paradigms. Failure to engage with the dynamics of agency residing in relationship remains, first and foremost, discriminatory against Indigenous societies, and thus unethical. In addition—and now also taking into account a participationalist paradigm, as discussed below—it is going to become clear that a mainstream that renders *any* contribution invisible—in this case, Indigenous contribution on its own terms—is, in doing so, committing a two-pronged act of epistemic negligence: it is missing an opportunity to extend its comfort zone in relation to the already existing; and it is severing connections vital to Little Bear's co-creative thriving into the future of the networks affected.<sup>31</sup>

Conversely, if contemporary Western networks do find the humility to learn to attune to Indigenous conceptions of agentive interspecies rhythms and dynamics—it becomes conceivable that multiple, and again networked, benefits will ensue. Interwoven with our regeneration of agentive interspecies networks specific to our own, contemporary Western localities (particularly in Europe), and with the increase in Western capacity for engagement with Indigenous philosophies (and thus with shared processes such as UNDRIP) likely to be supported by this regeneration, new potential also emerges for addressing our current, contemporary Western failure to be respectful neighbours to others. For better or worse, localised networks are in turn networked into a global one, and the West could do worse than to learn how to end our current overgrazing of the world's climate commons.<sup>32</sup>

## **2. Subtle subjugation: the perils of uneven playing fields**

“... we've all been bathed in a vat of cognitive imperialism,” writes Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.<sup>33</sup> As stated at the beginning of this article, despite Indigenous rights now being enshrined in the UN declaration, Indigenous ways of being in the world continue to be difficult to actualise in the nation states imposed on them, and the trouble relates to paradigm. Enrique Dussel's “myth of modernity,” while not taking issue with an Enlightenment Western definition of rationality *per se*, leaves the reader in no doubt about the harm inherent in the dynamic of its assumption of its own superiority, universalisability and exclusive validity producing forms of subjugation.<sup>34</sup> Overt forms of subjugation have been addressed by UNDRIP.<sup>35</sup> Subtler forms, operating through tacit prioritisation of an incommensurable paradigm, remain to be resolved.

The dynamics of such subtler forms of subjugation are, for example, explored by Bruce Wilshire: a dominant paradigm's tacit assumptions may not only render invisible any ideas and phenomena beyond its own comfort zone, but may also result in their very concealment becoming concealed.<sup>36</sup> Examples from Indigenous contexts abound. Non-anthropocentric conceptions of persons as potential partners in interspecies relationship<sup>37</sup> become invisible in discussions of personhood based on arguments of analogy with human-specific capacities.<sup>38</sup> When personhood is tacitly (as opposed to explicitly) linked to membership of the human species, the resulting invisibility of non-anthropocentric conceptions of personhood itself becomes unlikely to be noticed. Relatedly, suggestions of engagement with ritual were met with “guffaws”<sup>39</sup> at their alleged superstition in a cross-cultural discussion of organic farming practices: incommensurabilities between paradigms had concealed any nuanced experiences of ritual as whole-bodied conversation with non-humans in an environment experiencing the sacred as being present in the material world.<sup>40</sup>

At first glance, the trouble is simply that the capacities of a perceived “other” may be rendered invisible by its assignment to a category perceived not to have them, as contemporary Western theories of epistemic injustice suggest.<sup>41</sup> At second glance, the trouble goes deeper, as capacities' invisibility tips into their inability to operate in contexts where discourse eliminates scope for capacity to be exercised. Eva Marie Garrouette and Kathleen Delores Westcott's comparative study of the constitutive capacity of story illustrates this point.<sup>42</sup> In a dynamic of self-fulfilling prophecy reminiscent of educational opportunities being withheld from a student due to assumptions of their lack of potential, the scope for Indigenous story to do its work is curtailed in environments where incommensurabilities between paradigms result in its capacities being underestimated, and its opportunities to interact undermined accordingly. In other words, Western failure to understand a non-Western concept on its own terms has here resulted in the non-Western concept's inability to operate in a Western context.

A similar dynamic of tacit assumptions acting as constraints on co-creative reality is relevant to UNDRIP. The right to religious freedom, for example, is protected by UNDRIP's Article 12, while the right to subsistence is protected by Article 20.<sup>43</sup> The two are, however, treated as separate questions by UNDRIP, even though this (arguably Cartesian) separation does not travel well: where Leroy Little Bear's elements of philosophical unity-in-diversity between Indigenous worldviews are lived, such a separation cannot apply. Where relationships between humans and non-humans are grounded in conceptions of the universe being alive and imbued with spirit—where humans are co-participants, among other species, in the continued co-creation of the manifest as it arises from the potentialities of a manifesting understood to be spiritual in the material world—it is unrealistic to treat subsistence and religious freedom as separate issues, and then to expect legislation based on this categorisation to hold water when interacting with Indigenous communities as understood by Little Bear.<sup>44</sup>

Predictably, legislation conceived from within a contemporary Western paradigm alone—although technically compliant with UNDRIP—thus struggles to relate to the needs of an Indigenous whaling community in what is now known as Alaska. The Iñupiaq community in question experiences whales and humans as part of an interspecies kinship group. The sacred is experienced as being present in the material in this relationship, for which Chie Sakakibara has coined the new term “cetaceousness.”<sup>45</sup> The relationship involves whales giving themselves to the community when they are ready to do so, in a dynamic which echoes, for example, Gregory Cajete's treatment of Indigenous humans' relationships with smaller animals hunted for sustenance.<sup>46</sup> Sakakibara describes an interspecies relationality incapable of being captured by causality alone: it is not, for example, a simple case of a whale unilaterally deciding to give itself, and the whale's decision in turn triggering unilateral human hunting activity. Rather, a mutually responsive interplay of humans and whales involving drumming and dance is described, whereby drumming not only forms part of a community's celebration of a successful hunt, but is equally part of the community's communication with a whale before the whale's gift is made.<sup>47</sup>

Western categories such as “subsistence whaling” and “religious freedom,” severing the spiritual from the material, and locating agency solely in the (bounded) hands of the humans involved (as opposed to recognising its potential presence in interspecies relationship alongside this), cannot comprehensively engage with this dynamic. This means that UNDRIP's articles 12 and 20 are going to offer little potential for resolution here until a future version creates a way forward that links them.<sup>48</sup> At the moment, and in compliance with article 20, the encapsulating nation state of the USA is able to impose legislation with regards to quotas based solely on nutritional requirements, and these are able to override Indigenous experiences of a whale having given itself to the community as part of their interaction between whales and drumming and dance. Under article 12, the community is then permitted to engage in “religious” dance, but “religious” dance, now unable to interact with material interspecies practice, does not resolve the issue: the issue at stake is the unity of spirituality and subsistence experienced in co-creative interspecies kinship. This dynamic is not reflected in the current legislation separating religious freedom from questions of physical sustenance and locating agency in bounded entities alone.

The whaling dynamic can, in an extension, be placed into a wider context of land rights. The distress resulting from Indigenous peoples' separation from their land and from its fellow constituents has, on multiple occasions, found embodied expression in the deaths of some of those affected.<sup>49</sup> The need for redress—if such a thing is possible—is reflected in UNDRIP's Article 8; the need to prevent

future forced relocation is addressed in Article 26.<sup>50</sup> What neither succeeds in accommodating, however, are bilateral forms of belonging: land ownership is treated as unilateral human control of an object. Relationships of mutual belonging between land and its people<sup>51</sup> are not addressed; assurance of land continuing to be honoured as a partner in mutually respectful and responsive interaction after a change of legal ownership is not considered.<sup>52</sup> Customary ritual interaction with the land is again treated as an entirely separate matter of religious practice, based, again, on a Cartesian dualist distinction between the sacred and the material and on related assumptions of agency being located in bounded entities alone. The whaling case study already showed, however, that these are not universalisable.<sup>53</sup> Indigenous conceptions, as well as their lived realities, have been rendered invisible, and potentially unable to operate, by the tacit assumptions of a paradigm continuing to be treated as universalisable even after it has been found not to be.

The remaining sections are going to discuss how this conundrum may be addressed, and how much—in addition to the above-mentioned decency of eliminating a form of discrimination now that it has become known—stands to be gained by addressing it.

### **3. Once dignity has been acknowledged for its own sake, contribution is empowered to follow**

This section returns to the point raised in the Introduction to this article of a matter of decency and inclusion simultaneously being one of rigour. In a first step, and arguing from a contemporary Western, representationalist paradigm, Miranda Fricker shows that epistemic injustice corrupts the knowledge base.<sup>54</sup> Still considered from within the same, representationalist paradigm (and not, as yet, from within a participationalist one), corruption of the knowledge base is unlikely to be helpful in an environment whose complexity already entails our scientific understanding only ever stretching to verisimilitude at most.<sup>55</sup> Fricker's work links epistemic injustice to discrimination, which is a denial of dignity. Elements of Raimond Gaita's thinking in relation to dignity are therefore going to be relevant as a starting point for this discussion in **section 3.a.**, at its beginning solely relating to bounded entities.

In **section 3.b.**, in an extension of these first reflections beyond the realm of an Enlightenment Western paradigm alone, this article is going to return to a point made in **section 2:** much of the subtle influence of this dominant paradigm relates to its reluctance to engage with the possibility of agency not exclusively residing in bounded individuals or groups.<sup>56</sup> Enlightenment Western paradigms do not tend to attribute a capacity for agency to relationships (nor, relatedly, to stories), whereas Indigenous conceptions of performative knowledge processes, understood from within a participationalist paradigm, are going to be shown to rely on it: a glimpse of the potentially acausal dynamics involved has already appeared in the above whaling example. **Section 3.b** is thus going to argue that the dignity of acknowledging agency in relationships constitutes a vital step in processes of returning space to Indigenous worldviews to be actualised and to regain their ability to thrive.

Based on a proposed richer application of Gaita's thinking with regards to dignity, **section 3.b** will further argue that if the Enlightenment West extends the courtesy of recognising agency in relationship to the Indigenous societies who rely on its presence, it is again going to enjoy what was initially, in the previous, representationalist argument, simply referred to as enhanced rigour.

However, under a participationalist paradigm now, as co-creative agency resides in relationship and allows for co-creative innovation, enhanced rigour is going to mean more than it did before: it is going to mean enhanced scope for shared becoming. This is where Karen Barad's agential realism comes to life as it meets Leroy Little Bear's shared philosophical ground halfway.<sup>57</sup> Enhanced rigour, under a participationalist paradigm, is going to mean that if the West finds the humility to acknowledge the dignity of agency in relationship, then we may enhance our own capacity for co-creative, interspecies interaction in our own localities. Based on the transformative characteristics of Indigenous paradigms,<sup>58</sup> regeneration of our own, co-creative relationships with more-than-human nature may well become interwoven with the development of our capacity for engagement with Indigenous worldviews on their own terms—which is, as the whaling case study shows, vital to processes such as UNDRIP. Finally, and through this interwoven dynamic, we may find ourselves growing into becoming more respectful neighbours and partners in inter-locality networking to those currently affected by our overgrazing of the global climate commons.

### *3.a. Raimond Gaita: on decency and rigour as both move towards a participationalist paradigm*

Acceptability to an established mainstream can tend to be contingent on compliance with its pre-existing norms, even where these may be irrelevant to the job at hand.<sup>59</sup> When this plays out in plain sight, we readily admit that discrimination is unethical. **Section 2** showed that subtler dynamics may give rise to similarly unethical outcomes in the present. What is now at stake, in addition, is the ability of **section 2's** subtler dynamics to act as a stumbling block to our shared creation of liveable future ways of networking in the world.

Spinoza's network of individuals within the whole, too complex for any individual or group to grasp,<sup>60</sup> is one way of imagining the limitations encountered in the discussion of verisimilitude above. Given this complexity, and given our blind spots entailed by it, any individual or group arguably stands to benefit from interaction with those at home in different parts of the network from their own. Interaction need not mean agreement every time: any "other," too, is bound to be as fallible as we are.<sup>61</sup> What it does mean, however, is that more is required than the mainstream's simply allowing those who meet its criteria to add themselves to it. If an existing mainstream wants to grow into enhanced familiarity with the complex network it can never fully grasp, it will need the courage to let itself be transformed by its interaction with the previously unfamiliar.<sup>62</sup> If humans had allowed themselves to remain convinced that their own range of hearing was the only one, Nagel's bat would not have been available to make a philosophical point,<sup>63</sup> and ultrasound would not now be a diagnostic procedure in Enlightenment Western healthcare.

Raimond Gaita makes a pertinent point in this regard: the point of the inherent dignity of the "other," and of this dignity, once recognised, becoming empowered to blossom into the "other's" unique contribution which could not otherwise have been made and received. Gaita's point is made in relation to bounded individuals and to bounded groups.<sup>64</sup> Between the lines, however, the context of Gaita's remarks travels part of the way towards engagement with Indigenous knowledge processes on their own terms: between the lines, it is one of relationships and of meanings. It is through engagement with each other that contributions develop into shared meanings, and it is in engagement with each other that initially intractable predicaments may become capable of being resolved.<sup>65</sup> Gaita does not explicitly attribute agency to relationship. He does, however, welcome the necessary unforeseeability of outcomes of serious and equitable engagement between Indigenous and settler populations in Australia, and this arguably demonstrates openness to the idea.<sup>66</sup>

*3.b. Gaita's dignity, applied beyond bounded individuals and groups: allowing networks to breathe where the sacred is experienced in interaction with the material*

Gaita's thinking carries echoes of Martin Buber's conception of *I-thou* relationships.<sup>67</sup> It is the non-objectifying engagement of *I-thou* which enables all contributions to be made, and it is here that a multi-faceted stepping stone to agency in relationship emerges—alongside, as a corollary, a much-needed levelling of playing fields and creating of neighbourly networks relevant to UNDRIP. Recognition of agency in relationships involves recognition of the dignity of the unexpected. It is in this sense that this section is a call for us to allow our networks to breathe beyond that which is capable of being preconceived, and to find ways of enabling our legislative processes to create space for this.

Buber's thinking goes beyond mere openness to material non-objectification: he locates the spiritual between the *I* and the *thou*,<sup>68</sup> and this shows kinship with the above-referenced parallels between Indigenous thought and Spinoza's which formed a stepping stone into the Iñupiaq whaling case study. The complexity of Spinoza's network, in turn, supports William James's comments on the impossibility of any one individual or group offering an exhaustive account of the sacred.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the necessary philosophical diversity following from this, a piece of shared ground again appears between worldviews locating the sacred within the material world rather than beyond. Little Bear's elements of philosophical unity-in-diversity refer to the universe as being alive and imbued with spirit, and to humans as co-creators in a world that shows patterns rather than following laws. The dynamics of his "manifesting," which he links to the spiritual, interact with the "manifest," which he links to the physical, in this world. Little Bear's three elements do not talk about manifest objects to observe and to manipulate in this world, while placing sacredness into a separate realm: they talk about the sacredness of our co-creative participation with the manifesting.

Little Bear's dynamics between manifesting and manifest reappear in a group of Anishinaabeg authors' treatment of Indigenous story as dynamic in relationship.<sup>70</sup> In a predominantly verb-based language,<sup>71</sup> a pattern emerges of eternal dynamics being encoded in sacred stories grounded in understandings of story as verb, and of story as being alive in relationship. Nouns may well manifest, through story, in time- and place-bound instantiations of storied, eternal rhythms of verb-based interaction.<sup>72</sup> Dynamics of honourable harvest, encoded in stories of interspecies kinship, may become manifest from underlying rhythms in the manifesting, as geese may give themselves<sup>73</sup> and as enhanced sweetgrass growth may appear.<sup>74</sup>

Crucially, what is at stake in this storied dynamic is not whether preconceived precepts are correctly applied. As with the whaling case study, a manifest quota of manifest geese on its own is not going to help. Rather, knowledge as process emerges in a dynamic of mutual, interspecies attunement, grounded in custom and experience without being determined by these. Under a paradigm acknowledging the impossibility of attaining sufficient understanding to justify unilateral control (such as Spinoza's or Leroy Little Bear's), universalisable precepts cannot reliably be preconceived. Rhythms and patterns for feeling our way together, conversely, can.

Much ethical discussion in the Enlightenment West centres on questions of what universalisable ethical principles to apply,<sup>75</sup> of who is eligible to benefit from their application,<sup>76</sup> and, in some cases, of what may constitute appropriate application of universalised principles to a particular situation.<sup>77</sup> The above conception of story as verb, understood as an eternal pattern of dynamic relationship to

be continually renewed in mutually responsive, co-creative interaction, is very different from this. Brian Burkhart theorises what is at stake in a relational understanding of ethics.<sup>78</sup> To illustrate, Burkhart draws parallels between ethical conduct and the harmonies created in a jazz band, whereby the individual player enriches the whole while at the same time being buoyed by the play of the whole.<sup>79</sup> Mutual attunement is key: dynamics of story as verb play out in shared learning and creation of new variations on eternal rhythms, and it is this renewal which at the same time keeps story as verb alive<sup>80</sup> and relationship responsive,<sup>81</sup> reflecting the living, co-creative universe introduced by Little Bear.

None of this means that Indigenous groups would be likely to object to legislative processes playing a pivotal role in regulating behaviour: several of the Indigenous authors cited are qualified legal professionals as well as philosophers,<sup>82</sup> and Indigenous scholars contributed to the conception of UNDRIP.<sup>83</sup> It is rather that in Indigenous settings, instruments for regulating behaviour tend to be able to breathe in relationship: their purpose is a forward-looking one of restoring justice by enabling communities to live harmoniously together into the future more than it is to mete out outwardly equal punishments for outwardly equal transgressions.<sup>84</sup> Desmond Tutu's leadership of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa famously drew upon precolonial conceptions of *ubuntu* as well as on Enlightenment Western conceptions of forensic process. This involved taking the courageous step of, in a volatile situation, daring to allow an innovative process to unfold which relied on story and meaning as inalienable elements of creating a respectful path to restoring justice, while acknowledging that, at times, this might carry a pricetag of an outward appearance of unfairness to some.<sup>85</sup> Fallibility, in a worldview centring relationality, is acknowledged as part not only of the human condition, but as part of the very condition of being alive.<sup>86</sup> It is disrespect which is deemed unacceptable,<sup>87</sup> and it is, crucially for the argument being made in this section, disrespect which "precludes the knowledge process."<sup>88</sup> In Tutu's example, the respect of *I-thou*, and of expectation of agency, was not only paid to the individuals involved: it was also paid to the unbounded entities of their relationships, and these were given space to unfold and to become open to co-creative renewal.<sup>89</sup>

None of this renders *I-it*, or indeed legislative processes such as UNDRIP, obsolete. Tutu did not do away with the law; he created space for it to breathe in story and relationship.<sup>90</sup> It is when unilateral control replaces agency in relationship that knowledge processes are stifled, not when parameters are negotiated to support these.

Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat, in a discussion of the hubris of human aspirations to unilateral control, tellingly recommend Jacques Ellul for further reading.<sup>91</sup> Ellul's work presents the ossifying effect of a sociological phenomenon of a self-perpetuating spread of standardisation he refers to as "technique."<sup>92</sup> Mutually responsive interaction is no longer possible, because interaction has been reduced to the sole reign of standardised process.<sup>93</sup> A vicious cycle of depersonalisation and disregard may ensue.<sup>94</sup>

It is in this sense that, considered from within a paradigm where the sacred is experienced to be located within the material world, the influence of Ellul's "technique" takes on an additional dimension. The unilateral control embodied in Ellul's "technique," with the purpose of ensuring ever-predictable efficiency in the smooth running of things, cuts us off from the possibility of agency being able to arise in *I-thou* relationship. It thus cuts us off from the possibility of engagement in processes of shared learning and creation as understood in Indigenous philosophies and

exemplified in Burkhart's jazz analogy. The objectification of *I–It* allows the objectifying agent to retain unilateral control of the relationship's development. This first precludes Buber's spirituality entering the immediate relationship between *I* and *thou*, and then, in the medium term, precludes the maturing in relationship described as sacred, for example, in Anne Waters's work.<sup>95</sup> Little Bear's co-creative activity, and Anne Waters's maturing in co-creative relationship as Brian Burkhart's jazz band improvises on an ever-responsive dynamic of patterns in a sacred manifesting, have been overruled by standardisation.

A stepping stone to what is at stake for Waters and for Little Bear may be found in William James's thoughts on our doorway to "the More" being located in our unconscious—in other words, in our relinquishment of unilateral control through our conscious, and in our allowing ourselves to remain open to the "other."<sup>96</sup>

James's thinking is a mere stepping stone here, and by no means fully explanatory of Indigenous thought.<sup>97</sup> It is the stepping stone supplied by Gaita above which carries us more closely to Indigenous understandings of agency in relationship: Gaita's focus is on meanings embodied in interspecies relationships.<sup>98</sup> Most notably in the context of this discussion of agency being able to reside in relationship, Gaita actively embraces the unforeseeable quality in processes of *I–thou* relationship: the inability to preconceive unilaterally the outcome of a shared process of learning and co-creative activity, for Gaita, does not constitute a vagueness to be remedied, but an opportunity for shared becoming.<sup>99</sup> Gaita stops short of explicitly acknowledging either relationship or story as living, co-creative agents in the way that the above-cited Anishinaabeg authors do and as, for example, PRATEC would,<sup>100</sup> both chiming with Leroy Little Bear's elements of philosophical unity-in-diversity referenced throughout this article. What Gaita does do, however, is to show that there can be Western stepping stones to engagement with such forms of agency even for those of us without the benefit of first-hand experience of participation in multispecies kinship groups such as PRATEC's.<sup>101</sup> The sacredness in the material which is lived in co-creative, interspecies relationship in the whaling case study—whatever else it may simultaneously be—is a sacredness of non-objectification, and this non-objectification needs space in the law to unfold in living, mutual responsiveness.

It has become clear that these thoughts, while relevant to legislative processes such as UNDRIP, are relevant to these precisely because they cannot be conceived as legislative issues alone. What is at stake is, first and foremost, a wake-up call for the contemporary West to regenerate our pre-Enlightenment openness to entering into our own, mutually responsive, interspecies relationships in our own localities,<sup>102</sup> and to allow these relationships to begin to transform us.<sup>103</sup> Secondly, and through this transformation, we may become better placed fruitfully to engage in philosophical debate, resulting in approaches to the protection of Indigenous rights and capabilities which are sensitive to Indigenous requirements on their own terms. Finally, through the intertwined relationship of these first two steps, we may become more respectful neighbours in inter-locality networks to those currently affected by our Enlightenment Western overgrazing of the climate commons.

#### **4. Conclusion: agency in relationship as a path to networked renewal**

This article has argued that far from being a straightforward case of as yet patchy implementation of existing legislation, continued colonial injustice is also rooted in subtler forms of subjugation arising from paradigm. Teething troubles relating to aspects of UNDRIP in its current form, and to processes interacting with UNDRIP, similarly arise from this problematic. As previously stated by Krushil Watene, philosophical discussions are going to be needed in order to address this.<sup>104</sup>

In particular, Keith Richotte asserts that no mutual understanding is going to be achievable between Indigenous and settler populations in relation to legislative processes (in Richotte's case, in Canada) unless settler populations learn to engage with the dynamics of Indigenous story.<sup>105</sup> Drawing on Leroy Little Bear's elements of philosophical unity-in-diversity between Indigenous worldviews, this article has shown that Richotte's assertion is, above all, one of agency being able to arise in story and in relationship, and that this agency-in-relationship is intertwined with Indigenous experiences of the sacred in the material, as opposed to its being located in a separate realm beyond.

This means that the dominance of tacit assumptions inherent in Enlightenment Western paradigms—such as the treatment of subsistence and of religious freedom as two separate issues, and such as the treatment of agency as an attribute only of bounded entities—will need to be challenged in order for Indigenous worldviews, and for lived realities of these, to be able to return to thriving. A case study of a whaling community in what is now known as Alaska showed that these tacit assumptions, and their reflection in the current version of UNDRIP, not only render invisible certain aspects of Indigenous being-in-the-world, but that they also place constraints on present and future realities which are capable of rendering these aspects defunct.

A proposed path to potential resolution began from a starting point of Raimond Gaita's assertion of the inherent dignity of all, once acknowledged, then becoming empowered to grow into everyone's unique contribution. Initially argued from within a representationalist paradigm, Gaita's matter of decency and inclusion was shown simultaneously to be one of scientific rigour, and of the prevention of epistemic injustice corrupting the knowledge base.

Moving towards argument from within a participationalist paradigm, Gaita's thought process was then shown to be capable of being extended beyond application to the bounded entities of individual persons and of groups, and thus to become a stepping stone towards engagement with Indigenous concepts on their own terms. Garrouette and Westcott's work showed that once the same dignity is extended to the agency capable of arising in relationship (and, relatedly, to that of story), Indigenous conceptions of performative knowledge processes become empowered to operate. Leroy Little Bear's conception of our interspecies, co-creative and simultaneously sacred and physical communion with the manifesting was shown to be integral to these. Jacques Ellul's thinking with regards to the self-perpetuating spread of standardisation referred to as "technique," conversely, showed that a vicious cycle of increasing depersonalisation and increasingly undignified treatment may be at the core of contemporary Western difficulties in our meaningful engagement with those around us.

While Western stepping stones—taken, for example, from phenomenological thought—were available to help initial engagement with Indigenous ideas, it was important to note that mere stepping stones are all that they are: they cannot be fully explanatory of Indigenous thought, for

the simple reason that Indigenous thought is not what they were conceived from. What matters is that Indigenous worldviews receive space to thrive on their own terms, and that inter-paradigm conversation—for example, as part of legislative processes such as UNDRIP—takes place on Indigenous worldviews’ own terms, too. Western stepping stones can help to create an initial, inevitably rough and ready map to serve as a starting point. They are not the territory.

If the contemporary West dares to relinquish the aspiration to unilateral control and embarks on a regeneration of what Martin Buber refers to as *I–thou* relationships with human and non-human nature alike, then the return of agency into relationships related to this, in the first instance, may foster a regeneration of kinship between the contemporary West and more-than-human nature. Based on the transformative character of Indigenous worldviews, such non-objectifying interspecies engagement may then become conducive to enhanced mutual understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews. Through the intertwined relationship of these first two steps, hope may then arise of the Enlightenment West’s becoming more respectful neighbours and partners in inter-locality networks to those currently affected by our overgrazing of the world’s climate commons.

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1. See Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 5 and 81.
2. See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), 19-26 and 198-216; and Dennis H McPherson and J Douglas Rabb, *Indian from the Inside: Native American Philosophy and Cultural Renewal* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2011), 23-59. The section heading of "Have they left?" alludes to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's jokey reference to so-called postcolonial realities of continuing colonial subjugation (Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 25).
3. United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf) (accessed 29 May 2024).
4. United Nations, "Adoption of the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: 14 Years Later," *Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Indigenous Peoples*, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/news/2021/09/adoption-of-the-united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-14-years-later/> (accessed 29 May 2024).
5. For example, as recently as 2018, both mainstream research and mainstream practice in relation to Indigenous suicide prevention were shown still to be premised almost exclusively on Western assumptions, and therefore unsuitable for application in an Indigenous context. (Jeffrey Ansloos, "Rethinking Indigenous Suicide," *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 13:2 (2018), 8-28, DOI: 10.18357/ijih.v13i2.32061 (accessed 29 May 2024)). Ansloos' discussion of his findings carries echoes of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's seminal work discussing incommensurabilities between Western and Indigenous research methodologies (Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*). A powerful example of forms of continuing domination being capable of affecting all aspects of community life, as well as an illustration of a Mvskoke community's resurgence, can be found in Laura Harjo, *Spiral to the Stars: Mvskoke Tools of Futurity* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2019).
6. For example, McPherson and Rabb, *Indian from the Inside*, 147-8.
7. For example, Enrique Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)," *boundary 2*, 20:3 (Autumn 1993), 65-76, [www.jstor.com/stable/303341](http://www.jstor.com/stable/303341) (accessed 29 May 2024).
8. Keith Richotte, "Telling All of Our Stories: Reorienting the Legal and Political Events of the Anishinaabeg," in *Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, eds Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwew James Sinclair and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiiik Stark (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 379-96, at 385.
9. Scott Pratt, for example, offers a nuanced discussion of the difference between colonial forms of exploitative, universalising, potentially physically and epistemically violent expressions of neighbourliness, on the one hand, and what he terms an "Indigenous attitude" of interaction, pluralism, community and growth on the other: Scott Pratt, *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 38. Pratt goes on to derive from this distinction an inversion of what contemporary Western societies would refer to as the "Golden Rule" (of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you), arguing that since the Golden Rule universalises (and is thus incompatible with respect for difference), the desirable neighbourly attitude proposed in his work involves interacting with others in a way that they are comfortable with (ibid., 163-5).
10. For example, Brian Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019).
11. Glenn A Parry, *SEED Graduate Institute: An Original Model of Transdisciplinary Education Informed by Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Dialogue* (PhD thesis, California Institute of Integral Studies, 2008), 89, <https://originalthinking.us/pdfs/original-model-of-education.pdf> (accessed 29 May 2024). The Dialogues were initiated by a group of Indigenous academics led by Leroy Little Bear, and involved, amongst others, David Bohm and David Peat representing the discipline of quantum physics. Parallels between Indigenous thought and the findings of quantum theory were explored, alongside shared ground with aspects of contemporary Western philosophical thought (most notably, phenomenology and American Pragmatism) as it chimed with these. Elements of shared ground identified at the Dialogues are revisited at multiple points in this article, in particular those relevant to the dynamics of a participationalist paradigm.
12. For example, Andrea Sullivan-Clarke discusses issues of scalability in "Discovering Reality and a First Nations/American Indian Standpoint Theory," *APA Studies on Native American and Indigenous Philosophy*, 23:1 (Fall 2023), 4-8, <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/13B1F8E6-0142-45FD->

A626-9C4271DC6F62/APA\_Studies\_on\_Native\_American\_and\_Indigenous\_Philosophy\_V23n1.pdf (accessed 29 May 2024).

13. A similar point is made, for example, in an anthology in the field of Anishinaabeg studies describing its viewpoint as tribal and, simultaneously, as integrated into wider discussions of Indigenous worldview (Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwew James Sinclair and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiiik Stark, "Bagjiige: Making an Offering," in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, eds Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwew James Sinclair and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiiik Stark (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), xv-xvii, at xxvi.
14. Parry, *SEED*, 89. Some shared ground with Spinoza's philosophy is immediately evident. Viola Cordova, for example, explores this further. In particular, and with relevance to the whaling case study discussed in **section 2**, Cordova focuses on the interplay between the individual and the whole, and on the sacred experienced as being present in the material. Viola Cordova, *The Concept of Monism in Navajo Thought* (PhD thesis, University of New Mexico, 1992), 89-91, [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/phil\\_etds/29](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/phil_etds/29) (accessed 29 May 2024).
15. For example, Leroy Little Bear, "Jagged Worldviews Colliding," in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 77-85.
16. This is discussed, for example, by Anne Waters, "Language Matters: Nondiscrete, Nonbinary Dualism," in *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Anne Waters (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 97-115.
17. For example, F David Peat, *Blackfoot Physics* (York Beach: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2005), 170.
18. Examples of contemporary Western authors engaging with glimpses beyond an exclusively Newtonian paradigm abound. Besides those mentioned in these preliminary remarks, Louise Westling's work at the intersection of philosophy and ethology features below. In addition, Radhika Govindrajan's and Chie Sakakibara's works cited both draw on ideas previously put forward by Deborah Bird Rose (of human participation in interspecies life processes rather than human mastery of these); see, Deborah Rose, "An Indigenous Philosophical Ecology: Situating the Human," *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 16:3 (2005), 294-305, [https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/50443/2/01\\_Rose\\_An\\_Indigenous\\_Philosophical\\_2005.pdf](https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/50443/2/01_Rose_An_Indigenous_Philosophical_2005.pdf) (accessed 23 December 2023). More examples can easily be found: the point being made in these preliminary remarks is not that the contemporary West cannot think beyond an exclusively Newtonian paradigm, but that we appear to have lost the habit of thinking beyond an exclusively Newtonian paradigm when we are *not* actively thinking.
19. A case study of continuing scientific tendencies in the discipline of botany, for example, is offered by Robin Wall Kimmerer in her account of a postgraduate student's difficult experience with the committee overseeing her research when she attempted to submit a research proposal based on Indigenous experience of human interaction with the plant of sweetgrass (Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 159-60).
20. An example given by Marc Bekoff of legislation being passed to categorise laboratory-bred rats as beyond the reach of the Animal Welfare Act speaks for itself in this context (Marc Bekoff, *The Emotional Lives of Animals* (Novato: New World Library, 2007), 139).
21. Reference was made above, in the context of areas of philosophical unity-in-diversity between Indigenous "worldviews," to Waters, "Language Matters," pointing out that an exclusively Aristotelian conception of logic, while valuable, need not be all that there is.
22. For example, Ric Peels, "The Fundamental Argument Against Scientism," in *Science Unlimited? The Challenges of Scientism*, eds Maarten Boudry and Massimo Pigliucci (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 165-84.
23. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 346.
24. Enlightenment Western conceptions of non-objectifying forms of relationship do, of course, exist – for example, Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 28, where Buber locates "spirit" between "the I and thou." However, widespread use of factory farming methods – for example, "Compassion in World Farming," *Farm Animals: Dairy Cows*, <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/cows/dairy-cows/> (accessed 29 May 2024) – provides ample evidence of our patchy (to say the least) extension of this attitude to members of other-than-human species.
25. For example, Radhika Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 1-3.
26. In relation to the Western world, expectations of humans being involved in emotional, embodied and arguably spiritual relationships with parts of non-human nature are exemplified by two pre-Enlightenment Western myths cited by Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language* (New

- York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 49-60. In an Indigenous context, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is an example of an author focusing on these (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson with Edna Manitowabi, "Theorizing Resurgence from Within Nishnaabeg Thought," in Doerfler et al., *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, 279-93, at 290). However, for the contemporary West, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (for example, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 149-50) notes an absence of any expectation of kinship relationships developing between humans and more-than-human nature – an absence which is also identified by Krushil Watene as one of the stumbling blocks encountered by attempts to build bridges between Indigenous worldviews and capabilities approaches as proposed, for example, in Amartya Sen's and in Martha Nussbaum's work (Krushil Watene, "Valuing Nature: Māori Philosophy and the Capability Approach," *Oxford Development Studies*, 44:3 (2016), 287-96, DOI: 10.1080/13600818.2015.1124077 (accessed 29 May 2024).
27. For example, World Health Organisation, "2023 Emerging Technologies and Scientific Innovations: A Global Public Health Perspective," *WHO Global Health Foresight Series*, <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/370365/9789240073876-eng.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed 29 May 2024).
  28. For example, the experience of Robin Wall Kimmerer's postgraduate student referenced above included being told by her committee that questions of relationship had no place in scientific enquiry (Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 163).
  29. For example, Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat, building on Alfred North Whitehead's thinking, point this out (Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat, *Power And Place: Indian Education In America* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 2001), 2-6).
  30. Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 66.
  31. Shay Welch points out that disrespect precludes the knowledge process (as opposed to its only affecting knowledge as the thing known): Shay Welch, *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 45. Welch's examples and case studies are taken from the world of Indigenous dance, while Brian Burkhart is cited below offering a jazz analogy to make a related point. What is at stake, in both cases, transcends contemporary Western models of epistemic injustice such as Miranda Fricker's referenced in **section 2**: it is clear that it is not only already existing knowledge which is negatively impacted by disrespect. It is, in addition, also our ability to co-create new realities and knowledges at the intersection of ontology and epistemology opened up in a participationalist paradigm.
  32. For example, PRATEC, *Climate Change in Andean Communities*, March 2009, <http://www.pratec.org/wpress/pdfs-pratec/climatechange.pdf> (accessed 3 May 2024).
  33. Simpson with Manitowabi, "Theorizing Resurgence," 280.
  34. Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity," 75.
  35. Article 7, for example, enshrines the right to life, physical and mental integrity, liberty and security of person (United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*).
  36. Bruce Wilshire, *The Primal Roots of American Philosophy: Pragmatism, Phenomenology, and Native American Thought* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 163-74.
  37. For example, Thomas Norton Smith's definition of a person as a potential partner in relationship (regardless of species) whose dignity is inherent and inalienable (Thomas Norton-Smith, *The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 91). Relatedly, Deloria and Wildcat define personality as power and place, with power being the living energy of the universe, while place is defined as the relationships in locality (Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, 22-3).
  38. For example, Mark Rowlands, *Can Animals Be Persons?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), x. The blame for the anthropocentric argument in question cannot be laid at Rowlands' personal door, however: a few pages further in, Rowlands is citing Gaita and Wittgenstein, and, as I argue below, this is incompatible with an entirely anthropocentric conception of personhood. Rather, what appears to be at play is a dynamic of even non-anthropocentric arguments initially being pulled over onto anthropocentric terrain by sceptics, whereby the only option available to establish initial shared ground in potentially difficult discussions frequently appears to be a reluctant choice to begin with an argument from analogy with humans (see, for example, Bekoff, *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, 116-120).
  39. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, *Subversive Spiritualities: How Rituals Enact the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 183.

40. For example, Grimaldo Rengifo, "The Ayllu," in *The Spirit of Regeneration: Andean Culture Confronting Western Notions of Development*, ed. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin with PRATEC (London/New York: Zed Books, 1998), 89-123.
41. For example, Miranda Fricker, "Evolving Concepts of Epistemic Injustice" in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, eds Ian James Kidd, José Medina and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (Abingdon: Routledge 2017), 53-60. Fricker asserts two types of epistemic injustice: type 1, testimonial injustice, whereby someone's epistemic contribution is dismissed due to prejudice against them; and type 2, hermeneutic injustice, whereby someone's epistemic contribution is prevented by society's failure to allow them access to its mainstream's concepts (thus making it difficult for them to articulate their contribution in terms likely to be found relatable by others). In Fricker's model, a Western-biased academic might thus subject an Indigenous philosopher to epistemic injustice of type 1 by categorising them as a "primitive" and thus dismissing their contribution. A recent example of this has been documented by Viola Cordova, *How it Is* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2007), 40.
42. Eva Marie Garrouette and Kathleen Delores Westcott, "The Marie is a Living Being: Companionship with Stories in Anishinaabeg Studies," in Doerfler et al., *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, 61-79, at 75-6.
43. United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
44. A point intertwined with this – that Little Bear's co-creative activity in communion with the manifesting entails Richotte's suggestion of agency being capable of being present in story and in relationship – is revisited in **section 3.b** below.
45. Chie Sakakibara, *Whale Snow: Iñupiat, Climate Change, and Multispecies Resilience in Arctic Alaska* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020), 6-17.
46. For example, Cajete, *Native Science*, 73 and 161.
47. Sakakibara, *Whale Snow*, 154-58.
48. The issue of whaling has been a contentious one. Sakakibara sees potential for resolution in some shared ground identified between animal rights groups and the Indigenous communities involved: both agree that whales should be able to lead healthy lives until their deaths from natural causes or from predation. Remaining disagreement mirrors debates in relation to "conservation" in the wider sense elsewhere (as referenced by McPherson and Rabb, *Indian from the Inside*, 92 and 127) – of whether humans are part of nature or outside it. It is the question of whether and when humans can legitimately be predators that the two parties cannot agree on. The remaining

disagreement in Sakakibara's example, again, arguably arises from tacit assumptions related to Cartesian dualism, although at the same time questions of inappropriate behaviour in relation to the interspecies kinship cited remain to be asked of commercial forms of whaling extending beyond respectful acceptance of a gift made to the community. Sakakibara's account readily concedes that not all Indigenous-led whaling expeditions are necessarily grounded in interspecies kinship, alongside her emphatic assertion that many are. While strongly disagreeing with any wanton killing of a fellow creature, I would nonetheless distinguish this from genuine forms of interspecies kinship described by Sakakibara. This distinction changes the nature of the debate, but does not reduce its complexity. Once it is interspecies kinship (as opposed to wanton killing) which is at stake, two questions may arise even when arguing from within an Enlightenment, predominantly representationalist, paradigm: firstly, whether it is possible for a non-human to consent to their own killing; and, secondly, whether it is possible for humans to discern whether or not this consent is being communicated. With regards to the former, I find de Waal's discussion of convergence helpful: it is not always an evolutionary necessity for similar capacities to have developed from the same ancestral trait, as exemplified by wasps' facial recognition being achieved by different parts of the organism than humans' (Frans de Waal, *Are we Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (London: Granta Publications, 2017), 71-3). This shows that the absence of a particular organ or biochemical pathway cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of the absence of a particular capacity in every case. It would be overconfident, therefore, to argue that it was a priori impossible for non-humans to consent to a particular course of action. With regards to the question of discernment, interspecies attunement, achieved without the involvement of human language, has been documented in a variety of scenarios, famously, for example, in the case of Montaigne and his cat (Michel de Montaigne, *Essays, Book 2, Chapter 12: Apology for Raimond Sebond* (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, 2004), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm#chap12> (accessed 29 May 2024)). It would, thus, once again appear overconfident for contemporary Western science to rule out any possibility of Indigenous ritual having become sufficiently attuned within an interspecies relationship to achieve communication with phenomena such as, for example, a swarm of bees' waggle dance. Once the issue is then considered from within a participationalist paradigm alongside

- a representationalist one, the additional factor of shared learning and creation enters into the mix: an interspecies society based on mutually responsive interaction is arguably better placed to enact any necessary course corrections (arising, for example, from a change in circumstances) than a society predominantly relying on static forms of discernment of acceptable conduct (such as the sole use of predefined quotas based on a calculation of a community's nutritional requirements at a particular time) would be.
49. For example, Cajete, *Native Science*, 188.
  50. United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
  51. For example, Watene, "Valuing Nature," 292.
  52. For example, Pratt, *Native Pragmatism*, 151-4.
  53. More case studies can easily be found: the dynamic underlying the above whaling case study may rear its head wherever we fail to acknowledge the potential for agency to arise in relationship, and wherever we fail to respect the theory and practice of those experiencing the sacred as connected with participation in such shared agency. In other words, wherever we create a relationship of binary dualism between the rights of one and those of another (whether it be the rights of an animal "vs" the rights of a human community, or whether it be the rights of an allegedly inanimate part of non-human nature such as a river or a stone "vs" the rights of any other party potentially involved), we are thereby curtailing the potential for agency in relationship to innovate and to create a harmonious way forward. This does not mean animals or rivers should not have rights, nor does it mean that those around them should not have rights: it means that whenever these issues are debated, if Indigenous dynamics of interspecies kinship are to be honoured, then legislative processes will be required to allow space for agency in relationship to develop. This involves abandoning human aspirations to unilateral control over a preconceived process that an extraneous "nature" is then expected to operate in compliance with, irrespective of whether the process was conceived in a spirit of stewardship or not. Besides Sakakibara above, authors engaging with this question include Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*, 127-9; Cajete, *Native Science*, 211-212 and 305; McPherson and Rabb, *Indian from the Inside*, 92 and 127; and, with particular reference to the complexities (as well as opportunities) involved in recent discussions of granting personhood to allegedly inanimate parts of non-human nature such as a river, Vine Deloria, *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 2012), 177-88. **Section 3.b** considers some of the dynamics involved in more depth.
  54. Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Contribution as a Central Human Capability," in *The Equal Society*, ed. George Hull (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 73-90.
  55. For example, John Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 84.
  56. The question is arguably interwoven with concerns of determinism: the more we work on an assumption of Newtonian physics being all that there is (as opposed to accepting Newtonian physics as being explanatory of a subset of what there is, and embracing the stretch to our intellect and to our imagination introduced by the findings of quantum theory – for example, Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory*), the easier it becomes for us to become trapped in a perceived dichotomy of our either being powerless cogs in an automaton already in motion, or of our otherwise being required to seize unilateral control of the automaton as our only conceivable alternative. Relinquishment of our aspiration to unilateral control – and, relatedly, of our conception of agency only being found in bounded entities such as ourselves as individuals – may then carry the insecurity-inducing prospect of our becoming helplessly passive. A different conception, undercutting this perceived dichotomy, was found to constitute shared ground between quantum theory and Indigenous worldviews at the above-referenced Dialogues: in a participationalist paradigm partially accessible through Karen Barad's theory of agential realism (which is, however, not fully explanatory of Indigenous conceptions of performative knowledge processes. See Karen Barad "Meeting The Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism Without Contradiction," in *Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science*, eds Lynn Hankinson Nelson and Jack Nelson (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1996), 161-94), our co-creative activity is shown to unfold in relationship. Further engagement with this shared ground then explores its interaction, for example, with Spinoza's thought (Cordova, *The Concept of Monism*), as well as with Merleau-Ponty's – especially regarding our creation of circumstances placing constraints on what might otherwise have been conceived as a question of purely event-based freedom (for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003) 176-8). Merleau-Ponty was aware of his philosophy's kinship with quantum theory (he cites the work of Mme Paulette Destouches-Février in this regard: *ibid.*, 97-8). However, even Merleau-Ponty's related assertion of the subject weaving the network that carries its existence (*ibid.*, 176),

- although demonstrably intended to be understood as co-creative, stops short of attributing agency to relationship itself (rather than to the bounded partners contributing to it).
57. The previous endnote, accessed from the previous paragraph distinguishing participationalist from representationalist paradigms, offers some thoughts on Barad's agential realism as proposed in her "Meeting the Universe Halfway." The extended argument which is now being made – of rigour, now, in a participationalist paradigm, meaning more than it did before – is at least as relevant to Barad's thought. Barad places particular emphasis on our taking responsibility for our involvement in what we are co-creating. An area where Barad's article stops short of fully engaging with Little Bear's thought process is that of the necessity of our fallibility in doing so.
  58. For example, McPherson and Rabb, *Indian from the Inside*, 159-61.
  59. For example, the genuine occupational requirement for a bus driver to be competent to drive a bus has been far from the only criterion in recruitment decisions relating to bus drivers: Elizabeth Jones, "The Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963," *Black History Month*, <https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/civil-rights-movement/the-bristol-bus-boycott-of-1963/> (accessed 29 May 2024).
  60. While Spinoza emphasises the importance of our placing ourselves in a position to act from understanding as *much as possible* (for example, Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), 127/ E4P23), his work also makes clear that comprehensive understanding of all parts of the network of relationships in its complexity is unattainable (for example, Genevieve Lloyd, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Spinoza and the Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1996), 120-129).
  61. For example, Anne E Cudd, "Multiculturalism as a Cognitive Virtue of Scientific Practice" in *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, Feminist World*, eds Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 299-317, at 309.
  62. For example, Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding, "Introduction," in Narayan and Harding, *Decentering the Center*, vii-xvi, at vii.
  63. Thomas Nagel, "What is it Like to be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review*, 83:4 (1974), 435-50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2183914> (accessed 29 May 2024).
  64. Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 104; and Raimond Gaita, *The Philosopher's Dog* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2017), 193.
  65. Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, 106: Gaita points out that no one can (nor should) know in advance the outcome of complex processes of shared meaning-making, but that these can only unfold in mutually responsive relationship.
  66. *Ibid.*
  67. Gaita references Buber regarding the importance of mutual attentiveness (Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, 106). Buber's related thinking with regards to *I-thou* relationships is relevant to the points being made: Buber distinguishes between *I-thou* relationships on the one hand, which he conceives to be characterised by mutual responsiveness, and *I-it* relationships on the other. In the latter, the dynamic of immediate mutual responsiveness has been brought to a halt by the stasis introduced as attempts at propositional knowledge about the interlocutor replace participation (Buber, *I and Thou*, 9-10). Shared ground between Buber's thought process here and Barad's above-referenced theory of agential realism is evident. Relatedly, Brian Burkhardt offers aspects of Buber's thinking as a Western stepping stone to Indigenous understandings of processes of locality as interspecies kinship (Burkhardt, *Indigenizing Philosophy*, 121-2).
  68. Buber, *I and Thou*, 28.
  69. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 332-3.
  70. For example, Niigaanwew James Sinclair, "K'zaugin: Storying Ourselves into Life," in Doerfler et al., *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, 81-102, at 83 and 95-6. Sinclair first refers to story and relationship-making as an act of love, and subsequently explains that the Anishinaabemowin word for "love" occurs as a root word in many words relating to growth and becoming. He is careful to point out that "love" is here not to be understood in terms of romantic conceptions of pain-free togetherness, but is rather going to require hard work.
  71. For example, Sinclair, "K'zaugin," 91.
  72. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, in an Anishinaabeg context, distinguishes between two types of Indigenous story, with permeable boundaries between the two: *Aandisokaanan* are described as sacred stories encoding theories, while *Dibaajimowinan* are personal, ordinary stories. In a similar way to embodied ways of being in the world, the latter are described as expressions of the former, conceived to be echoing these (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson with Edna Manitowabi, "Theorizing Resurgence from Within Nishnaabeg Thought," in Doerfler et al., *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, 279-93.) A similar point is made by Sinclair (Sinclair, "K'zaugin," 91).

73. Ann Fienup-Riordan, "A Guest on the Table: Ecology from the Yup'ik Eskimo Point of View," in *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*, ed. John Grim (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 541-58.
74. Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 156-9.
75. A summary of some of those typically used in relation to environmental ethics can, for example, be found in Robin Attfield, *Environmental Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 30-69.
76. *Ibid.*, 9-15.
77. For example, Mark Johnson, "Imagination in Moral Judgment," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 46:2 (December 1985), 265, [www.jstor.org/stable/2107356](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2107356) (accessed 29 May 2024).
78. Burkhart's argument centres on his disagreement with Enlightenment Western requirements of ethical treatment being based on an individual's perceived value, and with Enlightenment Western assumptions of allegedly equal value necessarily requiring equal treatment (Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy*, 226.). Burkhart's conception of locality (as outlined in the remainder of his book) necessitates a nuanced, responsive approach to the ethical requirements inherent in any situation, as these arise from the mutually responsive relationships concerned as opposed to being linked to the perceived characteristics of any bounded entities involved alone.
79. Burkhart's jazz analogy (Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy*, 292) shows shared ground with Spinoza's conception of an individual's *conatus*, once they are acting from reason, chiming with that of the whole (for example, Spinoza, *Ethics*, 177 (E5P38)).
80. For example, Sinclair, "K'zaugin" 83.
81. For example, Rengifo, "The Ayllu" 106. A similar point is made, for example, by Henderson: James Sa'ke'j Youngblood Henderson, "Ayukpachi: Empowering Aboriginal Thought" in Battiste, *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, 248-78, at 262-4. Henderson also stresses the significance of the verb-based structures of Indigenous languages and describes Indigenous languages as continuously being forged by "creating a relationship with the living energy in an ecosystem ... an attempt to learn from being part of the flux" (*ibid.*, 262).
82. Examples include Anne Waters (<https://philpeople.org/profiles/anne-schulherr-waters-j-d-ph-d/publications?order=added> (accessed 29 May 2024)); Vine Deloria (University of Colorado Boulder, *Vine Deloria Jr.*, <https://www.colorado.edu/law/vine-deloria-jr> (accessed 29 May 2024)); Leroy Little Bear (<https://www.ulethbridge.ca/alumni/awards/2003/leroy-little-bear> (accessed 29 May 2024)); and Sa'ke'j Henderson (<https://www.cigionline.org/people/james-sakej-youngblood-henderson/> (accessed 29 May 2024)).
83. For example, Battiste, *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Battiste's anthology contains a collection of papers published in this regard.
84. For example, with regards to colonising powers taking responsibility for the harm inflicted on Indigenous populations, Linda Tuhiwai Smith offers positive examples of the use of healing circles in processes of reparation and potential reconciliation (Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*, 156). Gregory Cajete prioritises the establishment of level playing fields over reparation payments for past wrongs, while emphasising the need for both (Cajete, *Native Science*, 307-9).
85. Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (London: Random House, 2000).
86. For example, Rengifo, "The Ayllu" 117.
87. For example, Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy*, 286-7.
88. Welch, *The Phenomenology*, 45.
89. Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 126-9.
90. For Buber, too, *I–It* as subject–object relation arising from previous experience constitutes one vital component of our interaction in the world. His point is that a liveable world relies on *I–It* being continuously open to being tempered by *I–thou*. What is crucial for Buber is our openness to the part played by *I–thou* alongside *I–It*, and to continuing interplay taking place between the two so that the *I–It* relationship remains subject to ongoing transformation by *I–thou* (Buber, *I and Thou*, 23).
91. Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, 163.
92. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965). Ellul's use of the term "technique" relates to a sociological phenomenon rather than to one of mechanical engineering: Ellul's work is not critical of the use of technology, but of an ever-spreading, eventually self-perpetuating standardisation affecting all aspects of life (*ibid.*, xxxiii).
93. Although referenced here by Deloria and Wildcat, Ellul's stance on our interaction with the sacred is based on a contemporary Western (in Ellul's case, Christian) paradigm, and would thus jar with an Indigenous one: "technique," for Ellul, rather than preventing interaction with the sacred altogether, relegates the sacred to being a cog in an increasingly rigid and depersonalised machinery. This is because Ellul is talking about a conception of the sacred which locates it in a realm beyond the material, with no reference being made to Spinoza's or to Indigenous thinking. Increasingly

- standardised acts of worship of a sacred conceived to be beyond the material may well continue to be possible as Ellul's "technique" spreads. Non-objectifying, mutually responsive interaction, conversely, is not (Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 226). Relatedly, Ellul outlines the relegation of what might otherwise be conceived as relationships to "human techniques" (for example, *ibid.*, 401). He asserts similar forms of damaging influence of "technique" on the non-human world (*ibid.*, 79).
94. Sole reign of standardised process, with ever-narrowing options for nuance, arguably already poses a problem. To make matters worse, a vicious cycle of mutual reinforcement has been shown to be able to operate between undignified treatment and depersonalisation (for example, Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2000), 342): Glover shows that the trouble does not solely relate to those deemed unworthy then beginning to appear to be legitimate recipients of undignified treatment (which would already be problematic enough), but, vice versa, that those we have witnessed to be on the receiving end of undignified treatment may, as a result, then begin to be deemed unworthy.
  95. Anne S Waters, "Sacred Metaphysics and Core Philosophical Tenets of Native American Thought: Identity (Place, Space), Shared History (Place, Time), and Personality (Sacred Emergence of Relations)," *APA Newsletter on Native American and Indigenous Philosophy*, 21:1 (Fall 2021), 11-15, at 13-14, <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/13B1F8E6-0142-45FD-A626-9C4271DC6F62/NativeAmericanV21n1.pdf> (accessed 29 May 2024).
  96. James, *The Varieties*, 512.
  97. James, while clearly appreciative of non-human nature and while advocating kindness to non-human animals, mentions no expectation of wisdom arising from interspecies relationships (for example, James, *The Varieties*, 33 and 281).
  98. Examples of this can be found in his thought process in relation to our treatment of spiders (Gaita, *The Philosopher's Dog*, 100) and in his story of his response to a suspected terminal injury in a cat (*ibid.*, 26-7).
  99. Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, 106.
  100. For example, Rengifo, "The Ayllu."
  101. I include myself in this group: I am a learner as much as I anticipate the majority of my readers to be. As a Westerner based in the United Kingdom, I recently conducted some research in the discipline of environmental philosophy. The project looked at the all-but severance of contemporary Western relationships with the more-than-human world, and asked whether and how the West might, in our own localities, be able to learn from and with Indigenous philosophies to regenerate these relationships lost. I hope I came in humility. Whether or not I did, I certainly closed in humility: to my relief, and as a corollary of the project's engagement with the participationalist paradigm underlying the areas of shared ground sketched here, I saw a conclusion emerge that predicted no similarity of experience if and when the West embarks on its own journey of regeneration. Had this been otherwise, concerns of having fallen into the trap of validation would have needed to be raised. I was then generously invited to meet a group of Indigenous philosophers in an informal setting last winter. In the near future, I am going to be seeing some of the group's members again in a more formal context. Following completion of the above research project, I continue to try and honour the final step on Gregory Cajete's list of stages when creating a new object (Cajete, *Native Science*, 46-52) – the step of making the new object (in my case, the project's results) available to be used for good. From what has been said in this article about Indigenous philosophies being transformative philosophies, this will only be any use if I allow myself to become open to being transformed: I have been taking baby steps towards what I hope are going to become *I-thou* relationships with animals and plants where I live.
  102. Louise Westling was cited in this regard: Westling, *The Logos*, 49-60.
  103. Kimmerer, for example, cites Joanna Macy in this regard, emphasising that there is no need for us to wait until we have been transformed by some (unspecified) other means because it is in and through relationship that transformation is likely to take place (Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 339-40).
  104. For example, Watene, "Valuing Nature," 294.
  105. Richotte, "Telling All of our Stories," 385.

TARUNNA SEBASTIAN AND ANGELA GIOVANANGELI

## **REIMAGINING KINSHIP SYSTEMS AND NETWORKS: INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF ABORIGINAL ECOLOGIES IN AUSTRALIA (HUMAN AND LAND RIGHTS)**

### INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal people in Australia continue to endure the ongoing effects of 250 years of British colonisation and imperialism. At the same time, Aboriginal peoples have actively resisted these colonial and imperial forces, which sought to sever their profound connections to Land, Kinship, culture, Languages, Law and spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Despite enduring challenges, Aboriginal activism remains resilient, grounded in the intricate Kinship systems that interconnect human, non-human, animate and inanimate entities, as well as Land, spiritual and ecological relationships, responsibilities and obligations.<sup>2</sup> Over the last two decades, numerous studies have examined the complex interplay of power, control, knowledge, resistance and mobility that shaped the impact of British imperialism on Indigenous peoples.<sup>3</sup>

Indigenous peoples advocate for their rights, sovereignty, environmental protection and the preservation of their cultures and languages. Aboriginal activism focuses on resisting colonialism, combating systemic injustices and securing recognition and autonomy for Indigenous Nations. These efforts are aligned with contemporary global resistance movements calling for social justice including the Land Back Movement, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and #Black Lives Matter. A deeper understanding of Indigenous people's participation in these global networks of power, resistance and mobility is essential for comprehending contemporary Aboriginal rights in Australia.<sup>4</sup> It is also important to note that there are aspects of Aboriginal activism that are distinct. This paper explores how Kinship networks form the foundation of both cultural identity and resistance, emphasising that engagement in movements striving for land, human and ecological rights are inseparable from broader Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies. This exploration focuses on the firsthand experiences of three Aboriginal activists. Before examining these experiences, the scholarship informing this inquiry will be explored.

Indigenous scholarly perspectives and standpoints are central to understanding the role of Kinship and Country in Aboriginal activism and challenging the distinct silos of knowledge production in Western epistemologies.<sup>5</sup> Issues at the core of Aboriginal activism—including land rights, language revival and human rights—are treated as distinct entities, and studies of Aboriginal resistance movements frequently overlook how Kinship systems serve as the basis of such activism.<sup>6</sup> For Aboriginal activists, Kinship systems represent the vital relationship between culture, Land, water and nature, linking individuals across multiple Nation groups through bloodlines, marriage, adoption and other relational structures. This paper will examine the connections between Aboriginal activism, Kinship and Country through decolonial, Indigenous and political theories.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, the term “Aboriginal” refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The term “Indigenous” will be used to describe Traditional Custodians internationally, while “non-Indigenous” will refer to individuals who do not identify as either of these categories.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, capitalisation is used to show respect and recognition of Aboriginal peoples. We acknowledge that the terms “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” can be problematic, as they refer to First Nations people who share the experience of the ongoing effects of colonisation, yet have diverse histories and are also linguistically and culturally diverse Aboriginal Nations spread throughout Australia.<sup>9</sup>

## ABORIGINAL KINSHIP SYSTEMS AND BELONGING

Aboriginal Kinship systems differ from Western kinship and marriage classifications. Aboriginal Kinship systems represent a complex and interconnected web of relationships that not only connect individuals, families and communities, but also include deep ties to place, to Country (Land, water and sky), to the inanimate and to the more-than-human world including animals, plants and spirits.<sup>10</sup>

Specifically, this intergenerational knowledge system not only defines but transmits gendered obligations, roles and responsibilities to Country and to other people, including the ethical use of resources, social and marriage Laws, and Indigenous Ancestral and spiritual governance.<sup>11</sup> Aboriginal people regard Country as a living Ancestor, meaning that the land itself is imbued with the spirits of their Ancestors. Within this spiritual dimension, relationships with Ancestors are maintained and honoured. The spirits of Ancestors guide and protect the living, and ceremonial practices often involve honouring these relationships. This connection to Ancestors also reinforces the idea that Kinship systems are not just a present-day reality, but a continuity that links past, present and future generations.

Central to Aboriginal Kinship and knowledge systems is the concept of relationality, which emphasises that existence and identity are defined through interdependent relationships between people, Land, Language and spirituality—the core sources of meaning and being.<sup>12</sup> For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Kinship embodies a way of life, symbolising affiliation with Country and fostering a sense of belonging within Nation and Clan groups, families and wider communities. Queries amongst Aboriginals such as “who’s your mob?” and “where are you from?” establish connections based on lineage, Clan and Nation associations as well as personal affinities, which collectively transcend geographical boundaries and include wider social networks.

This relationality is expressed through culturally specific, gendered axiologies, ontologies and epistemologies that are deeply connected to the earth and to wellbeing.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, as Watson

emphasises, these relationships have been embedded within Indigenous knowledge systems and laws since time immemorial.<sup>14</sup> These structures determine roles, responsibilities and rights both within and outside communities and nations, providing the framework for caring for Country and both human and non-human entities, including land, animals and spirits. All these relationships are reciprocal; just as the land nurtures the people, the people have a responsibility to care for and maintain the land. Within this web of relationships, Country (Land) is recognised as one's primary kin and plays a central role in the Aboriginal kinship network.

Aboriginal people often describe themselves as custodians of the land, a responsibility passed down through Kinship lines.<sup>15</sup> Caring for Country involves practising cultural rituals, performing ceremonies, respecting sacred sites and maintaining a harmonious balance with the natural environment. Country is more than a place to live; it is an active participant in the Kinship system, reinforcing the interdependence between people and their surroundings. Country is understood as a living entity that holds and teaches Kinship Knowledges and Laws. Yuin Elder Guboo Ted Thomas illustrates this truth: "I do not teach the [D]reaming, the mountain teaches the [D]reaming."<sup>16</sup> This intimate, sacred and dynamic relationship with Country demands recognition of Country as an active agent in shaping Kinship laws and knowledges in a process of co-becoming. The concept of Country encapsulates the idea that people are intrinsically connected to and part of the Land.<sup>17</sup>

Distinguished Indigenous Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson introduced the concept of an "ontological relationship to Country," referring to the deep embodied spiritual connection that Indigenous peoples have with their Land. Their sense of belonging is deeply rooted in and derived from Ancestral Beings and Country, tied to specific locations, and this enduring connection has remained resilient despite the destructive forces of colonisation.<sup>18</sup> This connection is fundamental to their identity, culture and existence, challenging Western legal frameworks of land ownership and sovereignty. In Indigenous worldviews, Land is not seen as property, but as a living entity interconnected with people, languages, spirituality and all living things.<sup>19</sup> This perspective contrasts sharply with Western views that treat land as a commodity to be owned, traded or exploited.<sup>20</sup> Moreton-Robinson argues that Aboriginal peoples view themselves as integral to the Land, not separate from it.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, dispossession under colonialism disrupts not only territory, but also one's sense of being. Ontological belonging encapsulates this deep relationship with Country, positioning it as central to identity and resistance against colonial frameworks.<sup>22</sup>

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson extends this understanding through her work on Indigenous resurgence, emphasising the importance of relationship to the Land in sustaining cultural identity and resistance.<sup>23</sup> Aboriginal Kinship networks, deeply tied to Country, are not merely family structures, but spiritual, cultural and political systems.<sup>24</sup> These networks mobilise collective action and form the foundation of Aboriginal activism, which arises from these interconnected systems rather than from individual efforts. Kinship systems reflect a worldview where humans act as custodians of the Land, aligning with Moreton-Robinson's concept of ontological belonging.<sup>25</sup> Existence and identity are deeply intertwined with connections to Country.<sup>26</sup>

Aboriginal legal scholar Irene Watson's concept of "Raw Law" explores this relationship, explaining that law originates from the land and the Dreaming, the period of Creation, when Ancestral Beings shaped the land and established laws governing relationships among people, land and living entities.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Western legal systems, Raw Law is transmitted orally and upheld through ceremonies and cultural practices.<sup>28</sup> It emphasises reciprocity and mutual care between humans

and the land, embodying a *kincentric* worldview where the land is a sentient entity.<sup>29</sup> Raw Law serves as a form of resistance to colonial legal systems that impose Western concepts of land ownership and governance.<sup>30</sup> Aboriginal sovereignty is fundamental to this distinctive legal system grounded in Aboriginal relationality and spirituality, challenging the commodification of land and offering an alternative understanding based on care, reciprocity and cultural obligations.<sup>31</sup>

For Aboriginal peoples, Country comprises not just physical land, but also the relationships between land, people, Ancestors and the spiritual world.<sup>32</sup> Kinship systems emphasise stewardship, where land is treated with respect and care, reinforcing the reciprocal obligations humans have toward the Land.<sup>33</sup> This relational framework is integral to cultural survival and forms the basis for resistance against colonial forces. Aboriginal Communities continue to practice Raw Law and *kincentric* principles, resisting colonial fragmentation and asserting their rights to self-determination through governance systems that prioritise cultural knowledge, spiritual obligations and ecological balance.<sup>34</sup>

In many Indigenous cultures, laws governing relationships extend beyond human interactions to include all living entities. This worldview fosters a sense of collective responsibility and reciprocity, further challenging Western notions of land as a commodity.<sup>35</sup> Torres Strait Islander scholar Martin Nakata notes that this knowledge is carried with individuals as they live their lives and understand their place in the world. This highlights the inseparable connection between Indigenous law, knowledge systems and Country.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Moreton-Robinson emphasises that *kincentric* Indigenous cultures are shaped by histories, embodied knowledge and a life force that connects people to land, creators, living entities and Ancestors.<sup>37</sup> These kinship relationships are ethical systems governed by a deep spiritual reverence for the land, demonstrating that Indigenous law and knowledge are deeply rooted in a worldview of responsibility and respect toward both human and more-than-human kin.<sup>38</sup>

By recognising the significance of these kinship networks and their broader philosophical implications, it becomes clear that Indigenous law and knowledge systems are not separate from Country. They are rooted in a relational worldview that prioritises care, mutual responsibility and the preservation of cultural and ecological balance.<sup>39</sup> Understanding this connection constitutes not only a form of knowledge, but also a form of resistance, as Aboriginal peoples continue to uphold their cultural and spiritual obligations to the land, asserting their sovereignty and resisting colonial exploitation.<sup>40</sup>

## HOW KINSHIP WITH LAND RESISTS THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM

Aboriginal Kinship is political, structuring social and familial relationships, governance and resistance within Aboriginal Communities. These systems play a crucial role in organising leadership, decision-making and resource distribution, making them central to Indigenous activism and sovereignty.<sup>41</sup> In these societies, leadership and authority often stem from familial ties, where individuals become custodians of Land and Law.<sup>42</sup> Elders, who hold knowledge of the Dreaming and Law, derive their authority from their positions within these kinship networks, offering an alternative system of governance to Western political models which emphasise centralised, institutional power.<sup>43</sup> In this context, Kinship also governs land ownership and resource management. Custodial responsibilities over specific areas of Land and natural resources are passed on through Kinship ties, resisting the colonial concept of land as a commodity that can be privatised and exploited for economic gain.<sup>44</sup>

Colonial efforts to dismantle these systems through forced removals and assimilation policies have sought to fragment traditional Kinship ties.<sup>45</sup> In response, Kinship has become a central framework of resistance, with the spiritual connection to land, or ontological belonging, serving as both a political and cultural tool for healing and activism. When land is returned to Traditional Owners, it allows for governance based on traditional practices, strengthening community wellbeing and reviving deep connections between people and Country.

The landmark Mabo case (1992) was a turning point in this resistance. This case challenged the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, which had claimed the continent as “land belonging to no one” before the 1788 colonisation of Australia. Eddie Mabo, a Meriam man, fought for the recognition of his people’s land rights, which were deeply rooted in his Kinship system. The High Court’s ruling in favour of Mabo not only overturned the concept of *terra nullius*, but also acknowledged the ongoing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their Land, solidifying Kinship as a legal and political framework that resists colonial erasure. The Mabo case remains a milestone in Aboriginal activism, affirming the importance of Kinship in shaping land rights movements and reinforcing resistance to colonialism.<sup>46</sup> Aboriginal activist movements, such as the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972), and responses to events like the destruction of the Juukan Gorge (2020), have continued to assert sovereignty and land rights based on Kinship connections. Similarly, the fight to protect the Djab Wurrung sacred trees demonstrates how Kinship activism plays a vital role in resisting colonial exploitation and preserving spiritual heritage.<sup>47</sup>

Despite attempts to fragment Aboriginal Communities, the resilience of Kinship structures has continued to play a critical role in preserving Indigenous knowledge, law and the connection to Land, ultimately acting as a means of political resistance against colonial control.<sup>48</sup> Rolando Vázquez’s (2011) essay, “Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity’s Epistemic Violence,” examines how the translation of non-Western knowledge systems into Western frameworks often acts as an epistemic tool of erasure. Vázquez explains that when Indigenous knowledge is interpreted through a Western lens, its original meaning and cultural significance are frequently distorted or erased, especially when removed from its epistemic context. This process of translation marginalises Indigenous knowledge, stripping it of its unique value and reshaping it to fit Western categories.<sup>49</sup> As a result, colonial power structures that prioritise Western knowledge systems over Indigenous epistemologies are reinforced, leading to cultural erasure and the suppression of alternative worldviews.

Vázquez’s (2011) critique highlights the role that modernity plays in perpetuating this erasure, just as colonialism systematically suppressed diverse knowledge systems in favour of homogenised, Western-dominated frameworks.<sup>50</sup> This process has a significant impact on Indigenous communities, reducing the visibility and value of their cultural and social structures by stripping them of their original context. Adding to Vázquez’s critique, Audra Simpson’s (2014) concept of “ethnographic refusal” in her book *Mohawk Interruptus* illustrates how Indigenous peoples resist the extraction and distortion of their knowledge systems. Simpson argues that by refusing to engage in Western ethnographic practices, Indigenous peoples assert their sovereignty over cultural knowledge, preventing its misinterpretation and erasure through colonial translation.<sup>51</sup> This refusal is a method of resisting epistemic violence and maintaining control over the representation and integrity of Indigenous knowledge systems, ensuring that they are not subjected to the processes of distortion discussed by Vázquez.

## EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE AND COLONIAL DISRUPTION

In Australian Aboriginal culture, kinship is central to social organisation. Colonialism's imposition of Western governance models can be understood as a form of epistemic violence, a concept articulated by scholars such as Watson (2008) and Jaskiran Dhillon (2021).<sup>52</sup> Forced assimilation policies, such as the Stolen Generations, sought to sever Aboriginal peoples' Kinship ties to family, Language and Land, replacing Indigenous knowledge systems with Western institutions of law, governance and education. The suppression of Aboriginal Languages, as Dhillon notes, represents a profound form of epistemic violence.<sup>53</sup> Language is crucial for transmitting cultural knowledge and maintaining Kinship ties. The colonial education system, which prohibited Aboriginal languages, aimed to erase Indigenous cosmologies and disconnect Aboriginal people from their spiritual and ecological knowledge.

Despite this disruption and the terrible losses of Language and knowledge, Aboriginal Communities have shown remarkable resilience in revitalising their languages and reasserting Indigenous knowledge systems. These efforts are part of the broader movements for Land and human rights. Aboriginal activism plays a crucial role in this enterprise, drawing on principles such as ethnographic refusal, which directly challenges settler-colonial frameworks by asserting the significance of Kinship systems<sup>54</sup> and ontological belonging, describing the deep, inherent, spiritual connection that Indigenous peoples have with their Land, Culture and Community.<sup>55</sup> These bonds transcend Western notions of identity and power, positioning Kinship not only as a social structure, but also as a profound connection to Country.

Aboriginal activism is rooted in Kinship systems—upholding collective governance, relational responsibility and ontological belonging—and has been central to revitalising knowledge systems and Languages. These elements are crucial to decolonial resistance, demonstrating the resilience of Aboriginal Kinship in the face of modernity's attempts to marginalise Indigenous knowledge and sever connections to Land and community. Resistance to modernity and the revitalisation of languages and epistemologies illustrates how, in Aboriginal culture, Kinship extends beyond familial ties to imbue the spiritual, cultural and political frameworks that support collective action. This broader understanding of Kinship galvanises resistance, drawing from both the physical and spiritual realms. Aboriginal thinkers like David Mowaljarlai and Jutta Neidjie (1989) have emphasised that Country is a living entity, deeply interconnected with all beings.<sup>56</sup> This holistic view of Aboriginal activism illustrates how Kinship systems transcend distinctions between human and non-human worlds, incorporating ancestral and spiritual spheres. The Creation process—in which Land was formed first, followed by the people and their Languages—reflects the enduring connection between Land, Language and Kinship systems and the interconnected, relational strengths of Aboriginal cosmology. Languages, seen as living entities, forge connections between people and their Country, transmitting intergenerational knowledge across thousands of generations.

## ROLE OF KINSHIP SYSTEMS IN ABORIGINAL ACTIVISM

Aboriginal activism plays a crucial role in the lives of many Indigenous Australians as they resist structural racism and the ongoing impact of colonial practices on their claims to Land, Language and human rights. This activism has been influenced by global alliances, forging new understandings of knowledge, culture, spirituality and history. While Aboriginal activist networks are often thought to have emerged primarily in the post-World War II era, especially following the United Nations

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, they have deep roots in much earlier struggles for survival and self-determination. In recent years, Aboriginal activism has found resonance with the global #Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which emerged in the US in 2013 in response to the deaths of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement. In Australia, since 2020, the death of George Floyd has intensified the use of terms like “#Black Lives Matter” and “Aboriginal Lives Matter” in order to draw attention to Aboriginal deaths in custody and the high incarceration rates of Indigenous Australians.<sup>57</sup>

Although these movements have brought attention to issues of social justice and Indigenous sovereignty, Aboriginal activism has been shaped by older campaigns. For example, the Australian Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s campaigned against Aboriginal deaths in custody while advocating for self-determination and human rights. During this period, activists in Melbourne and Sydney established connections with African American leaders and, by 1971, had adapted the Black Power movement to suit their needs. The international influence of this movement extended its reach to various states in Australia, although the term “Black” carried the dual connotation of referring to both African American and Australian identities.<sup>58</sup> Uncle Charles “Chicka” Dixon, a prominent Aboriginal Elder, clarified that the Black Power movement, which was often misinterpreted as promoting violence, was in fact focused on self-determination for Aboriginal people.<sup>59</sup> Despite its significance, the movement remains under-recognised in mainstream Australian history. Another example of a globally inspired movement was the Australian Black Panthers who, like their American counterparts, sought to draw attention to the plight of Aboriginal people; they were active at the time of the 1967 Referendum and the 1988 Invasion Day Rally. Historian Kathy Lothian notes that, similar to African Americans, Aboriginal people and their white allies campaigned for equality in education, healthcare and legal representation, as well as the abolition of discriminatory laws.<sup>60</sup> The adoption of Black Power ideologies and Black Panther rhetoric by Aboriginal Communities provided a global perspective and highlighted the transnational nature of these movements.

Contemporary Aboriginal rights movements, shaped by these earlier struggles, continue to address issues of inequality, Land rights, identity and the impact of institutionalised racism. While these movements are often viewed through the lens of global activism, the role of Kinship networks is an essential, though sometimes invisible, component. At a 2021 Aboriginal activist rally, young activists called for racial, social and environmental justice, echoing global movements like BLM: “As Black, Brown, Indigenous people, and allies in the U.S. and across the world collectively rise up to end systemic racism and violent police practices, it was necessary for us here in Australia to also rise.”<sup>61</sup>

This call also reflected the deeply rooted history of Aboriginal activism, grounded in Kinship networks and responsibilities passed down by Elders that predated these international movements. Notable events included the 1938 Day of Mourning and the 1939 Cummeragunja Walk-off; and the Pindan movement and the Port Headland and Pilbara strikes in the 1940s by Aboriginal people: “We see this as our cultural and political responsibility and obligation to do so as Aboriginal people—we must pick up the fight where our Elders left off and continue their fight for justice.”<sup>62</sup>

Kinship networks, interconnected with Ancestral foundations, often serve as the driving force sustaining these calls for social change. Networks are not only a cultural framework, but also a political tool that strengthens Aboriginal activism. Being grounded in relational responsibility and an obligation to future generations, Kinship systems are central to Aboriginal resistance against settler colonialism and the pursuit of justice for Indigenous peoples.

## LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF ABORIGINAL ACTIVISTS

This final section draws on interviews with Aboriginal activists to examine the relationships formed through Aboriginal activism and how these relationships may be articulated in and through Kinship systems and networks. The interview questions explored the type of reciprocity that may exist between these systems, particularly in contexts that focus on environmental care, sustainability of Country, language revival and social justice efforts. Questions focused on how acts of Aboriginal activism drew on Kinship systems and networks to express the relationships shaped by both the human and non-human world.

Aiming to understand their lived experience of engaging in activism, interviews were conducted in 2023 and 2024 with three Aboriginal people, Kylie, Monica and Bill (pseudonyms), who self-identify as activists for Aboriginal rights and sovereignty movements. The participants were selected because of their long association with Aboriginal activism in Australia. They ranged in age from 50 to 70 and identified with three different Aboriginal Nations in New South Wales. They had been engaged in activism between 12 and 50 years. The interviews were audio-recorded digitally and later transcribed. A thematic analysis was undertaken of the key characteristics of their experiences of activism.

## ABORIGINAL ACTIVISM AND KINSHIP NETWORK CONNECTIONS

When reflecting on their experience of Aboriginal activism, the participants identified the strong connection between Kinship and activism and explained how they understood the concept of protest. Audra Simpson's (2014) notion of ethnographic refusal as a decolonial strategy provides valuable background here.<sup>63</sup> Rather than seeking recognition from colonial authorities, Aboriginal Communities assert their sovereignty by disengaging from colonial governance structures altogether. This form of silent protest, often led by Elders, demonstrates that resistance can take many forms, from direct action to the quiet endurance of cultural practices and Kinship systems. For instance, in the Aboriginal context, Kylie revealed the significant nuances behind the term "protestor," asserting that there were both active and silent protests:

*You've got your active protesters. But you've also got what's called the silent protests, our Elders and Ancestors, who can't physically be there at the protests. Active protests in local communities around New South Wales involve not just activists, but also what is known as silent protests. Silent protests means that Elders and knowledge holders in these communities often express reluctance to share their voices with the government due to historical neglect and lack of respect. (Kylie)*

The notion of silent protesters is significant. These individuals remain silent as a result of physical limitations, or fear and loss of faith in government institutions that have historically undervalued and undermined Aboriginal peoples. In this context, the voices of Elders and knowledge holders are passed down to active protesters. To further highlight the relationships forged by different Aboriginal knowledge holders, in the context of her activism Monica also refers to the lack of trust in government structures. Regarding the transmission of knowledge, she says:

*I'm not going to share my knowledge and ideas with the government. That's my choice, and, yeah, standing firm on that. (Monica)*

Kylie adds that connection to Elders and knowledge holders gives activists strength and understanding and supports their perseverance:

*So now, our Elders and our Aboriginal leaders, who are our knowledge holders within all our local Aboriginal Communities, have shared the past stories with us enough for us to be strong and to continue to fight and to resist against colonial systems and structures. Their position ... is, why should I continue to share with the government that never listened to us before? (Kylie)*

Similarly, Bill's response reinforces the significance of Elders in mentoring young Aboriginal people within Kinship networks, as well as fostering unity and advocacy through social movements. The role of Elders has also spilled into Australian government policies such as the Priority Reforms.<sup>64</sup> Bill refers to well-known Aboriginal activists to make this point:

*Elders and activists such as Uncle Wes Marne, Uncle Kevin Gilbert, Auntie Isabelle Coe and Ghillar Michael Anderson [co-founder of the Tent Embassy] play a vital role in educating and mentoring young Aboriginal people through the Aboriginal Lives Matter movement, Aboriginal Land Rights and Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Their invaluable knowledge and contributions have garnered immense respect. The government is now beginning to recognise this through initiatives like the Priority Reforms .... We have been involved in discussions about engaging with local communities and Elders and various organizations, including NGOs. (Bill)*

#### FOR BILL, THE ROLE OF KINSHIP SYSTEMS IS CRUCIAL:

*The strength of Kinship systems within Aboriginal communities plays a pivotal role in connecting everyone and standing united with one main voice and the fight for Land, Language and human rights. Each community's needs are unique, yet they remain interconnected through solidarity and shared rights, primarily facilitated by Elders. (Bill)*

An integral part of this learning and transmission process is the interconnectedness of this activism to Language, Country, Land and Kinship. Kylie notes that:

*Within all our Languages is all our learning, which also is deeply rooted to our Land, connecting us with our Country and our Kinship, our Mother Earth through words. And we do our learning through our Elders in our local Aboriginal Communities, in regards to protesting for those rights. (Kylie)*

As this passage and the following highlight, Kinship does not just refer to physical family ties and connections, but also the activists' spiritual bonds with the Land and all its elements:

*During the Land Rights and Sovereignty movement and Aboriginal Lives Matter movement protests, our Kinship was working with all the "blak" fellas there and ... I was trying to organise the protest. We were connecting up with word of mouth, mobile phones, Facebook and other social media platforms, inviting all our brothers and sisters, including family members, Australia-wide. That's ... our Kinship system—we wear it at a spiritual level, we don't work on a body level. It is more than just a physical and bodily level, connecting with the Land and everything on it and under it—minerals, rocks, water, mountains, rivers, insects, plants and animals—all connected spiritually. (Kylie)*

For Kylie, the Land Rights and Sovereignty movement, along with the Aboriginal Lives Matter protests, demonstrates the enduring strength, depth and resilience of Kinship, which extends beyond a physical presence to encompass a spiritual bond with the Land and all its elements. This terrestrial connection underpins the unity and mobilisation of the community. As Kylie emphasises,

Kinship operates on a level that transcends the human and fosters a holistic and deeply rooted sense of solidarity and identity through connection to Land, plants and animals.

Land or Country is also significant to activism and Kinship. The concept of Country is integral to Aboriginal identity and Language and has been at the heart of Native Title and Land Rights movements since the beginning of colonisation. Issues regarding the significance of connection to Country for identity, Language and wellbeing continue to inform activists.

For Indigenous Australians, the significance of Country is timeless and predates colonisation. In the interviews, the responses referring to Country mirror many Aboriginal people's deep spiritual relationship with their Country and its languages, a connection which has often been articulated in literary texts such as David Mowaljarlai's, *Yorro Yorro: Everything Standing Up Alive*, David Unaipon's *Aboriginals: Their Traditions and Customs*, Paddy Roe's *Reading the Country*, Sunfly Tjuperla's *Two Men Dreaming* and Bill Neidjie's *Story about Feeling*. Like the interview responses, these literary works convey a spiritual, physical and bodily connectedness to the Land. Bill Neidjie, for instance, describes this connection as a spiritual sensation that permeates one's being:

*Listen carefully, careful and this spirit e [he] come in your feeling, and you will feel it ... anyone that, I feel it ... my body same as you. I am telling you this because the land for us never changes. Places for us, Earth for us, star, moon, tree, animal. No matter what sort of animal, Bird snake ... all that animal like us. Our friend that.*<sup>65</sup>

As noted above, Aboriginal scholar Moreton-Robinson describes Indigenous relationships with the Land as forming an "ontological belonging."<sup>66</sup> This belonging is based on Ancestral systems of relational knowledge which spiritually binds individuals with the Land, all aspects of nature and the sources of Kinship.

## SOLIDARITY THROUGH CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY AND COUNTRY

It is often assumed by government institutions in Australia, and subsequently through laws and policies, that as a result of colonisation and the systematic development of structures aimed at fragmenting Aboriginal Communities (such as the forceful removal of Aboriginal people from their Ancestral Lands), Aboriginal societies are disconnected from their Kinship networks and Country. Monica's activism is centred on dispelling this myth through her existing Kinship systems and the story they tell. She explains that nothing could be further from the truth regarding this perceived disconnection:

*I think that's the disconnection of Western society from our Aboriginal society. I think for our society, we've always been told by the Western society that all of our Aboriginal society is disconnected. No, sorry. And I've said this to all local communities when I go there. But I'm sorry, but the government law and policies need to realise that we've never been disconnected.* (Monica)

This assertion directly counters the colonial narratives critiqued by Vázquez and Simpson.<sup>67</sup> Vázquez (2011) shows how the violence of modernity is perpetuated through the suppression of other worldviews and relational systems, a development which Monica actively resists. Audra Simpson further analyses this resistance, noting that Indigenous sovereignty persists through everyday acts of refusal and connection, despite the state's attempts to dismantle Indigenous structures.<sup>68</sup> Monica's activism, deeply rooted in her existing Kinship systems, offers a form of

epistemic resistance to colonial policies of assimilation. She reflects the persistence of Aboriginal relationality to Country, a connection that Western laws have failed to recognise or understand. The government policy of assimilation and efforts to break Aboriginal Kinship networks included the forced removal of Aboriginal people from their Lands and the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities, commonly known as the Stolen Generations. Despite the significant impact of these policies, Aboriginal Kinship networks continue to play a crucial role in contemporary activism, fostering resilience and a deep connection to Land, language and cultural heritage. This activism forms the basis of community teaching and learning that brings people together. As Monica elaborates:

*We're connected to everything. How can we be disconnected? And when we ask, who are you?, this means we need to find out how we are connected. And when a Stolen Generation family member comes into their community—yeah, the Elders, mostly women in the community, take on the role of teaching and accepting them.* (Monica)

This solidarity through Kinship aligns with Simpson's analysis of the enduring strength of Indigenous relational frameworks, despite the state's continuous efforts to deny them. For Monica and many Aboriginal activists, the role of women and their connection to both human and non-human mothers—the Land and the community—is central. For the community, the role of a mother is applicable to a woman as well as the Land. Monica foregrounds this understanding of the mother:

*Definitely, the women are the backbone, as you know, as we know, especially growing up in Aboriginal Community. They are the first teachers of everyone in our community. You know, the women are the strong Kinship, family, always ties to the mother. So, the mother is the first of the Kinship. And Land is the mother, too. And the women are the mothers. And that's why the respect factor for Country as Mother is super important in our Kinship system. In recognition of that as well. So, you'll speak to my mum or Nan as part of the Kinship, you know.* (Monica)

It is in this specific attachment to mother, as both a human and non-human, that a voice exists for Monica in her activist work and in the way it relates back to her family and community:

*Whoever you are really close to will understand this ... Yeah, actually start, a sister like you and I, we have a Kinship, right? ... When modern protests occur, I use my voice to make statements, standing up for what matters to my family and communities and protesting legally, passionately voicing our concerns.* (Monica)

In this response, Monica not only highlights the crucial role of women to preserve Aboriginal identity, she also sets out how this identity entails belonging to a specific people and place, rooted in Kinship. Similar to Kylie's response above, the notion of Country is key to this relationship. As Monica makes clear, Country is Mother, determining a person's origin and the Country and Nation group or Clan or language group to which they belong. This notion is fundamental to Aboriginal self-identity and the first port of contact when people are introduced to each other. Aboriginal identity fundamentally relies on descent and Country of origin, embodying a sense of community and Indigenous self-perception and recognition. Descent is understood not merely in genetic terms, but as a historical connection to the Land, a particular history, sense of being and responsibility.

Bill also refers to the notion of mother as integral to healing when discussing issues of trauma and health risks triggered by colonisation:

*Social determinants of health often focus on negative aspects such as substance abuse, particularly in Indigenous communities. Colonisation has profoundly impacted mental health, leading to intergenerational trauma. This trauma can span up to six generations, affecting language, land and overall wellbeing. The holistic connection to the Land, often referred to as "Mother," is integral to spiritual healing and balance. South Australia recognises traditional spiritual healing methods alongside Western healthcare, a model that should be adopted nationwide. Healing is a fundamental right, and Traditional Aboriginal Healers should receive the same respect and remuneration as Western healthcare professionals. (Bill)*

Here, the notion of mother encompasses a holistic understanding of Land and its connection to people's traditional spiritual healing. Bill's insights highlight the profound impact of colonisation on Indigenous mental health and the importance of spiritual healing practices as another dimension of activism. Recognising the Land as "Mother," and integrating traditional spiritual healing methods with Western healthcare, are vital steps toward addressing intergenerational trauma and promoting overall wellbeing in Aboriginal Communities. Respecting and properly compensating traditional healers and honouring their essential role in the healing process will contribute to a more inclusive and effective healthcare system that acknowledges the deep connection between Land, Aboriginal identity and wellbeing. These emerged as vital dimensions of Bill's Aboriginal activism.

## FIGHTING FOR LAND AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The fight for Land and human rights by Aboriginal activists can be analysed through the lens of epistemic violence, as articulated by Vázquez and Simpson.<sup>69</sup> Vázquez's critique of modernity emphasises the imposition of a Eurocentric worldview that systematically denies the existence of alternative epistemologies, such as those held by Indigenous peoples. Similarly, Simpson's work on settler colonialism highlights how Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination are undermined by colonial legal frameworks that deny Indigenous peoples' inherent rights. Both scholars offer critical insights into how the ongoing struggle for Land and human rights is a response to the violent erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems and sovereignty.

In the interviews, Monica asserts her legal right to protest for both Land and human rights, connecting this struggle to her identity, sovereignty and self-determination. Her words reflect Simpson's (2014) emphasis on refusal and the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty against settler-colonial domination.<sup>70</sup> Monica emphasises the government's refusal to recognise these rights:

*If you have a legal right to protest, you should be able to use that right, particularly in relation to human and Land rights, because the government doesn't recognise them [these rights]. The only way they'll recognise those human rights is if people stand up and use their voices. This is my right to self-determination, to maintain my identity and sovereignty, confidentiality and privacy. (Monica)*

Moreover, the fight for Land rights is intricately intertwined with Kinship obligations and personal wellbeing, emphasising the responsibilities of stewardship to care for the Land, ensure Language preservation and acknowledge the sacredness of Ancestral claims. Monica vividly illustrates this connection by recounting a dialogue with the government about the significance of a particular tree bearing fruit, highlighting the sacredness attributed to this tree by Aboriginal communities. She draws parallels between the preservation of Aboriginal Languages and the role of Elders, likening them to trees that carry the culture and lineage of their people:

*Talking about teaching and speaking an Aboriginal language? Believe it or not, we've posed this question to the government: We asked about a tree that bore fruit, "What would you do with that tree if it was the last one?" So, we've made that tree sacred. We went to the government, and they didn't know what to do. They just looked at it. Aboriginal language is like a tree, and Aboriginal Elders are like that tree. We carry the language. We carry the culture and the lineage. Yes, grounded and connected, big time. The closer you are to the land, the more connected you feel. Definitely. And that's why when you connect with nature and Country, even if you're by yourself, you're not alone. You never feel alone. That's our philosophy. Even though I don't have anyone around right now, I don't feel alone. Yes, you have the Kinship there all the time. I know they're here, and their presence is even louder now because I don't have anyone around me. So, they're really connecting with you every day. Yes, and now I can lean on them intentionally. Yes, she [the Land] understands me and helps me. (Monica)*

The interview participants underscore the critical importance of fighting for Land and human rights, highlighting the intrinsic connection between these rights, Kinship obligations, cultural preservation and personal wellbeing in Aboriginal activism. Their narratives illuminate the ongoing struggle for recognition and respect in asserting these fundamental rights and affirm the enduring bond between Indigenous peoples and their land and culture. Moreover, Monica's response seamlessly intertwines various elements, weaving together her sense of identity with knowledge acquired through Language and connection to the Land. Using the metaphor of the tree, her narrative depicts the convergence of human and non-human components in Kinship. Her metaphor connects Language, knowledge, Elders, lineage and Country and vividly illustrates the holistic relationship between Aboriginal culture, spirituality, the natural environment and personal identity, emphasising the interconnectedness and interdependence of all these aspects in shaping individual and collective experiences.

Elders have a pivotal role in Kinship systems that are highly significant to Aboriginal Communities. Interview participants make clear that it is imperative that these perspectives are understood in policy formulation, which continues to be influenced by colonial practices. Bill notes:

*The government, in collaboration with cabinet offices and ministerial secretaries, must now be listening to Aboriginal perspectives, incorporating cultural elements into their policies. This represents a shift towards social justice and recognition of rights. When engaging with local communities, it becomes evident that some frameworks still support assimilation and segregation, highlighting ongoing systemic issues. (Bill)*

Despite these failures, the Kinship system remains a source of strength, emphasising a shift from deficit-based models to those recognising community capacity, agency and Indigenous knowledges. As Bill states:

*Uncle Wes, who is a centenarian [and respected Elder], has expressed that the government, academics, policymakers and the education system has historically ignored the voices of his generation. This longstanding neglect is a shared sentiment among many Aboriginal Communities. The Kinship system, however, remains a source of strength, emphasising the need to transition from a deficit-based model to one that recognises community-based strengths. (Bill)*

Through their activism, the participants enact a form of epistemic resistance, asserting their right to sovereignty, cultural preservation and self-determination. The fight for human and Land rights, empowered by Kinship systems and knowledge of community responsibilities, continues to reflect cultural and spiritual connections to Country. This holistic and integrated approach is fundamental to understanding and sustaining advocacy for Land rights. The health of the Land, the community and the individual are seen as interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

## CONCLUSION

The narratives of Aboriginal activists collected in this study emphasise how Aboriginal Kinship networks and systems are essential frameworks for resistance and activism. Aboriginal Kinship networks continue to defy colonial legacies while empowering Aboriginal peoples to advocate for Land, human and language rights. The role of Elders and knowledge holders, the significance of Country and the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, are all fundamental to Kinship networks. The link between Aboriginal activism, Kinship and Country is deeply rooted in Indigenous philosophies and relationality. Scholars like Moreton-Robinson (2003), Simpson (2014) and Betasamosake Simpson (2017) emphasise the importance of spiritual and cultural connections to the Land and how these connections extend beyond and contradict the narrow boundaries of Western legal and political systems. These interconnected systems of Kinship and Country are central to Aboriginal identity and resistance efforts, highlighting the holistic nature of Indigenous activism.

The activists interviewed provide a deeper understanding of how these Kinship networks function as complex social, spiritual, political and cultural ecosystems. Kinship encompasses bodies, Ancestral foundations, actions, passions and Country, emphasising the interconnectedness of all entities, both human and non-human, in a network where each participant holds agency and significance.

In the context of Land rights, this perspective highlights how Land, Kinship, culture and activism are, dynamically and collectively, shaping the struggle for recognition and justice. Kinship networks resist colonial fragmentation by maintaining integrated and continuous relationships between people, Land and culture. The agency of non-human actors such as the Land and Ancestral knowledge contributes to sustaining these networks, reinforcing the importance of environmental and cultural stewardship as part of Aboriginal culture and spirituality.

Participant narratives reveal that Aboriginal Kinship networks not only preserve cultural heritage, but also drive contemporary activism, promoting sustainability, justice and recognition for Aboriginal peoples. These networks showcase the enduring nature of the agency and potency of Aboriginal people in the ongoing quest for a fair and just future. Kinship structures and networks involve material, expressive and territorial functions that evolve in dynamic ways. The Kinship system operating between Aboriginal people and the Land is a profound and central part of their activism and resistance to colonialism. This connection challenges Western notions of land as property, instead emphasising reciprocal, sacred relationships with Country that are integral to identity, culture and survival. Through various forms of Kinship activism—whether protecting sacred sites, reclaiming sovereignty or revitalising cultural practices—Aboriginal people are resisting the fragmentation of their communities and the ongoing dispossession of their land. In doing so, they affirm their cultural autonomy and the resilience of their Kinship systems in the face of colonial pressures.

The interconnectedness of Kinship, Country and activism in Aboriginal cultures offers a profound framework for understanding ongoing struggles for Land and human rights. By placing Indigenous ontologies and knowledge systems at the centre, this study has shown how Kinship networks sustain cultural identity, ecological stewardship and resistance to colonial forces. Aboriginal activism is not merely political but deeply spiritual, rooted in the enduring strength of Kinship

systems and the relational bonds between people, land and ancestors. In this way, the fight for land and human rights in Australia is inseparable from the broader, ongoing struggle to preserve Aboriginal cultural identity and sovereignty.

Kinship networks and systems emphasise collective wellbeing and social justice issues, providing a framework for advocating for human and Land rights. These systems challenge Western legal and social norms by promoting community-based approaches to justice and governance. The activist narratives in this study draw on Kinship obligations in order to highlight the interconnectedness of individual and community rights. The significance of Kinship systems in Aboriginal Communities cannot be overstated, as they form the bedrock of social cohesion and cultural identity. These networks, upheld by the wisdom and guidance of Elders, underscore the necessity of shifting from past deficit-based models to ones that recognise and celebrate Aboriginal Community strengths and voices. Despite historical neglect and ongoing systemic issues, the Kinship system remains a powerful source of resilience, solidarity and enduring activism. Acknowledging the ongoing spiritual connection to the Land and integrating traditional healing methods into mainstream healthcare are vital steps toward genuine social justice. The collective efforts of Aboriginal Community members and their Elders in nurturing, extending and informing Kinship networks, especially during times of activism, highlight the enduring strength and unity within these networks and the need for policies that respect and incorporate Aboriginal perspectives and cultural frameworks.

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JOE CITIZEN, TONI HERANGI AND HOLLIE TAWHIAO

## **WEAVING POTENTIALITIES AND AI: PATTERNS ARE NOT INSCRIPTIONS**

Ngaa tuku o Maahina is a roopuu (group) whose kaupapa (purpose) relates to the multiple interconnected strands of knowledge of ngaa maramataka (site-specific lunar calendars). We are Hagen Tautari, Horomona Horo, Te Taima Barrett, Hollie Tawhiao, Toni Herangi, Ra Keelan and Joe Citizen. At our inaugural hui (gathering), Toni brought along a taonga (prized treasure) which had been in her family for generations. Dated 1898, this photolithographed collection in te reo Maaori (the Maaori language) and English has copies of He Whakaputanga (Declaration of Independence), Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Maaori version of the Treaty of Waitangi) and other associated papers.

To some, this assemblage might appear to simply be copies of older original documents. In te ao Maaori (the Maaori world), however, this collection has its own mauri (life-essence), mana (spiritual authority and prestige) and haa (breath), and retains links to the tuupuna (ancestors) through their tohu (signs). Maaori knowledge is something that isn't just stored in the mind, but embodied in people, places and things. For three of us—Hollie Tawhiao (Ngaati Tiipa, Ngaati Naho, Ngaati Ruamahue), Toni Herangi (Tainui) and Joe Citizen (Castlefranc-Allen, Rawls), our koorero (discussion/ conversation/ discourse) became centred on its preservation. Simply photographing it and uploading copies of it online would make it vulnerable to AI apps that employ web-scraping and web-crawling practices in order to thief knowledge and assimilate it into a supposedly universalist framework.

This koorero brought to our attention the wider take (subject) of how we should navigate the colonial tendencies of AI—the structural violence that arises from those culturally specific practices that assume a priori truths as universally foundational. By appraising the Eurocentric and human-centric assumptions behind data recognition through the automation of iterative logic loops, we acknowledge the entanglements of historically systemic problems: how cognitivism and positivism underpin supremacist claims of liberatory technological progress; how material realism and representational indexicality have traditionally dismissed and abused Indigenous knowledge frameworks; how military–industrial control culture has normalised surveillance and transnational capitalism; and how reductionist methodologies reify libertarian claims of individual freedoms as commodified transactions between atomistic entities.

Avoiding and navigating these colonialisms requires different patterns of being than Eurocentric framings. In the context of Aotearoa–New Zealand and our kaupapa (cause/ goal/ plan), we assert that everything in existence is related, all things are living and that worlds ‘unseen’ in Western terms can be mediated by humans.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the interrelations of everything brings attention to the importance of whakapapa (generated layers of relations), rather than specific entities themselves. To use the metaphor of a net, it’s the spaces in-between that have more importance than the strands that connect the more tangible interstices. When contextuality takes precedence, the calculation of answers becomes secondary—like the way that the emergence of co-created phenomena is not the same as the quantified prediction of events. Perhaps, then, we can start to think of the interconnecting strands not in terms of edges or nodes, but as the boundary conditions to access deeper layers of knowledge.

Our speculations began to pick apart the chain links of digital imperialism; we challenge the proclamations of those supposedly self-evidential truths that have provided the historical pretext for the theft of countless tangible and intangible taonga. Our relational understandings of time contest the claim that homogeneously linear and equidistant measurements are universally applicable, and our relational understandings of potentiality transcend those narrow Eurocentric assertions that potentiality is synonymous with tangible probability. Relational understandings are woven and always open-ended; we are alert to the agencies of non-human people, of those that came before, of that which is hidden and unknown, and to our place within these relations as being within, not under or over, everything else already going on.

To pick a strand and call it a beginning: we begin with mauri (life force), and immediately there is divergence, or growth perhaps—for te ao Maaori does not automatically subscribe to Eurocentric framings of what does or does not have life, agency or influence. We also acknowledge that whakapapa is non-binary—for whilst this koorero is in English, there are no easy essentialist divisions between Maaori and non-Maaori in the way that the prefix ‘non-’ syntactically supposes. Similarly, although we acknowledge that cultures are not essentialist categories, we use the suffix ‘-centric’ to make generalised comments about different cultural trajectories, with all their multiplicities and understandings of normality. These strands are always already connected beyond our cultural knowledge frameworks meeting here. Using kupu, using words, what you are reading or listening to now comes from he kanohi kitea (the seen face), with emphasis on our spoken meeting, where listening is a form of active participation, where our voices contribute to the take.

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Toni: Mauri can be thought of as being natural or constructed. Take a mere (a short weapon, usually carved from stone), which can be thought of as being just an object before going through the process of being given the name of an ancestor, which in turn helps to embed their mauri into that taonga to elevate it. Their mauri and their mana [prestige/ authority/ influence/ supernatural power] and all that came with them as a person when they were alive—this is imbued into the mere. The stone is natural, but the form is constructed, is brought forth, is shaped. The natural stone already had its own mauri, but now the mauri of the mere is different—the carver has helped the form to come forth through their intervention, through rituals and naming. Perhaps we can call it a construction, or perhaps it’s like a birth—it was always there, but now it’s something else. Artificial Intelligence is like the mere: it’s a technology where all its wires and everything come from nature, but it hasn’t given birth to us, we’ve given birth to it.

Joe: Are there distinctions between the natural and the constructed, between humans and everything else? Can human-made objects like AI possess a mauri, considering that they are constructed of natural resources that go through naming and ritual processes? Has human intervention helped to embed mauri into what we now call Artificial Intelligence?

Hollie: Yes. As Toni said, it can be organic or constructed, and as [Horomona] Horo states, AI “has always been first triggered by a human. And so, the essence of the mauri [in AI] still goes back to a human mauri.”<sup>2</sup> Mauri, in a simple way being the essence of something, the life-force of it, whether born or constructed comes from the same place, that same beginning. It has a whakapapa.

Joe: So, can AI have its own personhood? If we say that the Whanganui River has personhood, and we acknowledge non-human agency as a tuupuna, can we acknowledge AI as personhood in the process of becoming?

Hollie: Firstly, are these the same really? Those non-human, but still natural, ‘things’ have agency because of more complex cultural systems that they exist within, as summed up in the Whanganui saying “Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au” (I am the river and the river is me)<sup>3</sup>—which is considerably different to AI. As Horo put it, with regards to AI having its own mauri, “although it can now continue on without us, it could never have been created without us.”<sup>4</sup> The mauri within ‘things’ is known in te ao Maaori, spoken about, experienced and understood. We have a whakapapa book within the Pei te Hurinui Jones collection here, organised by Princess Te Puea Herangi for the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tainui landing. The book shows the whakapapa of everything from Io Matua to the captains of the migratory waka, and then down from those waka to the Kiingitanga.<sup>5</sup> These whakapapa lines are written all across his unpublished manuscripts, focusing on our origin story from te kore to te poo to te ao maarama—in essence, the whakapapa of everything, the essence and origin of all life, matter and our contextual relationship within. I will also point out that these Maaori koerero are not literal in the way that non-Maaori interpret them—let’s just clear that up right now. Pei has considered the Maaori as “symbolical psychologist[s],” and that to interpret Maaori esoteric lore literally is incorrect. And early missionaries struggled with Maaori ritual, which may have been why they frowned on Maaori religion, and in turn why Maaori withheld esoteric lore.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this identifies one of the gaps in understanding between Maaori and non-Maaori. But coming back to the question “can this AI have personhood?”—well, based on precedents, it possibly could, it has mauri. But just because it has this potential, that does not mean the potential of it for Maaori is unlimited. It has a different whakapapa and, as an entity, it would be different to, say, a river. Similarly, our rivers are different to, say, Toni’s whaanau book. The potential of such things needs to be considered and reviewed by Maaori in the first instance and, to do that, Maaori first have to understand AI and that knowledge needs to be more accessible to Maaori.<sup>7</sup> What is your understanding of AI?

Joe: Generative AI represents a shift from frequentist statistical approaches towards Bayesian mathematics.<sup>8</sup> Frequentism has a notorious difficulty with the reference class problem: calculating the probability of events happening is always dependent on the number of things in a given set.<sup>9</sup> The problem is that the universe is always bigger than any set of things one chooses to include or not include within that set. Chance, or what has been called chance, sits within a number of known possibilities. The unknown cannot be accounted for because it sits outside of any mathematical set. Flipping an idealised coin will produce either a head or a tail—it’s a set of two possible outcomes, with each supposedly having a 50 percent chance of happening. When people like

Stéphane Mallarmé say “A roll of the dice will never abolish chance,”<sup>10</sup> what they’re really saying is that there are some possibilities that lie beyond the known probabilities. Our idealised coin could land on its edge, it could be lost, or something completely unforeseen could happen.

This brings us to Bayesian mathematics, which is more like a decision tree-making model. It’s not “probability as the relative frequency of occurrence of events” but rather “probability as a degree of belief,”<sup>11</sup> which refers to the likelihood that humans will believe that something holds some measure of truth. Today’s generative AI still relies on Kantian a priori truth, which, simply put, is a Eurocentric insistence that time and space are universally understood to operate in the same ways—ways that are fundamentally measurable.<sup>12</sup> Bayesian probability is less concerned with fundamental measurements, but has shifted to what is known as a posteriori truth—which is the bit that insists that it is the application of logical or mathematical operations on those quantities that will produce new universal truths. The real difference is that Bayesian probability relies upon conditional statements, which in maths are those constructions that say things like “if this, then that” or “this will happen if, and only if, this other thing happens.” In programming these terms are sometimes called gates, because they either allow or don’t allow the next part of a process to occur, depending on whether or not their conditions are met or not.

Multiply these processes by billions of instances and we get generative AI; it’s less interested in the frequency of events than it is in using these decision-making logic gates to provide a guesstimate of whatever it is that it’s being asked to provide in the specific moment that such a question is being asked.<sup>13</sup> What’s common to both frequentist and Bayesian approaches is that they both subscribe to an assumption that measurements stand in for reality—that numbers as representations provide the only ‘real’ access to reality.<sup>14</sup> There’s this 400-year-old cultural claim called objectivity that first of all says that measurement is the only real way of knowing ‘the’ truth<sup>15</sup>—but now, generative AI is really just interested in what used to be called subjective truth. And that works really well for hyper-individualised consumer capitalism because it doesn’t have to be right, it just has to be right enough that the system is profitable.<sup>16</sup> Bayesian mathematics in that sense is not really about probability at all. It’s a cultural logic machine. It’s positivism. That’s why I call it a cultural logic.<sup>17</sup> It assumes that the act of measurement is fundamentally a stand-in for the thing that it represents. It comes from the European Enlightenment.

Hollie: See, that is a lot of complex information. And the concept of correctness in a European enlightened way doesn’t necessarily align with Maaori concepts of correctness.

Toni: What are Maaori concepts of correctness?

Hollie: It’s far more fluid. This is what I love about the discussion around tikanga (protocols/ ways of doing things) in relation to what you were just saying: it’s that tikanga can change.<sup>18</sup> An example is black worn at tangihanga (funeral ceremonies)—that’s introduced and adopted. Being able to attend tangi via conference call would never have been allowed pre-Covid. That has also changed; it grows and adapts. But, as I mentioned above, this is for Maaori to decide. With AI, if an existing Maaori position doesn’t exist, it must be discovered.<sup>19</sup> I imagine utilising mathematics as an agreed, confirmed truth would give a sense of certainty, especially if one did not want to bother with the practical application of a process or have to manage many opinions. Less negotiation.

Toni: Predictable.

Hollie: Yes, but people aren't predictable. And then, could AI ever truly embody personhood? It's a bit 'apples and oranges' really. You're saying generative AI is basically processing billions of these calculations and allowing, or not allowing, parts of processes to happen to arrive at a potentially "correct enough" profitable guesstimate. And all this is based on concepts of time and space and how they relate, say, as "this, then that." But what if I suggest Maaori concepts of space and time, relationality and organising our knowledge are different; and that calculations based on linear time may be useful to a degree, but can't fully encapsulate a Maaori way of being? And is how we perceive 'being' the same as 'intelligence'? Are we trying to find a middle ground, for the sake of this conversation, between what we understand as Maaori intelligence and the differences with enlightened European intelligence?

Toni: When we say Maaori intelligence, what is it that you understand or know or think of that?

Joe: I think about differences between what some people call cultural knowledge frameworks. In really broad terms, I would say that there's kind of a European Enlightenment-era kind of thinking that's come through into the modern day and is atomistic.<sup>20</sup> It thinks of objects as being self-contained, discrete. It talks about causal relationships between things. It's 'if this, then that.'

Hollie: Limited to three-dimensionality?

Joe: Yes, it's spatial like that. And time is conceived as being linear in terms of past, present and future. Whereas my understanding of te ao Maaori is that time is not like that.

Toni: Yes.

Joe: Then, to come back to your question about intelligence, I guess you could describe Eurocentric intelligence as an academic understanding that seems to be, in a sense, linear, . that seems to be, in a sense, linear, whereas, from Eurocentric perspectives at least, Maaori intelligence appears non-linear. There are distinct differences between foundational concepts, for example, how does time operate? through to what has agency in the world and what is potentiality? I guess the way I'd describe it is that there are distinct traditions rather than distinctions. Well, you know, in Western thought there is t influence of Newtonian physics. People can acknowledge quantum mechanics, but Newtonian physics is still a dominant discourse regarding cause-and-effect relationships. Western thought acknowledges that in quantum mechanics the agencies of observation have an effect on that which is being observed.<sup>21</sup> That's the case for Niels Bohr, at least. But that doesn't stop us from wanting to use quantum computing as a giant calculator. It seems curiously counterintuitive. I can talk to the things I know. I can't really define what Maaori intelligence is.

Hollie: I want to go back to the concept of Maaori time being nonlinear, because I think I take this for granted, in a way, as a truism; it was always just stated as a fact in my whanau. When Anne Salmond discussed her interpretation of her experience travelling with Eruera Stirling, she described him as "navigating this multi-dimensional set of matrices" regarding how he experienced and related to places and people.<sup>22</sup> She began to understand, by being with him, that the "structure is different" and logic is not the same, such as going from point A to point B. Pei te Hurinui Jones produced visual renderings of this, some of which are in his book *He Tuhi Mārei-kura*.<sup>23</sup> He drew these concepts of time and space as spirals, and Brett Graham points out that while it's linear in a sense, it allows for "seeing" to the past, across the threads.<sup>24</sup> So, with this in mind, another thing is how we share Maaori knowledge, if we do at all—or if we don't, because it has already been

dismissed as invalid because of colonisation. I'm thinking about this in terms of experiences that I've had with people who I feel know more than I do about Maaori culture.

Toni: Are these people Maaori?

Hollie: Yes. We'll omit the name, but they're an influential person in te ao Maaori. We were being hosted at a university by local indigenous academics; I was recording, and [name omitted] contextualised themselves through their whakapapa. This koorero was to connect them with our audience and show their shared whakapapa. I recorded the session and afterwards they came over to make sure I deleted the whakapapa part. Consider that this was 2015, before our access to AI, on an SLR camera. This could be shared in person only, tailored for that group only, with the express purpose of understanding and connection.

So, with that being their stance on it—a person highly respected for their understanding of Maatauranga Maaori—I would like to discuss why they would not want their koorero recorded. Because that's a really good example of someone not wanting a portion of Maaori knowledge being shared or maintained on technology, with the understanding that it could potentially go elsewhere. When it comes to AI—for example, OpenAI—from the outset what risk does putting our koorero on there look like? They knew in 2015 they didn't want their koorero on technology that could be replicated. Doing that today then, with AI, would be an absolute no.

Joe: So, we can understand this reluctance for Maaori to engage with the technology, but is that AI or is that capitalism?

Hollie: It's probably a combination of both, because the politics that are happening at the moment within AI are not for the advancement or the benefit of people.

Joe: It's not just about progress, it's seeking to be the definitive articulation of a technology, and in a sense that relates to one's market share.

Hollie: It's been this strategic race for people to get things out first, and doing it without thinking through the ethics of it. Even though we are not yet 100 percent sure of where AI leads, it does have a lot of marketable and profitable potential, which is concerning.<sup>25</sup> Whereas with Maaori, the ethics and potential implications are an immediate issue.

Toni: And I think especially because Maaori and a lot of other indigenous cultures always think seven years ahead—it's seven generations. So how will what we do today affect those tomorrow?

Hollie: I think that's what they [name omitted] were thinking. They know it's not just their whakapapa only.

Toni: Yeah.

Hollie: People concerned with profits gawk at that.

Joe: It appears to me that one's whakapapa has been used to validate or invalidate a wide range of claims around ownership of resources, and what is or isn't education or mental health, or what is or isn't the law.

Hollie: We're not being difficult for the sake of being difficult—it's just something that matters a lot to us. It is a tenet of the way our communities function. So yes, watching it being used outside the context of te ao Maaori or forced into European systems in these ways, and in some cases weaponised and/or fragmented, can be concerning. It's dangerous to take things out of context.

Joe: Yeah. And the thing is that the rest of the world actually has to learn from Maaori in this respect, because the European Enlightenment and its heritage—for want of a better way of putting it—is destroying the planet. It's an extractionist attitude and an addiction to a bonanza style of exploitation in order to turn a profit; an exploitation of not just nature, but everything.

Hollie: Capitalism at work. It's doing a great job.

Joe: It's doing a great job of using everything up. And we can talk about humanism, because humanism was a big thing for the European Enlightenment thinker, and today it still is. It wants to have the control; it's kind of an addiction to control. There might be philosophical moves towards post-humanism or whatever, but there is still this thing about materiality—that somehow materiality is separate to spirituality.

Hollie: The idea of materiality and spirituality being separate—and your example earlier of things being self-contained, with causal relationships to other things—is already at odds with Maaori connectivity to all things, through whakapapa or history, et cetera. But also, we are not at the centre of everything; our relationship to other people and things is not a pyramid, with us perched at the top. There's a great example of Princess Te Puea's mum growling at her for being arrogant about her rank, reminding her she is only important because the people allow it.<sup>26</sup> I love this as an example of humility, but also the reality that we are, in fact, not the centre of everything. We realise that pretty quick in the face of disaster.

And I agree it is about control. It's built into every part of our society. That's what scares me about AI: it's the loss of control. Not even that, but our arrogance that we will always have control. And if we lose that control, were the benefits really worth it?

Let's consider some immediate potential benefits, yeah? Of AI as it is now. For example, as urban Maaori I exist in a constant state of negotiation, trying to relearn and reclaim what was lost during urban drift. AI could help with language rejuvenation and whakapapa. It could analyse historical koorero against those of other indigenous cultures and find similarities to close knowledge gaps. Moving beyond that, could it be recalibrated with indigenous knowledge to be less exploitative and more sustainably conscious? Though we know AI perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces injustices, there seems to be an idea that maybe we could use it effectively.<sup>27</sup> And, in fact, a lot more people would benefit in the move away from the dominant biases of the white male programmers, and more towards including indigenous ways of knowing that incorporate kin networks and thus interconnected wellness and accountability.<sup>28</sup> I mean, it can all sound lovely, can't it? But it still concerns me.

There's this entitlement to knowledge and information, I feel. For example, people know my genealogical whakapapa; they'd be aware of Toni's also. And because people have this information, they feel they're entitled to share it however they see fit. I can't stop people having access to these very personal parts of who I am, my own whakapapa—it's published by Pei, Michael King and the like. [Name omitted] could erase the recordings of their whakapapa. I can't. Once it's out there,

it's out there, and it will be used as it will be used. Once we give over this information, even with the best of intentions and with the greatest potential for benefit, how do we uphold its integrity?

And this is an interesting point. Did you know that unpublished and private Maaori whanau manuscripts can come out of copyright? By law, even though they are inherited and donated private manuscripts, passed down through whanau, they will technically be out of copyright and cannot be protected outside of limiting access. I thought that as whanau taonga, these would be safe, but it's not. And that's what I see as a risk of AI. We assume that our interest will be kept, and we're sometimes a bit naive in that sense.

Joe: I see AI as colonialism. It's claiming something which wasn't theirs to claim. During the Enlightenment, the belief emerged that knowledge should be universally accessible; there was a cultural assumption that if western culture was emancipatory, it would be emancipatory for everybody.

Hollie: I can see that reflected maybe in the way that [name omitted] was protecting their whakapapa and in my own experience in my role of kaitiakitanga (steward/ guardian) of knowledge, and especially digitally housed knowledge. I understand the digital space as noa, as unrestricted and accessible, regardless of how 'safe' we want to believe it is. Once digital things can be replicated and shared quickly and further than we've ever been able to before—when our koorero end up in these places—we have given up some level of control. Once it's outside of te ao Maaori, people feel they can take it, use it and claim it.

Toni: They've claimed the world and it's not even been theirs to claim.

Joe: Toni, I'm aware that you didn't give your definition?

Toni: What's my definition of AI? I understand that it is manmade. That it is, in a sense, a machine that can learn from everything that we do. That the more we use it, the more it learns and that one day it will become self-aware. We made it in our image, to a point, I suppose, but it's going to surpass us.

And for me, I don't know. I don't know about anyone else, but for me that fuckin' terrifies me, you know, because we lose control of everything. And because of the history that most indigenous cultures have experienced through colonial processes, which AI is, it's just same shit, different form. How can we preserve the essence of who we are, which is found in our taonga? Because with those taonga is preserved our heritage, our whakapapa, our knowledge systems, our everything. And if you think about it, that's fuckin' freaky. That's terrifying.

Joe: I have a question about awareness. What is awareness? When you talk about machines, will they become aware?

Toni: Maybe it will be able to think and not have to ask for confirmation. What does this mean? What would happen if we do this? It's got enough brain cells or brain or whatever to be able to calculate different outcomes.

Joe: I think it can already do that. I think it doesn't need to ask for confirmation.

Toni: Humans can't even do that. Not really.

Joe: It makes calculations, but these are all mathematical operations. That's not like human thinking. It's more like a highly refined or very, very narrow band of what or how some humans think.

Hollie: Technically, it follows logic, whereas human brains are able to take in a lot of stimuli as well. We can make leaps and bounds of logic, or seemingly impossible connections through what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, but also through the backlog of experiences we have and our emotional responses to them. Intuitive leaps.

Toni: That's relational intelligence, yeah.

Hollie: There's a lot of different inputs that we have as people in societies and constructed cultures with lived experiences. But, if we're going to talk about awareness in AI, you can feed in cues, but will it ever reach a point of emotional intelligence? Would we ever be able to feed it emotional data? Probably not. But it may be able to perform emotion.

Joe: It's interesting because of that performative thing, by which I'm referring to the idea that the emphasis is on the action, or the action of action, rather than the representation of action. AI, on the other hand, requires representationalism, inasmuch that programming requires the exchange of symbolic tokens, which stand in for the things they purport to represent. Bayesian mathematics is in a sense, more performative in its operations, because it's always being calculated in the event, instant-by-instant, on the fly. What's problematic, is that it uses the mechanism of representationalism in order to work properly, whilst simultaneously discarding an older foundational cultural claim that quantitative methods provide access to objective truth. In any case, I'm very uncertain about claims that AI may be able to perform emotion, because quantitatively tracking behavioural changes is not at all the same thing as the lived experiences of having emotions.

Coming back to intelligence, is that intelligence? Can we agree that it is a practice? This is a way of doing things. It is not innately true universally, in and of itself. We forget that these things are methods, not methodologies—that's what a machine is, it's a method.

Hollie: It's calculated.

Toni: Well, that can also go back to humans. Are we organic machines?

Joe: Some people might think so, but that's a mechanistic way of looking at what humans are. There are parallels between colonialism and AI within this capitalistic model. Purely productive, materialistic. Logical senses of inputs and outputs. AI programming has historically been heavily influenced by ideas that have come from neuroscience and psychiatric models of operant conditioning. Feedback loops, for instance, are in effect positive and negative reinforcements of data inputs.

Hollie: The idea of productivity is reinforced. For example, I come from factory parents; being a hard worker was a good thing and we were always told that if you're struggling you don't work hard enough. And every single problem you have in your life is because you don't work hard enough. But who does that benefit?

Joe: Well, the factory owner, not you. You're simply the means of production—or that would be a classic Marxist analysis of it, anyway.

Hollie: Because everything is productivity here. Everything. We rip our land to shreds because it's productive. We like the concept of AI because it can do things faster and more efficiently. We can be more productive, like light speed—productivity without any clarity as to what the ends are. But why? When is enough, enough?

Joe: I think some of that relies upon those ideas that, again, come out of the European Enlightenment, like the concept of the commons. The Enlightenment identified nature as being common—that there is common access to nature and that any surplus after survival can be turned into profit. The trouble is that this was seen as revolutionary within these culturally specific instances of older imperial colonial relationships. That may have been revolutionary for America to escape Britain, but we cannot assume it would be equally revolutionary for the rest of us. To assume that it is revolutionary in a universal sense is cultural arrogance.

Coming back to what we are talking about—this idea that essentially our behavioural data is there for the taking—again, it's a claim on what we would otherwise call natural resources. For profit. I mean, Linda Tuhiwai Smith talks about the difference between colonialism and imperialism, where colonialism is the fort and port of imperialism.<sup>29</sup> In that sense, that's what AI is. It's the means of acquisition and removing data from its original context. Production is not for the benefit of the people from whom it came. Ditto with the resources to make it go, and with everything else.

Hollie: So, the other question, then, is why? Say, talking in terms of Maaori data, why is it important that Maaori maintain hold of their data and what is the risk if it goes into AI? As I said, once it's out, it's out—can the integrity be protected?

Joe: Well, I think, first of all, you have to grapple with the concept of control and who has access. You talked about access to whakapapa and who has the right to recite which whakapapa and to who. And it comes down to the type of time that AI uses, which is an a linear sense of how time operates. Digitality typically requires a clock in order to make these processual calculations.<sup>30</sup> Clock time, as understood within a system of GPS and GMT, inscribes a very specific set of relations. It assumes a cause and effect, processual relationship between inputs and outputs. In a sense, this is a Newtonian understanding of how time operates, as if the universe was a giant clock. It may be true that the original idea of computers was that they computed. But when we move to a Bayesian model, we keep this culturally specific understanding of time but jettison the original search for certainty. It can't be assumed that this model of time is universally true, whether it's from indigenous perspectives or quantum mechanics. The Newtonian model cannot be taken for granted. So, we have to decide what is right for us. It's important for everybody to decide what they need to hold onto and to decide what belongs to them. It's about who has control about how we live our lives and what is 'normal.'

Toni: Maybe not control. Maybe the ability to navigate your own path.

Joe: I mean the ability to have self-determination.

Toni: Yeah.

Joe: That you are the ones that get to decide how you are, and are engaged with, in the world. I mean, is that control or simply self-determination?

Hollie: I'm asking if there's a point. But I'm asking because it is also interesting. If we are to consider precedents as one step to dealing with deciding such things,<sup>31</sup> then, historically, entering Maaori knowledge into Paakehaa systems has already not served us. WAI 262 [Waitangi Tribunal claim 262] touches on some cases of misuse, like koru on toilet paper, the misuse of Te Rauparaha's ngeri—better known as “Ka Mate Ka Mate,” the ‘haka’ of the All Blacks—and even copyright as ‘protection’ in regards to ngaa mooteatea (laments) or the writings of Elsdon Best.<sup>32</sup> Best himself is a great example of being given knowledge and space only to disseminate it in the most bigoted and offensive way.<sup>33</sup> Obviously, from a European perspective, it was reinforced as accurate and cited over and over again, giving it further credibility in the Western world. Non-Maaori became Maaori ‘experts’ because Maaori were dying out. Assimilate or die—so we did, we lived the Paakehaa way and we are good at it. Because there was absolutely no interest from Paakehaa in living a Maaori way, which was, I feel, our assumption of what could happen in the first place. A mutual growing. It turned out not to be the case, and here we are. Ferociously protecting what we have left.

Joe: Ngaa mihi o te mamae (acknowledgements of the wounds). It provokes a number of other questions. Generative AI is not just about pattern recognition, it's also about making tweens between things. There's an assumption that nothing means anything anymore because there's this supposed departure from the real. But I think conversations with indigeneity reveal that one cannot assume any such departures, because what is or isn't real can't be taken for granted. The exchangeability of meaning can't be assumed to operate in the same way that a hyper-capitalist world might align with postmodern understandings of meaning, where the commodification of meaning means that meaning itself is understood to be infinitely exchangeable. Conversations with indigenous cultural knowledge frameworks quickly reveal that this type of cultural trajectory can't be assumed to be universally applicable. So, when it is assumed to be universal, the question has to be asked as to who benefits from these claims?

Toni: Quite interconnected, the scope.

Joe: I just want to come back to a point that you talked about: Maaori becoming really proficient in Paakehaa ways of being and knowing. In the book *Pūrakau: Modern Maaori Myths Told by Modern Maaori Writers*, Nic Low writes about AI being made in the image of atua (ancestors/ deities/ personifications) for different iwi.<sup>34</sup> It's kind of written like a gangland war, and what's interesting about it is the question it asks—which is, what's to stop iwi (confederated tribes) or haapuu (sub-tribes) from having their own intranet-style AI that is not connected to the rest of the planet, in the same way that the internet was originally conceived of with DARPA?<sup>35</sup> All it really requires is consistent protocols for communication and the servers to be located here in Aotearoa. There's nothing to stop Maaori from doing it for themselves, to be used by themselves, and the way in which they want to use it for themselves.

Hollie: Money and an infrastructure that supports Maaori into these spaces. Maaori could do this, this is 100 percent true, except for the digital literacy gap, the digital divide with Maaori. Access to internet is expensive, quality devices are expensive and quickly obsolete, education is expensive, servers are expensive, land is expensive, and hosting a server for a large language learning model requires money.

There's a claim at the moment, the WAI 3311 claim,<sup>36</sup> arguing these points and highlighting where there are inequities specifically for Maaori in the tech sector. Inequities such as systemic discrimination against Maaori in the tech sector and lack of support for Maaori to enter into the sector, both through funding and meaningful legislation.<sup>37</sup>

Maaori can 100 percent do it, but—and I know people like to say that this isn't true, but it really, really is—we are often at a disadvantage. Maaori have been streamed out of the tech sector and instead channelled into unskilled labour.<sup>38</sup> The digital divide became very clear during Covid, when they realised that a lot of Maaori only had one computer in their household, if they had one at all.

Joe: You're right. I experienced that in my own classes.

Hollie: So, with that in mind, what do we do?

Joe: You know, you hear all the time the conversation about taonga tuku iho (cultural treasures handed down through the generations), and I can see how the need to think about the future in relation to the past, is not always seen as being immediately financially viable, but surely the need for digital sovereignty is as important now as it is for our shared futures? When you're handing down to next generations, you know, there's a lot of koorero about what sort of ancestor you are. And, surely, you're an ancestor—I mean, all of us are ancestors who want a better world and a sense of having our different knowledges protected. Now, maybe I'm informed by my own liberal Paakehaa traditions when I say that word 'better,' but what I'm getting at is that, as a Paakehaa walking into te ao Maaori, I often feel that I can't say the things I want to say, because it's not my place to say them.

Toni and Hollie: That's correct. Not in a disrespectful way.

Joe: Yeah, I don't take it in a disrespectful way because I recognise that I've come from a different culture. But if, we're talking about digital sovereignty, then it's beneficial not just for Maaori, but for everybody in Aotearoa, that our data is kept in this country. And was it you, Hollie, who was saying that the Ministry of Justice keeps all its servers overseas?

Hollie: I don't think I said that, but even our libraries—including the University of Waikato library—have moved all of their data overseas, with the exception of some pockets of data which we've managed to secure local servers for, specifically our kaimahi in the library; we've actually nailed down servers for Maaori and sensitive data. But outside of those, it's all cloud and international servers.

Joe: Yeah, it's really common for educational institutions and other ministries to do that, because it's cheaper to go with the cloud. And the thing is, that data is insecure because those overseas servers are not subject to our country's jurisdiction, so they're also susceptible to AI web crawling and web-bots to basically take it at will.

Hollie: It benefits people who are tech savvy, an area which Maaori have been proven to have been streamed out of.

Joe: It makes sense to me that we have control over our own data, simply because it comes down to our own self-determination. And are we really in a position to be able to decide the right side or the wrong side of that for today, when we're talking about those who come after?

Toni: To be honest, I don't think that I'm really that tech savvy in terms of AI and the computer kind of stuff, but I do know my te ao Maaori. You know, trying to find ways to preserve our taonga is my angle on this article. All the things that you guys are saying, I'm listening and I'm learning. So, keep talking.

Hollie: No, no, no, because this is the thing, you shouldn't have to know. You shouldn't have to understand the tech. You're already a master in te ao Maaori. Maaori already have to walk two worlds. Why, then, should you have to learn tech inside and out to use it safely, because there's this expectation that you have to do this in order to maintain your own interests? You know, this is what I'm talking about—we get tired. You—we—should be able to know our stuff and have support from people who know their stuff, like AI. Say, Toni, if I come to you to get you on board with AI and I'm, like, "We've got a language learning model and it's closed. The servers are held in New Zealand and what that means is that none of your information is going to go overseas, and what we can do is we can use it to record your koorero and it'll hold it. We're not going into the ether, this is where we will hold it. And this is the law it will come under, which will be New Zealand law." But you're sceptical, so I persist with "it's super-fast and efficient at analysing and organising your data."

Toni: What's wrong with the way that we organise our data? I can do it in my mind.

Hollie: What about big amounts of hugely valuable data, such as a Maaori academic's manuscripts or the Maaori Land Court minutes? It could organise that and make it easily accessible super quickly, whakapapa, koorero, the lot.

Toni: I disagree with that. I don't think that's a good idea.

Hollie: Awesome. Can you please tell us why?

Toni: Well, because, you know, for centuries, generations prior to the arrival of colonial people to Aotearoa, our tuupuna (ancestors) had their own kind of knowledge base that we were able to preserve. Generations and generations and generations of whakapapa that sometimes will take a month to recite nonstop—that is held in our brains, in our minds. So, we have the capability and the kind of mental capacity to be able to retain huge amounts of knowledge. Which is just exactly what that AI thing is, so it's obsolete. But I do know that not everyone has that capacity. Not everyone has a good memory. And I suppose AI could make it more accessible for others. Do they deserve that knowledge? What are they going to do with it, once they get that type of thing? So that's why that's not a good idea.

**Hollie Tawhiao** (Ngāti Tiipa, Waikato, Pākehā) (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8191-9021>) is Kaitiaki Mātangireia in Te Iho o Te Manawataki, University of Waikato Library. Graduating her undergraduate in Fine Arts at ELAM, she went on to complete her PGDip in Museum Studies from Massey and her Masters in Contemporary Arts with Te Pūkenga | WINTEC. Her masters explored the potential of visual culture as a portal to influence cultural evolution. Focussing on Māori visual culture as existing on a spectrum free from colonial parameters such as “traditional” and “contemporary”, her research reflected on the methods of knowledge transfer and the impact of human influence on shifts in cultural beliefs over time and how these impact identity and self-perception. Her research interests include Māori material culture, identity and self-determination.

**Joe Citizen:** I gained my PhD (Design) from AUT in 2019, and currently work for Wintec | Te Pūkenga in Kirikiriroa/ Hamilton. I am a collaborative practice-led creative-arts researcher mainly interested in speculative metaphysics located at the intercultural hyphen space (Fine, 1994), particularly in relation to te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā ways of knowing and being. My work has relevance to the fields of Māori-Pākehā relations, post-humanist and new materialist critique, aesthetics, and contemporary digital theory.

**Toni Herangi:** My creative practice is Toi Māori/Māori Art Practices based, meaning my creative explorations and processes are guided and nurtured primarily by bodies of knowledge and ways of knowing which stem from Toi Māori, te ao Māori practices and traditions. The narrative focus of both my creative practice and mahi rangahau processes are informed by Whakapapa; concepts focused on understanding the nature of relationships and connections from an indigenous perspective, and processes of doing or practical applications. My contribution to this field endeavours to illustrate the nature of the connections and relationships that weave the fibres of te ao Māori together, to articulate the significance of Whakapapa in its many forms, to pay homage to the knowing that is fostered through such explorations, and to highlight the value that matauranga Māori has to offer.

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## CALL FOR PAPERS: JUDGEMENT

*Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* invites submissions on the theme of “judgement.”

In the contemporary moment we regularly see both forthright judgements and a recoiling from the violence of such judgements. On the one hand, there has been a widespread (re)turn to the political right, bringing with it a gleeful dismantling not only of the gains made for marginalised identities and communities in the post-1960s period but an undisguised reimplementation of forms of discrimination and oppression. Meanwhile on the left there is a staunch refusal to allow space for anything that carries the whiff of, or bears some resemblance to, discredited attitudes, particularly with regard to cultural or gender identity. On the other hand, there is a growing view that critique, criticism, critical theory and critical thinking, rather than furthering progressive thought and countering unreasonable and entrenched beliefs, can be damaging. Judgement can perpetuate combative, competitive modes of being—affirming a state of opposition between competing ideologies. Judgement can tend to represent and reaffirm existing paradigms and conventions—that which already exists—rather than being conducive to generating unexpected and imaginative insights, spaces and relationships—that which might happen. Judgement can appear arbitrary and groundless in contexts (contemporary art, for example) where the criteria for value are unclear or unstable. Judgement, no matter how rigorously supported, can be stultifying, imposing the illusion of resolution, closure or an end-point rather than opening up more discussion. And judgement can be culturally blind, based on ignorance or disregard for world views different to one’s own, or harmful to mental health or wellbeing, a repercussion more conspicuous than ever in today’s culture of candour and diagnosis. Yet the refusal to judge could be regarded as allowing reprehensible or unsupportable views to go unchallenged, or as a pusillanimous acceptance of the prevailing state of affairs. To refrain from explicit judgement might be a failure to recognise that, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has written, “We evaluate all the time. It’s not a matter of should or shouldn’t. We can’t stop ... We continuously orient ourselves different toward things that seem better or worse, more or less desirable.” Smith’s position, simultaneously challenging entrenched values and socio-political power relationships while acknowledging the inevitability of judgement, constitutes a sophisticated form of post-modern relativism. Recent critical theory that advocates for less judgemental forms of discourse is more aligned with the ontological turn, as with Rita Felski’s 2015 book *The Limits of Critique*, a critique (for want of a better word) of what she calls (using Paul Ricoeur’s words) “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” The editors welcome proposals for articles in any field or discipline and from diverse perspectives on the current status of critical judgement.

Please submit a title and abstract of between 500 and 750 words for a finished paper of between 4,000 and 6,000 words accompanied by a short biography including your institutional affiliation by 31 March 2025. We will let you know if your abstract has been accepted by 14 April 2025. Final draft of submissions due by 2 June, 2025 with envisioned publication October 2025.

Please enquire about submission guidelines for other formats from editors:

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