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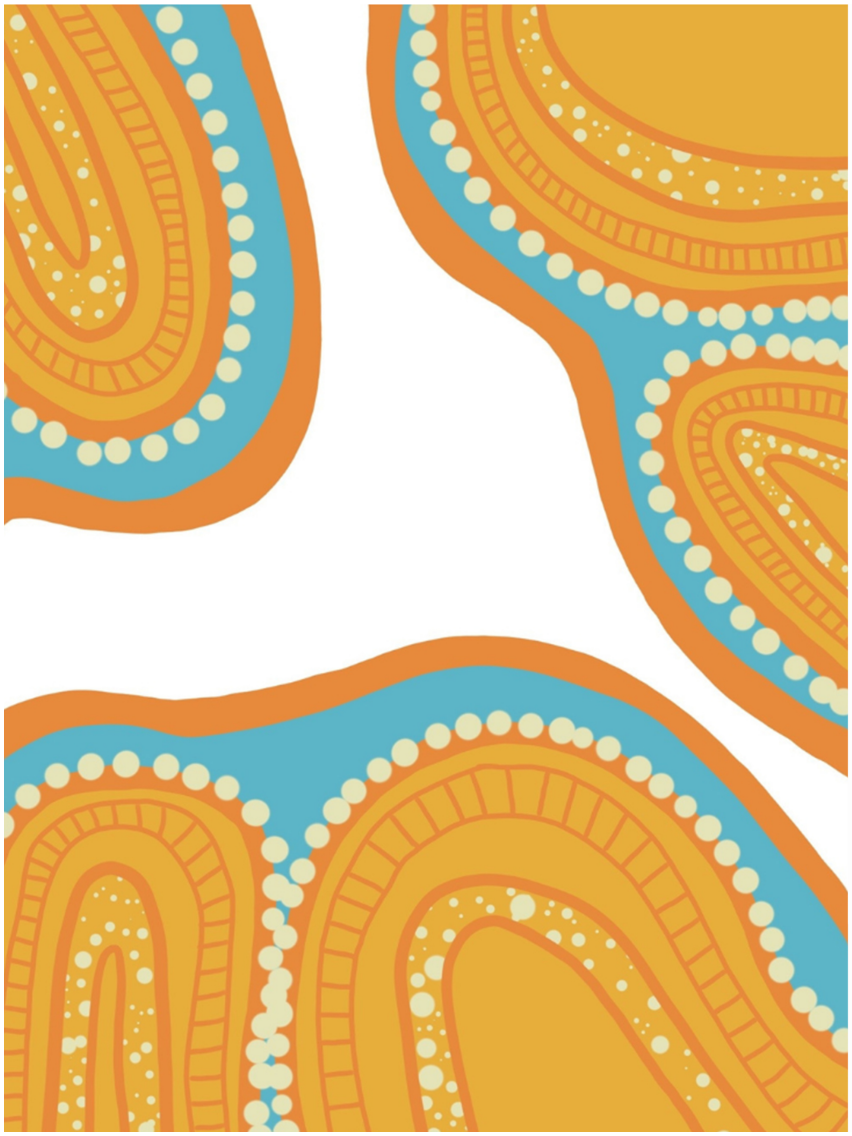

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Editorial

Metaphor, Hospicing, and the Work of Doing Otherwise

Oliver Koenig, Eva Pomeroy, Megan Seneque, and Otto Scharmer

For half a decade now, the Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change (JASC) has sought to accompany the deep, hopeful, and, at times, dissonant work of making visible, naming, and embodying emerging alternatives to dominant paradigms of knowing, doing, being, and becoming. There is both joy and also a particular discomfort—an edge—that accompanies the act of editorial writing. It is not merely about finding language to introduce a set of texts. It is the deeper struggle of meeting the moment, of offering words that do not merely describe but also invite, and of facing the tension between speaking from somewhere while speaking in ways that remain invitational to those whose somewhere is not our own. To be accessible without becoming formless; to hold a position without constraining difference—this is the work.

And yet, even as we write, we feel the subtle currents pulling in different directions. One pull moves toward clarity, toward language that can meet the practitioner's hand, the urgency of action, and the concrete, palpable impact that results in meaningful change for many, not just some privileged few. Another draws us toward the porous, the experimental, the slow work of inquiry that resists capture and refuses to translate itself too quickly into the grammars of productivity or use. Between them lies a space of friction: the field of awareness-based systems change itself stretches between the wish to be of service to what is happening on the ground and the knowing that service sometimes asks for surrender—listening, dwelling, or even hospicing the very habits of knowing that keep us from sensing and doing differently (Machado de Oliveira, 2025).

There are moments when these pulls feel almost irreconcilable: the desire to be legible and the need to stay faithful to what is emergent; the wish to speak plainly to a world in crisis and the recognition that our words and actions must themselves transform if they are to disclose anything new. In our work, we try to see these currents not as opposing camps but as living tensions or polarities—movements within us and between us—reminding us that every act of writing, every act of sense-making, is also an act of ambivalent positioning within a field still finding its shape.

Speaking Truth With Love From Within Crisis

To speak truthfully within such conditions calls for a particular type of courage—what Michel Foucault (2001) referred to in relation to the Greek concept of *parrhesia*: frank and risky speech. More precisely, parrhesia is a practice in which the speaker "expresses their personal relationship to truth, and risks their life because they recognize truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as themselves)" (Foucault, 2001, p. 19). To write in this spirit is to risk being misunderstood—and yet to speak nonetheless—from care: for truth, for the world, and for one another.

Such truth-telling, as Hannah Arendt (1958/98) observed, takes place in the spaces in-between—the web of human relations where we appear to one another "through words and deeds" (p. 198). When the shared world loses its "power of illumination" (Arendt, 1955/1968, p. 4), when retreat replaces relation, something vital is lost, because "with each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men" (p. 4–5). Losing this in-between allows us to drift toward isolation. Against this drift, Arendt (1955/1968) offers the practice of vigilant partiality—to remain awake to the world, to think about what we are doing, and to take up a position. It is a commitment to remain in relation, to sustain the shared space of discourse that allows plurality—and the possibility of a common world—to endure.

This vigilance feels especially needed now. The broader planetary context is one marked by intensification. Carbon dioxide concentrations have reached historic highs, accelerating the already critical pace of ecological destabilization (World Meteorological Organization, 2025). In parallel, we witness a resurgence of remilitarization and hardening geopolitics. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2025) reports that global military expenditure reached an unprecedented $2.718 billion in 2024, marking the steepest year-on-year increase since the end of the Cold War. Recent announcements (in October 2025)—such as the United States' intent to resume nuclear testing—evoke both past trauma and future risk. Social systems strained by pandemic-induced overspending now face renewed austerity pressures, with public spending on health, education, care, food, and climate protection giving way to militarized budgets and nationalist priorities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2025).

Amid these fractures, many speak of a deepening ontological crisis—a loss not only of political direction but of felt coherence and shared ground. Recent analyses warn that even in long-established democracies, complacency is paving the way for backsliding. As Lewandowsky & Hertwig (2025) state, "information abundance can be detrimental to democracy," (p. 1) because when people are "rushed and overwhelmed," (p. 2) their ability to differentiate between true and false information decreases. Drawing on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, Nord et al. (2025) find that global levels of liberal democracy have fallen back to those of 1985, with freedom of expression deteriorating in nearly a quarter of all countries and rising polarization and disinformation marking a new peak in twenty-five years.

For Arendt, such speaking truthfully is rooted in what she called *amor mundi*—love of the world (Zuurmond, 2016). This is not the unworldly passion that dissolves distance between people, but a worldly and political love that keeps difference alive so that plurality can exist. Amor mundi is the ground of action: to love the world in this sense is to take responsibility for it—to act, to speak, to create conditions in which new beginnings remain possible. It is to remain inside its complexity: to speak with care even when words feel inadequate, to act while knowing the limits of what can be known. In dark times, Arendt (1955/1968) reminds us, the task is to stay awake to what is happening and to think through what we are doing. Yet such vigilance asks for more than critique; it calls for presence—a willingness to meet the world as it is and to tend to what might yet become.

It is from this stance—of partiality, of staying with the world rather than withdrawing from it—that many of the contributions gathered in this issue speak.

Practices of Reconciliation and the Work of Doing Otherwise

In a sense, the pieces collated in this issue respond directly to the very tensions we named at the outset—the pull toward clarity and the pull toward depth, the urgency to act and the necessity to dwell. Each contribution, in a different way, shows that reconciliation does not mean that difference needs to be erased, but rather the ability to remain in relation while difference persists. All of the featured works grow from practice, and they return to practice. They are written from within movement—be it artistic, pedagogical, ecological, or communal—and each one turns reflection back into action. What we see in these contributions is a deep desire for a kind of *doing otherwise* (Akómoláfé, 2017), arising from an attunement to other ways of being and becoming. Such attunement, Meek and Morales Fontanilla (2022) write, calls for "an 'intensification' of the possible within situated practices and relations" (p. 278)—a speculative gesture that does not merely explain but "augments, validates, dwells, intensifies, insists upon, potentiates, opens up, and activates." (p. 278)

The movement of these pieces is cyclical rather than linear. Practice becomes inquiry; inquiry becomes practice. Transformation does not yet fully manifest itself but offers a first glimpse of a deepening of awareness, a reorientation of how one meets the world. There is a certain earnestness here that we sense—a willingness to remain with the trouble, in Haraway's sense (2016), and a perseverance to inhabit complexity over time.

If reconciliation, as these works suggest, is a practice of staying in relation, then it also calls for attentiveness to the spaces between—those interstitial zones where dominant and emergent systems, old and new worlds, meet, overlap, and at times collide. Several authors in this issue write precisely from within such thresholds. Their work, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, seeks to move beyond the notion of a *third way*. They refrain from attempting to merge systems into some new epistemic hybrid, choosing instead to honor the distinctiveness of traditions—including the historical, social, and embodied commitments from which they emerge—while bringing them into conversation.

In their Berkana Model, Wheatley and Frieze (2006) describe dominant and emergent systems as existing in a continual movement, one ebbing as another begins to coalesce. Such a dynamic flow demands practices that can both accompany and unsettle—for which Machado de Oliveira (2021) and Akómoláfé (2017) offer the metaphorical concepts of *hospicing* and *fugitivity*. Fugitivity here can be understood as a form of refusal—a conscious turning away from the logics of extraction and mastery that underlie much of modern epistemic life. Hospicing, in turn, asks what it means to accompany what is ending with care, without rushing to replace it. Functioning as a metaphorical pair, they open a field of praxis in which the work is neither to preserve the old nor to proclaim the new, but—as Machado de Oliveira (2025) uses as her book title—to navigate *complexity, complicity, and collapse with accountability and compassion.*

Metaphor as Relational Method

To dwell in such liminal work thus also asks for a language that can move otherwise. Several of the authors gathered in this issue turn to metaphor as a way of sensing and navigating across systems and epistemic boundaries without collapsing them. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) write,

> Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think we can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (p. 3)

This quality is particularly important given the pluriversal character of the work assembled here. Many of the metaphors in this issue—braiding, fugitivity, fermentation, hospicing—have roots in Indigenous knowledge traditions, which, in recent years, have gained renewed attention on the global stage, particularly in discussions of sustainability and systems transformation.

Indigenous traditions, as Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) note, offer pathways for "the restoration of complexity and connectedness to entropic socioenvironmental landscapes" (p. 7). Yet this engagement demands a shift in how knowledge is approached and enacted. Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) articulate this through the concept of *relational responsiveness*: to engage meaningfully with cultural metaphors is to enter into obligation—one that is shaped by situated relations to land, law, people, and practice. "Your intellectual process in relationally responsive standpoints," they write,

> involves engaging with and negotiating cultural metaphors that can express, structure and inspire thinking and learning processes. Cultural metaphors are the tools we have been given to know and therefore sustain creation. The structured manipulation of words, images, actions and objects that carry additional layers of meaning is the way we co-create systems and events within the spiritual fabric of existence which is Dreaming. (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020, p. 7).

Within a relational responsive standpoint, this layered intelligibility matters. It follows from the nature of relation itself. To think metaphorically is to stay with this groundedness—to attend to how language, world, and ways of valuing are made through one another.

This refusal to seek clarity at the cost of complexity also shapes Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's articulation of *stacked metaphors*, the constellation of layered images and concepts that resist resolution into singular meaning. These, she writes, are meant to unsettle "the way we've been conditioned to crave simple, clear, and logical explanations of reality" (2025, p. 7). The metaphor carries epistemic friction: "Reality is far messier than that," she continues, "always in flux, multilayered, and far beyond the limits of any system or framework we try to impose on it." (p. 7). In this view, stacked metaphors are methodologically disruptive; they expose the expectations of coherence and offer a means of staying with what cannot be resolved.

What runs through the varied uses of metaphor in this issue is a shared attentiveness to how it functions not simply as a means of expression, but as a site of *reworlding* and *relational labor*. Metaphor allows knowledge to remain unsettled, grounded in context-specific engagements and responsive to the demands of place. Meaning emerges in relation—through encounter, through friction, through situated acts of sense-making. To work with metaphor in this way is to take care with the conditions of understanding, to move without

seeking closure, to hold open spaces in which forms of a future that have not yet taken shape can stay open just a little bit longer.

To work in this way is not comfortable. It requires a willingness to remain with the complexity that difference generates. It asks for a form of attention that is ethical, affective, and embodied. In the context of this issue, we invite you to stay with the difficult work of doing otherwise—not through breaking away, but through shifts in how continuity is held; not through control, but through careful attention. What follows in this issue, in the varied contributions, are examples of how we are shaped by relation and how meaning forms in movement. What grows here depends on how we attend to it.

Contributions to this Issue

For this issue's *Commentary from the Field*, we feature a tribute to John O'Brien—visionary thinker, quiet catalyst, and one of the foundational figures in person-centered planning for people with disabilities. In *A Tribute to John O'Brien: Weaving Lives of Possibility*, Dave Hasbury, Lynda Kahn, Oliver Koenig, Beth Mount, Jack Pearpoint, and Patti Scott—long-time collaborators and companions in practice—come together to honor John's presence and influence on person-centered work and the wider struggle for lives of dignity and interdependence (Hasbury et al., 2025). Woven across six different braids, and patterned through John's own metaphors—the spiral, the edge, the star, the crack, the circle—the tribute reflects on decades of shared work through memories, images, and transformative developments John helped co-shape. John's lifelong quest is portrayed as an invitation to listen more carefully, to act with greater care, and to remain with the questions that continue to matter.

This issue features six peer-reviewed articles. We open with *Where, Who, When in Systems Change: Using an Indigenous Knowledge Systems Approach for Perspective on Systems Change* by Amara Bains and John Davis (Bains & Davis, 2025). Grounded in the authors' long-standing practice in systems transformation, the article offers a deep provocation to those seeking to engage with Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in non-tokenistic ways. Rather than positioning IKS and complexity science within a dialectical third space, the authors propose a culturally governed co-inquiry space—*duwur*—as a grounded entry point for ethical collaboration. Moving through protocols of yarning circles and guided relational frameworks, they describe a *kolab* process that makes space for different knowledge systems to meet without subsuming one into the other. Their articulation of systems change is rooted in Indigenous principles, practices, and metaphor as ontology, which surface tacit knowing and challenge Western linearity, calling attention to time, place, and accountability as prerequisites for emergence. The work draws attention to how understanding is made through embodied relation and the patterns held in community and country, offering a powerful framework for changemakers committed to intergenerational justice and decolonial practice.

The second article in this issue, *Dancing Otherwise: New Assemblages for Pluriversal Practices* by Victoria Hunter, Daniela Perazzo, and Michelle Elliott, offers an embodied exploration of how dance can serve as a mode of inquiry into pluriversal, more-than-human, and relational world-making (Hunter et al., 2025). Emerging from the AHRC-funded research network Dancing Otherwise, the article reflects on a series of choreographed events, workshops, and dialogues that brought together dance practitioners, researchers, and publics to examine the systemic conditions shaping dance research in the UK. With care and attentiveness, the authors articulate how movement-based practices can expose inherited patterns of exclusion and hierarchy, while gesturing toward more horizontal, attentive, and plurivocal ways of organizing knowledge. The article invites readers into a porous, reflexive process that engages dissent, ambiguity, and mutual learning. Through dancing, listening, improvising, and co-curating, the network modelled alternative modes of research as relational and responsive. Informed by a critical reading of power, ecology, and positionality, the work situates dance as a radical site of sense-making, one capable of tracing and enacting pathways toward ethical pluralism, systemic attentiveness, and reimagined ecologies of practice.

Ranjan Datta's article, *You Will Never Be Enough in a Settler Colonial System: Reclaiming Land-Based Identity as Decolonial Healing and Responsibility,* offers a reflective account of the author's use of story-sharing as a methodology to trace how settler-colonial educational, immigration, and governance systems recurrently sever land-based identities in favor of individualized *I-selves* rooted in Eurocentric logics (Datta, 2025). Drawing on lived experience from Bangladesh to Canada, the paper frames land-based identity as relational knowledge, ceremony, and responsibility to more-than-human kin. It argues that reclaiming such identity is simultaneously healing and political, enmeshed in acts of relational accountability, ceremonial practice, and radical responsibility. Throughout the paper, the author unsettles assumed hierarchies of knowing, shows how colonial systems perpetuate the message "you are not enough," and offers story-sharing itself as method and praxis for decolonial transformation.

The fourth article, *Cabbage, Curation and the Convivial: Relational Systems Change through Artist Residencies, Sympoiethic Rituals and Liberatory Practices*, by Miche Fabre Lewin, Flora Gathorne-Hardy, and Rika Preiser, draws on a three-week artist research residency held in early 2024 in Stellenbosch, South Africa (Fabre Lewin et al., 2025). Hosted by Living Justice in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of the Afterlife of Violence and the Reparative Quest, the Centre for Sustainability Transitions, and the Stellenbosch University Museum, the residency centered around a participatory cabbage fermentation ritual as a practice of ecological and cultural repair. Engaging researchers, artists, activists, chefs, growers, and curators, the work explores how relational systems change can be cultivated through arts-based inquiry, food ritual, and sensory co-creation. The article offers three intertwined contributions: curating the convivial as an aesthetic of care; ritual as a liberatory praxis that enacts

relational sovereignty; and the artist residency as a responsive habitat for situated, sympoietic transformation. With *sympoietic transformation*—a term drawn from Haraway (2016) and extended by Fabre Lewin—the authors refer to a process of co-creation that is rooted in interdependence, mutual shaping, and ethical attunement to the more-than-human world. Through the embodied and material poetics of fermentation, this work affirms how transformative change can emerge not from control or intervention, but from shared gestures of care, presence, and becoming-with.

The fifth peer-reviewed contribution, *Cybernetic Lookbooks: An Emerging Visual Approach for Organizational Understanding* by Lorenn Ruster (2025), brings visual method and diagramming practices into conversation with cybernetics and systems change in the context of the development of responsible AI. Developed through intervention research with two early-stage startups and one responsible technology ecosystem builder, Ruster adapts the fashion-industry concept of the lookbook to the organizational field and proposes the cybernetic lookbook as a way to surface and make sense of organizational dynamics. Drawing on cybernetic concepts such as feedback loops, scales, thresholds, and leverage points, these lookbooks bring together visual artefacts created and iterated in participatory processes. Ruster reflects on how these diagrams convened conversation, co-production, and reflection spaces—opening new shared understandings of products, practices, and organizational storytelling. Drawing on second-order cybernetics, she proposes that such visual practices may help cultivate cybernetic awareness—a shift in stance from detached observer to participant within the system. In this way, the paper offers not only a methodological contribution but a broader invitation to researchers and practitioners engaged in responsible innovation.

The final article, *Dancing and Tending the Spaces-in-Between: On Hospicing and Fugitivity in Transformative Public Sector Innovation*, is co-authored by Lindsay Cole and Lily Raphael (Cole & Raphael, 2025). Drawing on nine years of experience at the City of Vancouver's Solutions Lab, the authors explore the dilemmas of enacting systemic change within the institutional frameworks of municipal government. Their work is grounded in the *Two Loops* model of transformation developed by the Berkana Institute, which describes the overlapping dynamics of a dominant system in decline and an emergent system in formation. Within this model, Cole and Raphael focus on the *space-in-between* —the often-overlooked, liminal terrain where breakdown, refusal, and subtle reconfigurations take place. Guided by Black, Indigenous, queer, feminist, and decolonial scholarship, Cole and Raphael offer nine poetic *views* into this fugitive space, accompanied by concrete practices developed through their lab work. Their article contributes three key insights: a methodological framing of transformative innovation grounded in lived practice and poetic inquiry; an articulation of the public sector lab as a site for cultivating fugitive, relational, and liberatory practices; and a reimagining of innovation work as an ongoing dance of learning, rest, refusal, and care. By bringing attention to these interstitial spaces—where things fall apart and new patterns may quietly

emerge—the article suggests that meaningful transformation requires more than solutions; it requires tending to what breaks, what resists, and what might yet be imagined.

In this issue, we feature reviews of two recently published books from long-standing thought leaders in the field. The first review, by systems change practitioners James Gimian and Gabrielle Donnelly, considers the recent publication *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement*, by Adam Kahane. The second book review, from JASC Editorial Board Member, Vanesa Weyrauch, explores the newest publication by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, *Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society and Business*, which builds on and evolves the seminal *Theory U*.

As this issue's *Innovations in Praxis* piece, *A Story of 3 Metaphors: Forging the Middle Space,* by Rarrtjiwuy Melanie Herdman, Claire Rafferty, and Fiona McKenzie, is anchored in Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Gunyaŋara, and the surrounding Homelands of North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia, home to Yolŋu people across countless generations (Herdman et al., 2025). Emerging from long-standing work in education, governance, and systems change, the authors trace how Yolŋu-led practice can make space for shared work in contexts shaped by deep difference. The story is structured around three metaphors—Wärrkarr (*Onion Lily*), Munydutj (*Green Plum*), and Bulmuyuk (*a fire gone out*)—each offering guidance for forging relationship, fostering change, and engaging in complexity and the messy reality of collaborative work. These metaphors have grown from extended dialogue and practice, grounded in kinship, language, and long memory. Through them, the authors have co-developed frameworks that support Yolŋu-led work, while inviting others into more careful and accountable forms of partnership. As with many of this issue's contributions, the emphasis lies not in resolving complexity but in staying with it—in holding space for ways of knowing that are shaped in place, in relation, and in time.

At the Threshold

In addition to our commentary on the passing of John O'Brien, it feels vital to acknowledge other thinkers whose work continues to guide this field even as they leave it. If *hospicing*, as Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2025) writes, means accompanying what is ending with care and attention, then we must also mark endings within the wider field of awareness, action research, and systemic change. As we bring this issue to a close, we want to honor the work and legacy of four remarkable thought leaders.

Bill Torbert (February 8, 1944–October 21, 2025) served for many years as professor and dean at Boston College, where he developed *Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry* (Erfan & Torbert, 2015) and the Global Leadership Profile. His central question was how leaders might act and inquire simultaneously—how to integrate reflection into the moment of action rather than treating them as separate stages. He argued that real-time awareness

across what he called the *four territories of experience* (Torbert, 1972)—the outside world, behavior, thought, and post-cognitive consciousness—was necessary if change was to reach beyond surface interventions. His work challenged the assumption that systems change could happen without practitioners examining their own patterns of perception and action.

Joanna Macy (May 2, 1929–July 19, 2025) spent decades weaving Buddhist practice, systems theory, and activism into *The Work That Reconnects* (Macy & Brown, 2014). She created spaces where people could face ecological grief and despair directly, without the usual defenses or deflections. She argued that the scale of ecological breakdown we face requires a shift in how we relate to ourselves, each other, and the living world. Referring to this shift as the Great Turning offered a meta-frame that locates local and smaller-scale expressions of the work within a wider—planetary—vision, instilling in so many a sense of hope and agency.

Ha Vinh Tho (September 27, 1951–September 26, 2025) was a French-Vietnamese educator and dharma teacher who directed Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Centre from 2012 to 2018 and later founded the Eurasia Learning Institute for Happiness and Wellbeing. His work translated contemplative practice into educational and policy contexts, arguing that wellbeing—not growth—should be the organizing principle of social systems (Vinh, 2022). In Vietnam, he co-founded Tinh Truc Gia (the *Peaceful Bamboo Family*), a community for people with disabilities centered on ecological practices, green technology, and mindful education—an embodiment of his conviction that transformation happens in place and in relation.

Nicanor Perlas (January 10, 1950–August 15, 2025) was a Filipino activist, scholar, and recipient of Right Livelihood Award in 2003, who campaigned against nuclear power and industrial pesticides, co-founded the Center for Alternative Development, and later focused on the implications of artificial intelligence for society (Perlas, 2018). In this book, he developed the concept of *collective human intelligence* to argue that transformation cannot be purely technological or economic—it must engage culture, ethics, and human development.

What unites the work of these four outstanding figures was a refusal to separate the terrain of consciousness from the terrain of systems, between inner and outer work. Their practice unfolded at the intersections—asking how one's ways of knowing shape what one sees, how practices of attention can open space for different forms of action. They showed that systems change is also a practice of self-change, and that staying awake to the world requires both vigilance and care.

This issue, in its varied contributions, carries something of that inheritance. In the metaphorical spaces throughout the articles, we see traces of what each luminary described above modeled: that transformation is relational, that it asks for presence, and that it cannot be rushed. Their example lives on in the ways we choose to stay with complexity rather than foreclose it, in our willingness to

remain in relation even when difference persists, and in the quiet forms of courage it takes to keep turning toward the world as it is—so that something else might become possible.

As we go to press, we are also delighted to share that our journal has been accepted for listing in Scopus—a milestone that extends our reach and reinforces our commitment to rigorous, open, and engaged scholarship. We enter this next phase with gratitude—for the thinkers who walked before us, for the community around this journal, and for the work that continues in the in-between spaces of practice, research, and transformation.

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Commentary

A Tribute to John O'Brien (1946–2025):

Weaving Lives of Possibility

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John O'Brien influenced not only the way we think about supporting people with disabilities, but also how we think about the people who know, love, and accompany them. Everyone engaged in this field of work today—knowingly or unknowingly, directly or indirectly—has been touched by his ideas and presence.

This tribute is the work of a small circle of people who have shared long and intertwined journeys with John. Dave Hasbury, Lynda Kahn, Beth Mount, Jack Pearpoint, and Patti Scott have been close collaborators and dear friends of John over many decades. Oliver Koenig had the opportunity to collaborate with John between 2011 and 2015 in two European projects, and in this tribute serves as the weaver, braiding together the shared reflections that surfaced over a series of meetings and exchanges.

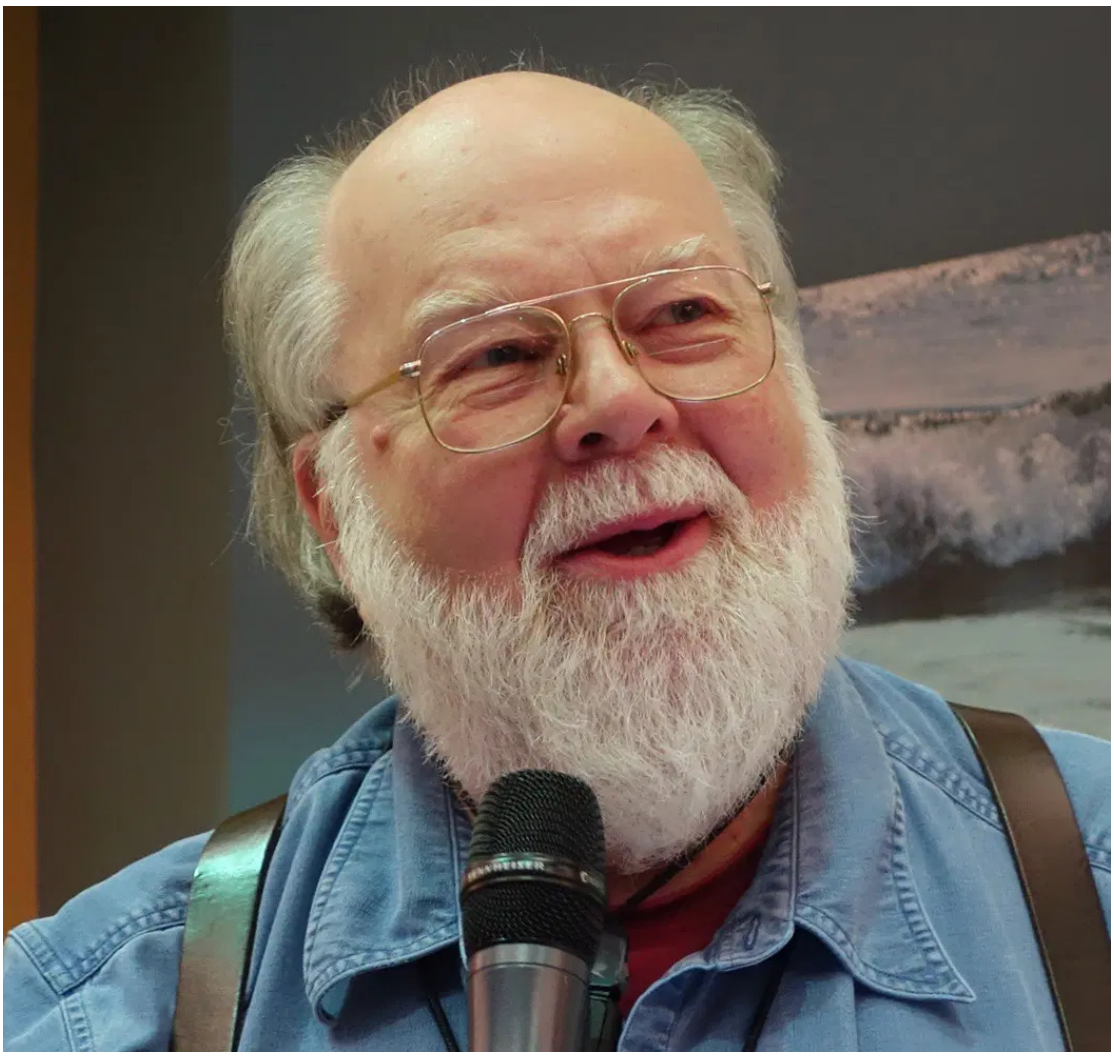

Figure 1: *John O'Brien at the Toronto Inclusion Summer Institute (photo by Dave Hasbury, 2014).*

As a founding father of person-centered planning approaches, John O'Brien was often the unseen sage behind many visionary innovations. His influence can be traced through practices and movements that changed the lives of people with disabilities and their families across the world. Person-centered planning refers to a set of approaches—a community of practices—designed to assist individuals—most often people with intellectual and developmental disabilities—to plan their lives and supports in ways that reflect their own choices, aspirations, and relationships (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1999). John's lifelong work centered on reimagining how societies support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities—shifting from systems that manage lives to relationships that honor personhood and possibility. While he always emphasized the primacy of people over institutions and rules, he built an extraordinary web of connections over his six-decade career.

Born in Potsdam, New York, in 1946, John studied philosophy at Le Moyne College and social work at Syracuse University, while also educating himself through a lifetime of voracious reading. He was a Fellow of the Centre for

Welfare Reform (UK) and affiliated with the Center on Human Policy, Law and Disability at Syracuse University (US), InControl Partnerships (UK), and the Marsha Forest Centre (Canada). He taught at Emory University School of Medicine and lectured at universities around the world, including McGill, York, and Keio University in Tokyo—where, as his obituary recounts, the demand for his lecture was so great that the event had to be moved to a sumo arena.

John co-developed influential approaches such as the Five Valued Experiences and Accomplishments framework (O'Brien & Lyle, 1988), MAPS (originally the McGill Action Planning System) (Forest et al., 1996), and PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) (Pearpoint et al., 1993)—conversational processes that continue to shape inclusive practices worldwide. His writings, translated into twenty languages, include more than a dozen books and hundreds of articles, many co-authored with his beloved wife, Connie Lyle O'Brien, and collaborators across the globe.

This tribute holds a double intention. It speaks to those who knew (of) John, inviting reflection on memories and learning with and through him. It also introduces John to those who may not know who he was or how he shaped the field of inclusion and person-centered work.

We see this written piece as part of a broader set of interconnected efforts to curate, preserve, and make accessible John's living legacy. Alongside this article, we have created a companion video that includes pictures and oral recordings of John.[1] To truly sense John—his way of listening, questioning, and holding space—one must both hear and see him in action.

We offer this written tribute as an invitation to continue learning with John—whose work, questions, and spirit remain alive and needed wherever people gather to imagine fuller lives, stronger communities, and a more humane world.

Weaving the Remembering

How can one remember John—this humble giant? Any written account will necessarily be incomplete. He touched so many lives, and no set of words could ever contain that. His philosophy was never confined to words on a page. He enacted it in a way of being with others—a philosophy of personhood lived in circles, conversations, and communities.

This is why we have chosen to use the metaphors of braids and weaving to write this tribute. Weaving is rarely the work of one person. Most often, it is a collective process, a gathering of strands. Here, the braids we use are stories,

[1] The companion video "Lessons At The Edges: Selected Reflections of John O'Brien" can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWJMh3hcmGs

images, and personal memories woven together to carry something of his presence and legacy.

John planted himself in solidarity with people marginalized by intellectual and developmental disability. He dedicated his life to the belief that the greatest teachers of a community are those most often excluded from it. From them, he drew lessons about what it takes to support lives of distinction, and he invited the rest of us to learn in the same way.

Listening was at the heart of this faithfulness. John enacted deep listening as a way of life. He trusted that generative listening—listening that opens mind, heart, and will—was the surest path to insight. He recognized how quickly judgment, cynicism, and fear can close us off. He practiced, and taught others to practice, listening through them. His listening was rooted in a quiet faith—that there is a deeper coherence in life, a self-actualizing tendency, a larger carrying force into which we are all knit. This trust in emergence shaped his way of teaching. John was a master of non-directive counsel. People around the world came to him for advice, but he never pretended to hold the answer. A colleague in Rhode Island once asked Lynda, "Is he ever going to tell us what to do?" Her answer was, "No, no he is not.". Instead, he would sit with us and the questions, knowing that the questions we hold are fateful. The quality of the question, the quality of our wrestling to find answers, and the nature of our commitment and investment in finding our way forward together, with everyone's voices, are what matter.

Among John's most extraordinary gifts was his ability to hold a vision of connectedness. He saw that nothing—no person, no object, no label—exists in isolation, but that everything comes into being through relationship with everything else. He did not leave this understanding suspended in theory. He carried it into the everyday, giving it form through practice—by noticing ruptures and openings in patterned life, sensing the hidden choreographies beneath ordinary routines, and locating those moments where agency might quietly take hold. His work was, in essence, the art of making life's patterns visible. He offered ways of seeing, questioning, and acting that allowed meaning to take shape in relationships.

Stories form one part of the braids that we weave in this tribute. Human life and memory are storied: we come to understand ourselves and one another through the stories we craft, remember, and share. Remembering, as we practice it here, is itself a form of weaving. Images are the second component of the braids that we weave. As carriers of essence, images are waymarkers that help people orient and recall deeper truths together; they carry relationships within them. Writing from Anishinaabe tradition, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, describes how images and metaphors function as pedagogies: The braid itself is a teaching—a practice of weaving wisdom and responsibility across generations. Much of John's work drew on archetypal patterns—images that touch and speak to speak to the mythological aspects of our collective journey. Stories were the means by which they were shared. Sometimes, the images we

speak of here appeared directly in the tools he co-created; at other times, they moved beneath the surface, shaping the way he invited and guided our attention. Each served as a doorway into the generative principles he lived by. Some of these braids will be rewoven here.

Braid One: A Crack Opening the Heart

David Hasbury

In a recent interview, John reflected: "I'm an amateur, as far as the field of developmental disabilities goes. I was schooled as a philosopher (...) I found myself working with people with disabilities by accident of circumstance" (Hasbury, 2024, 5:20). In navigating the world he found himself in, John embodied and enacted philosophy as a lived practice in search of wholeness—for individuals and for our social body.

His "accident of circumstance" was a locked ward in a large institution in Georgia in the late 1960s. That experience cracked his world open.

> *It's when we face for a moment*
> *the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know*
> *the taint in our own selves, that awe*
> *cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:*
> *not to a flower, not to a dolphin,*
> *to no innocent form*
> *but to this creature vainly sure*
> *it and no other is god-like, God*
> *(out of compassion for our ugly*
> *failure to evolve) entrusts,*
> *as guest, as brother,*
> *the Word.*
>
> — Denise Levertov (2013), *On the Mystery of the Incarnation*

Figure 2: *Power in the Dark (Beth Mount, 2016).*

The *crack*, as he often recalled through the lines of Denise Levertov's poem (2013), marked the place where awe entered—where the heart first broke open to the realization of what exclusion and segregation do to human beings.

Historical realities of othering, devaluation, and segregation are so deeply ingrained that people's experience remains invisible in the consciousness of the wider population. The horrors of life in institutions were publicly exposed in the 1970s, yet for John and his wife and partner, Connie Lyle O'Brien, what took root here was a sense of wonder. He often said that what sustained his curiosity and commitment was "witnessing what happens when people even have a minimum of human connectedness, and the minimum of environmental conditions that allow a person to act like a human being… in an odd way, it's how easy it is" (Hasbury, 2024, 19:52).

John and Connie pursued what it would take for people to leave the life of confinement in institutions and find a place to call home, as valued members of society. Together, they discovered and articulated our need for a shift toward a vision of wholeness rooted in person-centered practices that shine a light on the gift of humanity expressed in each person.

The wisdom and experiences John and Connie shared are expressed in a simple but profound truth that John often voiced: "People are not problems to be

solved. They are a mystery, to inspire wonder. If we catch a glimpse of a person, that is an awesome mystery" (Hasbury, 2024, 38:03).

Recognizing this personhood of people with developmental disabilities remains a radical act. John included the experience of people he came to know in his search for our collective wholeness, influenced by a philosophy of "personalism," guided by questions: "What is the gift of personhood? What conditions allow a person to thrive? How can our gifts contribute to the common good?" (Hasbury, 2024, 28:56)

The image of the crack holds both grief and possibility. It is also an invitation to others—to stay with what is broken in our systems and in ourselves, to look at it without turning aside, and to recognize that transformation begins exactly there. The crack is where a lifelong journey in pursuit of wholeness began. For John, this meant a journey always traveled in the company of others, as expressed in this poem he recited often:

> *If you don't know the kind of person I am*
> *and I don't know the kind of person you are*
> *a pattern that others made may prevail in the world*
> *and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.*
>
> *(…)*
>
> *For it is important that awake people be awake,*
> *or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;*
> *the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—*
> *should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.*
>
> — From William Stafford (1998), *A Ritual to Read to Each Other*

Braid Two: The Spiral—"What More is Possible?" or the Power of Being Held in the Imaginative Space of Possibility

Beth Mount

Figure 3: *A World that works for Everyone (Beth Mount, 2000).*

You who portend to know great truths,
Wearing your scholarly gowns of knowledge,
Speak to me in my own language,
For to do otherwise
Is to discriminate against the vast majority of
So-called "uneducated" people.
I wish to know too,
And for your knowledge, I will bring
The colors of my life,
And a basket of fresh fruit to share,
And we will see
If there are even greater truths!
—Jane Evershed (1990), *Universal Language*

The *spiral* became a quintessential image and metaphor for John's way of being and working—circling outward, touching the edge, returning, expanding again. It symbolizes a living form that holds and embodies layers of humanity and emergence in the on-going journey of imagining "what more is possible" (O'Brien & Mount, 2015).

John practiced with faith that possibilities will emerge if we take seriously the practice of listening to and learning with each other. The spiral represents this willingness to stay engaged in the ongoing journey of co-creation—being open, able, and willing to value the deep wisdom of every person. Within these generative spaces, we learned to listen with the eyes of the heart, to experience other ways of knowing, to touch the energy of something new that each and every one of us might bring into the world.

Fifty years ago, we didn't have the language of emergence. We had our lived experience. John and his partners could design and hold a conversation so that we could all hear into it and become part of something greater. People began to see themselves in a different light. That is where initiative for real change—for activation—came from: from being part of that bigger whole.

The spiral is an archetypal space we are willing to enter with one another, with a sense of expectation, not knowing what will come. John could listen to words spoken and unspoken, offer a summary, and everyone would gasp, amazed at what we had heard. He had the gift of listening and synthesizing, yet the gifts returned were reflections of the wisdom of those gathered in the space. We felt and knew something was happening—and we were changed by it.

There was a unique element in how John worked with others: a dance between ideas, images, and stories. Many remember conversations with John that began as sketches on napkins. If the drawing held resonance with others, John would turn it into a more refined version—adding words, ideas, and patterns—making it *electronically beautiful* and easy to share. That one-page image might be used for years, going through countless revisions, until it evolved into an article or a book. The symbol would take on a life of its own, woven with living examples and stories, connecting the personal and organizational alike.

John called this the "aesthetic side of practical imagination." He once wrote:

> The aesthetic side of humanness … expresses and celebrates imagination, which is the capacity to think of things as if they could be otherwise (Greene, 2001). It is this sort of practical imagination that people trapped in the box of segregation and socially sanctioned deprivation of opportunity need almost as much as they need fresh air. Bringing disciplined imagination into people's lives is the privilege of those practitioners of person-centered planning who decide to heed the call of people's faces and honor their concerns as worthy of attention (O'Brien, 2002, p. 412).

The spiral quest of holding the question "What More is Possible?" is just one example of how John and the global inclusion network strengthened practical

imagination in the lives of people. The weaving of archetypal images and symbols, language, and practices grew as countless people imagined better and discovered their own capacity to create spaces for the new to enter.

This personal and collective *presencing* necessary to invoke such powerful healing possibilities called for equally deep dives into the destructive forces of devaluation and dehumanization that define the lives of so many. John could hold the weight of desperation and despair carried by those who face crushing constraints and realities. The generative listening that gave rise to new landscapes of inventive social forms was forged within the interplay of pain and possibility.

John created and strengthened an imaginative presence of alternative modes and practices. The quality of relationships, the dignity afforded to each person, the anguish of constraint, and the awe of unexpected invention—all of this was part of being held *in the imaginative space of possibility.*

The spiral, in this way, was always a pedagogy of faith and relational emergence—what Otto Scharmer and Eva Pomeroy have called "fourth-person knowing," defined as "neither my knowing nor yours, neither solely outside nor inside me but rather something beginning to articulate from a different source that operates beyond these distinctions" (Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024, p. 27). John moved in that field long before it had a name.

Braid Three: At the Edge of Possibility

Jack Pearpoint

Edges invite experiments. The Toronto Summer Institute became such a place: a circle big enough to try, fail, and try again.

John O'Brien remains a remarkable thought leader and creator of approaches to support people with intellectual disabilities—and all of us. The Toronto Summer Institute (TSI) was one of many unheralded O'Brien co-creations. Like almost all of John's ventures, it was born out of listening to the pain and anguish of families who wanted real and better lives for their children.

Now many laws internationally have changed to afford children with disabilities the right to education. In those early years, many of us were struggling to find ways to welcome children with disabilities into regular classrooms. Facing opposition from governments, rejection by medical establishments, universities, and publishers, John listened. Then he quietly helped rally a loose team of like-minded thinkers including Marsha Forest, Judith Snow, myself, and others.

He became one of the founders of an "institute." The concept was simple: create a space where families and organizations could learn from one another and from thought leaders like John, Marsha, and Judith. There was no master plan—it just seemed like a good idea, and the only way to test it was to *just do it.*

That was John's way. It was his lifelong quest to discover and adapt new and pioneering ways to share ideas and move people into action. The key was his core belief that all persons deserve a full life—especially those labeled with intellectual disabilities.

That first two-week experiment in 1984 ignited a fire that led to 34 years of Institutes—first at McGill University in Montreal, later in Toronto at the Primrose Hotel and Ryerson University (now Toronto Metropolitan University). Thousands came from across the world—the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa—forming a global circle of people who shared a passion for inclusion and a willingness to explore the edges of learning together. And it left many impacts in the world.

Fascinated and frustrated by the power of mainstream culture to reject and discard certain people, John set a personal objective: to change the culture. He understood that it would be a long, painful journey because the attitudes of rejection are deeply ingrained. He knew that if transformation was to emerge, it must begin from the wisdom of those who had been excluded. This required that we listen to them—and learn and relearn how to listen underneath and between words to see their hearts and feel their souls.

We held a simple vision: if children grew up, played, and learned together, the scars of exclusion could begin to heal in the next generation. There was resistance everywhere, but the collaborators were determined to try.

Among them were John's friend and fellow philosopher Judith Snow and her "Joshua Committee," the circle of friends who accompanied her as she broke out of institutional life and onto the leading edge of thought and practice (Pearpoint & Snow, 1998); and Marsha Forest, working at the forefront of inclusive education (Forest, 1987). The Circle of Friends model they developed built networks of relationships around individuals to foster belonging and participation (Pearpoint et al., 1992). The idea had enormous promise. We recruited a few school classes and began. Marsha and Judith were on the front line while John observed, analyzed, and stirred his creativity cauldron.

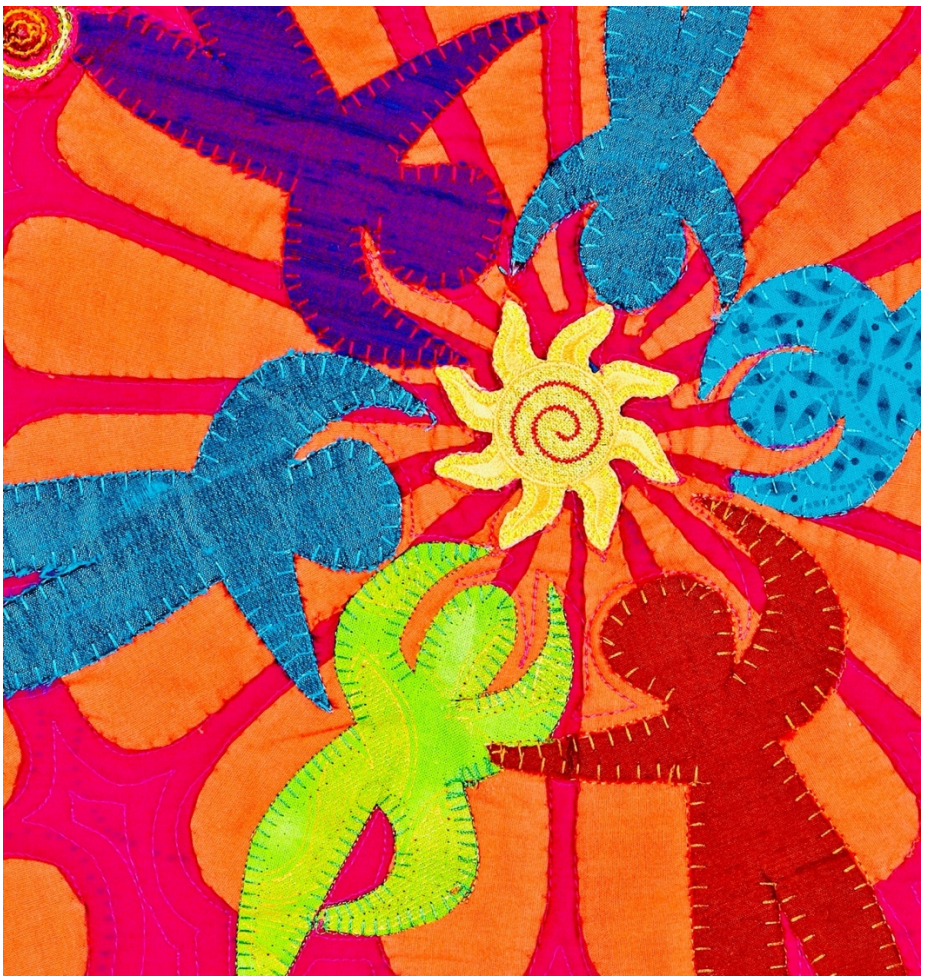

Figure 4: *Garden of Soul 1 (Beth Mount, 2011).*

MAPS grew out of that collaboration—a process grounded in storytelling to help individuals and families envision positive futures. When the focus on history in MAPS revealed its limits, John proposed a radical shift: begin with the "North Star," a shared vision of the desired future. From this inversion emerged PATH, guiding people and organizations to identify and move toward their best possible outcomes. Circles of Friends, MAPS, and PATH have since traveled globally, assisting countless individuals, families, and communities in creating inclusive and hopeful futures.

The Institutes became the testing grounds where these ideas evolved through many iterations. As they unfolded, John was always there—sitting quietly to observe and listen into the latest experiment, while already inventing the next. He consumed books, articles, and conversations voraciously, always searching for what could be adapted, tested, and learned from. The Summer Institute was never a fixed form. It was a constantly evolving experiment on the edges of learning—and John was the patient gardener of that growth.

That is what John did all his life. He listened with a gentle, focused intensity that few could comprehend—and then he taught us to listen in fifty different ways. Listening became a kind of contagion—a "virus" that continues to take

root, generating the ideas and energy to change a life, a family, an organization, a culture.

The edge, for John, was always where the real work took place—where what is known meets what is not yet formed. To stand at the edge is to enter a kind of emptiness, what Japanese aesthetics call "ma"—the pause, the gap, the fertile space in-between. John trusted that emergence comes from such spaces, if we can wait and listen.

Braid Four: The Circle and the Star—Co-creation and Friendship

Lynda Kahn

Our most powerful relationships are transformational. John raised the bar for my own expectations of myself. He intentionally opened spaces for me to step into and up to. He offered belief in my capacity and contribution, even when my head was saying, "I cannot do that. I am not good enough." Or best of all, he pushed me to *let go* when my inner voice was saying, "If I can't do it perfectly, I won't try."

I can hear him asking me, at a PATH and MAPS workshop in New Mexico in 2004 that John and Jack were guiding:"What do you think you are doing there?"
"Taking notes on what you're doing," I said, happy just to watch.
"Stand up now and lead the debrief of this conversation."
That is the way.

In planning together with John and Connie—whether in Toronto, or in a hotel room in Australia—John would ask, "What are you energized about that you are learning, or that you have experienced recently?" We would collaboratively work and co-design the offering to bring in those ideas. John could easily have designed any experience or workshop on his own. That was not his way.

That capacity to deeply listen and see a person and invite their gifts and contributions as he appreciated them—even if you did not see or feel them yet yourself—was part of the soul of his work and way of being in the world. He embodied co-creation, pushing the edges together.

I reflected about my experiences of John on one occasion with Connie Lyle O'Brien. She noticed my wonder and appreciation and simply said, "He is a teacher."

Yes. Yes, he still is.

John held threads of people in his wide web of relationships. You always knew he was thinking about you—what you cared about, what you might enjoy. The emails and messages shared came from sources you might not otherwise have found. John read widely and deeply. His "shares" came in the form of newspaper articles, magazines, books, poetry, recipes, music, films, and

television series. A deeply curious person, John would learn more, ask more about something that interested you that he had not yet explored.

John was once seen in a "jimmy wig," a yellow top hat with blond curls, but I could never get him into glitter. He did, however, immerse himself in *The Gilmore Girls* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* willingly engaging in conversations about character development and layers of meaning.

The circle of friendship also extended into his consulting and teaching. He was a transformative ally for more than two decades in Rhode Island, where he and Connie introduced the Five Valued Experiences as a way to continually ask, "What is worth working for?" (O'Brien, 1989).

The framework has its roots in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the deinstitutionalization movement was gaining strength in North America and the United Kingdom. Drawing inspiration from the principles of normalization and social role valorization (Nirje, 1969; Wolfensberger, 1983), John and Connie sought a more accessible, human way to talk about what people with intellectual and developmental disabilities said truly mattered in their lives.

The Valued Experiences—Belonging, Contributing, Being Respected, Sharing Ordinary Places, and Choosing—emerged from countless conversations. John and Connie listened to people around the world, in People First meetings, in family circles, with direct support workers and professionals, where they would ask, "What brings quality of life to you?" Listening for patterns, they shaped what would become a global compass for meaningful lives.

Over the decades, the framework has informed person-centered practices, service standards, and policy approaches in countries across the world—from the United States and Canada to the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand—offering a simple yet profound ethical orientation for inclusion work.

John later reflected:

> The quest to act in ways that offer more of these five interrelated experiences builds a more competent community. Healthy communities work to notice and overcome us-and-them thinking by exercising social creativity in doing these five community tasks:
>
> – Promoting Interdependence
> – Living inclusive stories
> – Practicing hospitality
> – Seeing and supporting capacities
> – Resolving conflicts (O'Brien, 2011, p. 2).

These Five Valued Experiences and Community Tasks became the foundation of Rhode Island's Service Quality Network and later the Facilitator's Forum. Holding this quality framework continues to define my work and the work of people around the world. They remain among the most generative of

John's images: the Star of the Five Accomplishments—a constellation to navigate by.

***Figure 5**: Garden of Soul 2 (Beth Mount, 2011).*

The *circle* and the *star* belong together: the circle creates the conditions, the star provides direction. Together they reflect John's enduring belief that community is both art and discipline—the slow work of listening and the courage to act.

Braid Five: The Work Taking Root—A new organization beginning

Patti Scott

In January 1997, Neighbours Inc., a newly formed non-profit organization in New Jersey, had just officially supported the first person with a developmental disability to move into their new home. We were a very young organization then. We wanted to work one person at a time, helping people who were moving from institutions into their own homes to choose their support staff, to control the funding available to them, and to lead lives rich in purpose, people, and participation in their new neighborhoods (Scott & Hasbury, 2022).

We were sitting in the library of our new home—mostly on the floor, as we had no furniture yet—a small team of four, joined by two people from the government agency for developmental disabilities (DDD) and the head of our University Center for Excellence (UCED). Together we were trying to achieve something that hadn't yet been done in our state, and we wanted to think it through collaboratively.

John was there with us at that beginning, doing what he does so well: asking questions, listening, graphically recording, summarizing, and helping us plan how to move forward—imagining how to best support the people who would choose us to work for them, and helping us think about how we could push our system forward. We entered that meeting with a vision of what we wanted to see for people in New Jersey. Thanks to John, we came out with a deeper understanding of that vision, along with the next steps on our path forward.

John stayed with us throughout our journey. He visited regularly over the next twenty-eight years. He visited our staff and board, and the people we work for. He led what we called "visits with critical friends," helping us to explore where we were living into our values and where we needed to do better. These visits offered unflinching honesty—*but* from a friend, with respect. They enabled us to keep planning, to stay grounded in the heart of our work while navigating the complicated, confusing, and often contradictory world of a federally funded, fee-for-service system.

Any success that people we work for may have experienced can be traced directly back to John's support, his insight, his ability to listen, and his gift for helping it all make sense. There are so many pieces to John's legacy. We are just one small agency with our own story. It is deeply personal—but it is also part of something much larger. Our organization is one of many around the world that John supported in this way, with similar results, leading to real differences in people's lives.

Figure 6: *We are Seeds Wisdom Flag (Beth Mount, 2018).*

John had the ability to see something in each of us he encouraged and supported—especially if we were lucky enough to be considered friends. He would push us, in just the right way, out of our comfort zones. He would encourage us to try new things, to probe new possibilities. These stretches that he invited us into often felt scary at first, but they were never reckless; they were precisely tuned to our capacity and our courage. They required bravery, but they always held opportunities for growth.

I have many examples of those moments. One stands out: In 2018, a group of us were co-hosting an event in New Jersey. The night before the second day, we had stayed up late planning and organizing. I woke early, painstakingly preparing for my part, confident and ready. Then, literally as we were walking out the door, John turned to me and said he'd been rethinking things: that we should forget the plan and instead, Dave and I should facilitate a pop-up open space.

Since John suggested it, I said yes—though I confess to not fully understanding what a pop-up open space was. We pulled it off—just barely—but the experience demanded improvisation, courage, and trust. And it left me changed. John had that gift: to invite you into something that would stretch you, unsettle you, and ultimately enlarge you.

John constantly opened my thinking to new ways of looking at and thinking about the world, our work, and how it all fit together. Quite often this was through ideas that had nothing to do, at least on the surface, with disability—ways of thinking I would never have discovered except through him.

To really support people to have a life, a spirit of innovation is needed—a willingness to try things, to *probe and prototype* in small, safe-to-fail ways; an openness to see what emerges, to amplify what works and let go of what doesn't.

These explorations were just one more way John helped us continue to push the edges of what more is possible, to innovate and to create space for new possibilities. It opened us to emergence and has allowed many of us on the ground to approach our work in a way that leads to authentic person-centered planning, discovery of gifts, practices that have become ingrained in our culture, innovation—and life in all its beauty and messiness. All of which is an ongoing demonstration of the massive impact John has made.

Braid Six: Cross Pollinating and Inspiring Generative New Forms

John's work and the practical wisdom it uncovered have been profoundly influential, shaping the course of life and work for countless people around the world who care about the personhood of people with intellectual disabilities.

Figure 7: *A New Way of Being Wisdom Flag (Beth Mount, 2020).*

His was the work of cross-pollination—matching the wisdom from one set of experiences with the circumstances of another, always listening for what might

emerge when stories and practices met. “The first step,” he said before looking for the right words,

> is finding the right people. And what I have found is that almost anybody can be the right person. But there are always circumstances where people are moving the edge of what we are doing forward, deeper into a territory that I find valuable. And so, my first step is to find somebody to listen to. And always that's the place where the image, the phrases, and the possibility comes alive, and so lots of what I write is reflection on those generative statements, images that come from the experience of people who are living the struggle for a better life by all the pressures of social devaluation and social exclusion (Hasbury, 2024, 06:32).

Through dialogue with John, countless innovative organizations and efforts were created and designed through collaboration with him.[2] Through them, opportunities have been created for people and families; agencies have transformed from traditional, institutional models to individualized, person-centered approaches. This tangible aspect of John’s legacy continues to touch lives across the world each and every day.

He never confined his learning to one field. John looked outward, beyond the segregated world of disability, to discover what people were exploring on the front edges of experience in other realms: community development, science, leadership, and systems change. He read widely, studied deeply, and entered into dialogue with authors and thinkers who helped him refine and extend what he was learning with others. His dialogue with Mike Green and Henry Moore on *Asset-Based Community Development* (Green et al., 2006) reached thousands across the globe. His quiet guidance helped thought leaders, organizations, and policymakers explore paths toward inclusion—possibilities often first resisted, then slowly realized through John’s gentle persistence and powerful questioning.

His influence also reached unexpected places. For decades, he was a behind-the-scenes brain trust for Frontier College, contributing to strategic efforts that helped move literacy from the margins to a national priority in Canada. This was

[2] Among them are: Total Living Concepts in Seattle; Lifeworks in California; Options for Community Living and The Dane County Difference in Wisconsin; Georgia Options in Georgia; Rensselaer ARC in New York; My Home and Western Australia Individualized Services (WAIS) in Australia; Imagine Better in New Zealand; In Control, Citizen Network and National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTI) in the United Kingdom; Inspiring Inclusion in Scotland; AIREA in Spain; The Network of Person-Centred planning (Persönliche Zukunftsplanung) in German speaking countries—and so many more. The list of organizations that exist directly due to John’s support, thinking, and guidance is too long to mention. We apologize for omitting—you know who you are.

another expression of his lifelong focus: to change the culture, one relationship, one experiment, one conversation at a time.

At the heart of all this cross-pollination was humility and collaboration. John nurtured gently, listened deeply, cajoled, questioned, and then synthesized confusion into new, shared clarity. Always, he paved ways for others to take another step forward on this long journey toward fuller lives and justice for all.

His presence remains woven through the work of many—a living pattern of relationships, friendship, and allyship, of images, and practices that continue to evolve and multiply. Through each of these crossings, John's touch endures. In this way, John's work was always about braiding. He braided people and practices, stories and traditions. He braided philosophy and daily life, art and organizing, method and mystery. His was not the work of a single strand, but of weaving many into stronger cords of possibility.

To remember John is not to close his story.
It is to keep weaving the braid he left in our hands.

> The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't.
>
> — Wendell Berry (2019), *The wild birds: Six stories of the Port William membership*

Further Reading

The companion video: "*Lessons At The Edges: Selected Reflections of John O'Brien*" can be accessed here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWJMh3hcmGs

The full archive of John O'Brien's books, articles, and talks, as well as recordings of John and Connie, is being curated through Inclusion Press:
https://inclusion.com/change-makers-resources-for-inclusion/change-makers-make-change/john-obrien-change-makers-books-videos/john-obrien-books-videos/

A curated collection of personal reflections giving testimony to the lives and organizations touched by his thought, friendship, and example is available at:
https://www.pathfinders-studio.com/reflections.

To honor John and his contribution to creating a world where everyone matters, Citizen Network is publishing a series of articles that reveal different dimensions of his work, which can be accessed: https://citizen-network.org/library/goodbye-and-thank-you.html

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Peer Review Article

Where, Who, When in Systems Change:

Using an Indigenous Knowledge Systems Approach for Perspective on Systems Change

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Abstract

The growing interest in using Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to address systems change and champion intergenerational justice in Australia has started to find ways into mainstream discourse. However, to avoid the co-option of these knowledges, this paper offers change-makers provocations to assist in recalibrating perspectives on systems change efforts and epistemic injustice. These provocations are the combination of our experience from work in systems change and the insights gained from an application of IKS us-only closed circle work between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors. We briefly outline the

process used to generate insights, sharing the differences between Indigenous-led and non-Indigenous processes, positing that there is a prerequisite personal undertaking via a cultural or co-inquiry space to facilitate the translation of IKS into mainstream practices for non-Indigenous changemakers, in particular. We argue for an adaptation of third space terminology to facilitate a decolonised and IKS-led approach to complex systems change and, in doing so, challenge concepts of time and how decolonising our assemblages may have the potential to uncover new capabilities for sense-making. We suggest these as prerequisite undertakings prior to embarking on systems change initiatives and conclude with a calling-in for future generations to ground them in Indigenous ways of knowing and doing.

Keywords
Indigenous Knowledges Systems, cultural field, kolabbing, allyship, complex systems change, relational systems thinking, intergenerational justice, epistemic justice

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Introduction

In Australia, there is a growing interest among advocates for change to understand how Indigenous Knowledges Systems (IKS) can be applied for systems change and to address intergenerational justice (Deakin University, 2023; Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2024). While this interest is largely welcome, there is a need for caution. Unless the current extractive approaches of the dominant colonist hegemonies are made visible, the risk is that IKS may be instrumentalised into simplistic and unconnected processes devoid of their complexities, contexts, and relationships that have kept the knowledges relevant for millennia.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems describe the ways of knowing and sense-making within the network of relationships that create and regulate the world we inhabit, and these relationships are inclusive of non/more-than-human co-inhabitants, as well as the connections to ancestors, creator deities, and spirit (Davis, 2024; Nakata, 2002; Nakata & Langton, 2005). For the authors, the term "Indigenous" refers to the Australian First Nations peoples who have long-held connections to the lands, waters, and skies of Australia—more than 60,000 years—distinguishing them from other Australians and their knowledges. While using the collective term "Indigenous," we do not seek to homogenise the numerous distinct cultures, stories, laws and lores that exist among and guide the Australian First Nations peoples; rather, we utilise the word to highlight the

origin of the knowledge systems we refer to in the paper (Tassell-Matamua, 2025).

The dynamism within the relationality that constitutes IKS necessarily renders it a contemporary sense-maker, offering today's changemakers an alternative to current extractive practices of colonisation that have thrown the earth's ecological balance into disarray. Prioritising the understanding and application of fundamental aspects of IKS, we believe, is a first step towards decolonising systems change actions and actors. Harms, deficits, and imbalances created now are likely to continue across generations, impinging on human and non/more-than-human abilities to thrive, and now, more than ever, we must critically reassess our current approaches to systems change by de-emphasising structural elements in systems and embracing the relations within the system (Cabrera et al., 2015).

Both authors work in environments dedicated to supporting children and young people to thrive. Our separate but aligned work draws on evidence that shows children and young people are concerned about climate change and the costs of living; they experience high levels of stress associated with education settings and managing life's transitions, as well as holding on to a sense of belonging. Most importantly, children and young people want to shape the policies that affect them and shift the focus away from the short-term to the long-term. They want to play a meaningful co-design role in their futures (Noble et al., 2024). Children and young people are heavily invested in their futures and are prepared to mobilise their agency, knowledge and creativity to challenge existing norms and practices as demonstrated through the climate change protests of 2018 and beyond.[1]

Typically, the contributions children and young people can offer to systems transformation are undervalued—a feature of the colonial neoliberal economic system that upholds epistemic injustices with paternalistic rationalism. Recent calls by the Australian Federal Government for improved productivity referenced the need for intergenerational fairness and consideration of the type of trade-offs that may be required to meet the productivity requirements for a prosperous future Australia.[2] Yet, the productivity roundtables that followed the Federal Treasury's call were constituted largely by business and aligned groups, with the

[1] Beginning with global activism on climate change, where children and young people were encouraged to miss school on a Friday to call for action on climate change (www.fridaysforfuture.org; https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com/), the movement now encompasses protests on climate justice along with climate action—a recognition that the effects of climate change are disproportionately felt by the more vulnerable in society.

[2] See https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/speeches/address-national-press-club-canberra-5

social aspects of productivity represented by one organisation with no specific remit regarding children and young people.[3]

We strongly assert that if we are to have a strong, inclusive and prosperous Australia for future generations, then we need to take a sharp turn away from current extractive paradigms and approach the future from a pluriversal, biocultural perspective and engage with IKS (Yunkaporta & Davis, 2025). IKS offers a means to rekindle the relational ties between species and to the environment; it acts as a translation tool for ancient knowledges to be applied to "wicked problems", and as Yunkaporta and Davis (2025) state, we "… must have a process for coming into relation that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can use together or separately to the limits of their capabilities and relations, without fear of overstepping culturally" (p. 7)—to engage in *ko-learning*.

This paper seeks to share our experiences of a process that elucidates our operational complexities and offers a way for Indigenous and non-Indigenous change-makers to work together. We first provide the experience of using IKS in larger groups with an Indigenous lead, Dr. John Davis; then we share our ko-learning experience which took place ahead of our planned *kolab* as an example of a "micro" application of Indigenous and non-Indigenous coming together within the protocols of IKS. Using these examples, we highlight the applicability of IKS processes with different cohorts, yet signal the context appropriate adjustments required to enter this co-inquiry space. We also reflect on the nature of emergence with respect to this process and challenge the idea of the third space in complex systems change. Second, we discuss the applicability of IKS in awareness-based complex systems change practice. Finally, we conclude the paper with provocations for decolonising approaches connected to *the work* we both do in our respective roles to support children and young people to thrive across generations.

Throughout the paper we use Aboriginal English—for example, "kolabbing" instead of "collaborating," "ko-design" or "co-design," and "ko-learner" or "co-learner" (Davis & Coopes, 2022; Fletcher et al., 2023)—as a way of distinguishing the Indigenous ways from current dominant colonised modes. This method of distinguishing an IK approach signals that "relations and routines of exchange are made explicit and structured according to Indigenous protocols" (Yunkaporta & Davis, 2025, para 18) and challenges epistemic injustices.

Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Co-inquiry

As Goodchild (2021) states, "(A)wareness-based systems change is a process of co-inquiry into the deeper structures of the social system in order to see, sense, presence and shift them" (p. 94). From our experience, below we suggest that IKS

[3] See https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/media-releases/more-invitations-issued-economic-reform-roundtable

can facilitate access to these "deeper structures." When entering a co-inquiry process, a space needs to be created for different knowledges to meet. This paper describes our experience of creating this space—a space that has been called a variety of names; for example, the "third space" (Bhabha, 1994; Chilisa, 2019), "cultural interface" (Nakata, 2007; Yunupingu,1990), and "the borderlands" (Anzaldúa, 1987), among others.

This co-inquiry, relational space has been employed by Indigenous Australians for millennia. The Bunya Mountains, in the Southeast part of Queensland in Australia—my (John Davis) homeland—was the place, for thousands of years, of multi-tribe gatherings every three years when the bunya nut was in abundance. These gatherings, held over months, were opportunities for exchange, sense-making and ceremony. At the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lab (IKSL), at Deakin University, we refer to this relational space as "embassy," a concept elaborated on later in this paper.

While we acknowledge the ease of fit between IKS and complex adaptive systems—the systems lens we apply to systems change—this paper does not seek to create a "third space" dialectic between Indigenous Knowledge and complexity science" (Fletcher et al., 2023). Rather, it seeks to highlight the importance of a cultural co-inquiry space to dismantle the othering of (Indigenous and non-Western) knowledges and to turn understanding into action. If systems theory knowledges are the "translation tools" to engage with IKS concepts (Fletcher et al., 2023), then this paper posits that there is a prerequisite to facilitating that translation, which is entry into this cultural co-inquiry space (Davis, 2024; Sarra et al., 2020).

Understanding and meaning come from more than language; it is arrived at through historical and social contexts as well as embodied experiences. In Indigenous Knowledges contexts, this understanding and meaning extend from and to relations with the non/more-than-human kith and kin, with patterns revealed through these relations woven tightly with human understanding. Capturing the sentience and authority of the land is the concept of "Mimburi" (Gaibarau in Steele,1984), which may be understood as a great energy or flow. Found in particular places, these become of great significance—full of life and energy—requiring recognition of their flows and their role in knowledge transferral (Davis, 2024; Yunkaporta & Davis, 2025). As humans, we continue to shape our understanding through existing as well as newly created relationships, practices, structures, and institutions (Bourdieu, 1972/1977; Foucault, 1969/1972); therefore, we argue for effective systems change action—or translation—a co-inquiry space is essential; one in which all knowledges are present.

From an Indigenous principles and protocols perspective, there is a "right way" to enter this space—our kolab (between the authors) is an example of the right way. We begin by establishing our ko-learning closed circle. Yarning circles are part of Australian Indigenous peoples' traditional practices and exist in some form or other among many of the world's Indigenous peoples (Barlo et al., 2020;

Chilisa, 2019). We follow the principles of duwur (closed circle) (Davis, 2024; Davis & Coopes, 2022)—an essential time prior to kolabbing (the work)—which in turn determines the type of sharing permitted outside of duwur. For principled movement from duwur to baulan (open circle) a governance framework is defined by signals, signposts or markers in the field. Duwur is led by Indigenous knowledge holders and sense-makers, and it is through and with them that the governance framework is established for sharing—baulan. In the *Homelands* section, later in the paper, the difference between duwur and baulan is highlighted based on the participants in the circle. The IKSL at Deakin University describes this establishment of duwur as "calling in", and it is a deliberate and respectful process led by Indigenous knowledge holders—those who hold the authority and responsibility to guide others into Indigenous ways of working. This invitation is not open-ended; it is extended through deep relationships grounded in trust, respect, and culturally held protocols (Fletcher et al., 2023). To engage in meaningful relational work, there must be a clear entry point—one shaped by Indigenous principles that act as a bridge. Being "called in" means being guided across that bridge with care, humility, and accountability (Makwa & IKSL, 2024).

Setting Circle: An IKS Process for Co-inquiry

The time spent developing relations is an essential component of working together between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Setting circle—like duwur—is a method of creating the space for relations to form because of strict protocols around conduct within and outside the circle. There is accountability to all in the circle. This accountability acts to prevent co-option of IK and scaffolds the relationships formed within the circle. Without the protocols and accountability (or responsibility), setting circle becomes merely a performative action with more similarities to a focus group used to extract information rather than an enmeshing of experience and exchange.

A yarning circle is a dialogic process "that is reciprocal and mutual" (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 38). Dialogic processes, in their mutuality and reciprocity, allow participants to co-create knowledge, to sense-make from a variety of perspectives—essential for initiating change in complex systems. Relationality is central to dialogic processes, creating trust and empathy and fostering collaboration—conditions necessary for co-creation and emergence.

Used extensively in participatory action research because of the array of knowledges kept within a community, the participation of community in dialogic processes not only produces "knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people; it can also empower them at a second and deeper level to see what they are capable of constructing using their own knowledge" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 9). The Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, in his seminal piece *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/1970), writes of the power of dialogue to foster learning and knowledge, with these processes—including yarning circles—used extensively in education settings today.

Importantly, the knowledges within individuals and communities are not only those that are explicit but also include tacit knowledge, where learning becomes "an act of insight" (Polanyi, 1958, p. 78) and evolution is a "feat of emergence" (Polanyi, 1958, p. 412; see also Stronger Smarter Institute, 2020). For example, we are reminded of the bigger "forest" stories which connect us, and the closer we are to the trees, the relational or cautionary tales emerge which we share to ground or regulate our behaviours. In our duwur, JD, living off Country, shared open—baulan—stories of connection and respectful knowledge on the Country where he lives and has grown up, Yugambeh ngin Yuggera dgagun. Over time, he has been gifted story on the local areas from the Traditional Owners of Yugamberh ngin Yuggera, who hold the fuller stories, and has, in his role as a teacher, worked alongside local First Nations Logan communities to bring those stories into the centre of curricula and assist in local language revitalisations—that is, Yumgambeh as a language other than English.

Local Yugambeh gifted the language and process permissions for establishing First Nations educator circles using the concepts connected to durithunga—or growth. The metaphor or connector utilised across the Logan diaspora was the gum tree. At meetings along the local Logan rivers, with permissions, JD shares local stories of and on the importance of the river gums and how these trees continue to tower hundreds of years on—earlier than colonisation—all along the riverbeds of dgagun baulans. And with these trees now—tjanga—there is story and life. In fact, on initial startup of dekol kolabs between the authors, JD used these metaphors and meeting times to describe the extractive actions and insensitivities of a non-Indigenous colleague who reminded him of gugunde ngin bungal—the possum who scratches their trail along the bark of the river gum trees.

This example seeks to illustrate the tacit knowledge that is imparted from context and obtained through collective cultural experiences. These knowledges, or stories, held in the land and embodied on Country, assist in guiding or regulating human behaviour and enhance the way in which people interact with their environment. Recognising these stories, patterns or knowledges held within the environment also means that, as the environment changes, what is known and ways of knowing also change—this adaptive capacity has sustained Australian Indigenous peoples for millennia.

By understanding this capacity, the synergies of IKS with complex adaptive systems and its features of self-organisation, adaptation, and evolution with a changing environment become clearer. Thus, with this understanding of systems and any systems change ambition, attempting to identify a cause and effect is not possible; rather it is only general patterns and behaviours that can be observed, and any causality can only be seen in hindsight without any benefit of prediction (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003; Peter & Swilling, 2014).

People have great capacity to recognise patterns at a variety of scales "because of their ability to communicate abstract concepts through language…" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003, p. 465). According to Kurtz and Snowden (2003), the

implication of this human ability is that to "simulate human interaction, all scales of awareness must be considered simultaneously rather than choosing one circle of influence for each agent" (p. 465). We suggest that our closed circle process—our duwur, our co-inquiry space—is a vehicle for this insight and emergence because it facilitates a "transknowledging" (Yunkaporta & Davis, 2025) across time and relationships: a capability we regard as important in inter- and intra-generational focus of systems change. It may be likened to bringing the ant view and eagle view together in one place. The ant, while in the same place as the eagle, has a very different view and perspective on patterns than the eagle who is inhabiting the same space. Together, these views offer the layers of meaning and sense-making required in systems change for intergenerational fairness.

Indigenous Knowledges are not open knowledges and have strict management practices carried out by elders and senior people in the community (Bunya Mountains Elders Council, 2010; Davis, 2018; Sheehan & Walker, 2001; Steffensen, 2020). By working within the principles and protocols of IKS, non-Indigenous kolabbers can begin to grasp knowledge as a living thing residing in the relationships between and among the kolabbers, and with the changes in those relationships (Sheehan & Walker, 2001).

While we acknowledge the vast collections of Western or euro-centric work on dialogic processes, we present our experience of duwur to privilege Indigenous (and non-Western/euro-centric) approaches to sense-making. We attempt to make a case for the role of these IKS processes in stewarding systems change initiatives from a decolonised perspective and the inherent power of authentic kolabs. The example below, *Homelands*, highlights the process of setting circle with Indigenous and non-Indigenous kolabbers.

Homelands

This process of circle making has been applied with groups of knowledge makers, designers, and influencers – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – to facilitate meaning matching and relations. These processes are held on Bunya Burras Country and led by me, JD, a Traditional Owner of Bunya Burras. Bunya Burras is the place of great gathering or embassy mountains. Here, for tens of thousands of years, neighbouring tribes would be invited to gather every three years based on the signalling from the Bunya trees (fruiting season) to share in the Bunya nuts and to conduct business and ceremony. To move through the deep space of relating, principles and protocols are required to "call in" people, and these are signalled by the environment.

In a recent gathering of a collective of IKS First Nations researchers, Bunya Burras Traditional Owner family groups hosted the visiting national scholars for a week's reflection on IKS protocols, principles, and processes, because their learnings and actions of governance are "based

> on protocols from the huge multitribal gatherings that occur in the Bunya Mountains on Wakka Wakka and Barrungam Country every three years…as they have done forever" (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 258).
>
> This systems time and space was closed to outside kolabbers and focussed on IKS translators only. A total of 10 IKS translators were invited into this duwur[4], during which Bunya Burra Murri Rangers—who actively care for Country, live in and on Country by the protocols and process patterns set out by Elderships (Bunya Mountains Elders Council, 2010)—connected national IKS Labbers with the knowledges which flow from the mountains. Time spent on Country together around our collective fires and shared ceremony and song, as is the protocol, enabled "individual self-determination while also binding us in networks of relational obligation that extend throughout a '*deep time*' ontology encompassing both ancestors and descendants as stakeholders" (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 258).
>
> This pattern was then opened up—more baulan[5]—for non-Indigenous kolabbers who were already partnering with First Nations community-controlled hubs. Here, a thirty-plus group of participants were hosted on Country. Ceremony and story were not shared here, like the earlier duwur. These participants were called in and songs sung to them of Country, time and place, balancing the unequal power relations which shapes our existence in mainstream Australian society. Coming into this special time and space, movement and memory of Bunya Burras was by First Nations invitation only. "Non-Indigenous affiliates ('kolabbers') are … inducted and regulated through these protocols. We are responsible for their behaviour in the Lab and resolve any transgressions by 'calling in' rather than 'calling out'" (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 258).
>
> I share this process of broader circle making, meaning matching, and field immersion as a way to place what we (JD and Amara) have done on a micro level as an institutional kolab into a broader macro level, where groups of knowledge makers, designers, influencers set circles in relation to each other and are cradled together in the same way by Bunya Burras, the great gathering or embassy mountains.

In creating our co-inquiry space, John Davis, Cobble Cobble from Bunya Burra, brings into circle Amara Bains, a non-Indigenous Australian and descendant of Punjabi and Latvian ancestors. This circle process is duwur, and what is spoken here cannot be shared outside of our duwur. However, our

[4] See bpac.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final-Bonye_Buru_Booburrgan_Ngmmunge-301010-ss.pdf

[5] See www.credly.com/org/griffith-university/badge/first-nations-cultural-immersion

reflections on our time in duwur, are presented to indicate the power of this process. These reflections—an example of a "micro" application of IKS—are the emergence of our co-inquiry space, providing the basis for this paper and are written in the first person from a non-Indigenous perspective (see *Meanderings*).

Meanderings

As the non-Indigenous participant in our duwur, I (Amara) took time to prepare for my "entry" into our closed circle. In those preparatory moments, I reflected on my own ancestry, which has often been hidden—not intentionally, but through conformity to colonial norms—and I found myself constantly engaging with the concept of time, both in and out of duwur.

A strong sense of self, of my own culture/s, was an important ingredient in embarking on my IKS journey. This was important because it is my flow, and it needs to be strong to meet the flow from my friend—bandji as a research fellow. These two flows come together to create a new space—like the place we would sometimes meet for our yarns—where fresh water meets salt water (Yugambeh dgaguns). Honouring our own flows creates a space that takes us into the realms of interwoven possibilities—into emergence. By moving into this metaphorical space, we exist in a field of respect and of inquiry. Cultural appropriation falls away to expose shared language and new relations.

In preparation for bringing my whole self to our circle, I recalled a practice from an Indigenous Research Methodologies workshop conducted by the Australian First Nations organisation, Stronger Smarter Institute. In fact, it was at this workshop that I met JD and found the threads for our current weave. This practice, *My Hand in Research*, designed by JD (Davis, 2024) and taught by the Stronger Smarter Institute, encourages one to (re)connect with one's own culture before taking on the "wicked problems of the world." By engaging in that practice prior to entry into duwur, the propensity to act from an a-cultural perspective was diminished. The physical act of tracing my hand on a paper and placing symbols representing my culture and the qualities that I will bring to our kolab acted as a grounding artefact while moving into the co-inquiry space. *My Hand in Research* (Figure 1) carries symbols of both my Latvian and Punjabi heritages as well as representations of my respect for that heritage, my relations with my work and community, my role as a connector, as well as my connection to a higher, creator energy. Creating this artefact is a ritual of humility.

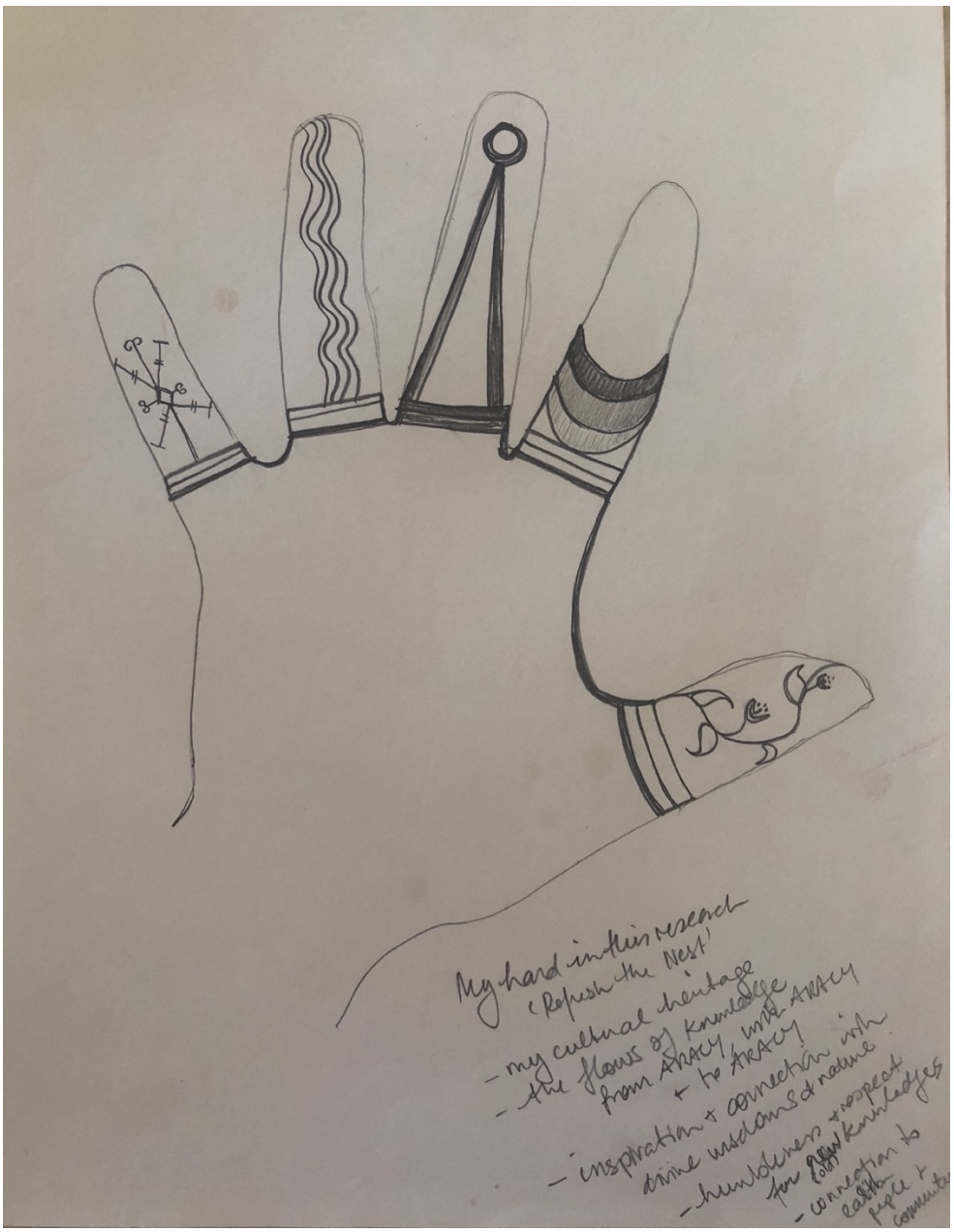

Figure 1: *My Hand in Research*

The spaces between our yarns in duwur provided fertile ground for my own exploration of decolonisation. It was—and is—time to reflect on the intersection of my ancestry as the colonised with my history as a settler colonist, stimulating deeper thinking on the practice of colonisation, the key features that define colonisation, and how, if possible, to reconcile the experience of colonisation with that of being a coloniser. For me, it also meant considering the differences between white and non-white settler colonists, and in what ways that may change our experience of and contribution to the continued oppression of First Nations peoples in Australia.

> The constraint of temporality with respect to our Western knowledges kept popping up in our yarns and my reflections. Now, when I look around me, I see all time in a moment—the ancient time in the rocks and mountains where I live, the historical time of the grandmother trees shading the ground where I sit in this moment of time. I see *everywhen* (Muta & Durmugam, 1956, as cited in Troy, 2023). But I'm not claiming this is what Australia's First Nations mean by *everywhen* but it is how I understand it today, with respect to First Nations' voice and definitions. It makes me think that if we understand where we are in time—in our moment—we can adjust our notions of scale, our ideas about impact, and our hopes for social and system change. If we can find ways to link our actions for change, for intergenerational justice, to the "long time"—to the mountains—rather than to our moment and relinquish our need to "see results" or have ourselves validated, it would mean a recalibration of contracts and funding models. It may even *create* time—time for relationship, time to care.

In the above micro example of the authors' setting circle, the acknowledgement, foregrounding, and sharing of cultures (within protocols) facilitated emergent thinking on systems change. This was the same process applied to larger groups, outlined in *Homelands*, creating the conditions for emergence—but an emergence that is constrained within the protocols and intentions set in circle.

The two examples provided highlight the potential of Indigenous and non-Indigenous kolabs (see Figure 2). Adoption of the IKS process of setting circle, in its capacity to facilitate a decolonised co-inquiry space, requires one to reflect on one's own social and other constructs, such as colonisation, as well as one's relations. It must be signalled that our reflections are not derived from a single moment but come from a continuous evaluation cycle, including journalling reflections of praxis. These co-inquiry spaces create the conditions for emergence.

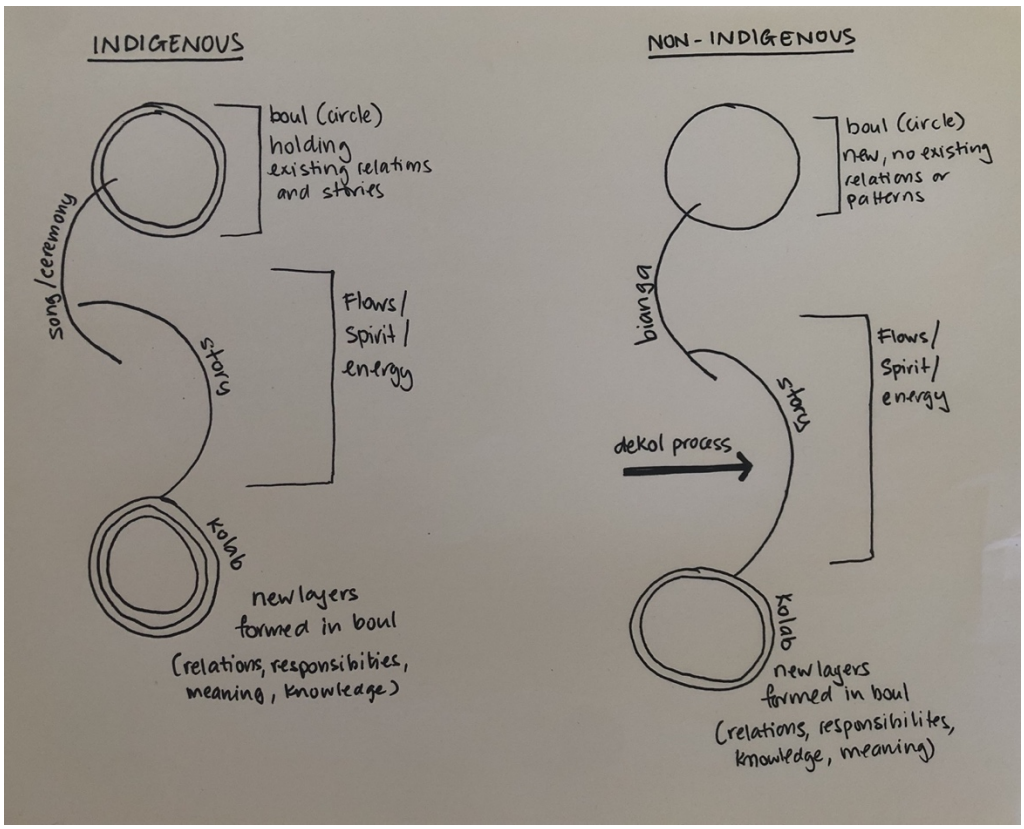

Figure 2: *Setting Circle: Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The energy /flow/spirit travels with and through the boul ("circle") and there is always movement in the boul (Davis, 2024). The energy/spirit that connects everyone in the boul persists outside of it and here this first boul may be considered as the ko-learner circle. The resulting boul – the kolab circle, the cultural field of inquiry – is now space for emergence. This is embassy. The dekol process in the non-Indigenous circle is the revealing of stories that arise from the Who Where When questions outlined in the paper.*

The Cultural Field: A Co-inquiry Space for Complex Systems Change

This second part of the paper captures our thinking on complex systems change emerging from the process of duwur and is divided into three sections—where, who and when—to replicate the pattern of three that arose from our us/only time. Each section outlines how IKS, from the closed circle ruminations, can be applied to enacting change in complex systems. However, first, we reflect on the co-inquiry space, and in particular the use of the term "third space" with respect to postcolonial discourse, its critiques, and decolonisation. We discuss how these reflections, and those in duwur, lead us to adapt the third space terminology to facilitate a decolonised and IKS-led approach to systems change. In doing so, we don't negate the applicability of the third space in other settings, such as education; rather, we seek to highlight how the complexity of systems change may require alternative semantics (Fletcher et al., 2023; Makwa & IKSL, 2024; Yunkaporta & Davis, 2025)

Third Space, Hybridity and Liminality

A key element of our personal engagement is the creation of our co-inquiry, liminal space—an environment of movement, change, deconstruction, and reconstruction. It is a liminality that follows us in day-to-day meanderings—its presence is not contingent on our proximity to one another (our campfire), nor is it limited to the physical space between us, but extends into all the spaces we enter. It is this dynamism, this energetic transformation, this haze of liminality—the smoke from the campfire—that we walk in, prompting us to consider the extrapolation of this experience to systems change. "The image isn't fully clear through our initial fires, the first wisps of smoke and the pattern and way of the fire. But how the fire is made, what is laid to create strong fire, is" (Davis & Coopes, 2022, p. 105).

When Bhabha (1994) coined the term "third space" in describing how the coloniser tried to understand the colonised and convert it to the familiar, yet ended up with something new, he was articulating a mode for creating new possibilities. However, for some engaged in post-colonial discourse, the third space was regarded as bereft of the material and social conditions that exist for the colonised (Mitchell, 1997; Parry, 1994), which they argue are required for engaging in meaningful postcolonial discourse. From our perspective, we view this criticism with some merit because of the way humans create and share knowledge. We also believe that taking account of the material and social conditions is poignant for the reality of settler-societies, like Australia, where the colonists have not gone "home" and our discourse turns to dekol (decolonisation) rather than postcolonialism.

The language of third space has also encountered criticism in that it is essentialist by design. Although contrary to our experience through duwur, we recognise that the essentialist argument may pose more of an issue in settler societies, where a bi-cultural polarisation often influences the nature of interactions and understandings, reducing them to "us and them" scenarios. In this case, consideration of how and who controls the third space becomes a salient point, as do the material and social conditions that influence the power dynamics. This is where IKS processes may be best placed to overcome reductive, dualistic notions of culture and address power imbalances held in place by the prevailing material and social conditions.

For Bhabha (1994), the hybridity of the third space overcomes any essentialism, as it represents the fluidity of the contact between cultures and the formation of new cultures and meanings. It rejects the essentialist position that cultures are static identities. Chilisa (2019) also recognises the third space as the metaphorical place where Western and Indigenous knowledges can mix and coexist. However, we regard the use of "third" to describe this liminal space as limiting, especially when engaging people unfamiliar with cross-cultural or decolonising discourse. From our perspective, the third space terminology, because of an implied dualism, may be problematic in complex systems change due to the multiple actants, power gradients, relationships, and resulting

interactions. For example, in settler colonist countries like Australia, the notion of a Western knowledges and Indigenous knowledges dichotomy is flawed and unrealistic, with large proportions of the population coming from non-Western cultures, and the "Western way" of doing things may not always be dominant. For me (Amara), my cultural heritages influence the way I interact with IKS, and in some ways have facilitated strong connections with aspects of IKS because of the familiarity of underlying concepts.

Similarly, the role of the interconnectedness of humans and non-/more-than-humans in creating culture and meaning is not only understood by Indigenous peoples but is enlivened through complex kinship patterns, ceremonies, and stories. IKS recognises the fluidity of these interconnections and their power to guide and shape the new—to adapt. For many non-Indigenous contributors to complex systems change, the tangible value in illuminating this interconnectedness is only beginning to influence our perspectives and our actions. For the most part, systems change has focussed on a small and human-centric subset of the system/s we inhabit. This non/more-than-human connectedness explains one of the key differences between Indigenous methods and processes compared to Western methods—that is, the targeting of local phenomena instead of a theory (Chilisa, 2019).

In highlighting the theoretical underpinnings for some of our views, we suggest that it is no longer feasible to *other* IKS—to exclude it from the mainstream episteme—but rather to see how modernity is slowly finding its way back. Despite attempted subjugations, obliterations, and appropriations, engaging in IKS will reignite your own campfires and unearth *all* your relations. And all those relations exist in a field connected to another field, just as our third space expands to our field and our relations. Therefore, we ask you, as changemakers, to create and prepare for your cultural field of inquiry. We pose three provocations below—an opportunity for you to gather the materials for your campfire and enter the smoke haze, accepting it as your blanket while you shrug the weight of your knowledge from your shoulders. Now we can consider IKS in complex systems change—let us go into the field.

Where is Systems Change?

> *Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.*
>
> *I will meet you there.*
>
> —Rumi

The place where our flows meet, the cultural field of co-inquiry, is the place where systems change can happen. In Barrungam language we can refer to this field as *baulan ban*—a grassy open learning space. The term *field* is not new to those actively engaged in thinking about and understanding systems—"field" has been used extensively to capture the totality of influences at any one time, the network of agents in a system and the scope for capacity building (Kania et al.,

2018; Lewin, 1951; Westley et al., 2007). For us, the term allows us to move away from the language limitation of a third space, which can restrict thinking and discourse to dualistic perspectives, when what we are seeking is an "and/both/all" view.

Our cultural field of emergence, we argue, differs from the prevailing thoughts on emergence because it makes explicit the recognition of culture in complex systems change and the relationality defined, formed, or adapted with respect to IKS. This is more than the "mental models" often referred to in systems thinking (Senge, 1990), or the relationality between people (McKenzie & Seneque, 2024); rather, it is emergence as a purposeful, sought-after manifestation of equally strong cultures meeting in flow and in relation to their non-human context, too. It is the protocols and principles that guide engagement in IKS processes that enable emergence to become purposeful and sought-after because it exposes relationality, respects diversity, and situates the time and place in deep time. We suggest that the current view of emergence as a random and spontaneous property of a complex system is only one way of considering emergence. Instead, we regard emergence as a place that can be created by humans—also argued by McKenzie and Seneque (2024)—but when we entwine IKS with complex adaptive systems, these relations include our non-human cohabitants. From our perspective, we offer a view of complex systems change, guided by IKS, that occurs in a cultural field—an emergent space—that seeks, learns, and draws from the intelligences from both human and non-/more-than human cohabitants in any context. It invites the reprioritisation of knowledge artefacts and cultural shifts within the constraints of protocol.

There is a trend in Western systems theories to recognise non-humans as actors in a system—for example, complexity theory, which is used to model the relationships between environment and humans, and actor-network theory, which regards all aspects of life as a network of relationships and is often applied to the interactions between humans and technology (Latour, 1996). Yet, these theories, like many others, continue to obscure IK perspectives and relational standpoints for considering systems, thus perpetuating the epistemic injustices of colonisation. However, theories such as relational systems theory, which interacts well with complexity theory (Goodchild, 2021, 2022) and Medicine Wheel (Menard, 2023), which privilege and combine IK, offer non-Indigenous allies the opportunity to decolonise their systems thinking.

We propose that the call for dialogue (McKenzie & Seneque, 2024; Nichol, 2003) should be extended to include engagement with the languages, rhythms and cycles of non-humans as well. To weave our First Nations' languages our ways, located within the fields of co-inquiry, enacts the cultural authority protocols captured in duwur. Giving language primacy puts our First Nations kolabbers at the forefront of the design queue and ensures a culturally grounded feedback loop—ensuring First Nations first delivery is not co-option of language and systems knowledges.

IKSL thinking refers to the roles of dialoguing as "embassy" (Fletcher et al., 2023). Simply put, "embassy protocols… allow Lab members ('labbers') with diverse tribal or clan affiliations to self-regulate within a framework of Aboriginal Law" (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 758). To support non-Indigenous allies to kolab, recently published guidelines by Makwa and IKSL (2024) offer further explanation on the protocols for working with Indigenous peoples and their knowledges.

Ultimately, to answer the *where* of your systems change, we suggest that situating your cultural field of inquiry enables the sentience of your gathering place, whether that is physical or metaphorical, to enter the field and contribute to the array of knowledges weaving together to bring forth the new. It is the first step in creating embassy.

Who are You in Systems Change?

> *The assistance people need is not in learning about Aboriginal Knowledge;*
>
> *it is remembering their own.*
>
> — Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand talk: How Indigenous thinking can save the world*

As humans we act within and from multiple identities. These are not only created as individuals but also in our relationships. These identities allow us to situate ourselves within our environment and make sense of it. The duwur process catalysed a series of thoughts on identity, which led to a line of inquiry—could decolonisation of our assemblages have the potential to uncover or form new identities with new capabilities for sense-making? Could it create the requisite "inner awareness"—one that allows other ways of seeing to emerge by making decolonisation personal?

Following Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/1987) concept of assemblage—a dynamic construction of multiple and differing elements that come together to form the whole—we assert that by turning our gaze on ourselves as we enter the cultural field of complex systems change with the intention of recognising colonial legacies, we reveal the dynamism of our identities, which allows us to set forth our flows into the field to form and reform. Through that decolonising gaze, we recognise the relations we share with non-/more-than human inhabitants and bring these into the field. Utilising the Deleuzian concept of de-territorialisation, decolonisation brings a destabilisation and transformation of existing structures, permitting self-determined ways of being and knowing to manifest.

In working in systems change, acknowledging one's current perspectives, worldview, or "cultural baggage" can assist in making way for deep listening with others. Theory U makes explicit the need for inner awareness (Scharmer, 2009) to effect systems change, as undertaking this approach connects one to "their

highest future potential," which provides the guidance for action. While we acknowledge the value of this—and indeed this is what acting in the cultural field can offer—we suggest that without the requisite decolonisation of our identities, the extent to which one can connect to "their highest future potential" may be limited, especially as, through the decolonisation process, the notion of individual existence and influence yields to the notion of relational networks and us/all.

Therefore, we posit that making explicit the *readily available* (or conscious) aspects of the key identities and corresponding relationships that one brings to systems change discussions is critical in keeping potential power imbalances in check. However, there is a right way to do this, as referred to earlier. Unpacking the *who* you bring to the cultural field of inquiry is a key process in bringing the right materials to the campfire. These IKS processes set the conditions for the right fire, right gathering protocols to be enacted. To restate again, reflections on IKS-focused work, "The image isn't fully clear… the first wisps of smoke and the pattern and way of the fire. But how the fire is made, what is laid to create strong fire, is" (Davis & Coopes, 2022, p. 105).

When are You in Systems Change?

> *Times are urgent: let's slow down.*
>
> — Báyò Akómoláfé

Even though entrenched disadvantage, held in place by systems, has accompanied humans for at least the last two millennia, our systems change discourses are cloaked in a sense of urgency, with "solutions" implemented at a frantic pace. The inability of modern humans to fully understand their place in time acts as fuel for this pace; therefore, understanding *when* you are is an important aspect of acting for systems change.

A sense of *when* you are can be felt through your relations, and it is more easily discerned after you have worked through *where* and *who* you are in systems change. The temporal context for systems change is important because it influences actions, and because our temporality—or our *when*—is found in our relations, the significance of intergenerational relations is revealed. Previous and planned systems change actions now exist in relation and not as discrete interventions on a linear timescale. Acknowledging these relations (and the responsibilities), the stories and cautionary tales held in these energy flows expose our obligations to other generations, particularly the younger, and can assist changemakers in shifting focus to the long time.

IKS brings that temporal perspective to actions through practices such bianga, which refers to a practice of deep listening in the language groups kinnected to Bunya Burras (Davis, 2024). A similar practice—and perhaps more widely heard of among non-Indigenous Australians—is dadirri: "a deep contemplative process of listening to one another … link[ing] critical theory with

reflective practice" (Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 2022, p. 96). Dadirri, like bianga, is guided by Country. Dadirri is a word that belongs to Ngan'gikurunggkur people of the Daly River but is also found in other language groups in a variety of anglicised versions.

A powerful process in flow we participated in on Bunya Burras at the partners gathering, was the "singing in"—calling into Country at Bunya Bush Uni. Following the ceremony, all participants circled around the ceremonial gathering/dance circle and were asked to be still, bianga. In that time and space, we all sat in circle, in rhythm and relationship to Country, to listen—let Bunya Burras speak. Through the Bush Uni, which is nested down the range of Mount Mowbullan, we all listened in our silence to the deep time languages and spirits of the land.

It is through practices such as this that we can truly be in flow with one another around the campfire of the cultural field of complex systems change. Coming together in this way creates the conditions for the flows to maximise the opportunity for exchange and emergence to occur. It also provides the opportunity to reflect on the long time—the legacy for future generations and the sacredness of our relations with the non-/more-than human.

To remember yourself in the long time and act accordingly is a foundational aspect of IKS. As mentioned earlier, the key is in all your relations, and as Troy (2023) explains, "[I]ndigenous storytelling and modes of historical practice often emphasise the virtues of continuity rather than change." The continuous or "always nature of certain phenomena" (Troy, 2023, p. 13) exerts an authority that grounds new knowledges, to ensure that there are right relations and emphasise the connectedness of the environment, of the inanimate and animate, without the boundaries of time.

We argue that this simple concept of the "virtues of continuity rather than change" (Troy, 2023, p. 13) offers guidance on how we can upend current notions of time and the existing colonised mechanisms for "delivering," funding, and governing systems change actions. Understanding and practicing this concept places emphasis on relationality, meaning that if we consider a system as both its structural *and* relational parts, we find emergence is a product of interactions (Cabrera et al., 2015), and the temporality of the emergence is in relation to continuity.

When we come around the campfire, we shed the boundaries placed on us by colonisation. The smoke from the campfire blurs our edges, and we "bleed" into our environment. As Davis and Coopes (2022) reflect, "our role in this fire circle is to stoke, make space and place more metaphoric wood (ideas) on the fires to increase knowing and relationship in addressing the wicked problems we all (us/all) are facing" (p. 86).

Engaging with IKS allows us all to enter a new decolonised space—one in which the "master's tools" are set aside (Lorde, 1984) and the power of *all* forges mutually beneficial pathways to profound change.

Provocation for Intergenerational Justice

In the authors' respective professional roles, our day-to-day work and our kolab is to contribute to transforming systems so children and young people thrive across generations. We know from Australian children that they are concerned about their future—concerned about managing significant transitions, concerned about climate change. They want to be heard and be involved in co-design on the things that affect them (Noble et al., 2024). Engaging in decolonised approaches and working within IKS is challenging, individually and organisationally, within the prevailing systemic structures. This paper, our experience, is our share to all those working in systems change and intergenerational justice. We have offered three questions for changemakers to consider in decolonising their practice and to inform engagement with IKS to guide systems change without appropriation.

We suggest, based on our practice, that these questions—*where, who* and *when are you*—are the "work" (the dekol process; see Figure 2) that needs to be done before embarking on any kolab between anybody, Indigenous or non-Indigenous. The challenge for changemakers is to renegotiate the affordances that prevent them from working within these protocols, such as funding, project timeframes, and deliverables, and even "collecting the evidence," just as much as it is the challenge of funders and policymakers.

We believe decolonised systems transformation practices challenge epistemic injustices—not only those that exist for Indigenous and non-Western knowledges, but for children and young people, as well as for non/more-than-human counterparts. From our perspective, there is a moral, ancestral obligation to offer all children and young people access to ancient knowledges so that it may provide an anchor point for their agency and enable them to shed the colonial legacies of "growth" and "sustainable development" and craft the world they will live in.

Rather than trying to "do systems change" for a better world *for* them, we suggest that including children and young people in these emerging dialogues on relational networks, rhizomic pathways, and posthuman intelligences and perspectives—bringing them into duwur—will activate patterns and memories latent within them, facilitate their outward expression, and reconnect them with their eternal mother, Earth—boobargun nguuminge (Jutja Pa Paddy Jerome, as cited in Davis, 2024).

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

No formal ethics review was required. The protocols established within the closed circle process described in the paper act to prevent sensitive cultural or other material from being inappropriately used.

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Dancing Otherwise:

New Assemblages for Pluriversal Practices

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Abstract

This writing articulates praxis-led approaches arising from the co-authors' research network Dancing Otherwise: Exploring Pluriversal Practices, funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) from October 2023 to March 2025. It presents commentary on embodied modalities of reflexive enquiry employed by the network, which aimed to examine the structures and frameworks around which dance research is organised in the UK. This article explores how the research presents innovation in praxis within dance

studies and dance research, and contributes to an emerging inter- and transdisciplinary field of awareness-based approaches to systemic transformation.

Keywords
dance, pluriverse, embodied relationality, horizontality, dance ecology, being otherwise

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Opening: An Invitation to Move

It is November 2024, and nearly twenty people have gathered in Bath's city centre, in a spacious room at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution. The event is part of a series of outreach activities programmed by the UK's Being Human festival, which celebrates humanities research through public engagement initiatives. Participants are mainly locals, including older adults, students, and a parent-and-daughter pair. They have responded to the Dancing Otherwise Network team's invitation to explore the "pluriverse" through movement, bringing a mix of dance experience and new curiosity. Guided by verbal directions, participants choose a place in the room to settle and attune to the invitation to arrive:

> Allow your arrival to unfold into a gentle walk through the space. As you move silently past each other, notice how your pathway might shift and respond to the patterns created by others around you. You might find yourself caught up in the slipstream of someone ahead of you, or accelerate or decelerate to avoid a collision. Experiment with shifting your attention between consciously watching others and then sensing the experience of being watched. Can you toggle back and forth from one attentive state to the other? Can you simultaneously be watching and being watched? Allow your awareness to encompass your own experience, whilst also observing the experience of others. As we progress, see if you can build a common kinetic sensing, which allows the singular to become plural. (Michelle Elliott, Dancing Otherwise Network team, personal communication, November 2024)

As the subsequent instructions unfold, the group moves to make sense of the verbal directives by establishing new relationships between bodies, space, and environment. Everyone is invited to gather first in a circle, then stretch into a line, then divide into two, always in silence, so that the sensing of sight, sound,

and movement awakens with sharp clarity. The early, more straightforward, commands offer a sense of safety, which settles the nerves some participants experience upon agreeing to take part in the movement task. As the requests grow more intricate—a zigzag, a map, three distinct groups—individual pauses and hesitations are gathered up, absorbed, and woven into the collective gesture. Uncertainty feeds exploration and often results in unexpected configurations. A sense of complicity emerges, as it becomes clear that everyone's skills and intuitions have a part to play. The task reveals that there are many ways to respond to the verbal cues, and that any one configuration the participants may adopt in the space is but one of several possible visualisations of the directives. The challenge of moving the whole group through the space while staying in close contact soon dissolves into laughter. Relationships emerge from the movement of bodies and, in doing so, constantly produce and materialise sets of possibilities. Choreography and moving together provide a space where a vital collective intelligence is exposed.

Introduction

This article shares insights from the AHRC-funded network project Dancing Otherwise: Exploring Pluriversal Practices (October 2023 to March 2025), led by the authors—three dance researchers from Bath Spa University and Kingston University London. A pluriverse imagines a world of many voices, practices, and perspectives coexisting in an enmeshed manner (Escobar, 2018; Mignolo, 2018a). It thrives and survives through equitable exchange and shared endeavour. The aim of this article is, firstly, to articulate how pluriversal thinking informed our design of the network activities that engaged researchers, dance artists, and the public in round table discussions, workshops, and online webinars. Secondly, we consider how the activities led us to identify and propose modes of working, relating, and doing dance research that might develop a more equitable and sustainable dance ecology. Thirdly, the article offers reflection on how practices of embodied relationality, horizontal organising, care, and curation, central to the network's activities, propose modes of being and doing "otherwise" to bring about systems change within dance research and wider fields of practice and enquiry.

The project was designed as an exploratory network which aimed to identify and challenge the systems and approaches to designing research across the UK dance community, and experiment with ways of being and doing *otherwise* (Akómoláfé, 2018). The research engaged with the following overarching question: What are the future directions for UK dance research, and how might the work of this network propose strategies and ideas for the development of a radical model of dance ecology—a pluriverse—to interrogate good practice and co-develop principles and frameworks grounded in awareness, equity, and critical diversity?

Whilst situated within academic institutions, all three researchers are engaged with dance research initiatives, arts organisations, or artist communities existing outside the academy, and have, in various stages of their

careers, participated in regional dance development initiatives and public engagement activities. Michelle Elliott teaches choreography with a focus on improvisation as a dynamic tool for fostering creativity, collaboration, and embodied exploration; she is also research-active in the field of embodied cognition and serves as a dance promoter for Bath Spa University's Theatre, where she supports the integration of performance, scholarship, and community engagement. Victoria Hunter is a Professor in Site Dance; her research explores people-place relationships through movement and dance practice in non-theatre locations, and employs ideas of new materialist, human-nonhuman porosity to inform practice-led enquiry. Daniela Perazzo works in the fields of dance theory and performance philosophy to investigate the political potential of movement; through her academic work, collaborative projects, and public engagement activities, she interrogates how dance can envision new ways of attending to the increasing complexity of today's sociopolitical environment.

Over the eighteen-month period, the project team invited choreographers, artists, educators, students, and interdisciplinary researchers to contribute their ideas and perceptions of dance research structures and systems—who gets to research, where research takes place, what constitutes dance research, what is centred and what is marginalised, and what forms of knowledge-making are inherent in the practices they engage with. We invited guest speakers and thinkers from other disciplines (philosophy, ecology, social justice, economics) to participate in online webinars and share their insights on broader sociopolitical and ecological conditions that shape and inform how systems of knowledge production and power relations operate and circulate at the local and global levels. Members of the public were invited to attend the open-access events and public workshop activities that aimed to disseminate the research ideas and provocations further, beyond the academy and into the public realm.

As a project team, we reflected on what we perceived were systemic failures within the current system of dance research, both within the UK academy and within the wider cultural industries. We identified a problem with communication between the academy and industry, the systems in which research is circulated, and the funding structures and power imbalances that replicate neoliberal economic concerns for progress and individual project development. Within this framework, colleagues, artists, and researchers are forced to compete against one another for funding, and not necessarily engage in collaboration, discourse, sharing resources, and working towards a collective ecology or development.

This competitive dynamic sits in stark contrast to systems thinking, which emphasises interconnectedness and collective behaviour. In her writing on systems thinking and behaviour change, Donella H. Meadows defines a system as:

> A set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time. The system may be buffeted, constricted, triggered, or driven by

> outside forces. But the system's response to these forces is characteristic of itself, and that system is seldom simple in the real world. (Meadows, 2008, p. 2)

The Dancing Otherwise Network considered the patterns of behaviour common to the dance research field and the drivers or external forces that worked to shape and influence dance research systems. To do so, we looked beyond the centre-periphery binary to explore culturally diverse, environmentally-engaged, experimental, non-typical, and emergent modes of making, producing, and researching dance "otherwise" through pluriversal practices.

Pathways to the Pluriverse

Predicated on inclusive and diverse approaches to researching dance and movement practices, the project drew on an interdisciplinary field of theory and practice to bring new perspectives to researching dance. Notions of pluriversality (Kothari et al., 2019) and of the non-neutrality of material histories and social configurations (Yusoff, 2018) were employed to shape the network's design, activities, and modes of engagement with participants and members of the public. Through modelling horizontality as a praxis, the network engaged dance practice-research with socio-political themes of inclusion and decolonisation to explore physical and conceptual border crossings between ideas, practices, and people to help us envision new and experimental assemblages of dance ecosystems.

The terminology of the pluriverse draws from Latin American decolonial studies and critical anthropology, that acknowledge Indigenous peoples' practices of social mobilisation and self-organisation that work to reimagine ways of being, organising, and relating. These practices challenge and resist the "colonial matrix of power" (Mignolo, 2018b, p. 91), and their discourse points towards "the existence of multiple worlds that are partially connected but that exceed each other in complex ways" (Fitzgerald, 2022, p. 353). Dance Studies scholars have previously employed notions of pluriversality to discussions that include Indigenous People's dance and movement practices (Castillo, 2016) and the development of de-colonial approaches to site-based movement practice (Demerson, 2024). In this article, we acknowledge these contributions and wider applications of pluriversality by scholars and practitioners in the field, whilst extending them to consider the implications for systemic changes to thinking and doing dance research differently.

While our work is not located within organisational studies or systems thinking *per se*, it is nevertheless concerned with change, specifically through the collective enquiry of the structures and organising principles of the dance world across the professional, academic, and educational sectors. Rooted in our research interests in the politics of dance and in interdisciplinary perspectives on knowledge systems, relational models, and practices of transformation, our

references for working with emergence and embracing otherwise ways of doing are located in somatic approaches and in their intersections with theories of unknowing developed by decolonial thinkers, queer theorists, and posthumanist philosophers engaged in the project of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) while also imagining alternatives. Specifically, we traced the term "otherwise" to the work of Báyò Akómoláfé (2018), whose philosophy of embracing uncertainty and engaging with emergence—with what surfaces from unexpected places, cracks, and in-between spaces—represented for us an inspiring model for engaging with the complexities and contradictions we perceive and register in the dance world in the current configuration of industry, research, and pedagogical structures.

In dance practices, the notion of "being otherwise" embraces the idea that non-verbal sense-making is a cornerstone of the dancing experience. Dancers are well versed in the idea that not all knowledge can be accessed through the proxy of language, a concept which has been robustly explored by early dance phenomenologists such as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2015) and Sondra Fraleigh (1987). Many commonly held assumptions about knowledge, intelligence, and its relationship to the body have their roots in a deep and complex colonial history that has been distinctly "anti-body" (Claxton, 2015). Reductionist scientific positions frequently bypass tactile-kinaesthetic experiences and artificially separate out concepts, such as, for example, thinking and doing. Whilst verbal and written language provide deep, rich insights into complex phenomena, their symbolic nature means that they point to, and are a proxy for, the knowledge they seek to represent. As philosopher and scientist Michael Polanyi asserts, "We can know more than we can tell" (1966, p. 4). Such embodied ways of knowing invite us to reconsider the conceptual and structural systems that shape our field.

In this light, the project's engagement with deep systems change reflects a desire to surface and reconfigure the often invisible forces that govern how we think, relate, and organise within dance research and practice. The ideas and paradigms from deep systems change proposed by Meadows and others align with the central concerns of this project, in which we sought to identify systems within our field (e.g., languaging, conceptual framing, and embodied relationality). The project aimed to reimagine alternative, more equitable, and inclusive futures for our sector of dance research through dialogue and practical enquiry. Similarly, in their editorial for the inaugural edition of this journal, Koenig et al. identify that:

> *Deep systems change* implies a shift towards a social field perspective of systems change. This perspective emphasizes the source conditions that give rise to patterns of thinking, conversing, and organizing in systems which, in turn, produce practical results. By including the interiority of the system (first- and second-person experience), a social field perspective addresses the less visible dimensions of social reality creation. (Koenig et al., 2021, Footnote 1)

The social-field perspective they define directly aligns with the modes of intra-personal exchanges and methods of embodied enquiry employed in this project, through which we strived to explore how knowledge is produced, articulated, and valued through practices of embodied relationality central to dance and movement-based practices.

Imagining Alternatives Through Dance

We envisioned the network as being for and with dance people—researchers, artists, producers, educators, students—while also aiming to reach outside of the field and explore the potential of dance to inform wider systemic changes. We wanted to acknowledge the different positionalities that are represented in the field and found it important to reflect on our own positionalities—as the research team—and, especially, on our own blind spots—although, of course, these are difficult to recognise. For instance, we have been conscious of the power that comes with our institutional positions, in an academic sector and artistic field that has been traditionally characterised by precarity and is increasingly affected by systemic precarisation. Aiming to reach widely and beyond our existing spheres of influence, we questioned our approach to issuing calls, our channels of dissemination, and our own engagement with equality, diversity, and inclusion agendas, which so often result in tick-box exercises. In planning events, we considered closely the relationship between our duty as facilitators to shape the activities and the risk that our own priorities may prevent other perspectives and needs from being expressed and explored. Whilst taking the role of curating conversations for the various events we hosted, we committed to letting the dialogues that emerged rub against our own preconceptions, push us outside of our comfort zones, and help us learn how we may see and do things differently. We were keen to learn how dissenting voices might be harnessed to envision alternative dance worlds and hoped to understand how to respond to crises differently, and work towards building alternative futures.

In this sense, attending to and celebrating the field and its people also meant engaging with care with its different voices and trajectories, asking questions, listening, travelling through areas that we (as the core researchers) may be more or less familiar with, asking more questions, pausing to get to know a new place better, to take in its energy, its roots, and its driving forces. We felt strongly that, to do that, we needed to move both within the field and outside of it, to try and gain new vantage points. Therefore, the opening event, *Mapping the Pluriverse* (January 2024), functioned as an online collective mapping exercise in which we began to open up discourse around the diversity of dance and movement practices in the UK and the hierarchies inherent in organisational structures that prioritise some forms of dance practice whilst eliding others. We invited contributions from UK-based dance makers, artists, producers, teachers, and academics, alongside international researchers from social and environmental activism, philosophy, and the environmental humanities. Over the course of two days, we curated presentations, images, videos, provocations, and conversations

employing a range of approaches to capturing their diverse practices, positions, and voices, and their intersections. Through this initial exercise we wished to identify and name the ways in which a range of different, even dissenting, voices may be harnessed to envision an alternative dance world.

Dance contributors offered reflections on how the body itself provides a lens through which to understand the notion of the pluriverse. Over the course of the two-day event, we recorded attendees' comments and questions that made us reflect on the material and social "pluriversality" of our bodies, the "murky and blurry edges of the body as a site of knowing," as one contributor put it (*Mapping the Pluriverse* audience member, personal communication Jan 2024). Participants reflected on the inherent plurality and interdependence of the dancing and performing body, and on how this may result in a predisposition for care, empathy, and collective responsibility. The reflections we collected include: "There is no such thing as a solo; I exist in relation to you and to the world. Anything I choreograph or perform is never going to be singular, individual. A body is a pluriverse as a queer body, moving towards different identities but never identifying as any one in particular. The relationship with the audience is in itself an intersubjective and interactive relationship"; "I wonder whether a felt interdependence, the awareness of our own planetary materiality, can involve greater care, and whether care and a felt form of empathy will foster more responsible and sustainable action? How can such a way of knowing be trained, passed on, and how can it inform new fields within dance and movement practices as well as become relevant beyond the field of dance?"; "As makers, what is our responsibility in the pluriverse we construct? How might we soften and extend the borders of the creative works we make, to allow for multiple modes of entry and engagement?"(*Mapping the Pluriverse* collated audience and participant responses, Jan 2024, online)

To examine what models of coalition might inspire the dance community, and how we might respond to the crisis of the existing system by attending to and staying with what emerges, we reached out to colleagues outside the dance world and invited them to join our conversations, as we hoped their perspectives would help us draw a richer, better-informed, and more wildly imaginative map of the dance pluriverse—of its present and its future. We asked socio-environmental researcher and activist Katia Valenzuela Fuentes, environmentalist and post-development expert Ashish Kothari, and philosopher, writer, activist, and psychologist Báyò Akómoláfé to offer their own views of what being and operating in a pluriverse may look and feel like. By learning how activist groups organise, we wished to understand how dance could shape its community differently.

The idea of being and doing otherwise as a continuous practice was at the centre of Chilean sociologist and activist Valenzuela Fuentes' talk, which discussed activism as a horizontal praxis, one that involves both a horizon to walk towards and the continuous practice of walking. While we work towards a point of arrival, we also continuously enact the principles that make that horizon

possible—what Fuentes called "the fuel and backbone of autonomy." In her analysis of the "politics from below," based on the experience of Chilean autonomous activism (coalescing around the social uprising that occurred between October 2019 and March 2020), she identified the key ingredients of horizontal practice as: non-hierarchical and flexible structure; rotation of roles, tasks, and responsibilities; the role of spokespersons in speaking up for the group Valenzuela Fuentes, *Mapping the Pluriverse* talk, online Jan 2024). These are crucial features that support structures organised around consensus decision-making (which challenges liberal representative democracy), placing assembly at the heart of collective praxis and foregrounding the importance of exchanging information, knowledge, and experience.

In the context of our project, developing a dialogue with sociologists, activists, and agents of social change was not aimed at finding all the answers to complex questions. Rather, the network's interaction with broader perspectives on social transformation enabled the project to engage with modes of awareness and attention that operate beyond individual and group processes (respectively the "micro" and "meso" levels in Theory U terms), thus exploring the potential of embodied pluriversal practices to effect change at institutional and global levels (respectively the "macro" and "mundo" levels in Theory U terms). In this sense, it was useful to reflect on Fuentes' analysis of the challenges that structures that attempt to enact horizontality inevitably face, as some of these difficulties are mirrored in the dance world: interpersonal tensions, the narrow scope of self-managed actions, uneven levels of participation, unlearning dominant logics (based on vertical structures), tacit forms of leadership, asymmetries in political or organisational experience, financial precarity. In developing the project further, the awareness of these challenges formed the seed for follow-up dialogues we initiated with dance educators, programmers, and policy makers.

Báyò Akómoláfé spoke of how, in these times of crisis, it is vital that we challenge what we think we know about being human, in order to expose the delusions our minds create about the present conditions. Specifically, he proposed that:

> We're co-participating in assemblages, in larger territories, in larger logics that exceed the idea that we are private, citizen subjects. That's my way of beginning the idea that the human is territory...The actuality of how the world emerges and spills away from itself requires much more than our humanistic tropes of intentions and choices. (Dancing Otherwise Network, 2024, 2:51–57)

Considering UK dance research from these perspectives, it can be argued that researchers are incarcerated in realities that consist of many invisible patterns and deeply entrenched colonial narratives, and, through their (often unwitting) complicity in these systems, reproduce the very conditions from which many strive to escape. Akómoláfé referred to these types of repeating, reinforcing loops as "death spiral[s]" (Dancing Otherwise Network, 2024), but proposed that

this exhausting process, which challenges the neoliberal idea of productivity through its repetitive and unproductive nature, might allow us to transform and do things differently.

Similarly, the environmentalist and activist Kothari talked about the multiple intersecting crises of the contemporary moment as he saw them—namely, ecological, social, and political—and reflected on their impact on personal and interpersonal relations. He discussed development and its relationship to violence, which for him manifests as the religion of economic growth. Relatedly, he suggested that, in the contemporary moment, we have moved away from livelihoods (i.e., artisan, agricultural, and craftsmanship) towards mass-produced "deathlihoods." Through his questioning, Kothari advocates for resistance movements that promote other ways of being, knowing, doing, and dreaming. These include youth justice movements, social and racial justice movements, and environmental activism. Proposing a post-development approach to pluriversal thinking, acting, and organising (Kothari et al., 2019), he asks if there are alternative acts of resistance that we might draw on or turn to, and how we might consider degrowth and horizontality in our own disciplinary fields and research contexts as modes of being and doing.

Over the two-day online event, perspectives on disabled dance, queer dance, multimodal performance, eco-somatic movement practices, activist dance, Black dance, political dance, embodied spiritual practice, and collaborative performance were framed around, and were in dialogue with, Fuentes', Akómoláfé's and Kothari's talks on political activism, sustainable radical transformation, and emergent responses to the current polycrisis, which sparked debate and further reflection on what dance artists and researchers may need to become more aware of and be guided by in their practice. Dance contributors and attendees discussed, for instance, how dance's relationship with audiences invites a constant negotiation of positionalities and a deep engagement with local knowledges, especially through community or participatory work. Some reflected on how the iterative nature of choreographic processes mirrors natural rhythms, offering a felt experience of the material consequences of interrupting them, while creative movement work that challenges conventional temporal models by playing with duration can invite a plural understanding of time and its effects. Others questioned how dance may be able to model a form of deep listening that engages all the senses, including beyond material stimuli, to build a connection with the spiritual dimension of ancestral layers and archetypes.

Building on the launch event, we developed a programme of research and networking activities that aimed at exploring themes, approaches, and contexts that the initial collective mapping exercise identified as important to understand how dance practice and research can serve as enablers for wider systemic transformation. The January 2024 event revealed the existence of a latent community of dance artists, teachers, and programmers invested in finding pathways for dance to capitalize on its ability to generate deep connection at micro and meso levels (through its capacity to build a felt sense of commonality

between individuals and among groups), and enter into more sustained dialogue with the macro and mundo levels of institutional systems and national and international frameworks. Moving forward, we envisioned the Dancing Otherwise Network as a catalyst for this potential, aiming through our activities to generate and co-devise tools for this shift to become possible. With this in mind, attending to the approach of our own hosting and convening practices became the next important step.

Welcoming Vulnerability and Dissent: Conditions for Meaningful Participation

Curating the following events, we thought carefully about how contributors and attendees might relate to the material brought into the conversations and with each other. As a research team, we had all been previously exposed to, and actively involved in, different ways of convening dialogues and gatherings that emphasise inclusive approaches to presenting, frameworks for "safe" spaces or "brave" spaces. Accordingly, we were mindful of how guidelines around constructing inclusive spaces can often be co-opted by institutional narratives of diversity and equality. We were aware that what feels right, safe, brave, inclusive, or engaging is inevitably different for different people. With Elise Ahenkorah we also acknowledged that "safe spaces don't exist for equity-deserving communities—or for those learning about identity and privilege. And brave spaces [...] negate the daily bravery marginalized communities need to display everywhere, to navigate everyday and common biases, discrimination, and microaggressions, in workplaces and society" (Ahenkorah, 2020).

Ahenkorah's invitation to "embrace accountability" informed our curation of the events that followed: "Accountability means being responsible for yourself, your intentions, words, and actions. It means entering a space with good intentions but understanding that aligning your intent with action is the true test of commitment" (Ahenkorah, 2020). Adopting this approach, we invited attendees to join the network's events with an open mind, with a respectful heart, and a willingness to listen with care and empathy. This aligns with processes of shifting the structures of attention central to Theory U's approach to systems change, starting with an opening up of perception and developing a sense of 360-degree awareness of others, self, and context from which we can move towards a process of change.

> When we listen empathetically, our perception shifts. We move from starting at the objective world of things, figures, and facts into considering the story of a living being, a living system, and self. To do so, we have to activate and tune a special instrument: the open heart, that is, the empathic capacity to connect directly with another person or living system. If that happens, we feel a profound switch; we forget about our own agenda and begin to see how the world unfolds through someone else's eyes. (Scharmer, 2009, p. 12)

In this vein, we suggested that participants might allow some space for their own and other people's vulnerabilities, to an extent that felt manageable for them. We encouraged people to join us on their own terms and do what they needed to do to participate meaningfully from their perspective. We acknowledged the generative role that dissent can play in these encounters, "recogniz[ing] and embrac[ing] friction as evidence that multiple ideas are entering the conversation—not that the group is not getting along" (Ahenkorah, 2020).

This attention to intention, awareness, and accountability, and the acknowledgement of the importance of naming these approaches in the context of individual and collective explorations, appear particularly relevant in relation to Theory U's thesis that "behaviours within systems cannot be transformed unless we also transform (deepen) the quality of awareness that people in these systems apply to their actions, both individually and collectively" (Scharmer & Yukelson, 2015, p. 35). In this sense, while operating within the field of artistic and creative research, our dialogical and interdisciplinary approach towards imagining and building alternative configurations for the dance sector has mirrored (albeit not explicitly, but rather intuitively) Theory U's trajectory from "ego-systems" to "eco-systems" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013), which maps the expansion of attention through developing stages of awareness that enable a shift from habitual patterns to open presence, which in turn becomes a space where possibilities can emerge.

Choreographing and Dancing the Pluriverse

Our first in-person event was a two-day practical workshop at Bath Spa University, UK, in which choreographers, dance researchers, postgraduate students, and alumni came together to explore how it might be possible to choreograph from a collective and pluriversal perspective. The *Choreographing the Pluriverse* event (April 2024) revealed the complexities of pluriversal thinking and doing, as they played out through choreographic practice. The balance between choreographic and artistic ownership, whilst working in a dispersed and democratic manner, came to the fore alongside questions of dissent and managing multiple voices and perspectives in the studio. The Bristol-based Gather Up collective ran a group improvisation session led by dance artists Laïla Diallo and Kit Hall. Participants engaged in a series of improvised movement conversations, exploring notions of creative generation and exchange. Dancers were first invited to listen and respond to their own internal impulses, and then to dance alongside—or with—the ideas of others that emerged. Participants were invited to "try on" each other's ideas, engaging as both witnesses and contributors in a spirit of open exchange that prioritized collaboration over transactions. By the final improvisation, the room felt charged with a shared focus and vibrant collective energy. Dance practitioner Alexandrina Hemsley, who served as a respondent for the day, offered these reflections on the workshop activities: "If everything I value about myself are things that cannot be taken

from me, then I can risk being porous without fear that another can diminish me." The day's unfolding revealed how choreographic practice can serve as a powerful site for negotiating plurality, and how openness, agency, and collective creativity can co-exist in dynamic tension.

This event was followed by a free one-day public engagement workshop at South East Dance, Brighton, UK, in which members of the public were invited to explore approaches to collective dance practice and embodied relationality through movement scores, talks, and exchanges. The *Dancing the Pluriverse* (April 2024) workshop activities opened up practices of moving together to a range of movers, both experienced and beginners, exploring how themes of equity, inclusion, and pluriversality are practised through dance. One participant offered the following observations on the event:

> The experience was very powerful for me, as it is so rare to get a group of strangers to relate and care for each other and hold space together. It was really quite a unifying experience. The creativity of people was inspiring, and it was wonderful to see people happy! To give people space and to explore themselves, their bodies and others. To express their individuality but to also come together in unity and togetherness. (Participant A, 17 April 2024)

The activities engaged with the following questions: How do we co-create and dance with and alongside each other? What do we learn when we make space for multiple voices, bodies, and ways of being in the dance space? In response, the Brighton-based choreographer and founder of Communitas Dance, Anna Des Clayes, delivered a workshop based on forging connections through shared movement tasks and collective endeavour. Utilising the shared space of a communal circle, Des Clayes began the session by gently guiding the participants into sharing movement responses to simple tasks across the group. Through creative imagining, she then invited the participants to work in duets to explore collaborative responses to ideas and themes of identity and coexistence prior to extending this work into whole-group tableaux making (see Figure 1). Through these tasks and propositions, the group explored being together, picking up on each other's rhythms, and collective, embodied decision-making through nonverbal means. In these moments, bodies rested against and moulded into each other, sharing weight and collectively working to shape into and out of the tableaux designs. Through tacit negotiations, participants managed and shaped space, time, and tempo as they relied on corporeal cues to navigate the group through the space together.

Figure 1: *Participants in Anna Des Clayes' workshop (South East Dance, Brighton, April 2024, image by V. Hunter).*

Charlie Ashwell, a London-based dancer, dramaturg, writer, and researcher, invited participants to explore the connections between dance, imagination, and magic. During the workshop Ashwell posed the questions, "What might be considered to be magical about what we have shared?" and "If dance is a form of magic, then what kind of magic is it?" The workshop tasks and movement explorations invited participants to play with ideas of conjuring things up and making things appear, and to explore the magic in moments of connection between individuals as they moved together. After participants had danced

together, Ashwell asked them to consider and explore further the traces they had left in the studio space, beginning with everyone's own trace forms and then picking up on the trace forms of others in the space. By moving in the space together in this manner, the group conjured up a thickness of atmosphere, collectively troubling and stirring up the dynamics of the studio space through shared improvisations and endeavours as they were encouraged to play with memories, images, and ghosts through the moving body. Following the movement tasks, participants sat with a partner and were invited to make a drawing that consisted of a single line; as they drew, they engaged in a process of shared invention infused by embodied traces (see Figure 2). The role of imagination was central to both the movement explorations and the collaborative drawing, as it enabled the group to disrupt realities, enact worlds which were not immediately present to the senses, and to experience the worlds of others.

Figure 2: *Participants in Charlie Ashwell's workshop (South East Dance, Brighton, April 2024, image by V. Hunter)*

At the subsequent roundtable discussion, Ashwell described how the "fuzzy" nature of these collective explorations dismantles borders between the singular and the plural, the individual and the collective. Reflecting on their experience of this event, one participant observed:

> For me, *Dancing the Pluriverse* proved that integrating, listening to, and understanding many voices brings out new ways of thinking—the

> open negotiation between what everyone in the room needed and the freedom to engage in your own capacity without judgement contributed to feelings of belonging, community, and togetherness. (Participant B, 17 April 2024)

Pluriversal Perspectives and Horizontal Practices

Through the exploration of diverse practices and ways of moving in the gaps between spaces, places, and disciplines, the design of activities aimed to de-centre dominant frameworks and discourses (such as whiteness, ableism, heteronormativity, anthropocentrism). The network positioned pluriversality and dancing otherwise as knowledge-making practices central to the urgent project of re-imagining and re-shaping relationships towards more socially and environmentally just worldviews and developing practices of "ethical pluralism" (Cortes-Capano et al., 2022). Its design and ethos made space for challenging and, at times, difficult dialogues, acknowledging that diversity and equitability lead to better research, enriched by different perspectives. As a team, we aimed to create a space for dialogue with peripheral perspectives and pluriversal thinking, whilst acknowledging the inherent complexities and challenges of pluri-vocal exchange in which multiple voices, opinions, and positionalities share the same space-time. How to acknowledge and celebrate difference, messy complexity, and discord, and work otherwise lay at the heart of the endeavour.

Building on these experiences of interacting with a range of stakeholders and perspectives, over the course of the following twelve months, the project team continued to instigate dialogue with dance colleagues, academic partners from wider interdisciplinary domains, industry representatives, education specialists, and the general public. Later in the year, we held a three-day residential retreat at Hawkwood Centre for Future Thinking in Stroud, UK, for artists and researchers interested in pluriversal perspectives, ecological systems thinking, and embodiment, sharing practices and points of view. This event, which we called *Examining Pluriverses: Learning From Nature, Coalitions, Kinship and Care* (June 2024), enabled the network team to learn from other movement practitioners and researchers engaged with dance, ecology, social activism, choreography, conflict resolution, and ethno-botany, and to consider how organic systems might inform our thinking around an evolved dance ecology.

In November 2024, we hosted an online webinar with dance programmers and creative industry researchers exploring systems of producing, financing, and promoting arts and dance activity from pluriversal perspectives. In *Enacting the Pluriverse: Strategies for Organising Otherwise*, contributors and participants discussed models of producing and promoting dance performance and research—from practices of commercialisation and sponsorship to notions of gifting, de-growth economics, mentoring, and reciprocity.

Our closing symposium, *Moving Otherwise: Making Change*, was held at Kingston University London, UK, in February 2025. It engaged dance researchers, activists, artists and students in sharing the project findings and

exploring learnings from the network activities. This event disseminated some of the ideas emerging from the network, whilst also inviting guest artists and collectives to respond to the themes of pluriversality through sharing practices and leading sessions. In this manner, the event illustrated the iterative nature of this work and employed a horizontal mode of organising and curating events to offer space to diverse voices and perspectives.

Participants and contributors commented: "What I sense is a commoning of the practice and a horizontal shift; something is unravelling in order to become the thread of a bigger cloak" (Participant C, 12 February 2025); "I found myself wishing that other conferences and symposia I've recently spoken at could have witnessed the unfolding of what you brought together. It was a testament to what is possible within an academic framework when critical inquiry is held with care, openness, and a willingness to embrace the unknown" (Participant D, 12 February 2025).

This curatorial approach invited unknowing and uncertainty into the space of the academy, often resulting in unexpected moments. These included a workshop facilitated by movement artist Manuela Albrecht, who invited participants to engage with mycelium as a choreographic act invoking human–nonhuman intra-actions, and a performance by the anti-racist art collective A Particular Reality, with artists Demelza Woodbridge and Alicia Graham, exploring themes of visibility, ecology, and care. The day concluded with Seke Chimutengwende's improvised solo performance, blending dance, poetry, storytelling, and political–philosophical reflection in a moment of collective charge with the audience. The purpose of this curatorial approach was to disrupt and decenter dominant practices, make content choices open, malleable, and spontaneous, convene diverse practices and perspectives, and invite reflection from participants and the wider public on the network's emergent themes.

Dance as Radical Relationality

Building on the phenomenological research on which dance studies is rooted, the network events investigated how dance and movement-based practices can make the complex systems—both built and natural—that we find ourselves entangled in visible and tangible. This felt necessary as we attempted to expose and move beyond the inherited narratives that limit our ability to shift towards more sustainable ways of being. People often do not recognise the fictional nature of cultural narratives because they are presented as facts, or worse, act as an invisible doctrine that reduces our capacity to experience different realities (Monbiot & Hutchinson, 2024). Even ways of relating are culturally, socially, and historically mediated and, as Arturo Escobar, Michal Osterweil, and Kriti Sharma propose, we inherit patterns of thought and action that have a tangled colonial history:

> There is a tight relation between the production of non-relationality and the historical processes of colonialism, capitalism, slavery, and

> the genocides that accompanied them and that separated people from their territories, cultures, and communities, destroying and subjugating collective lives to logics of markets and development. (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 32)

Mignolo (2018a) reminds us that, even when these misleading stories are exposed, delinking ourselves from the constraints of Western universalism and its claims to superiority is an extremely difficult task. Akómoláfé (2024) suggests that exposing these patterns of thought and action, and the associated feelings of "stuckness" and being lost amidst the cracks that emerge as ideas and narratives collapse, presents possibilities for change. This is also proposed by Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma, who suggest that "the planetary crisis is creating new conditions for thought and the possibility of other modes of relating, oftentimes lurking beneath capitalist modernity" (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 45).

During the activities of the network, we proposed that pluriversality, as a mode of attention, can provide us with tools and processes that afford an examination of the multiple relationships that exist between different human and nonhuman worlds, many of which may be beyond the reach of conscious perception. As Iain McGilchrist (2019, 2021) posits, what we pay attention to changes what we find in the world. Therefore, our attention, and what we direct it to, can help enact new realities. So, what might dance, as a particular form of worldly engagement, be able to offer these conversations?

The network events offered a direct, embodied insight into how dance practitioners are deeply attuned to the ways in which choreographic ideas and movement practices can heighten specific forms of attention and perception. Many of these practices invite an exploration of the attentional mechanisms that shape our relationships with ourselves, others, and the environments we inhabit. As such, dance is uniquely placed to help heighten sensitivity and awareness of forms of perception because it encourages a more integrated approach to the cognitive mechanisms that support perceptive processing. This, in turn, provides access to different types of information enabling people to be more vigilant and critical about what they are giving their attention to. An epistemology rooted in dance suggests that if we embrace the idea that anything we perceive might provide us with useful information to help us decide what we should do next, then extending our perceptual capacities should be a vital concern.

During our activities, we experienced how moving together can be a powerful form of network learning that offers transformative possibilities in the world, allowing us to extend beyond our inherited patterns of thought and action. Dancing bodies are always situated in and inseparable from the environments that surround them, providing a unique terrain for exploring how to respond to Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma's call to replace separation myths inherited from modernity with new stories of radical relationality (Escobar et al., 2024). We celebrated how dance allows us to experience ourselves in complex relation to others, the environment, systems, and structures in order to move beyond the artificial propositions of separation.

Dance practices expose the radical relationality that connects everything to everything because they provide ways to experience a core, collective resonance that works against dominant narratives of separation. Dance encourages us to value both our embodied knowledge and our sensemaking interactions with the world and, in doing so, expands the possibilities for moving beyond the "ontology of separation to a life-centred ontology of inter-existence" (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 43). Through the network's activities, we experimented, for example, with how to move alongside others using a different narrative from which to begin the engagement. Rather than thinking, "I am separate from others; how can we connect?" we considered, "I am already deeply related to others; let's move together to find out in which ways."

Conclusion

Over the course of eighteen months, we discussed, debated, moved, and improvised together—as a project team, with other dance artists, researchers, students, teachers, programmers, and members of the general public. We experienced moments where we were not sure what would come next and expanded our capacity to embrace uncertainty, tolerate ambiguity, and experience how relations are often underscored by deep uncertainties about what is and what could be. Returning to Koenig et al.'s notion of a social field perspective (2021), when we move with another, we are reminded of a way of being that emerges somewhere between the *I* and the *we*, a type of inter-ness, a form of experiencing that is also reminiscent of bell hooks' (2009) descriptions of interconnectedness as a spiritual practice. As Escobar, Osterweil, and Sharma propose, "there is no such thing as an individual; rather it makes more sense to speak of persons in relations" (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 33). In our workshop spaces, moving together became a way to think things through, and actions became a form of nonverbal sensemaking. We exchanged but without the need for a transactional relationship, and we enacted life rather than passively consuming it. Importantly, we also experienced how difference can be a vital component of a healthily functioning collective (Escobar et al., 2024) and how this acknowledgement can be helpful in supporting communities to transition towards nonhierarchical structures. Circling back to pluriversal thinking, the network participants gained an embodied experience of pluriversal thinking:

> The pluriverse is the result of the dance between autonomy and interdependence that living beings and many place/territory-based communities perform to keep themselves and the pluriverse going. At its best, autonomy is a praxis of inter-existence. (Escobar et al., 2024, p. 278)

In relation to its long-term aims of envisioning and materialising a new model of dance ecology, rather than arriving at a new tight structure or framework as a replacement for the constricting boundaries of the existing one, the network proposed a mode of moving towards horizontality, slowing down,

attending to others, and valorising embodied knowledge as guiding principles for engaging with one another. The network's dance improvisations opened up spaces of possibility for relational and horizontal theories to be enacted through creative, embodied engagements. The project embraced the pluriversal principle that we are inextricably enmeshed with other worlds; to perceive these entangled relationships, we need to be able to both sense and attend to what lies beyond the self. Through movement and embodied interaction, we experimented with how experiencing pluriversality as a mode of attention can help us to sense worlds differently, enabling us to experience alternative possibilities beyond the present conditions. As James Bridle (2022) reminds us in *Ways of Being*, where he challenges anthropocentric views of intelligence, other worlds are already here—we just need to start paying attention to them.

The network also provided opportunities to explore how dance can fine-tune our capacities for what we are able to perceive and pay attention to. Feelings, emotions, sensations, physical actions, inklings, and hunches are all valid forms of knowledge; movement practices can hone skills in sensory awareness of both live and retrieved experiences. When network participants improvised together, even in very simple ways, they were experiencing and learning to navigate and negotiate nonverbally. This, in turn, enabled them to encounter and respond to difference whilst simultaneously experiencing a collective, kinetic, embodied intelligence. The experiential nature of these types of dance activities requires complex, cognitive processes that draw on pre-reflexive, nonconceptual forms of knowledge. The practical activities and conversations encompassed in the network activities invited deep listening to each other and the nonhuman world to promote a recognition and valuing of the multiple, complex forms of intelligence of all life forms. These conditions offered a rich terrain from which to develop an embodied awareness of potential systems change, ways of organizing people, ideas, and shared concerns to reimagine a more equitable and collaborative UK dance ecology. This terrain is unstable, porous, and precarious; it is simultaneously dynamic, entangled, and messy in nature. Ideas, practices, and processes of dancing, researching, organising, and being *otherwise* are literally in motion.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors (Hunter, Perazzo, Elliott) declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethics Statement

All research processes, including planning, documenting, and disseminating findings, were conducted in adherence to ethical approval protocols from Bath Spa University and Kingston University London.

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Peer Review Article

You Will Never Be Enough in a Settler Colonial System:

Reclaiming Land-Based Identity as Decolonial Healing and Responsibility

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Abstract

This decolonial, reflective story-sharing paper centers on reclaiming land-based identities as a ceremonial process of healing and resistance within the enduring structures of settler colonialism. Drawing from my lived experiences and guided by story-sharing methodology, it examines the systematic oppressions and reconstruction of identity, land, and spirituality imposed by settler colonial education, immigration, and governance systems. These Eurocentric systems sustain disconnections from land-based relationships while imposing hierarchical identities designed to maintain colonial power. Challenging these imposed narratives, this work affirms the significance of relational ways of knowing rooted in land-based ceremonies, responsibilities, and teachings. Positioned as

both inquiry and activism, reflective story-sharing emerges as a vital decolonial method to resist settler colonial domination and advocate for land-based adaptions. Reclaiming stolen identities is framed not only as resistance but also as a political and spiritual act of love, responsibility, and healing—toward a future grounded in justice, reciprocity, and relational accountability.

Keywords
Decolonization, Indigenous healing, land-based identity, relational knowledge, story-sharing

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Introduction

In ongoing settler colonial societal and educational systems, the challenges of decolonizing meanings of land-based identity are critical and essential. The legacies of colonialism continue to shape individual and collective understandings of identity, often marginalizing land-based and relational ways of knowing (Datta, 2018, 2020, 2024). These settler colonial frameworks impose colonial categories, promoting an individualistic *I* over the collective *we*, thereby alienating individuals from their land, culture, and spirituality (Smith, 2012). Decolonizing identity involves dismantling these systems, reasserting relational ways of being, and reclaiming land-based identities that honor interconnectedness and reciprocity (Datta, 2015). For me as land-based scholar, land is not only a source of knowledge but also a living relation that shapes ways of being, perceiving, and knowing (Datta, 2015). The term *land-based culture* refers to understanding the land as a source of science, spirituality, and responsibility. It is also a process of recognizing our responsibility to protect it. Similarly, ceremony is not a generalized practice but a deeply responsible act—entangled with land, spirituality, language, knowledge, water, and more-than-human worlds (Paul et al., 2021). Therefore, recognizing these specificities affirms that land-based identity is simultaneously an ontological position and an epistemological practice, central to both healing and decolonial resistance. This paper highlights these challenges, emphasizing the importance of this reclamation as an act of resistance, healing, and transformation (Battiste, 2013; Coulthard, 2014).

Settler colonialism is not a historical relic—it is an ongoing structure that continues to shape Indigenous and racialized experiences, particularly through

systems of education, governance, and identity construction.[1] The settler colonialism operates by severing relational ties to land, displacing spiritual and cultural knowledge, and replacing them with rigid, hierarchical systems that uphold Eurocentric norms (Battiste, 2013; Simpson, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The central objective of this paper is to expose how colonial structures—through formal education, immigration policy, and spiritual doctrine—have systematically stolen land-based identities, and to advocate for decolonial reclamation through story-sharing and relational knowledge. Drawing on lived experiences from Bangladesh to North America, the study shows reflective storytelling to both analyze and resist these systems. It centres the importance of land-based identity as a ceremony of healing, activism, and resurgence (Archibald, 2008; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

The erasure of land-based identities and practices through colonial systems is not merely historical; it persists in modern educational structures that prioritize Eurocentric knowledge and achievement over collective, relational learning (Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2012). These systems disrupt cultural continuity, replacing ceremonies and spiritual practices rooted in land with commodified and hierarchical notions of education and identity. Settler colonialism systems have systematically disconnected individuals from their land-based roots, often reconfiguring their identities in ways that serve settler colonialism power structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Reclaiming land-based identities is critical not only for personal and cultural healing but also for creating sustainable ways of living and learning. Land-based identities offer pathways to understanding the interconnectedness of humans, land, and all beings (Alfred, 2005; Grande, 2015). These identities challenge commodification and exploitation, advocating for relationships rooted in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. As my healing stories of identity reveal, this reclaim is both deeply personal and inherently political, challenging settler colonialism structures that seek to silence and marginalize land-based ways of knowing (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

The significance of reclaiming these identities lies in their ability to transform both individuals and systems. For individuals, this process reconnects them with their cultural roots, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). For communities, it strengthens collective resilience and cultural revitalization. At a systemic level, decolonizing identity disrupts the epistemological dominance of settler colonialism frameworks,

[1] While colonialism refers to the historical structures of domination and extraction, coloniality describes the enduring logics, mindsets, and systems that persist even after formal colonial rule (St. Denis, 2007). As Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) argues in Hospicing Modernity, addressing ecological crises requires confronting these deeper colonial patterns of thought and practice.

opening spaces for diverse ways of knowing and being (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Marker, 2019).

This paper has three primary goals. First, it aims to explore the mechanisms through which settler colonialism systems have stolen and reconstructed identities, focusing on the role of education, spirituality, and power (Dei, 1996). Second, it seeks to highlight the transformative potential of reclaiming land-based identities, using my lived experiences as a healing lens (Cajete, 2000; Regan, 2010). Third, it advocates for decolonial methodologies that center story-sharing as a means of resistance and reclaiming. Engaging with these goals, the paper contributes to broader conversations on decolonization, emphasizing the urgent need to reclaim and honor land-based identities within contemporary societal and educational contexts (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012).

Decolonizing identity from land-based perspectives are vital, requiring individuals and communities to navigate complex intersections of power, culture, and resistance. Reclaiming land-based identities, we can challenge the erasure of our histories and cultures, asserting our right to define who we are and who we need to be (Simpson, 2017; Tuck et al., 2014). This process is not merely an act of defiance but a critical responsibility. Through decolonial colonialism methodologies, such as reflective story-sharing and reconnecting with land and land-based culture, we can create spaces for our self-determination to the land we belong to (Archibald et al., 2019; Wilson, 2008).

Positionality Statement

As a land-based minority researcher from Bangladesh and a racialized scholar residing in Treaty 7 Territory, Canada, my positionality is situated within intersecting histories of colonization, displacement, and resistance. This position is epistemologically and ethically informed by decolonial and land-based frameworks that centre relational accountability, reciprocity, and ceremony as core principles of meaningful research. My scholarly orientation develops through sustained learning from community Elders, knowledge-keepers, and land-based practitioners who have taught me to understand land not as property or resource but as identity, relative, and pedagogy. I inhabit a complex and often contradictory location—simultaneously shaped by the enduring legacies of settler colonialism in Bangladesh and implicated within settler colonial structures in Canada. This relational complexity necessitates humility, reflexivity, and continuous processes of unlearning and relearning. As a decolonial, anti-racist, and land-based researcher, my responsibility is to engage meaningfully with Indigenous and land-based communities, respecting their sovereignty while reclaiming my own disrupted cultural and spiritual connections to land. I understand research as a ceremonial act rather than a neutral practice—an exemplified process of relational care and accountability. Through reflective, land-based story-sharing, I position myself not as a detached academic but as a participant in collective decolonial healing, bridging transformational experiences of colonial violence, resurgence, and reclaiming.

Decolonial Reflective Research Framework and Methodology: Story-Sharing as a Method

Reflective stories is a process of centering my lived experiences, reclaiming my relationships, and centering my land-based cultural practices as sources of knowledge and healing (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). Connecting in decolonial and land-based epistemologies, this research framework and methodology challenge colonial notions of fixed objectivity, embracing the relational and situated knowledge (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2013). Prioritizing decolonial personal narratives and collective memories, story-sharing creates spaces for voices that have been marginalized or silenced to be heard, validated, and honored (Grande, 2015; Simpson, 2014).

My decolonial story-sharing serves as a ceremonial act for me to reclaim my land-based identity and my lost spiritual relationships with my land and communities. The term *ceremonial act* reflects my process of reclaiming my rights, strength, and self-determination in expressing my truths. Ceremony here is not invoked in abstract, but with specificity: it emerges through relational practices such as responsibility to plants and waters, seasonal rituals, memories carried in language, and teachings that connect humans with more-than-human relationships. These practices situate knowledge in place and affirm that learning is inseparable from responsibility to land, water, and community. Framing story-sharing as ceremony therefore highlights its role as both method and worldview, bridging ontology and epistemology through lived practice.

My reflective stories reveal how settler colonialism systems have sought to sever connections, replacing relational ways of knowing with hierarchical and extractive frameworks (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Sharing my land-based and settler colonialism stories helped to create my self-determination, and my responsibility to protect our traditional knowledge and practice as science. It also helps the validity and importance of land-based identities and relational knowledge. Story-sharing thus became a critical tool for decolonization, enabling me to reconnect with the land that currently I am living and coming from. This process is also helpful for reclaiming and reconnecting cultural roots, and for communities to reclaim our collective histories and practices (Cajete, 2000; Dei, 1996). Therefore, decolonial reflective methodology, as exemplified through my story-sharing, emphasizes the interconnectedness of knowledge, identity, and land. My stories are not merely recounting events; they are acts of creation and transformation. They carry cultural teachings, healing, values, and responsibilities, guiding me and my community toward healing and justice (Archibald, 2008; Marker, 2019). Thus, my story-sharing is both a method of inquiry and a form of activism, challenging settler colonialism systems of knowledge production while creating relational and land-based ways of being (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Simpson, 2017).

From my land-based language and cultural teachings, I have come to understand that I am part of a collective *we*. This *we* includes all beings and

elements of creation—the land, water, plants, animals, insects, the sun, the moon, and all that sustains life. When I use *my*, it reflects my personal journey of reclaiming a land-based identity shaped by both Bangladesh and Canada. When I use *our*, it reaches toward the shared teachings of my communities and other Indigenous traditions, while recognizing that these teachings are deeply contextual and not universal. This distinction helps me stay rooted in my lived experience while honouring the collective wisdom that guides me. My relationship with the land is deeply healing—it reminds me that I am never alone. Reconnecting with the land beneath my feet is a continual act of renewal, respect, and belonging. Through these relationships, I have learned that our sense of self, sustainability, emotions, empathy, and spirituality all emerge from how we live in relation to the land and to one another.

My stories are central to my decolonial responsibility. Unlike methodologies in settler colonialism that often extract and commodify knowledge, story-sharing is interconnected in reciprocity and respect (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). It acknowledges the storyteller's agency and the relational context in which stories are shared, emphasizing the responsibilities of both the teller and the listener. This relational approach disrupts the power dynamics inherent in settler colonialism research, creating spaces for mutual learning and collective transformation (Smith, 2012; Tuck et al., 2014).

Through story-sharing, I engage in a process of decolonial reflection, examining how settler colonialism systems have forced me to shape my identities by *others* and reclaim the relationships that sustain them (Coulthard, 2014; Said, 2004; Simpson, 2014). This process is deeply personal and inherently political, challenging the settler colonialism narratives that seek to define and control land-based peoples. Centering reflective stories, I not only reclaim my identity but also contribute to broader movements for decolonization and justice (Freire, 1968/1970; Regan, 2010).

The strengths of story-sharing lie in its ability to connect individuals and communities, creating solidarity and collective action (Archibald et al., 2019; Grande, 2015). Sharing my lived experiences, I invite my readers to reflect on their own journeys, challenging settler colonialism systems and reclaiming their land-based identities. In this way, story-sharing becomes a substance for decolonial transformation, creating spaces where diverse voices and ways of knowing can thrive (Battiste, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Findings: Stolen Identities— My Life is Not Mine

In this decolonial reflective paper based on six stories from many stories, I aim to share my ceremonial journey with how my land-based identities were stolen, reconstructed, and governed by settler colonialism systems of education, spirituality, and influence. These processes not only stripped away my personal sense of belonging but also eroded our collective understanding of sustainability. Sharing my stories is more than a recounting—it is an act of reclamation. Through my decolonial stories, I am reclaiming my identity(ies), my

relationships, my responsibilities, and my healing. My stories are my ceremonies, the rituals through which I rebuild what was taken and honor what remains.

Stolen Relational Meanings of Learning: Who I Am and Who I Need to Be

My stories taught me that our belongingness, and our relationships, define our sustainability, our identity, our emotions, our empathy, and our spirituality. Our relationships with the land are not separate from our spirituality—they are our spirituality. Without these relationships, we have no identity. For instance, my mother often reminded me of this interconnectedness through her land-based teachings. Every morning, she encouraged me to pray to the plants, fishes, and insects, recognizing them as our gods. These gods are not distant or invisible; they are present in our lives, tangible and vibrant. We feel them, touch them, and celebrate them. They (i.e., all non-humans) are our family members, living with us. They are within and from me. These land-based teachings helped me to understand that our land-based relationships are not just connections; they are ceremonies and celebrations that guide us toward understanding, responsibility, and healing. To be meaningfully educated, in this sense, is to learn through land-based ceremonies and relational practice. It is a process of becoming a knowledge-keeper for taking the responsibility of protecting our land-based relationships. This form of relational learning teaches us that there is no separation or hierarchy between human and non-human. It is about love, respect, and care for all beings. Every culture, whether human or non-human, has agency. The essence of this learning is reciprocity and the shared understanding that we all belong to one another.

However, these relational and land-based teachings were systematically stripped from me through the settler colonialism education systems I encountered from childhood onward. From primary school to high school, from university in my home country (i.e., Bangladesh) to international institutions in Western countries (i.e., Canada and USA) I was offered no space to acknowledge or practice land-based culture and spirituality. These systems were designed to undermine and control immigrants, alienating me from my land-based knowledge, identity, education, and spirituality. My settler colonialism education has stolen the collective *we* from me with an individualized *I*, a concept rooted in settler colonialism hierarchies and power. This shift went beyond a personal loss; it was an intentional dismantling of our ceremonies, and displacement from our land, relationships, and responsibilities. By the mainstream settler colonialism spirituality (i.e., non-land-based), our land-based relationships with non-humans were stolen. Settler colonial gods became distant, abstract entities. Our land-based ceremonies, once rooted in collective reciprocity, were replaced by rigid doctrines and colonial spirituality.

This transformation imposed fixed categories of identity—human, gender, nationality, caste, and religion—stripping away the fluidity and interconnectedness of our transnational and transcultural identities. In the name

of progress and profit, our land-based lives, emotions, and dreams were commodified and stolen. The settler colonialism system did not simply happen to us; it was meticulously crafted to generate uncertainty, dependency, and profit for a few at the expense of land-based minority communities. Today, I reflect on these experiences not as a passive observer but as an active participant in the process of reclaiming. The systems that caused this loss were never broken—they were intentionally designed to create and maintain these divisions, ensuring that inequities would persist. Yet through this reflection, I try to reclaim who I am and who I need to be in the Indigenous land where I am currently living in Canada. Thus, reclaiming land-based identities and relationships is an ongoing journey—a ceremonial act of healing, resistance, and love.

Story of "You Do Not Have Enough Indigeneity"

In this reflective story, I share how settler colonialism processes have stolen not only my land-based identity but also my Indigeneity. This settler colonialism process was deliberate and systematic, creating a world where my identity, culture, and stories were rendered invisible, insignificant, less, invalid, or subordinate to settler colonialism narratives. To explain this, I must reclaim my land-based identity, which is deeply rooted in the community and culture where I was born and raised—a community where every practice, ritual, and relationship was intertwined with the land.

In my minority land-based culture in Bangladesh, daily life began with ceremonies of gratitude and respect for the sun, water, plants, animals, and all beings as family members, parents, and gods. These relationships were reciprocal and sacred, forming the foundation of who we were. As I explained in the above section, I was taught through land-based learning from my mother that my identity came not from an individualistic *I* but from the collective *we*—a network of relationships that defined our responsibilities and grounded our spirituality. Our relationships were our gods, our ceremonies, and our education. This learning taught us that sustainability, empathy, and identity were not isolated concepts but relational and interconnected.

Yet, these sacred teachings were systematically erased by settler colonialism institutions such as education, constitutions, and legal systems. From my childhood schooling in Bangladesh to university and beyond, I was forced to disconnect from my land-based knowledge. The settler colonialism education system devalued our culture and labelled our ways of knowing as "uncivilized" or "unscientific." Settler colonialism science, often cloaked in mainstream religious ideology which is not connected with land and land-based spirituality, taught us that our land-based spirituality was invalid and that salvation lay in adopting an "outsider" way of thinking. For land-based learning, heaven was our land—a living, active agency—but settler colonialism education made us see our land as a resource to exploit or as something distant from spirituality.

Through settler colonialism structures, we were forced to learn our colonizers as heroes and to vilify our land protectors as enemies. This colonial

education was not neutral; it was a tool used, and continuously being used, to take away *us* from our land, land-based spirituality, and identity. Under its force, our land-based sustainable practices were replaced with extractive ones, and we became strangers to our own land as we did not learn the importance of land-based culture and practice. Members of our community were oppressed, our communities were displaced, and our spirits stolen—all in the name of "education and progress."

The more we conformed to settler colonialism values, the more we were rewarded with the illusion of acceptance. Silence became resilience, and forgetting became survival. Like many others, I was shaped by this process, forced to see my land-based culture as backward and irrelevant. The term *land-based culture* refers to understanding the land as a source of spirituality and recognizing our responsibility to protect it. When I had the opportunity to engage with Indigenous land-based education in Canada, I began to reclaim what was stolen from me. Through the guidance of Indigenous Elders, educators, and activists, I learned to reconnect with my roots and speak up for my land-based identity and culture. However, this journey was challenged by my home country's settler colonialism educators. In my home country, I was told my reclaiming was inauthentic. My identity was threatened by those who claimed the power to define it. When I began to speak up through my decolonial and anti-racist academic work, I received threats from individuals from my home country asserting their power to dictate who I could be. “We are the majority; we have the power to define you. Without our permission, you are no one,” they threatened me many times over the phone and e-mails. I was given the impression that “our lives are not ours”. These threats extended into my professional life, as settler colonialism educators from my home country undermined my work and shared false narratives with my mentors and peers abroad.

Even in Canada, where I sought refuge in decolonial and anti-racist education, settler colonialism structures persisted. Emails from my home country's mainstream educators questioned my authenticity, and some Canadian educators and activists took those narratives at face value. Once again, I was told I was “not Indigenist enough.” The settler colonialism structures that had stolen my identity in Bangladesh now echoed through systems in Canada, perpetuating the erasure and invalidation of land-based people. This experience has deepened my understanding of how settler colonialism power operates globally to silence and marginalize. It creates fixed, oppressive definitions of identity that deny the fluidity and relationality of land-based ways of being. It insists that we, as land-based people, are never enough and that only settler colonialism systems have the power to define us.

Despite this, I continue to reclaim my identity and resist these narratives. My decolonial journey is a ceremony of resistance and resilience. It is a reminder that my identity is not for others to define—it is rooted in my land, my relationships, and my responsibilities. Even as I am told I am “not enough,” I hold onto the truth that my Indigeneity is beyond settler colonialism definitions.

My stories, my culture, and my connections to the land are more than enough, and they always will be. I do not need validation from either people within the colonizer mainstream in Bangladesh or the settler colonialism system in Canada.

Story of "Kick You Out"

As an international graduate student in a university in the United States, I arrived with hope, determination, and a scholarship contingent upon working as a research assistant (RA) in the international student office. I was thrilled by this opportunity to learn and grow. From the outset, I made every effort to adapt to the new system, even as I faced subtle and overt reminders that I was "less than" in the eyes of the institution.

The international office coordinator, who was from the White community and lacked lived experience as an international student, carried an air of superiority that shaped my entire experience. Their condescending attitude often framed my scholarship as an act of charity rather than a recognition of my academic achievements. Each interaction was peppered with remarks about how "different" and "better" the United States was compared to my home country and my immigrant community, as though I should be grateful for the privilege of being there. Despite these microaggressions, I tried to focus on learning, even as the coordinator's behavior began to erode my mental health and academic performance.

Feeling isolated and desperate for support, I decided to seek advice from the dean. As I entered the dean's office, I was met with a cold and formal atmosphere. I began explaining my situation, hoping for understanding or guidance, but I was immediately interrupted with a stern warning: "Slow down, or I'll kick you out." I froze in shock. Those words—"kick you out"—were more than a threat; they were a declaration of power that left me feeling silenced, dehumanized, and deeply traumatized.

This moment solidified my understanding of the unspoken rule within settler colonialism systems: if you speak up against racism or injustice, you risk being erased, expelled, or ostracized. The phrase "kick you out" became an invisible, ever-present spectre in my mind. It was not just about that room or that interaction; it was a systemic reminder that I was an outsider in a structure designed to exclude me. The trauma lingers, surfacing every time I encounter injustice or feel the weight of being "othered."

Story of "You Are Not Canadian Immigrant Enough"

After completing my graduate studies, my spouse and I applied for Canadian skilled immigration with two master's degrees and a PhD each—mine from the United States and Bangladesh, and my spouse's from Sweden and Norway in Women and Gender Studies. Despite our qualifications, we were saddened to learn that our international degrees were not fully recognized in Canada. The

settlement services recommended a three-month employment training program as a pathway to Canadian integration.

The program was a surreal experience. For a week, we were taught how to greet others and shake hands "properly." Curious and slightly amused, I asked the instructor, "Most of us here are skilled immigrants—doctors, engineers, social workers—don't you think we know how to greet and shake hands?" The response was a pointed gesture toward a photo of two white individuals in formal attire shaking hands, accompanied by the remark, "Yes, you know, but not the Canadian way." When I pressed further, asking what made a handshake "Canadian," the instructor replied, "Your ways of greeting are not like Canadian. To get a good job, you need to learn the civilized Canadian way." This interaction was a stark reminder of how racialized immigrants are made to feel inadequate in Canada. Despite our education and skills, we were deemed "uncivilized" and forced into a performative assimilation. The three-month training program concluded, and we waited eagerly for job opportunities. A month later, I received a call from the immigrant settlement center. The mentor's enthusiastic tone made me hopeful, but my optimism quickly faded when they informed me of a job offer—a position at a coffee shop for an hourly minimum wage.

I was not shocked by the offer of a coffee shop job; I was shocked by the irony of spending three months learning how to shake hands only to be funnelled into menial labor. This was not about job preparation; it was about reinforcing a narrative that we, as racialized immigrants, were not enough—our education, experience, and identities were insufficient.

Although I ultimately declined the job offer after being admitted to a Canadian university for a PhD program with a scholarship, the experience left a lasting impression. It reminded me that the settler colonialism systems governing immigration and employment are designed to strip us of our dignity, our qualifications, and our identities. We are made to internalize that we are "others"—never quite enough, always striving for acceptance in a system that demands our assimilation while denying us recognition. These stories are not isolated incidents but reflections of systemic injustices that racialized immigrants and international students face daily. They are reminders of how settler colonialism power operates to marginalize, silence, and traumatize. By sharing these narratives, I reclaim my voice and assert that we are enough—our experiences, knowledge, and identities matter.

Story of "You Are Not Academic Enough"

Despite excelling throughout my academic journey—earning prestigious scholarships, completing my PhD, receiving a prestigious Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship, and securing a prestigious position—I have often felt that my presence in academia is seen as an anomaly. As a racialized scholar, I am constantly reminded, directly and indirectly, that I do not truly belong to the institution where I work. Here, I recount two stories that exemplify this exclusion and the emotional toll it takes.

Story of "Sorry to Lose You"

As a faculty member, I have consistently been a top researcher in my department and in my faculty, securing grants and making impactful contributions. Yet, my personal life has been marked by financial strain. Supporting my family on a single income was nearly impossible, forcing us to rely on food banks and free food distributions.

My spouse, a highly qualified scholar with a PhD and a federally funded postdoctoral fellowship, struggled to find employment in our new city. Hoping to explore opportunities for her, I met with a higher institutional leader and explained our situation. I spoke candidly about the financial challenges we faced and emphasized my spouse's qualifications for academic or administrative roles. The responsible institutional leader listened patiently and responded, "I know your spouse very well. She is highly qualified. However, we don't have anything for her at this time. We would be sorry to lose you if you decided to leave." The phrase "we would be sorry to lose you" was not reassuring—it felt like a veiled threat. It left me frozen, unsure of how to respond. I managed to say, "Please let me know if anything comes up," but I felt an immediate need to end the conversation and retreat. Instead of feeling supported, I felt vulnerable and isolated. The meeting reinforced a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity. As a racialized scholar, I realized that no matter how well I performed or contributed to the institution, I would always have to live with the uncertainty of whether I truly belonged. These incidents, among others, have left me questioning the institution's commitment to inclusivity and belonging. The university's motto, "You Belong Here," feels hollow when faculty like me are made to feel fearful and unwelcome. If I, as a faculty member with significant accomplishments, feel unsafe voicing my needs, I can only imagine the experiences of racialized students navigating these same spaces.

I have come to understand that this systemic exclusion is not about individual incidents but about the structural barriers that exist for racialized people in academia. No matter how much we achieve, we are continually reminded that we must live with fear and uncertainty. For racialized scholars, the message is clear: excellence is not enough. We are constantly navigating the unspoken rules of belonging in spaces that were not designed for us.

Story of Respect the "Furniture"

One spring day, after a long and tiring day at work, I found myself resting in a quiet sitting area at the university. The space was nearly empty, and I closed my eyes briefly to recuperate. Moments later, a security officer approached me and abruptly touched my shoulder. "Sir, you cannot close your eyes and sit here," they said. Startled, I stood up, confused and worried that I had done something wrong.

"Did I do anything wrong?" I asked.

"Yes," they replied, "you're closing your eyes. You can't do that. You need to respect the furniture."

I looked around at the completely empty seating area and replied, "I've never heard of this rule before. Are you saying this to me or to everyone?"

The officer's tone shifted sharply. "Are you planning to play the race card here?"

I was taken aback. "Where is that coming from?" I asked.

"You just played it," they replied.

At that moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of fear. I knew that speaking up too much could lead to negative consequences for me, as it often does for racialized individuals in these spaces. I carefully de-escalated the situation, saying, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make this complicated. I won't close my eyes while sitting here. Thank you."

While I managed to avoid further conflict, the incident left me shaken. It was a reminder of the invisible rules that racialized people are expected to follow—rules that others might not even encounter. The phrase "respect the furniture" became emblematic of the ways my presence in this space was questioned and surveilled. More than that, it symbolized the unspoken threat: "You do not belong here."

These experiences are a stark reminder of the emotional and psychological toll that comes with being "othered" in academia. Despite my achievements, I am often left asking myself, "Am I academic enough?" But the deeper question is not about my abilities—it is about the systems that refuse to see me as enough.

Discussion

Decolonizing land-based identity requires a deep and committed engagement with the intersections of settler colonialism histories, land relations, and identity formation. For a land-based researcher from Bangladesh and a settler of color and decolonial scholar in Canada, this process is not only a scholarly responsibility but also an act of healing and resistance. The settler colonialism processes that severed me from my land, culture, and spirituality necessitate a deliberate and transformative approach to reclaiming these lost connections. This discussion explores why decolonizing land-based identity is crucial for personal and collective healing, emphasizing the roles of responsibility, interconnectedness, and the transformative potential of decolonial methodologies.

Responsibility as Land-Based Researchers and Scholars

Reclaiming my spiritual relationships with the land has been an act of self-determination, resilience, and healing from the traumas inflicted by the colonizing status quo. The responsibility of decolonizing land-based identity emerges from recognizing how settler colonialism structures have systematically

severed relational ways of knowing. As a land-based researcher from Bangladesh, this responsibility is deeply personal and political. Settler colonialism education systems in Bangladesh deliberately dismantled Indigenous and relational learning rooted in ceremony and spirituality, replacing them with Eurocentric, hierarchical frameworks that disconnected people from their ancestral lands and lifeways (Battiste, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012). These imposed structures fragmented collective identities, replacing the deeply interconnected *we* with an individualized, extractive worldview (Simpson, 2014).

Similarly, as a settler of color scholar in Canada, my responsibility includes acknowledging my complex position within settler colonial systems—both as someone affected by racial marginalization and as a beneficiary of settler colonialism. This positionality demands a commitment to dismantling settler colonialism hierarchies while actively centering Indigenous sovereignty and land-based knowledge systems (Regan, 2010).

Both perspectives share a foundation in relational accountability, emphasizing reciprocity, respect, and the collective well-being of communities and lands. Decolonization, then, is not only an intellectual project but a lived practice—one that requires challenging dominant settler colonialism epistemologies in academic spaces and advocating for the resurgence of diverse, land-based ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Healing Through Decolonization

The process of decolonizing land-based identity is inherently a journey of healing. For the racialized researcher, reclaiming land-based practices offers a pathway to reconnect with cultural roots and counteract the erasure perpetuated by settler colonialism systems. Ceremonies, rituals, and relational teachings rooted in the land are not only acts of resistance but also sources of spiritual and emotional restoration (Alfred, 2005; Cajete, 2000). These practices reaffirm interconnectedness with all beings, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose.

For the settler of color scholar, healing involves confronting the trauma of displacement and erasure experienced by Indigenous peoples while navigating their own histories of migration and settler colonialism impact. Engaging in decolonial methodologies such as story-sharing allows for the creation of spaces where marginalized voices are validated and honored (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). Participating in these practices, scholars can contribute to collective healing processes that challenge the dominance of settler colonialism narratives.

This paper highlights how healing is both a personal and collective journey. It requires critical learning of the interconnectedness of humans, land, and other beings, moving away from individualistic paradigms toward relational ways of being (Marker, 2019; Simpson, 2017). This transformation is not merely an academic exercise but a profound expression of love, care, and responsibility toward the land and its inhabitants.

Challenges and Transformative Potential

Decolonizing land-based identity is fraught with challenges, particularly within academic and societal structures that uphold settler colonialism hierarchies. For the racialized researcher in Canada, these challenges include navigating educational systems that prioritize Western knowledge while devaluing local and Indigenous epistemologies (Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The erasure of land-based identities through these systems perpetuates feelings of alienation and displacement.

For the settler of color scholar, the challenges involve addressing the tensions between their positionality as both marginalized and complicit within settler colonial frameworks. This requires a continuous interrogation of privilege and an unwavering commitment to allyship with Indigenous communities. My personal decolonial stories illustrate how these challenges manifest in academic spaces, where racialized scholars often face microaggressions and systemic exclusion (Dei, 1996; Marker, 2019).

Despite these obstacles, I learned that my transformative potential of decolonizing land-based identity lies in its ability to disrupt settler colonialism structures and create spaces for diverse ways of knowing. The article underscores the power of story-sharing as a decolonial methodology that prioritizes relational knowledge and personal narratives (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Story-sharing is ceremony because it enacts relational accountability, renews responsibilities, and situates identity within place. Taken together, this framework brings conceptual and methodological clarity by showing how reflective narratives operate simultaneously as decolonial praxis and as pathways for healing. It also provides a model for other researchers and communities seeking to integrate story-sharing and ceremony into their own work. Through storytelling, scholars can resist colonial erasure, foster solidarity, and contribute to movements for decolonization and justice.

Conclusion

Reflecting on this article, I recognize the critical act of reclaiming land-based identity as both a personal and political act of healing and resistance. Through reflective story-sharing, I explore how settler colonialism education, governance, and epistemologies have severed Indigenous and land-based peoples, including myself, from cultural and spiritual roots. In doing so, I challenge settler colonialism hierarchies by centering relational accountability, reciprocity, and land-based knowledge systems.

I use decolonial methodologies, particularly storytelling, as both an act of inquiry and activism. Weaving personal narratives with critical analysis, I make complex colonial critiques accessible while reinforcing the lived realities of land-based knowledge suppression. The personal nature of my stories strengthens my argument, making the process of reclaiming identity tangible, emotional, and deeply resonant.

However, I acknowledge the ongoing resistance faced in reclaiming land-based identity within settler colonialism academic and social structures. While I highlight these struggles, I realize I could further explore strategies for sustaining these efforts in hostile environments. Additionally, while my work serves as a model for others seeking to decolonize their identities, providing more concrete steps or community-based frameworks would enhance its applicability. This work is not just about theory but about lived experience and survival. My journey of reclaiming land-based identity is an offering to others navigating decolonization, demonstrating how this process fosters both individual healing and collective resurgence.

The responsibility of decolonizing land-based identity is a critical act of healing and transformation for a land-based researcher from my home country and a settler of color anti-racist scholar in Canada. Attending to specificity—whether in place, ritual, memory, or more-than-human relations—strengthens this contribution by showing how story-sharing is both personal and translatable. For others, this offers a way to engage decolonial praxis that is not about adopting a universal template but about carefully situating one's own responsibilities, relations, and contexts.

For a racialized researcher, decolonizing identity is a reclamation of cultural roots, spirituality, and relational practices that settler colonialism systems sought to erase. As a settler of color scholar, it is my strength and challenge to settler colonialism and a commitment to advancing anti-racist and decolonial efforts. Together, these perspectives showcase the transformative potential of decolonization as both a personal and collective journey.

Centering relational accountability, healing, and decolonial methodologies, this work contributes to broader conversations on decolonization, advocating for systems and practices that honor land-based identities and knowledge. This process is not merely an act of resistance but a profound expression of love, care, and responsibility—an essential step toward creating a more just and sustainable world.

This article shows how this research may be understood as a ceremonial story-sharing framework that guides researchers and communities in decolonial praxis. It unfolds through four interconnected movements: (1) situating land as a living relation; (2) surfacing lived stories that reveal how colonial systems shape and sever identities; (3) engaging those stories collectively through reciprocity, listening, and ceremony to generate relational accountability; and (4) transforming these insights into community-led actions for healing and systems change. This iterative process—reflection, ceremony, sharing, and renewal—positions story-sharing as both method and ethical orientation. It invites others to locate their own responsibilities within their lands and relationships, rather than adopting a universal template. In doing so, it offers a translatable model for integrating ceremony and storytelling into research that seeks to decolonize identity and reimagine relationships of land, knowledge, and justice.

Conflict of Interest Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Ethics statement

No formal ethics review was required, as this paper draws solely on the author's (my) own decolonial autobiographical and land-based reflections. I have carefully protected personal and contextual details to avoid identifying others, and I honour cultural teachings by sharing only what I am responsible and permitted to share.

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Peer Review Article

Cabbage, Curation and the Convivial:

Relational Systems Change through Artist Residencies, Sympoiethic Rituals and Liberatory Practices

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Abstract
This article explores an artist-led research residency centred on a participatory cabbage fermentation ritual as a lens for systems change. Drawing on arts-based and postqualitative methodologies, the work engages with food, ritual, and

somatic knowing to cultivate relational awareness and collective sense-making. Using fermentation as a material, culinary practice, and metaphor for systemic shifts, the residency created a space for experiential inquiry into questions of ecological restoration, racial justice, and cultural transformation.

Participants engaged with food as sustenance, and as a site of memory, care, and co-creation. Through slicing, salting, storytelling, and stillness, the cabbage becomes co-curator and teacher, activating sympoiethics as a co-creative ethic rooted in interdependence with the more-than-human world. Three *sympoethic* inter-relationships manifest: curating the convivial as an aesthetic of care, ritual as a liberatory praxis for relational sovereignty, and the artist residency as a vital habitat for emergent and situated transformation. This work affirms that systems change can be enlivened through embodied, intimate, and sensory engagement where thinking, making, and sensing are inseparable. In the fermenting jar, the sharing of food, a listening circle, and the relational gesture, a different future is unfolding.

Keywords

arts-based research, artist residency, convivial, curation, fermentation, food ritual, experiential sensemaking, postqualitative inquiry, sympoiethics, Ubuntu, relational sovereignty

Funding Statement

The Residency was financially supported by Centre for the Study of the Afterlife of Violence and the Reparative Quest (AVReQ) and the Centre for Sustainability Transitions (CST) at Stellenbosch University. The Stellenbosch University Museum generously offered studio space and logistical support. Airfare for Living Justice was sponsored by a generous private donor. Food donated from Boschendal Estate.

Introduction

The *Tasting Ubuntu* Artist Research Residency, held over three weeks in early 2024, formed part of a longer-term programme of exchange between Living Justice,[1] a UK based cultural agency, the Centre for the Study of the Afterlife of Violence and the Reparative Quest (AVReQ)[2] and the Centre for Sustainability Transitions (CST)[3] at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, and Stellenbosch University Museum (SUM).[4] Commissioned by AVReQ and in collaboration with

[1] https://livingjustice.earth/

[2] https://avreq.sun.ac.za

[3] https://www0.sun.ac.za/cst/

[4] https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Museum

CST and SUM, Living Justice was invited to curate experiences and dialogues around the inter-twining arenas of food and racial justice. With their research partners and with the generous involvement of Earth Lore Foundation,[5] they devised a sequence of encounters, knowledge-exchanges and *Tasting Ubuntu* cabbage fermentation food ritual.

The residency was developed to explore the intersecting fields of food justice, ecological repair, and cultural transformation through situated, arts-led research. Commissioned and supported by these institutional partners, Living Justice was invited to design and facilitate a series of experiential inquiries and community dialogues. These included participatory practices, artistic interventions, and listening circles culminating in a cabbage fermentation ritual. With the involvement of an organisation specialising in indigenous ecological knowledge and community sovereignty, the project curated a sequence of making listening and thinking encounters and knowledge exchanges rooted in story-telling, collective memory, sensory engagement, and liberatory aesthetics.

We reflect on three inter-twining contributions that emerge from the residency. The first is the concept of curating the convivial as an aesthetics that centres an everyday ethics of care and co-creative world-making within systems change (Fabre Lewin et al., 2015). The second is contemporary ritual as a responsive and liberatory praxis within which to experience our personal agency as part of a participatory consciousness, our relational sovereignty as defined by Living Justice (Fabre Lewin, 2019). Our third contribution is highlighting the value of the artist research residency as a spacious time, exploratory and enlivening habitat for cultivating emergent, context-sensitive responses to complexity (Fabre Lewin, 2019).

Our inquiry aligns with the emerging field of awareness-based systems change (Scharmer, 2018), which emphasises the cultivation of inner capacities such as attention, presence, and collective sensing, as foundations for transforming outer systems (Pomeroy et al., 2025). Within the residency, awareness is seen as relational and embodied attunement (Hayashi, 2025) becoming both method and outcome. Our process of harvesting unfolds as an on-going diffractive exchange of entangled interactions and *intra-actions* (Barad, 2012). Through image, material engagement and a poetic narrative, we give voice to the sentience of the cabbages grown within the nearby food garden of an eco village, to the multiplicity of air-borne yeasts, and to the subtle intelligences of the body in relationship with the matter and processes of life (Barad, 2003). This opening to a resonant field of co-inquiry holds space for the agency and vibrancy of matter as a pathway for sensemaking towards systems change (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025).

[5] https://earthlorefoundation.org

We invite the reader into the context, lineages, evolution, gestures, and insights of this situated residency and food ritual.

Contextual Groundings and Living Practice

The Artist Research Residency, *Tasting Ubuntu*, originated through encounters between Living Justice and research partners in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The connective threads wove together an understanding of art as a relational modality of intervention with the potential for cultivating a politics of consciousness through food rituals which surface how racial, social, ecological and food justice (Goodchild, 2021) are intertwined. The dialogue between Living Justice, AVReQ, CST, and Stellenbosch University recognized the value of experiential knowledge and embodied co-creation as integral to decolonising practices around food sovereignty. The fourth partner, Stellenbosch University Museum, came forward to offer an accessible and spacious studio within an annex building on the Museum site and at the centre of the university campus. For the Museum's curatorial team, there was benefit in a residency embodying the participatory philosophy of Ubuntu as part of marking 30 years of Democracy in South Africa. The residency was an opportunity to explore how situated artistic practices offer relational ways of knowing, being, and becoming within entangled human and more-than-human ecologies (Goodchild, 2021). Drawing on enactivist thought, the residency embraced thinking, making, and sensing as a dynamic mode of inquiry where understanding arises through material engagement (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). This is work which calls for a shift from detached observation to participatory enactment and transforms, rather than complements, intellectual inquiry by centering felt experience and relational co-constitution.

Living Justice's body of work is dedicated to the restoration of art, ritual and the artisan for coming to know through collaborative engagement with our bodymind's intelligences in co-existence with the vibrancy of matter. Sympoiethics offers a relational awareness of this nature-cultural worldmaking wherein we experience our humanity as a responsive and reciprocal becoming-*with* the other-than-human world (Fabre Lewin & Gathorne-Hardy, 2021a; Haraway, 2016;).[6] This invitation to make-with each other and the matter of life enlivens and integrates the sacred and the political, the embodied and psychological, the ecological and cultural, all within a responsive ethics of care in the everyday (Fabre Lewin, 2019; Fabre Lewin & Gathorne-Hardy, 2021b). Central to these enlivenment methodologies (Weber, 2019) is the role of somatic and imaginal work (Hayashi, 2025). These are practices which assist in uncovering and attending to both the conscious and unconscious ways in which

[6] Sympoiethics as a relational praxis emerged through on-going collaborative explorations of Fabre Lewin's sympoietic ritual methodology that she developed through her practice-based doctoral research (Fabre Lewin, 2019).

dominant ideologies, such as white supremacy, marginalise and exclude people from actively contributing and shaping cultures and food ecosystems (Fabre Lewin, 1990; Fabre Lewin, 2012).

Within a socially engaged practice, Living Justice engages with food and food rituals as a vital ground for sympoiethic practice. Through the soil-food-web of growing, cooking and sharing food we as humans are part of a cycle of intimate, life-giving connections to each other and the more-than-human world. The process of thinking-making-with the matter of ecologically grown produce within the bounded form of a thanks-giving ritual food highlights how our co-existence takes place within extensive and relational experiences. As Goodman (2013) reflects, "given the embodied nature of food, whether eaten, grown or husbanded, different practices and different ways of 'being with food' provide the space for different food relationalities that then give rise to possible, transformative political openings" (p. 2).

This experiencing of the matter and processes of food as a connective aesthetic (Gablik, 1992b) aligns with and draws inspiration from the wisdoms of Ubuntu cosmology and philosophy from Southern African indigenous cultures (Murove, 2012). Core to its ethos is an understanding of individuality as an *inter-becoming* through intricate inter-dependent relationships between humans and non-humans (Ramose, 2003). As a way of living, it aspires to interrelatedness, cooperation, and working together towards a common goal, all as "a fundamental part of the human experience, shaping our interactions, relationships, and responses to the complex and ever-changing world around us" (Carstens & Preiser, 2024, p. 7). What it means to be human emerges from a participatory consciousness of "teachings, interactions, experiences and intuition" (Carstens & Preiser, 2024, p. 7).

Tasting Ubuntu as the title for the residency engages us in the intention that considers the relational ethics of Ubuntu consciousness through the senses of touch, taste, smell, feeling, as well memories and biographies associated with food. The focus of the residency was a ritual of cabbage fermentation which engaged the participants within processes of co-production, skills- sharing, and the creating of a health-giving food, all of which offered a small scale, domestic experience of biodiversity, and a potent metaphor for cultural transformation. As Mara Miele writes "taste has emancipatory powers" (Miele cited in Goodman, 2014, p. 272). Being-with the cabbage, with each other, and with the culinary interactions of salt and air-born microorganisms offered us an experience of our relational sovereignty inviting in refreshed forms of knowing and sense-making. As a participant expressed, "I sense the Ubuntu in my body through the fermenting of the cabbage" (Participant A, 6 March 2024).

While this paper offers a textured account of the residency, our methodological commitment remains to foreground the *processual* and *relational* dimensions of knowing rather than to represent individual participants. The residency was intentionally designed as a safe and experimental space in which participants could explore creative and embodied forms of inquiry without the

gaze of observation. To honour that trust, we have resisted ethnographic narration, personal profiling, or the impulse to evidence change, and have instead sought to evoke the collective atmospheres, gestures, and resonances through which relational learning unfolded. In doing so, the focus remains on process rather than personhood and on the sympoiethic dynamics of *curating conviviality* that made the work possible.

Figure 1 brings the fermenting cabbage into view, a presence whose voice we wanted to bring in here to include the materiality of the more-than-human agency that enlivened the practices of conviviality.

Figure 1: *Purple cabbage in mid-ferment: a living symbol of transformation, interdependence, and the slow choreography of care.*

In the beginning we touch, holding the head of cabbage between our palms. We listen. And what we hear the slicing through layers of leaves, through the salt massaging, is song. A green and purple bodied archive of soil and water, sun and ancestry, microbial life and seasonal rhythms, the cabbage becomes our teacher, ritualist, and co-curator.

As the cabbage softens and begins to bubble in glass jars, so too do the boundaries between ourselves dissolve. Microbiota becomes metaphors for community, for resilience, for the fact that we are, quite literally, made of multiplicity. Biodiversity in a bowl and cultural diversity in a room.

Through the cabbage, Ubuntu ferments… slow, moist, alive. We begin to sense that knowing arises from the hands, from mind, from membranes, from the tang of brine, and the patience of waiting. Cabbage teaches us about entering into living cycles of Kairos time, re-composition, transformation, the enlivening taste of care.

As a culinary, cultural, and microbial process, cabbage fermentation is a health-giving and transformative activity through which care, intimacy, and healing manifest materially. As a living process and as a participatory ecology, fermentation links the health of the human body with environmental cycles, harnessing the biodiversity of bacterial cultures with cultural traditions of wellbeing. Raw cabbage is turned into a food medicine which promotes good gut bacteria in human beings. It also contributes to low carbon living and food security, and supports practices in food sovereignty.

Emplacing the Residency

The three-week Artist Research Residency *Tasting Ubuntu* took place between late February and early March 2024. During this time, Living Justice catalysed a participatory model of research-in-practice through iterative, emergent, and documented dialogues within the University Museum studio, across campus research centres, and through interventions at local food and farming venues. The title *Tasting Ubuntu* emerged from the residency's intention to make the philosophy of Ubuntu tangible through the senses. Ubuntu is a Southern African philosophy and ethical worldview originating in Bantu languages and cosmologies. Rooted in the expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,* which translated means that a person is a person through other persons, it articulates a relational ontology in which human existence is constituted through mutual care, interdependence, and community (Carstens & Preiser, 2024; Chilisa, 2012). The act of tasting evokes a slow, intimate mode of knowing: one that requires presence, attention, and trust in embodied discernment. To *taste* Ubuntu is to encounter relationality not as an abstract ethical principle but as a felt, multisensory experience of interdependence. Through shared food, smell, touch,

and memory, the residency invited participants to sense how belonging, care, and transformation ferment through everyday gestures. Naming the work *Tasting Ubuntu* thus honours the relational ethics and sensory epistemologies at its heart gesturing to an invitation to know *with*, rather than *about* one another (Peers, 2024). True to a participatory and collaborative methodology, these cycles of improvisation with the unknown were welcomed and engaged as part of an approach that embraces the emergent and responsive, the serendipitous, and the intuitive (Haraway, 2016; Haugen, 2011).

The open and accessible studio environment provided time and space for a range of activities, including art-making with found objects, collaborative pair work, mark-making, presentations, and convivial exchanges focused on deep listening. It also hosted the *Tasting Ubuntu* cabbage fermentation ritual and culminated in a residency exhibition. Throughout, the presence of the cabbage and the microbial agents of transformation served as guiding forces and companions in the process. These encounters contributed to a pedagogy of liberation and consciousness-making that expands beyond individual cognition into collective, ecological, and equity-based awareness (Roszak, 1976). Responsive and process-sensitive in nature, the residency welcomed a diverse group of participants to co-create and share in these experiential, intercultural, and relational interventions. These included students, chefs, curators, artists, researchers, local residents, gardeners, food growers, activists, policy makers, local government representatives, and Museum staff.

The *Tasting Ubuntu* fermentation ritual, co-hosted as a day-long event with visiting collaborator Method Gundidza of EarthLore Foundation, took place toward the close of the residency. There were 26 participants from diverse backgrounds welcomed into the studio, including longstanding collaborators and new connections drawn through informal networks. Around the walls and along a washing line were drawings, writings, images, posters, articles, and other printed material generated during the previous weeks of the residency. Once participants had introduced themselves and shared the soil of their birth, Method Gundidza offered his experiences of thanksgiving food rituals as cultural spaces for honoring our interdependence with the elements of soil, air, earth, and water. The fermentation ritual was then opened by Miche Fabre Lewin by the lighting of a candle and the lifting of a tablecloth under which were arranged 26 red and green cabbages, wooden boards, chopping knives, and bowls. The ritual unfolded through a series of participatory moments: a time of silent contemplation as each participant was invited to hold a cabbage in their hands, a hands-on exchange of fermentation practices, the shared preparation, and the filling of jars filled with fermenting cabbage. The ritual closed with the placement of the filled jars alongside the candle and the extinguishing of the flame. The ritual was followed by a celebratory sharing of a lunch of local and seasonal food, and, in the afternoon, a closing circle for listening and reflection, creating space to attune to the resonances of the experience and the relationships it fostered.

During the ritual, participants were invited by Miche Fabre Lewin to engage viscerally with food through actions such as slicing, salting, massaging, and tasting. Memories of soil, family kitchens, ancestral recipes, and personal stories were recalled and shared. These spacious interactions, layered with conversation, silence and reflection, reconnected us to lineages of care that are often rendered invisible by colonial and capitalist food systems (Penniman, 2023; Salami, 2020). The room became a space for communion and co-creation rather than consumption and control. The process echoed forms of intergenerational healing that often elude discursive language. In the space shaped by ritual, gut feeling, physical gesture, and relational gaze were given priority over speech and grammar, allowing participants to access a different mode of sensing and knowing. Moments of laughter and silence, the scent of salt and cabbage mingling with body heat, became data of another kind that offered felt traces through which the research came alive. The residency was lived through the pulse of everyday gestures: the shared bowl, sound of cutting, the cleaning of the knife, the washing of hands. These small acts grounded the conceptual language of transformation in the body's own ecology and biography. A short series of participant reflections collected informally after the ritual underscored this visceral texture. One participant described the experience as "research that smells of earth and salt" (Participant A, 6 March 2024). Another spoke of "feeling the theory in my hands" (Participant B, 6 March 2024). Such fragments remind us that the residency's knowledge production unfolded through pulse, breath, and proximity, informing a material epistemology of lived experience.

Tasting Ubuntu engaged the three intertwined movements of transformation as mentioned by O'Brien & Sygna (2013): the practical, political, and personal. In the residency these were manifest through the embodied and iterative experiences of sensing and presencing. These spheres unfolded through studio emplacement, slow attentional practices such as holding the cabbage to experience it sensuously before working with it. Through the physical gesture of the fermenting process we shared the tactile, the smell of brine, awaiting the bubbles, hearing the creaking sound of cabbage being massaged. With these embodied connections, presencing expanded. Together these processes trace a living arc that connects the personal, practical, and political. These inner shifts of awareness through convivial, sensory practice prefigure broader institutional and policy imaginaries, inviting systemic change within embodied, relational, and everyday acts of care (O'Brien & Sygna, 2013). *Tasting Ubuntu* contributes to a *gastrosophy* (Lemke, 2007) as a food politics and philosophy experienced through taste and touch, anchored in lived, sensory truth. By opening to new understandings of food as a participatory consciousness, participants shared feelings of being "viscerally moved," "reconnected to something old and real," and "reminded of home in a way I didn't expect" (Participants C, D, E, 6 March 2024). The ritual was at once a living archive and an experiment, an embodied space where the convivial could surface, circulate, and be consciously cultivated.

Curating the Convivial | An Offering

Tasting Ubuntu, as an arc of encounters and a fermentation food ritual, invited convivial engagements in which curation emerged as an intentional practice of care—a sequence of offerings and invitations with the potential to touch, educate, and transform those involved. Participants were able to be with themselves, to work in pairs, silently or in conversation, to ask questions and offer insights and support – all as hands massaged fresh leaves, as pinches of salt were added to bowls, as smells emerged and slices of cabbage secreted their fresh juices. This generative and iterative unfolding is what we refer to as curating the convivial. It is a sensuous choreography of movement, gestures, and exchanges oriented toward a shared intention. It is a living conversation and an exploration of how we live well together. Conviviality, in returning to its etymological roots, becomes a relational ethic. It calls us to treat matter and, in this case, cabbage, with the same tenderness we offer to our own head (Dōgen, 1237/2005), to tend to one another, and to honour the sentient, animate world in which we are embedded.

This ethic of care is a foundational element of being human, as illustrated in the Roman myth of Cura (Pogue Harrison, 2008). In the story, Cura shapes a human body from clay. Jupiter grants it spirit, Earth claims the substance, and Saturn names it *homo*, derived from *humus*, or soil. Saturn decrees that while the body lives, it will be held in Cura's care. Upon death, its spirit returns to Jupiter, and its body to Earth. The myth reminds us that to care, or to curate, is to act from Cura's lineage. It is to allow life, transformation, and relational integrity to unfold in their own time. Care is not peripheral to curatorial practice; it is its very ground (Haraway, 2016; Mathews, 2003; Tronto, 1993). Within this framing, curatorial work becomes a living, breathing art of care. The fermentation ritual involved shaping spaces that offered welcome, safety, and belonging. Attention was given to how people entered and moved through the studio, how objects were encountered, the acoustics, furnishings, walls, and places of interaction. During the ritual, each participant was invited to and found their own way to contribute, to express themselves within the rhythm of a collective endeavour. Curation involves this conscious designing of the psychological, material, and built conditions through which people can relate to themselves, each other and the more-than-human world.

Conviviality is defined as "amiable, intimate sets of relationships which carry a notion of peace and equality" (Overing & Passes, 2000, p. 14). It resembles the interdependent dynamics of a biological system. Derived from *con* (with) and *vivere* (to live), it describes a way of being in relation, of living with and alongside others. Convivial sociality requires and nurtures both emotional and cognitive capacities. "To live a moral, social existence," write Overing and Passes, "requires that there be no split between thoughts and feelings, mind and body" (2000, p. 19). Illich adds that conviviality is "the autonomous and creative intercourse amongst persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment," rooted in interdependence and imbued with ethical value (Illich, 1973, p. 17). A convivial life is inherently creative and relational. It must be

cultivated, co-created, and cocurated. It also requires containment where spaces are designed with care for comfort, memory, rhythm, and ease of movement. For conviviality to take hold, it must grow from situated, attentive engagement with the material and relational ecologies we co-inhabit—a commitment embodied by the *Tasting Ubuntu* cabbage fermentation ritual, as well as through other informal food sharing moments and artistic explorations during the residency.

Curating the convivial is thus a way of making space for connection. Drawing from Illich's vision of autonomous and creative interplay, we understand curation as both aesthetic and ethical. The convivial lives in the gestures, interactions, and exchanges that unfold within consciously held and collectively shaped space. It holds the possibility of sacred encounter, where ritual, art, and the everyday converge in a resonant moment. The residency was devoted to this: curating the convivial to nurture connection and foster practices of living well together. Through everyday rituals of harvesting, cooking, eating, and composting, life rhythms and relationships were honoured (Ballantyne-Brodie, 2018). *Tasting Ubuntu* and the wider residency sought to create a container where we could practice being and becoming-with in a carefully crafted and co-created space made sacred. In this way, the fermentation ritual and other invitations and processes—collage making, sitting with objects, listening circles—offered forms of artful knowing capable of dissolving boundaries between mind and body, theory and practice, nature and culture, art and academia, matter and spirit (Seeley, 2011).

For conviviality to take root, we must attend to the context and address the *out-of-placeness* created by patterns of alienation, disconnection, and dispossession. Genuine relational encounters require that curation be oriented toward connection rather than separation. For one of the group, this collective ritual experience "birthed the deep sense of reverence, connection, and groundedness which I have been longing for" (Participant F, 6 March 2024). Curating the convivial is about enlivening the conditions necessary for living well together. This potential for expanding relationships with ourselves and each other, arises when hospitality is intentionally cultivated, and the warmth of welcome is felt as genuine care. Indeed, the choreographed gestures created for dialoguing in the presence of cabbage fermentation catalyse our ability to know ourselves and each other more deeply. In curated encounters with food in the unfamiliar setting of the studio, participants are invited into exchanges that enliven selfhood and deepen mutual understanding through embodied experience (Weber, 2019).

Ritual Methodology | Becoming-*with* Food

The second offering to the reader is contemporary ritual as a responsive and liberatory praxis for experiencing relational sovereignty (Fabre Lewin, 2019; Fabre Lewin & Gathorne-Hardy, 2021). Ritual- making and art have been embedded within the making of nature-cultures since the birth of humanity. As long-standing cultural practices, rituals have shaped human societies by

choreographing bodily gestures, handling objects, and honouring present time, ancestry, and future generations (Bell, 1992; Grimes, 2013; Somé, 1998; Turner, 1969). Fox and Sheldrake (1996) highlight the cohering role of ritual in society through which we connect to the whole. They write of ritual as a form of visceral education that needs to get "into our bloodstream" with the participation of our bodies and breath and visions (Fox & Sheldrake, 1996, pp. 146–147).

It is in the making of ritual that we practice consciousness and respect our interdependent origins with the Earth (Fabre Lewin, 2019). Healer, theorist, and ritual-maker Malidoma Patrice Some discovers in his healing workshops and seminars in Europe and North America that people are longing for connection, there is a hunger for community (Somé, 1998). For the regeneration of human cultures, he frames a cultural practice where we can be dwelling in radical ritual for healing (Somé, 1998). Suzi Gablik writes of a "remythologizing of consciousness through art and ritual as a way that our culture can regain a sense of enchantment" (Gablik, 1992a, p. 48). Both choreograph forms, gestures, and processes through the handling of matter and artefacts, and both stimulate the movement of the body. Additionally, the impulse of art and ritual encourages the practice of gratitude as well as nurturing the sensibility for a feelingful life. Both engage humans in inter and intra-ctions vital for keeping alive our dynamic relationship within the ecosystem.

These practices invite participation in an animate, sentient world (Haley, 2016), sustaining a dynamic connection between human and more-than-human communities and nurturing a feelingful, responsive existence within Earth's ecosystems (Macy, 1991). *Sympoiesis*, coined by Beth Dempster, names the co-creative and interdependent nature of ecosystems (Dempster, 2000; Haraway, 2016). Fabre Lewin and Gathorne-Hardy (2021a) expand this into *sympoiethics* to name an ethics of care practiced through participatory worldmaking. Aligned with Ubuntu philosophies, sympoiethics affirms human sovereignty as relational, grounded in mutual respect for sentient matter and the habitats we share. As Fabre Lewin (2019) describes, the artful bodymind as an instrument for intuiting and knowing modes of being-with the world, operating in a *sympoietic* dance with psyche, soma, and the imaginal processes. Corbet (2024) echoes this, framing the bodymind as an ecological whole, constantly attuned to its context through dynamic, relational flow. The art of *sympoiethics* values this integration of sensation, memory, imagination, and matter as vital for nurturing natureculture relationships. Holdrege's *living thinking* (2013) complements this by describing a mode of inquiry shaped by vitality, flexibility, and openness. Fermentation becomes a material expression of this thinking. It slows us down, connects us to process, and brings attention to the entanglements between hands, cabbage, bodyminds, and environment. Preparing and tasting fermented cabbage together became a catalyst for epistemic healing, affirming how transformation begins in embodied, shared actions rather than abstractions.

The shared etymology of *art*, *ritual*, and *artisan* in the Sanskrit word *rta*, meaning cosmic truth or dynamic order, points to their origins in attunement

with life's flow (Haley, 2016). This expansive understanding aligns with Ubuntu cosmology, affirming that human creativity is part of a co-creative process with the living Earth (Gablik, 1992a). At the heart of the *Tasting Ubuntu* residency and cabbage fermentation ritual was a commitment to **rta**, the unfolding process of being-with. The artist-researchers engaged with the studio as a transformative container where thinking, making, and sensing converged into an integrated way of knowing. Fabre Lewin's concept of the *artful bodymind* (2019) captures this ontological stance, where psyche and soma, imagination and emotion move in co-creative relation. It recognises human beingness as embedded within an interdependent ecology of life.

In this way, art, ritual, and the artisan create conditions for remembering diverse ways of knowing rooted in interaction with others and the more-than-human world. A jar of fermented cabbage remained in the studio throughout the residency, as well as jugs and glasses of fresh water, a bowl of soil from the site, and baskets of seasonal fruit for people to enjoy. The elements and found objects with all their multiple cultural associations were always present and honoured within the space, as were people's written words and drawings. In this regard, we find deep kinship with the work of Zayaan Khan, a South African artist and food justice practitioner whose practice activates *food, seed, and land* as living archives of memory, resistance, and relation (Khan, n.d.). Through material storytelling, fermentation, and embodied ritual, Khan's work also enacts what we call *tasting Ubuntu*: a sensorial ethics of interdependence. For her ritual practices with food and land are acts of reclaiming political agency. Her fermentations and gatherings make visible how nourishment itself can be insurgent as an act of re-membering and restoring power to the hands, soils, and communities from which it was taken. In this sense, ritual becomes both a politics and a poetics of repair through engagement with material processes in everyday life; it reconnects inner and outer, felt and formed, mundane and sacred.

Within the ritual of fermentation, the ancestral and the ecological become extended sensory and memoried intelligences nourishing us while reconnecting to the living world. Many stories were shared during the *Tasting Ubuntu* fermentation ritual that connected us to anestral knowledge, forging links between the past, present and future. The word *culture* itself recalls its roots in agri-culture and culinary traditions of nourishment. Through this lens, fermentation becomes a way of cultivating ecological consciousness as an everyday alchemy. Embracing both preservation and transformation, fermentation as matter and metaphor, is a process that holds the tensions between stability and change. It reminds us that biodiversity is necessary for ecosystems to thrive, and essential for the health of the internal ecologies of our bodies. It reconceptualises an understanding that the lived experience of everyday practices, such as food making, becomes an emancipatory arena for cultivating and inspiring a politics of consciousness. Rae Johnson (2009) suggests that everyday practices such as food preparation and ritual hold untapped potential for fostering both personal growth and socio-political change. While

feminist and activist movements have often focused on large-scale institutional reform, these embodied, poetic engagements with the simple rhythms of life may offer a powerful, overlooked pathway toward both self-actualization and transformative action. Engaging in fermentation reclaims culture as an everyday, participatory practice.

Embodied and ecological rituals with food and culinary practices offer a solution to our disembodied living and disconnection from each other and the animate world. Fermentation as Julia Skinner (2022) notes, enhances a food's nutrient profile as well as fostering relational renewal. Here, the food ritual becomes a site of reconnection thus addressing intergenerational trauma, ecological disconnection, and reminding us that care, transformation, and collective becoming start with how we live and nourish together. In our contemporary and commodified cultures, there is the potential for ritual to offer a channel for bringing together diverse and intangible elements of culture and life and restoring the lost wisdom that we humans are naturalcultural creatures within a sentient world (Haraway, 2016).

In Figures 2-7, we depict the intentional and practical movements of fermenting cabbage on 6 March 2024.

Figure 2: *Green and purple cabbages placed on a cutting board prior to preparation for fermentation.*

Figure 3: *Hands cradling a purple cabbage, inviting an early moment of encounter before its transformation through fermentation.*

Figure 4: *Slicing fresh cabbage to prepare it for dry-salting and fermentation.*

Figure 5: *Hands massaging cabbage together, marking the start of the embodied, microbial work of fermentation.*

Figure 6: *Massaging the salted cabbage breaks cell walls and releases liquid, creating the natural brine needed for lacto-fermentation.*

Figure 7: *Ritual attunement to the jars of fermenting green and purple cabbage held in place by water-filled glasses.*

Artist Residency | Sympoethic Habitat for Worldmaking

The frame of an artist research residency and its methodology of curating the convivial with ritual practice, together offered a safe container for honouring the experience of the entangled, living processes of sympoiethic worldmaking (Tsing et al., 2017). This concept of a residency as a radical refugia for innovative thinking-making has its precursor in the concept of Artist Placement Group (APG) (Flat Time House, n.d.), where artists were placed within organisations to pioneer change and progression as well as enhancing the capacities of a site. Founded by Barbara Steveni and John Latham, these residencies championed the role of artists in decision-making and fostered participatory, collaborative projects between artists, students, teachers, researchers, staff and workers, evolving into opportunities for alternative learning and creative exploration.

There are many artist residencies across the world. While it is a well-established concept, the form that residencies take is experimental and emergent, encompassing many different kinds of activities and engagements that invite processes of reflection, research, presentation and production (Fabre Lewin 2019). During a residency the artists explore the multi-layered nature of their practice and are supported to engage new materials or immerse themselves a new locations and communities.

Tasting Ubuntu embraced the spirit of place, preparation for, and careful attention to the particularities of context. This contextual awareness to the politics of place, the people, the material, and the more-than-human presences and its specific relational textures were the ground for creating the conditions for meaningful interaction to unfold. Such emplacement included tuning into the surroundings of the studio, building on existing relationships, opening the space

to visitors, making time to be with situational processes, discovering new elements, sensing into their resonances, and researching histories and relations.

These practices made possible by being in residency also point toward what Maclaren (2018) terms *ontological intimacy*—a condition in which we are inevitably transgressed by, and transgress upon, each other. This is being and becoming-*with*: we shape and are shaped by the orientations, gestures, and intentionalities of others. The enactive perspective held within the residency illuminates how thinking and knowing arise from doing and being, interactions that require time and agency within a generative habitat (De Jaegher & Di Paolo , 2007). Within this ecology of mutual influence and interrelation, memory and imagination became felt senses; knowledge became movement; care became a choreographed practice of relationality. The residency enacted awareness-based systems change through inner somatic shifts in collective awareness. The cabbage ritual served as an anchor for presencing, a slowing into felt connection where future possibilities could be sensed and offered a way of transforming relational fields from within.

The studio, furnished with art-making materials, armchairs, plants, a nature-culture shrine and fresh herbal drinks, becomes a place to welcome, dwell, listen and co-inquire into what was needed. As the days passed, connections and conversations extended with students, growers, community activists, researchers, policy makers and local residents, all with a personal commitment to engaging in difficult conversations around food, insecurity, trauma and racial justice. Being in residence and hosting *Tasting Ubuntu* ritual along with the recollection of its textures, smells, and stories opened up a space for such intimacy to be acknowledged and metabolised. It revealed how freedom and understanding arise not from distance or detachment, but from an entangled relationality in which care is both given and received over time. This engagement with the spirit, ecologies, and life of place included the sourcing of locally grown cabbages and finding local tree trunks to use as chopping boards. The studio within the residency thus became not just a time and site of production, but an expanding relational field for ethical attunement and epistemic intimacy.

Intimacy here is emotional closeness as well as shared attunement that allows for becoming-with an ethical condition of openness to transformation. The power of art and food rituals invite encounters of connection which nurture an awareness of our interdependence and re-orient us to worldmaking as something within which we are continuously co-constituting (Haraway, 2016; Tufnell & Crickmay, 2004). Sharing a deep and everyday relationship to food opens us toward what contemporary theorists define as an ethics of care in the everyday (Curtin & Heldke, 1992; Eliasson, 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). As reflected by a participant in the "care, connectiveness, and inclusiveness expressed in this event we are cultivating an holistic approach, a culture of love, of many things coming together to support the whole" (Participant A, 6 March 2024).

The iterative and emergent engagements within the 3-week residency affirmed the value of slow, situated scholarship (hooks, 1994). Rather than

extracting conclusions from participants, the residency cultivated spaces in which insight could surface gradually unfolding in rhythm with lived experience. The cabbage, once fermented and shared, became more than a symbol: it was a medium through which connections to place, ancestry, kinship, and care were palpably felt. In this way, the studio moved beyond its role as a site of production and took on the character of a crucible, an alchemical space for cultivating relational intelligence, affective depth, and collective meaning-making. This approach affirms the premise that embodied, convivial practices can function as a living aesthetic with rigorous and responsive modes of research, particularly when working across the porous boundaries of art and reparation, belonging and dispossession, ecology and pedagogy. By foregrounding *thinking–making–sensing* as an entangled mode of inquiry, the residency positions art not as an outcome, but as a vital, life affirming process through which the intangible becomes tangible, the invisible becomes visible, and the everyday becomes a ground for transformation. Returning to sympoiethics, we remember our human sovereignty as relational, one which respects the integrity of each, one which flourishes through the *we*, one which is interdependent with the sentient matter of our Earth and the habitats we dwell within.

Conclusion | An Aesthetics of Care

Through the unfolding of *Tasting Ubuntu*, we came to recognise how convivial encounters with food cultures, mediated through the artful bodymind, offer a vital ground for cultivating an everyday ethics of care. These embodied rituals and practices invite a deeper attentiveness that reawakens our felt sense of connection with the more-than-human world. Art-making, ritual, and artisan practices become vessels not merely of expression but of relational intelligence: living processes through which we come to know ourselves as part of an interconnected ecology. What unfolded can be read as awareness-based systems change through artistic means: a re-patterning of perception that allowed participants to experience systems not as structures to be fixed but as relationships to be felt.

Engaging with fermentation, soil, and the shared preparation of food amplified the subtle intelligences of the body such as gut, hand, breath, and intuition. These multisensory practices entwine thinking with doing and sensing, drawing knowledge out of abstraction and into touch, taste, movement, and memory. In re-embedding the arts into the rhythms of daily life, we begin to restore social and ecological relationships rooted in presence and participation (Lederach, 2005). In the collective rituals, we encountered food not merely as nourishment, but as sacred substance: a mediator of memory, affect, and ancestral presence. The fermentation circle, for example, became a vessel for multidimensional connection. It allowed us to apprehend the complex interweaving of soil, microbial life, cultural heritage, embodied skill, and interpersonal exchange. Within the liminality of the ritual, we became attuned to the genius loci of place, to the felt presence of lineage and land, and to the

layered textures of collective and personal transformation. The ritual form, held with care and intention, offered a space for re-membering what it means to belong bodily, emotionally, ecologically.

These experiences affirmed sympoiethics not only as a conceptual framework but as a lived aesthetic, a way of becoming-*with* the world through acts of mutual shaping and sensing. The art of sympoiethics invites us into postdisciplinary territories where environmental activism, multispecies kinship, relational aesthetics, and embodied ethics converge (Fabre Lewin & Gathorne-Hardy, 2021b). It gestures towards a plurality of thinking that values the interdependence of affect, contextual knowledge, and relational experience as essential to cultural and ecological renewal (Braidotti, 2022). By translating theoretical commitments such as sympoiethics, Ubuntu, and awareness-based change into micro-practices of hand, word, and presence, the residency wove concept and practice into a single fabric. What emerged was the application and emergence of theory from life lived together.

Thus, sympoiethics is not a method but a murmuration, a responsive, choreographed movement with matter, story, and spirit. Sympoiethics situates art, ritual, and the artisan as ethical and relational modes of world-making. Its ethics are not abstract but lived in the slice of a knife, the press of hands, the draw of microbes, and the choreography of encounter. It is grounded in everyday gestures including stirring, massaging, pressing, and noticing. It affirms our interdependence with the animate Earth. In growing this kind of attuned aesthetic consciousness, we also grow our capacity to be human differently. Within the group was experienced, "radical kinship with many—humans, more than humans, ancestral realm, multiple dimensions we find ourselves in" (Participant F, 24 March 2024). We are called to attune, to lean closer, not toward abstraction, but into the fibres of the real (Rendón, 2014).

An aesthetics of situated care rises from compost and brine, from the glisten of salt on skin. Here, the sacred crackles in the crunch of cabbage, loops in the laughter around a shared table, and ferments time itself. In this bubbling, biodiverse alchemy, transformation begins.

> *In the presence of cabbage, something yielded.*
> *A doorway cracked open. Not into another world,*
> *but into this one, sensed differently.*
>
> *As we tended the microbial, we entered myth.*
> *In that slow stirring of what is alive but unseen,*
> *we found ourselves not only making food,*
> *but feeding a future… tangy, alive, still becoming.*

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

This Residency arose through long-term collaborations, mutual trust and voluntary and self-elected participation.

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Peer Review Article

Cybernetic Lookbooks:

An Emerging Visual Approach for Organizational Understanding

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Abstract

Academic research often privileges written language in both production and dissemination of knowledge. However, language exists alongside visual and material artifacts in the definition, sensemaking, transportation, and stabilization of organizations (Boxenbaum et al., 2018). In contrast, a focus on language is not as prominent in the realm of fashion, where visuals, aesthetics, and materiality are core (Castaldo Lundén, 2020; Jenß & Hofmann, 2019; Julier, 2006; Pecorari, 2021). This paper demonstrates how an appropriation of a commonly used visual artifact in fashion—the lookbook—can promote the surfacing, sensemaking, and co-creation of new organizational realities. The cybernetic lookbook compiles a series of visual representations of the organization, created through cybernetic diagramming practices—diagrams that reflect feedback loops, scales, thresholds, leverage points, and cybernetic

awareness. These visual representations emerged in the context of intervention research with three organizations—two early-stage startups and one responsible technology ecosystem-enabler. Reflections on the process suggest that cybernetic diagramming afforded three types of convening spaces—conversation spaces, co-production spaces, and reflection spaces—prompting new shared understanding about the products being built, new product innovation ideas, and potential new ways to communicate organizational stories as well as that of the research itself. It is hoped that this contribution may open novel avenues for visual methods experimentation for organizational understanding.

Keywords

Cybernetics, organizational understanding, visual approach, diagramming practices

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Introduction

> Organizations all develop their own languages and types of conversations, which increases efficiency. However, these can become constraints that limit future vision.
>
> — ANU School of Cybernetics (2022, p. 29)

As organizations emerge and grow, so too does language—language that describes organizational activities, articulates organizational values and identity, and makes promises about what will be delivered, to whom, and how. In the earliest stages of an organization, these languages are nascent, emerging, and sometimes fragile, and there is frequent pressure to standardize language in order to achieve scale and efficiency. In doing so, language can become a constraint that limits future vision (ANU School of Cybernetics, 2022). Conversely, adopting new types of language can open previously unseen pathways for action (Krippendorff, 2023).

Language provides one path to organizational awareness, but many other forms of knowing deserve attention and that are often present before language can even be articulated. Heron's extended epistemology, for example, proposes four interwoven ways of knowing: experiential (from direct encounters), presentational (exploring through aesthetic responses such as art, images, movement, music), propositional (focused on concepts and propositions), and practical (focused on action) (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). The creation of visual artifacts can touch on each of these extended ways of knowing—for

example, by drawing upon action and experiences in the real world to identify concepts and present them aesthetically as diagrams.

In many cases, visual artifacts are said to represent tacit knowledge that guides organizational behavior (Taylor & Hansen, 2005). Non-explicit ways of knowing are also at the core of Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), particularly ideas around co-sensing and listening from the emerging future. Visual artifacts act as boundary objects (Leigh Star, 2010), creating relational spaces for dialogue, suspending habitual patterns of thought through engagement with different visual representations, and for co-sensing emerging possibilities (Scharmer, 2009). In this way, visual artifacts are not static objects but mediating objects that facilitate abductive reasoning, helping to surface new organizational understandings and stabilize provisional interpretations for further testing and revision (Peirce, 1931-1958; Stjernfelt, 2000). Often, new possibilities emerge in relation to a change in how distinctions are made, and visual representation can assist with that—for example, making a distinction that brings form into existence, redrawing boundaries to indicate a new or different relationality, and making explicit the influence of previously implicit power dynamics; that is, visual artifacts can create space for conversation that leads to transformation.

Similarly, Shaw (2002) posits that sensemaking conversations can ultimately shift constraints, opening new future possibilities. Sensemaking involves creating boundaries around specific instances from the dynamic, changing system and reducing uncertainty around them (Weick et al., 2005), and is also a generative process that creates new knowledge artifacts (Weber & Glynn, 2006). "Messy sensemaking" emphasizes the looseness often involved in such processes. Shaw (2002) claims leaders drive messy sensemaking by creating spaces for convening conversations that may not otherwise occur, ensuring conditions for team members to meaningfully participate, and opening areas for reflective inquiry. This paper explores the role of cybernetic visual practices in affording these messy sensemaking spaces—specifically, conversation, co-production, and reflection spaces.

By engaging with two early-stage startups and one responsible tech ecosystem enabler, all grappling with how to enact their responsibility in practice, this paper explores an emerging visual artifact—the cybernetic lookbook—and its role in affording conversation, co-production, and reflection spaces. The cybernetic lookbook combines and appropriates elements from two different realms: cybernetics and fashion. Cybernetics is engaged through the creation of artifacts that reflect feedback loops (Wiener, 1950), scales (Brand, 2000), thresholds (Ashby, 1956; Midgley, 2000), leverage points (Meadows, 2008), and what I term here "cybernetic awareness"—an understanding that one is an active part of the system, not a passive observer of it (von Foerster, 2003).

It is proposed that these artifacts be combined into a lookbook, appropriating the idea of lookbooks from fashion (for an overview of lookbooks, see Wong & Rud, 2011). Lookbooks are generally used to curate and communicate a fashion designer's aesthetic, vision, and style to external audiences (e.g., marketers,

buyers, etc.). More than just a collection of images, lookbooks aim to tell a story in a coherent way and convey an underlying understanding of the designer's identity and what they wish to be known for. The aesthetic of a lookbook also communicates a tacit level of knowledge that guides the designer's brand and decision-making.

In this case, the idea is adapted to communicate the underlying cybernetic dynamics of an organization's vision, purpose, and product for a common understanding internally—and perhaps, in the future, for external audiences such as funders or prospective new employees. A lookbook goes beyond simply collecting diagrams to meaningfully curating and communicating the essence of an organization's identity, aspirations, and decision-making. In this way, it adopts Taylor and Hanson's (2005) perspective that aesthetic knowledge (captured in diagrams, for example) "provides a means to express that tacit knowledge that guides much of organizational behavior" (p. 1226). Further, I posit there may be merits in adopting a cybernetic lookbook to describe the dynamics sitting behind academic research itself. I believe there are many learnings to be harnessed from both the realms of fashion and cybernetics, where visual representations have a rich history, and hope this paper serves as an interesting starting point for further investigation.

This paper explores the idea of a cybernetic lookbook as an approach to understanding organizational possibilities. Specifically, it discusses the spaces a cybernetic lookbook can afford: spaces for conversation, co-production (including thought experimentation and product innovation), and reflection. By focusing on the value of cybernetic concepts such as feedback loops, scales, thresholds, leverage points, and cybernetic awareness, this paper aims to demonstrate an emerging set of visual artifacts that may assist not only with researchers' organizational understanding but also with organizations understanding themselves differently, fueling awareness-based systems change. Further, I speculate that the cybernetic lookbook is a valuable accompaniment to intervention research, assisting in articulating and testing rational myths.

Research Context and Approach

This section provides broader context for the wider research agenda within which cybernetic lookbooks have emerged. The visual approaches shared in this paper were used in intervention research with two early-stage startups (OrgB and OrgT) and one responsible technology ecosystem-enabling organization (OrgH). Intervention research (Baskerville & Myers, 2004; Hatchuel & Molet, 1986; Susman & Evered, 1978) positions the researcher as an insider-outsider of the organization and, far from being a passive observer, requires the researcher to form, test, and iterate upon "rational myths" in a specific organizational context. In this case, a series of rational myths were formed around some of the conditions needed for organizations to act on their motivation to "be responsible" as they built their artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled products.

The broader research objective is to investigate responsible AI as a site of organizational practice. Specifically, three proactive responsible AI prototypes were developed to address three questions. The first prototype—a pledge-making process (Ruster & Daniell, 2025)—examines how organizations can get started with responsible AI practice. The second prototype—the Dignity Lens (Ruster et al., 2025)—focuses on how organizations can embed human-centered values such as dignity in AI development. The third prototype—a series of reflective practices (including Ruster, 2023) explores how organizations can sustain their commitment to responsible AI practice over time. The cybernetic lookbook emerged principally in the context of developing the first and third prototypes with OrgB, OrgT, and OrgH.

The two early-stage startups—OrgB and OrgT—were both united in their motivation to be responsible in the ways they developed their AI-enabled products. Although they operate in different industries—media tech and sustainability tech—they were both seeking early-stage (seed or Series A[1]) funding, had at least one Australian founder, and were leveraging (or planning to adopt) Large Language Models (LLMs) within their recommender algorithm products. OrgB seeks to simplify sustainability actions that small to medium enterprises can take through its sustainability tech platform, which recommends actions alongside relevant suppliers and tracks progress over time. OrgT aims to burst users' media news bubbles by recommending alternative news sources to diversify their news diet and build critical thinking muscles. Similarly, OrgH was also committed to being responsible in its activities. OrgH is an initiative incubated within a large humanitarian organization, working to promote responsible tech practices with startups building humanitarian-focused technologies.

Although this is not an empirical paper, its explorations are rooted in 47 hours of recorded participatory workshops and interviews (along with some unrecorded interactions) across three organizations (see Table 1).

[1] Seed funding refers to early-stage funding (ranging from $10,000 to a few million dollars) raised by a business to validate its idea and build an initial product. Series A funding is more substantial (typically $2–$15 million) and is generally raised to help startups scale their operations. See Reiff (2025) for more details.

Characteristics	OrgB	OrgH	OrgT
Type of organisation	Early-Stage Startup	Responsible Tech Ecosystem Enabler	Early-Stage Startup
Data collected	16 participatory workshops; 19 individual interviews	8 individual interviews; internal and external documents	20 participatory workshops; 4 group interviews; 3 individual interviews
Timing of interactions	June 2022 – November 2024	April 2023 – December 2023	June 2021 – April 2024

***Table 1**: Overview of the organizations involved in the study*

In the case of OrgB and OrgT, these interactions centered on participatory workshops where we explored challenges related to responsible AI practice. The approach to these workshops was emergent; rooted in pragmatism (Dewey, 1938; James, 1890; Peirce, 1935/1978), it drew on relevant resources as needed. For OrgT, the starting question for exploration was how to meaningfully engage with responsible AI principles that made sense in its context. One-hour workshops were held online once or twice a month over 18 months, with various follow-ups conducted for about a year afterward. The workshops included thought experiments on what particular principles could mean in practice, detailed sharing of how their product worked and what decisions had shaped how it worked, as well as reflective practices regarding the impact of previous decisions on their ability to meaningfully engage in responsible AI practice.

For OrgB, interactions initially focused on updating its existing organizational values in light of new founders joining the team; they were interested in being future-ready and aligned on what was important before building their AI systems. Data collected in this case included one-on-one reflective practice interviews to understand how their values were already reflected in decision-making (or not), and participatory workshops to align the co-founders around what was really important to them and how they would express it through product design decisions. In both OrgB and OrgT, a practical result of these interactions was the crafting of responsible AI pledges (see Ruster & Daniell, 2025 for further details on the process undertaken). In the case of OrgH, the primary mode of data collection was eight individual interviews where we discussed the meanings of responsible AI practice in their context and analyzed various organizational documents. I coupled all these interactions with my own reflective practice to make sense of the decisions made over time and, in many cases, reflect, test, and iterate upon what was heard through the creation of visual artifacts.

During and outside the participatory workshops and interviews, a series of visual artifacts were created—some directly by me and tested and iterated upon with the organizations involved, and some by one or more of the participants and refined through our interactions. The visual artifacts were analyzed, taking into account how and when they were created, the purpose for which they were

created, who created them and participated in their iteration, and the audience for which they were intended. Artifacts created to assist the organization in understanding its own context, products, services, and/or decision-making processes were further coded according to cybernetic concepts (described below) and compiled into a lookbook. The impetus for selecting visual artifacts for OrgT's lookbook arose from a pragmatic reason: wanting visual aids to support individual reflective practice interviews. In that context, the visuals were chosen to reflect the depth and breadth of organizational dynamics captured throughout the interactions to date and foster reflective conversations with the co-founders. Following this, I began to review visual artifacts created in other organizational contexts and compiled a lookbook across the three organizations, organized by cybernetic dynamics. Many of these artifacts appear in the remainder of this article.

It is important to note that I do not identify as an artist but am influenced by the "generative scribing" practices developed by Kelvy Bird. Bird became known to me while I was a participant in *u-lab: Leading From the Emerging Future*, in 2021–2022—a course focused on learning Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), an awareness-based method for transforming systems. I then took an online introduction to generative scribing facilitated by Bird. Bird's approach emphasizes visual representation as "a distinct social art form that facilitates group learning and cultural memory" (Bird, 2017, para. 1). Bird's (2018) focus on generative scribing's translation capacity, systems-based perspective, and orientation towards reflection and aiding decision-making was appealing to the purposes of my broader research agenda, which investigates and prototypes responsibility practices in early-stage AI startups.

Cybernetic Diagramming Practices

From the late 1940s to the 1960s, cybernetics was a popular framework through which mathematicians, physicists, philosophers, anthropologists, computer scientists and others explored notions of thinking machines, autonomous systems, and neural networks. Cybernetics preceded the term "artificial intelligence" (Cordeschi, 2002). Over time, cyberneticians split into multiple communities with different underlying epistemologies—for example, those concerned with communication and control of technical systems, and those interested in how humans are part of modeling, intervening in, and/or evaluating those systems of interest (see Rid, 2017). These different approaches to researching and acting in relation to systems became known as first- and second-order cybernetics, respectively. Cybernetician, Heinz von Foerster (2003) distinguished between first-order cybernetics described as "the cybernetics of observed systems" (p. 299) and second-order cybernetics described as "the cybernetics of *observing* systems" (p. 303, emphasis added). The crucial differentiator in second-order cybernetics is that those involved in the system are not considered separate, detached, or objective, but are actively part of it, shaping and stewarding its evolution and development. For the purposes of this

paper, "cybernetic awareness" refers to the ability to perceive systems—including oneself and others—as part of them, which aligns with the second-order form of cybernetics. I posit that the creation of visual artifacts may assist in building cybernetic awareness.

Cybernetics, and its close connection with Complex Adaptive Systems, Soft Systems Methodologies, and other systems-thinking approaches, has an interesting history with visual forms (see Ison, 2008, for a visual representation). For example, there are a range of diagramming practices associated with systems dynamics, such as stock-and-flow diagrams or causal loop diagrams. This study draws particularly on the work of Donella Meadows (2008) in her creation of such diagrams. In addition, Rich Pictures are a common practice in Soft Systems Methodologies and, despite their widespread use, only began to appear in the literature in the 1970s (Checkland, 1972; Churchman, 1979). Rich Pictures refers to the output of a process where participants free-form draw a situation or system under consideration, often in groups, in workshop settings, and on large pieces of paper (see Ison, 2008). Rich Pictures are often used to reflect situational awareness of the system and, through discussion, generate a shared representation of it. The approach is very flexible, usually with minimal prompts. In a way, the pictures developed in this research could be considered Rich Pictures in that they were often created in a participatory way—but online and not around a large piece of paper. Further, as outlined below, the pictures are less free-form because they use specific cybernetic concepts as framing.

In the sections that follow, a range of cybernetic diagramming practices—centered on feedback loops, scales, thresholds, leverage points, and cybernetic awareness—are outlined, with examples from the research provided. It should be noted that the term "cybernetic diagramming practices" is introduced in this paper to refer to the curation of visual practices with cybernetic roots that I have found helpful throughout my doctoral research.

Feedback Loops

A central preoccupation of cybernetics has been "feedback" in mechanical, social, and biological contexts: how its presence, disruption, or distortion serves to stabilize or destabilize a system's behavior, and the effects of these feedback loops over time. Although feedback is a common concept today, the language of feedback loops only became prominent in the 1940s as scientists, in the context of the World Wars, sought to solve the mechanical anti-aircraft problem. Norbert Wiener, often considered the forefather of cybernetics, places feedback at the center of the cybernetic worldview; for him, feedback "described the ability of any mechanism to use sensors to receive information about actual performance, as opposed to expected performance" (Rid, 2017, p. 41). He recognized a fundamental dynamic influencing the behavior of any acting system: that the output of a system is also one of its future inputs (Bell, 2021; Wiener, 1950). Since then, the concept of feedback loops has become commonplace in systems mapping practices—for example, causal loop diagrams and systems dynamics

represented as stocks and flows (see Barbrook-Johnson & Penn, 2022). The role of feedback loops as places to intervene to change systems dynamics is also considered part of Donella Meadows' (2008) leverage points model (see section below).

Thinking in feedback loops was used at various parts of the research process with the different organizations. Figure 1 shows one example that surfaced when trying to understand how OrgB's "Environmental Social Governance Financials Score" (ESGF) might influence user activity and incentives on their platform. For example, it was important for OrgB to realize that "break even activities"—ones that manage to a predefined target—exist in a balancing feedback loop: the more activities recommended, the more activities done, the higher the ESGF score, the less activities left to do. In contrast, for "positive pursuits" activities—those that do not manage to a target but are more open-ended—the score can go up and up without restraint. Seeing their scoring system in this visual format led to conversations about how to manage the ESGF score over time, what the numeric value of scores will really mean, and the barriers that may get in the way of the logic behind the scoring system.

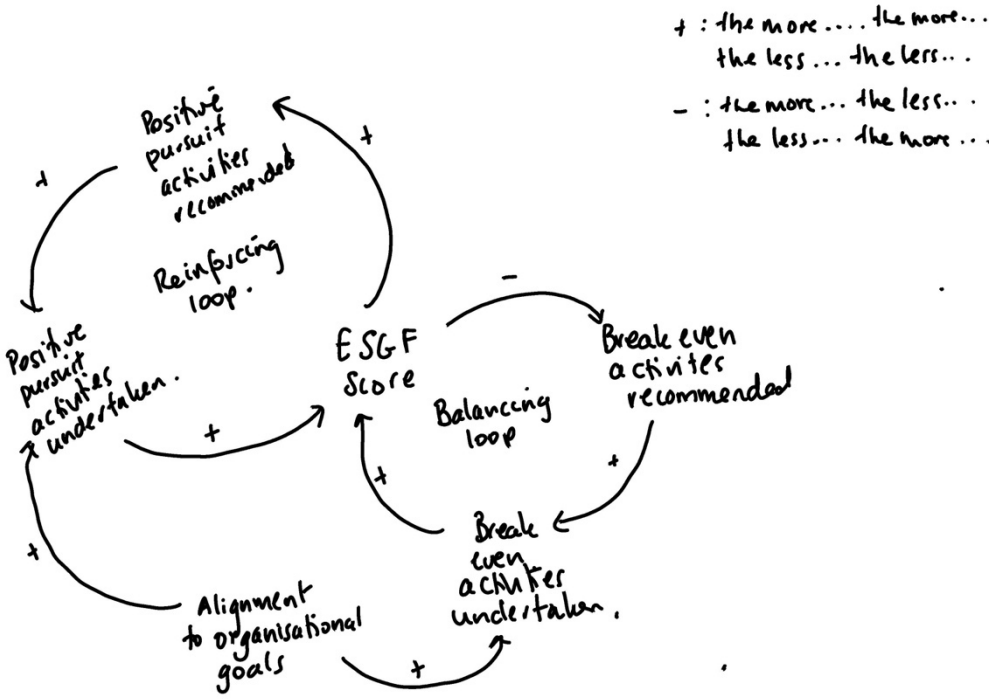

Figure 1: *Visual representation of how OrgB's "Environmental Social Governance Financial Score" (ESGF) interacts with customer activities. Created as a summary of conversations with OrgB and tested with OrgB. Positive feedback loops (+), also known as reinforcing loops, indicate that a change in a particular direction prompts changes in the same direction (i.e., the more something changes, the more something else changes; or the less something changes, the less something else changes). Negative feedback loops, or balancing loops, indicate that a change in one direction prompts changes in the opposite direction (i.e., the more something changes, the less something else changes, and vice versa).*

Scales

Scales can be thought of as "the spatial, temporal, quantitative, or analytical dimensions used to measure and study any phenomenon" (Gibson et al., 1998, p. 9). Scales and levels (locations on a given scale) are relevant to a variety of phenomena across different disciplines, making them a ripe concept for cyberneticians who often work in transdisciplinary contexts[2]. For example, Daniell and Barreteau (2014) expand upon Cash et al.'s (2006) schematic illustrations of scales and levels critical in understanding and responding to human–environment interactions to describe eight different scales and their associated levels relevant to water governance. These scales are spatial, temporal, administrative, institutional, management, networks, knowledge/information and stakes/issues. Further, Brand (2000) talks at length about the importance of scales:

> Consider, for example, a coniferous forest. The hierarchy in scale of pine needle, tree crown, patch, stand, whole forest, and biome is also a time hierarchy. The needle changes within a year, the tree crown over several years, the patch over many decades, the stand over a couple of centuries, the forest over a thousand years, and the biome over ten thousand years. The range of what the needle may do is constrained by the tree crown, which is constrained by the patch and stand, which are controlled by the forest, which is controlled by the biome. (Brand, 2000, p. 34)

Unsurprisingly, time is an important scale during my interactions with the early-stage startups. On the one hand, they are operating in ever-present short timescales: what might happen tomorrow, be shipped by the end of the week, or targeted for the next month or quarter. Concurrently, there are discussions about longer timescales—for example, for garnering investment and for exiting the business altogether. These longer timescales are driven by investors, particularly venture capitalists, who want to see growth trajectories in metrics such as revenue, customer acquisition/retention, and/or profit across a portfolio of companies over the lifespan of their fund (usually 7–10 years). This combination of short timescales for product development and delivery and longer timescales for profitable exits is very characteristic of startup environments.

For the early-stage startups I have been working with, the "fail fast" mentality is deeply ingrained in what it means to be a "good entrepreneur." Short timescales, however, as Brand (2000) discusses, can often be at odds with

[2] The transdisciplinary nature of cybernetics was especially prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s with the Macy Conferences—a series of meetings where mathematicians, physicists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and others gathered to discuss a general science of the workings of the human mind. See American Society for Cybernetics (n.d.) for further information on the Macy Conferences.

responsible behavior. To assist in shifting the perspectives of OrgT's co-founders towards longer timeframes, we engaged in futures and forecasting activities, which helped them place their efforts in a much wider historical and future context. We used the Institute for the Future's (2021) exercise "Look Back to Look Forward," which prompted OrgT to think about the major moments that have influenced the wider industry that they are operating in: information consumption. This consideration was made over time as well as through the lenses of new interventions, laws and regulations, products and services, behaviors, and events (Figure 2).

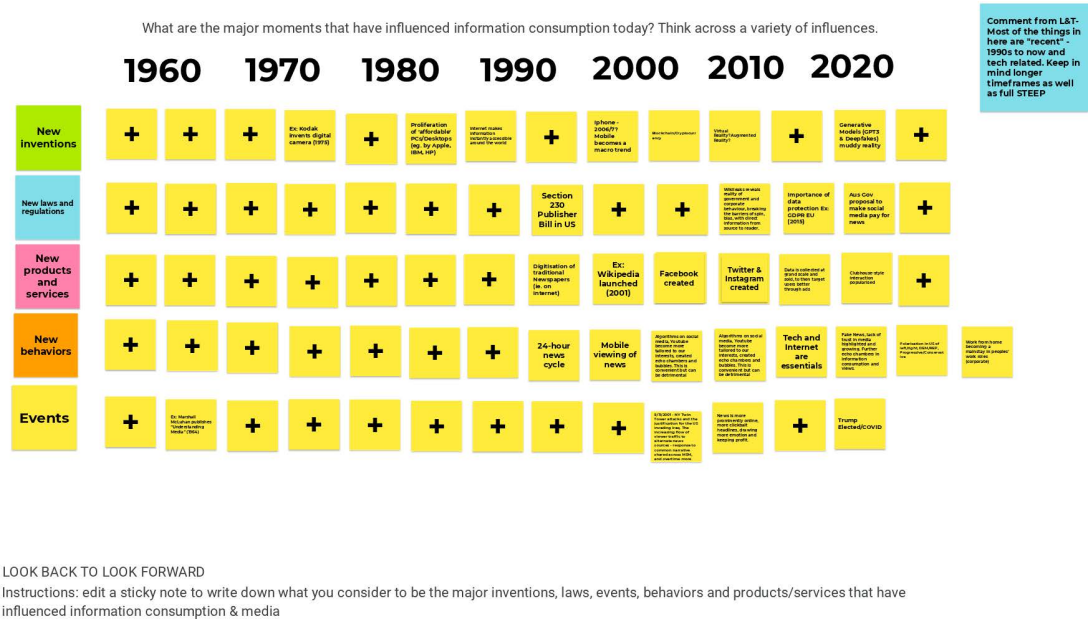

Figure 2: *Visual representation of major moments that have influenced information consumption, placing OrgT's activities within a longer historical time horizon. Co-created output as part of futures and forecasting workshops undertaken with OrgT.*

We also collected signals—surface-level phenomena—and drivers—longer-term trends unlikely to change—and combined them in different ways to prompt the creation of different forecast narratives (see Appendix B6 of Bell et al., 2021, for an example of this process). Armed with these narratives, we considered their impact on OrgT's users in 10 years' time. We created profiles of different users operating within some of the forecast scenarios and using OrgT's products. Although OrgT believed they were building a "neutral platform" at the beginning of our interactions, by the end of these futures and forecasting activities they had changed their perspective: "We are well aware of the impacts that a 'growth at all costs' mentality can have. We take our responsibility as entrepreneurs seriously to ensure that we don't make the same mistakes of the past." (Org T Cofounder)

Thinking across different scales was also brought into a variety of product-based conversations. For example, with OrgT, there was clear importance placed on time, communication, and knowledge scales through their *storylines* and *storyspaces* product features. In an effort to understand what was involved both

conceptually and algorithmically in these features, we drew several iterations of how storylines and storyspaces were connected over time and also used metaphors such as a beaded necklace to bring further understanding (Figure 3 A–C).

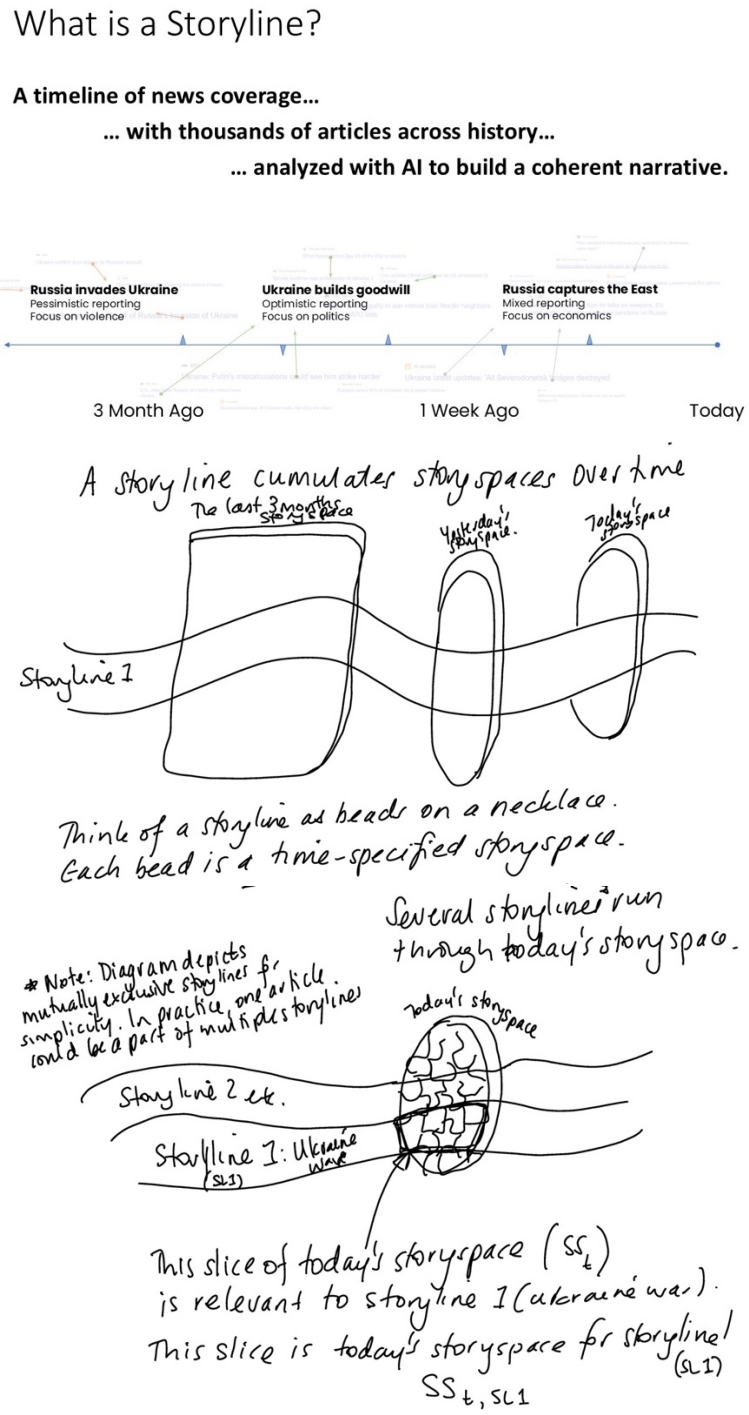

Figure 3 A, B & C (top to bottom): *Visual representations of OrgT's storylines and storyspaces and their interrelation over time.*

Various iterations were created and discussed in OrgT participatory workshops. 3A was created by developer co-founder. 3B and 3C were created by the primary researcher. All representations discussed within participatory workshops.

We also considered the impact of OrgT's products over time from the user's perspective (Figure 4). These conversations prompted different prototyping ideas regarding how a user might track their progress over time—for example, in a dashboard showing their changing news diet.

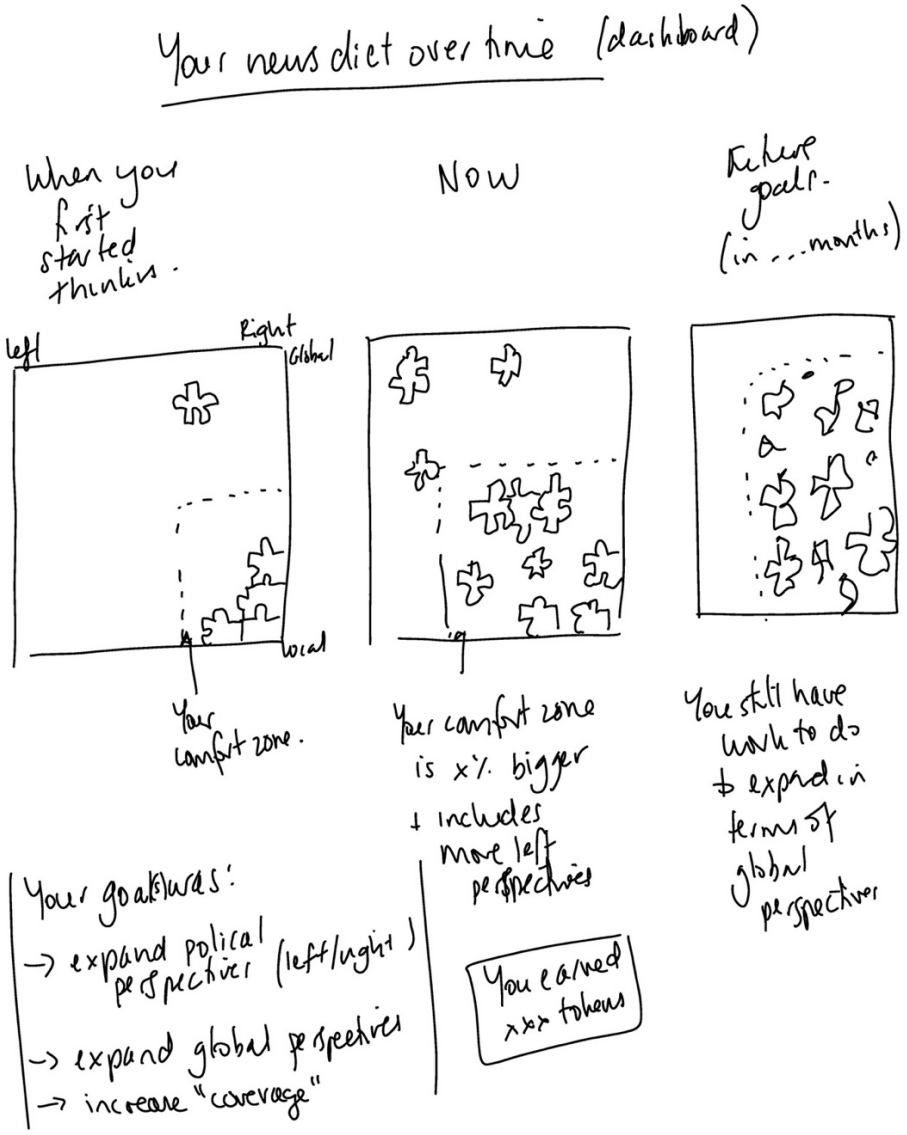

Figure 4: *Visual representation of the intended change in users' "media diet" from using OrgT's product. Discussed in OrgT participatory workshops. Puzzle pieces represent news articles.*

Thresholds

Thresholds can be thought of as a point that, once passed, catalyzes some sort of change. The concept of thresholds and their importance to cybernetics can be connected to ideas around homeostasis. For Claude Bernard (1957), homeostasis referred to the steadiness of the internal environment as a condition for free and independent life. Over time, these ideas have been recast into the language of thermodynamic systems to describe the persistence of a living system in the face of specific and dynamic disequilibrium (Pross, 2016). Wiener brought homeostasis into cybernetics, drawing upon the self-regulatory capabilities of organisms (Rosenblueth et al., 1943). Further, cybernetician W. Ross Ashby (1960) describes the brain as a homeostat -and observes the existence of a threshold as when "the variable shows no change except when the disturbance coming to it exceeds some definite value" (Ashby, 1956, p. 66)—a phenomenon ubiquitous in our nervous systems. Cybernetician Gordan Pask turns the notion of thresholds into art through the design and creation of the Musicolor machine, which used the sound of a musical performance to control a light show, incorporating "adaptive threshold devices" (Pickering, 2014). In more recent times, systems scientist Gerald Midgley (2000) discusses at length the power associated with setting, questioning, and critiquing boundaries (which one can think of as a type of threshold).

Thinking in thresholds became a helpful visual device for organizational understanding in this research. In the case of OrgT, thresholds were an important way to articulate some of the deepest fears about the potential impact of their product—namely, the risk of radicalizing their user base:

> Any content feed that's a modern content feed you start getting into filter bubbles… but our very business offering is to pop people's filter bubbles. So I guess we have to be aware of going in the other direction as well…we don't want to push people away from our platform because none of it's relevant…and we don't want to radicalise people as a result of popping their filter bubble. (OrgT Co-Founder B, participatory workshop March 23, 2022)

Visual representation was used to assist OrgT in ensuring that users' media bubbles are expanded, but not "too much," as represented in Figure 5.

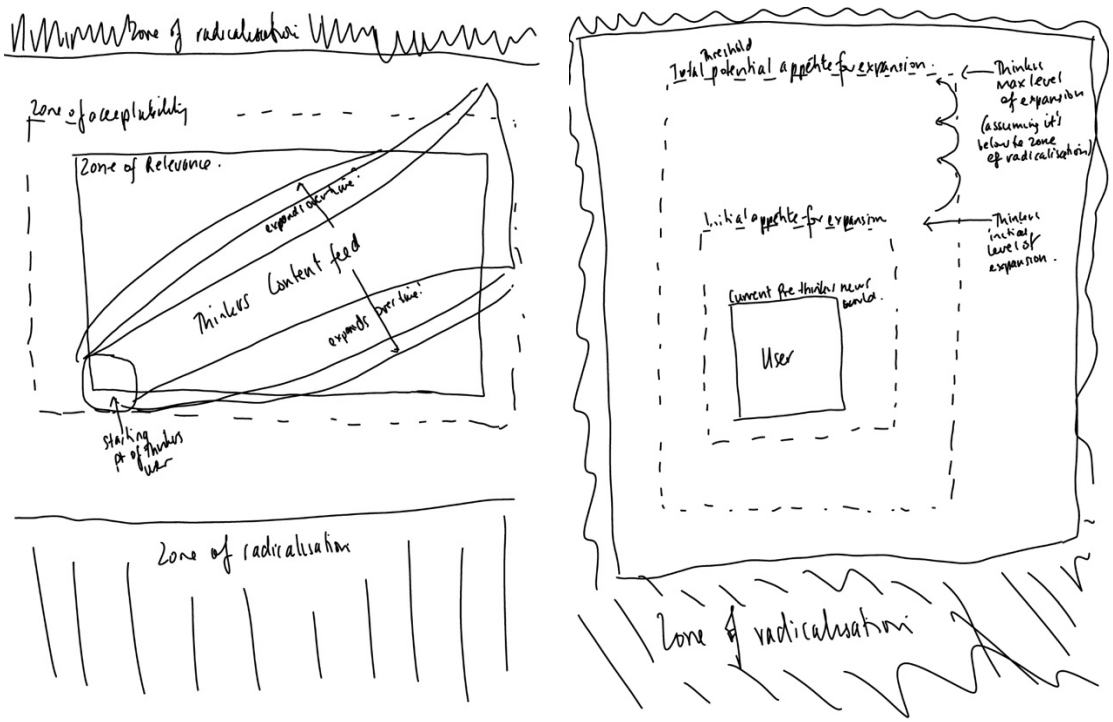

Figure 5: *Thresholds-based view of OrgT's product goal. Left: Centering the User. Right: Centering the content feed of OrgT's product. Created after participatory workshops with OrgT and discussed in follow-up sessions.*

Threshold thinking has also been helpful in my own distillation around what I am learning about responsible AI practices—specifically, how different modes of responsibility operate in relation to zones (or thresholds) of un/acceptability. Figure 6 depicts one attempt to show the difference between protective/remedial responsibility—which either prevents a system from moving into a zone of unacceptability or remedies it when it does occur—and proactive responsibility, which operates within and beyond the known threshold of acceptability, prompting innovation and new thinking in the process.

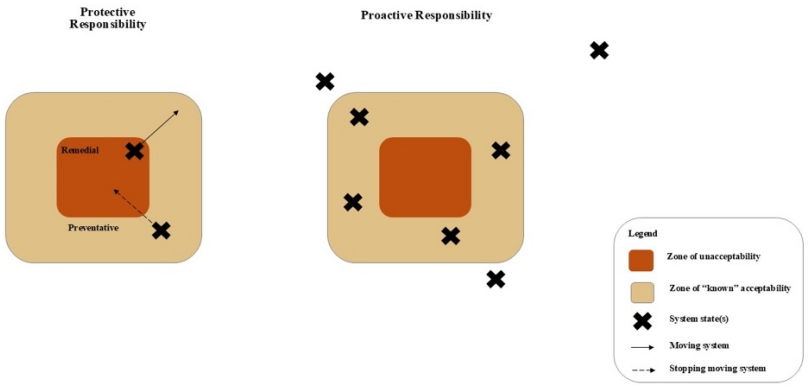

Figure 6: *Descriptive, protective/remedial, and proactive responsibility in relation to the thresholds of un/acceptability. Created as a part of my own reflective practices as a researcher.*

Leverage Points

According to Meadows (2008), a system comprises elements, a function or purpose, and interconnectedness—and is always more than the sum of its parts. Meadows (2008) identifies twelve places to intervene in a system in order to change its dynamics and calls these "leverage points." The most challenging leverage point to intervene at, and the one likely to yield the biggest shift in systems dynamics, is the power to transcend paradigms (Leverage Point 1, LP1). This is followed by the mindset out of which the system arises (LP2), the goals of the system (LP3), the power to add, change, or self-organize system structure (LP4), the rules of the system (such as incentives and constraints) (LP5), the structure of information flows (LP6), the gain around driving positive feedback loops (LP7), the strength of negative feedback loops (LP8), the length of delays relative to the rate of system change (LP9), the structure of material stock and flows (LP10), the size of buffer stocks relative to their flows (LP11), and finally parameters (LP12)—the easiest place to intervene and least effective to create system-wide change.

Since Meadows' (2008) influential work, various authors have adapted the notion of leverage points. For example, Abson et al. (2017) group the twelve points of leverage into four larger categories: intent leverage points (LP1–3), design leverage points (LP4–6), feedback leverage points (LP7–9), and parameter leverage points (LP10–12). Similarly, Malhi et al. (2009) adapt Meadows' leverage points into an Intervention Level Framework with five categories: paradigms (LP1–2), goals (LP3), system structure (LP4–6), feedback and delays (LP 7–9), and structural elements (LP10–12). Given the broader research agenda is based on intervention research, I have adopted the Malhi et al. (2009) structure as a way to think through how the different interventions trialed in my PhD research are tackling different leverage points. As shown in Figure 7, my PhD has three prototypes—a pledge-making process, a Dignity Lens tool and a reflective practice approach—which directly intervene in different ways across goals, system structure, and feedback and delays. Indirectly, these prototypes are contributing to paradigm shifts around engaging with both protective and proactive forms of responsibility as well as fostering cybernetic awareness; these indirect interventions are aimed at shifting paradigms of the system of responsible AI.

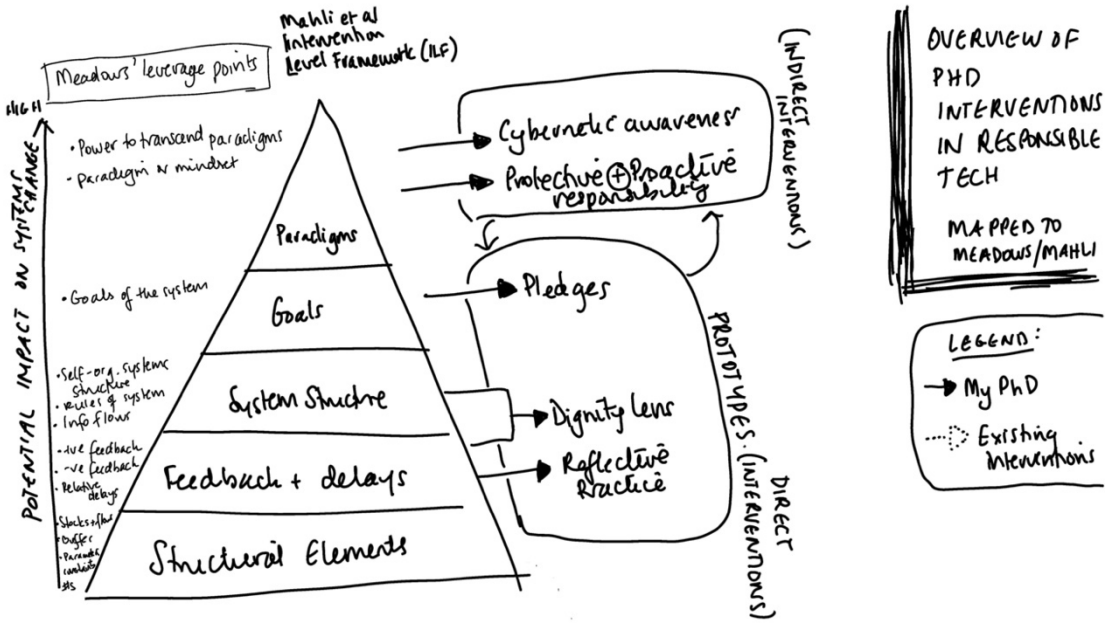

***Figure 7**: Overview of my PhD intervention research, organized by leverage points. Created as part of my researcher reflective practices.*

Cybernetic Awareness

Von Foerster (2003) commented that people could generally be separated into two types: discoverers, who saw themselves as citizens of an independent universe, whose customs and rules would eventually be uncovered; and inventors, who recognized themselves as "participants in a conspiracy, a world whose customs, rules and regulations [they] were inventing" (von Foerster, 2003, p. 5). This distinction in worldview—as observer or participant, discoverer or inventor—lies at the heart of the distinction between first-order and second-order cybernetics. This paper adopts the term "cybernetic awareness" to encapsulate the second-order, participant, inventor approach to seeing oneself as part of the system, not merely observing it.

From the perspective of undertaking research, cybernetic awareness is closely connected to ideas around researcher positionality or researcher stance (Corlett & Mavin, 2018) as well as critical cybernetics. Researcher positionality begins with the premise that subjectivity is inherent in research, particularly social sciences research, and is used to make explicit the influences that have shaped the research itself. Critical cybernetics pays attention to the ways we name, describe, and model systems and the role of power, values, and systems in doing so (Krippendorff, 2023). I have used diagramming practices as a way of building my own cybernetic awareness as a researcher (Figure 8 and Figure **9**).

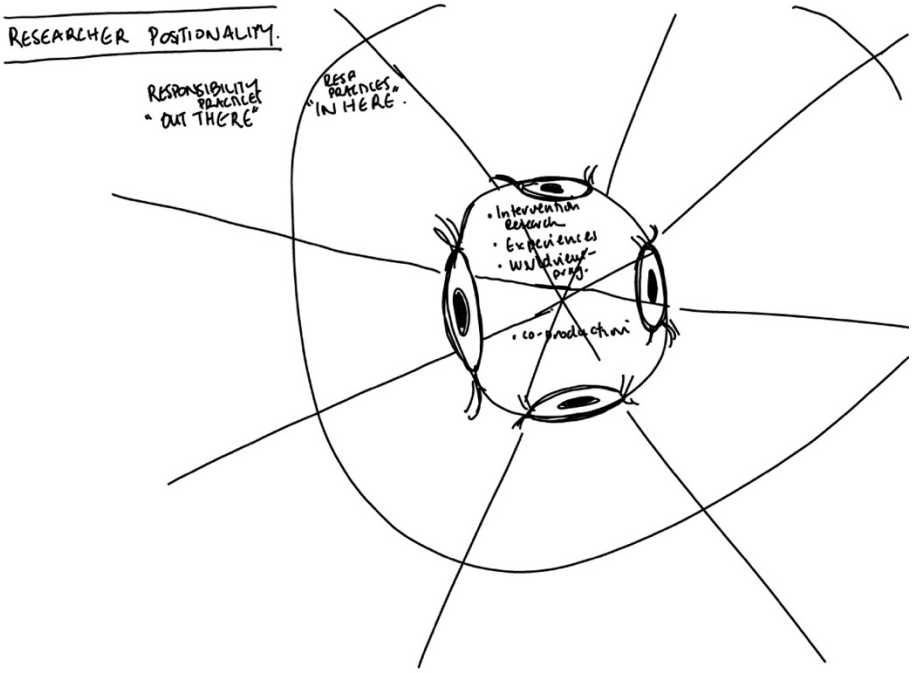

Figure 8: *My researcher positionality, representation 1.*

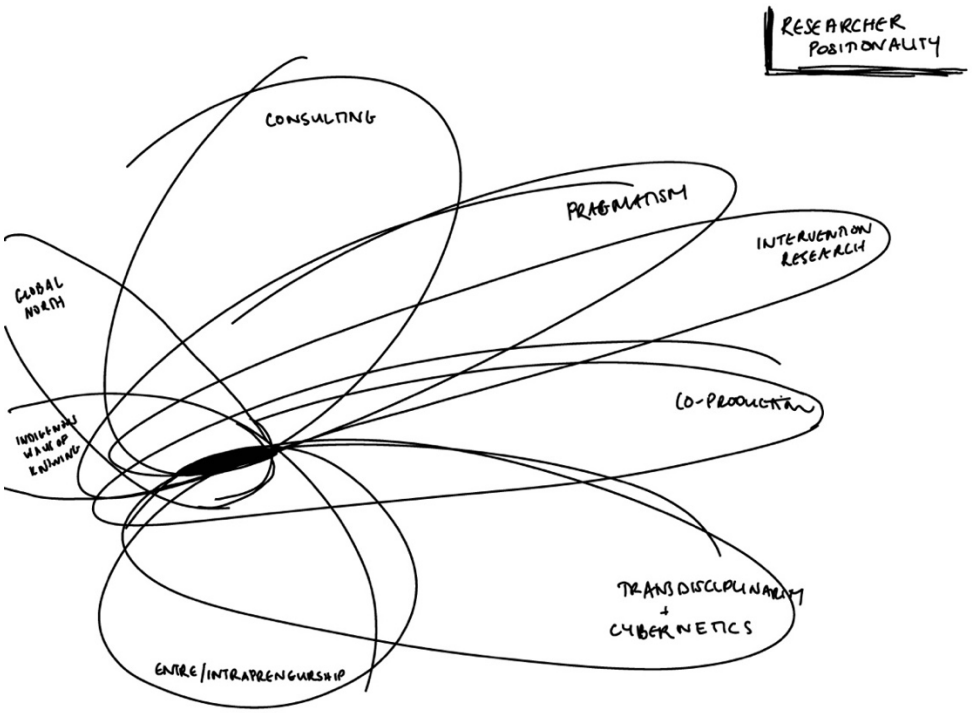

Figure 9: *My researcher positionality, representation 2.*

I have also created positionality diagrams when working with OrgH to outline broader systems dynamics at play. Eventually, a version of this diagram became the organizing structure for a report for OrgH reflecting our research findings (Figure 10).

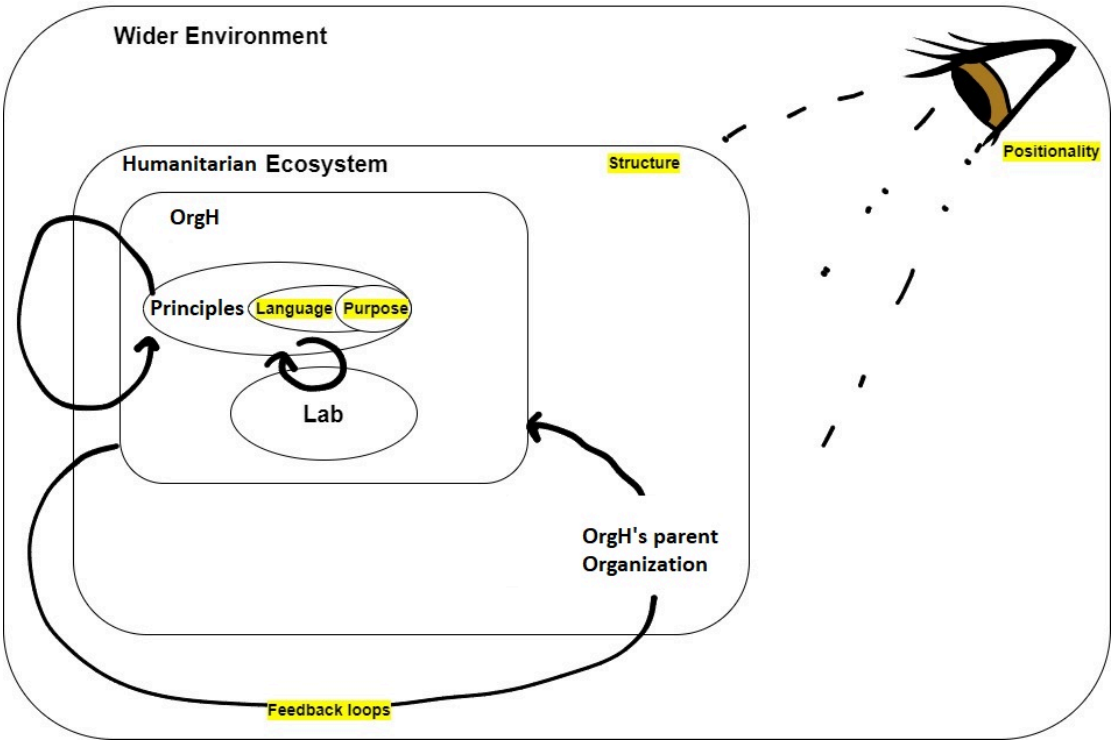

Figure 10: *Positionality of OrgH. Aspects of this diagram have been anonymized. Yellow highlighting indicates the high-level structure of the research report created for OrgH*

Spaces Afforded by Cybernetic Diagramming Practices and the Cybernetic Lookbook

In the case of OrgT, the above cybernetic diagrams (and others) were compiled into a "lookbook." In this section, we focus on OrgT's lookbook and the different spaces it affords—conversation, co-production, and reflection spaces.

Conversation Spaces

Working through what responsible AI could look like in practice for early-stage startups was a non-trivial exercise. For OrgT, it became clear that, to have a conversation around what responsibility looks like in practice, the group needed to discuss the decisions made to date in the work-in-progress product. To assist with this, various visual artifacts were produced to unpack what was meant by certain terms. For example, I created visual artifacts to clarify the organization's use of the terms "storyline" and "storyspace" (Figure 3). In doing so, these

clarifying conversations served not just my understanding but that of the other co-founders as well.

Further, the technical co-founder of OrgT produced various data maps to explain how data flows occurred within the product, including the feedback loops involved. Some of these were digitally animated. These visual artifacts enabled a wide range of conversations, particularly when they revealed that several responsible AI principles that OrgT were considering adopting were in tension with the current design. For example, OrgT often discussed the importance of its products in providing access to a plurality of perspectives. However, examining the data flow maps in detail revealed that the sources of data used as algorithmic fuel were scraped from quite limited sources, driven in part by the economics of using GPT-3 (which charges by tokens or pieces of words used for natural language processing). These conversations then transitioned into a co-production space. As summarized by one of the OrgT co-founders,

> [We're] being reminded to pay attention…we've gone from just chatting to keeping documents and writing things down and drawing the sorts of structures and systems that we're building… what are the extra questions we should be asking? (OrgT Co-Founder B, interview, August 26, 2022)

Co-production spaces

In response to input from the different co-founders and from me, co-production was encouraged through the visual artifacts. For example, in creating data maps, one technical co-founder of OrgT often contributed first, and the other co-founders and myself added further information. Seeing the product's dynamics through different lenses—such as the cybernetic perspectives of feedback loops and thresholds—opened new ways of designing, configuring, and communicating their product. For example, following the conversation space enabled by the data flow maps and the surfacing of tensions, the co-founders then moved into solutions mode, prompting product innovation ideas to tackle the tensions inherent in providing access to a plurality of perspectives. As a result, they devised a way to enable better representation of sources while maintaining similar economics. One co-founder reflected: "A lot of our biggest product breakthroughs have been in these sessions rather than in our weekly check-in call. (OrgT Co-Founder B, interview, August 26, 2022)

Similarly, visual artifacts employing the cybernetic concept of thresholds also led to product innovation ideas. For example, in **Error! Reference source not found.**, I crafted a visual representation of OrgT's content feed as navigating zones of relevance, acceptability, and radicalization. This prompted product feature ideas to help guardrail the zones in which the content feed operated—for example, through features that encouraged additional user input and feedback.

Reflection Spaces

Many of the artifacts produced over the course of the participatory workshops were compiled into a lookbook for OrgT with an initial goal of prompting reflection. In its first iteration, this was far from a polished document, but served as a starting point to bring the different parts of OrgT's product story together. This lookbook was particularly used during one-on-one reflection interviews with each co-founder. It helped visualize the evolution of ideas over time and prompted a range of reflections from the co-founders on what they had learned and how helpful these visual artifacts had been in generating a shared understanding of what they were really building and the potential implications for various stakeholder groups. One of OrgT's co-founders shared how reflective space was afforded through the drawings captured in Figure 3, for example:

> The storylines and story spaces development [seen in Figure 3] … drawing them … [and] pushing the questions about … general ways to think of them [has been helpful]. I think because we get so wrapped up in specifics … having to write down into a document and having to draw it out in a sort of abstract way is really nice versus most of my drawings or our [OrgT] drawings are user interface and mockups and so it doesn't let you step back and think, okay, what is this system? What is the structure of this thing? (OrgT Co-Founder B, participatory workshop, August 26, 2022)

In the future, I envision a version of the cybernetic lookbook sitting alongside other entrepreneurial visual tools, such as the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder & Pigneur, n.d.), as a way of capturing organizational understanding. Further, I speculate that the lookbook could have additional relevance as a visual artifact to help startups track the evolution of their models over time, fuel reflective practice, and potentially play a role in accompanying storytelling to attract prospective new hires or funders.

A compilation of the various cybernetic diagrams is also being curated for my doctorate. A cybernetic lookbook may be useful for conveying the values, perspectives, and approaches that have been taken in the research, enhancing understanding of my own research practices and building cybernetic awareness. This approach may be particularly relevant for intervention research and other action-oriented methodologies, where reflective practices are core (Bradbury, 2010; Costello & Costello, 2011; Ison, 2008; Schön, 2017).

Conclusions

Grounded in the real-world complexity of organizational change, this paper repurposes the lookbook from the field of fashion to support systems thinking and transformation. Cybernetic lookbooks open new avenues for understanding organizational dynamics by affording several types of spaces: spaces for conversation, co-production, and reflection. By affording conversation spaces,

they allowed different members of the co-founding team, with their varied backgrounds and directions, to surface crossroads in the form of tensions to navigate, decisions to make, or impacts of decisions to rectify. In this way, the cybernetic lookbook fulfilled a role as a boundary object (Leigh Star, 2010), where the co-founders, with their different perspectives, could participate, problem-solve, innovate, and collaborate towards systems change. By affording co-production spaces, the cybernetic lookbook assisted in forging new paths in response to the crossroads surfaced in conversation. And by affording reflection spaces, the cybernetic lookbook enabled the team to distil learnings that may serve for future crossroads. It is hoped that this paper provides a useful starting point for others who may wish to engage with cybernetic diagramming practices and the creation of lookbooks to enhance organizational and research understanding for awareness-based systems change.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

To the author’s knowledge, there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

Ethics Statement

This study underwent formal ethical review through the Australian National University's Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol 2022/051), with all participants providing voluntary consent after receiving comprehensive information about the research. They explicitly authorized the use of their data for academic purposes. To protect the participating organizations from any inadvertent negative consequences, extensive measures were taken to anonymize both institutional identities and individual contributors referenced throughout this document. Additionally, each organization received advance copies of the manuscript sections discussing their involvement, allowing them to verify that confidentiality had been maintained and to provide input. The review process yielded limited comments that did not materially alter the core findings or analysis, and all organizational feedback was incorporated into the final text.

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Peer Review Article

Dancing and Tending the Spaces-in-Between:

On Hospicing and Fugitivity in Transformative Public Sector Innovation

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Abstract

This article offers theory-informed, learning-oriented, and imaginative insights into working in and with the unique stuckness of public sector organizations when trying to generate and catalyse transformative innovations on complex challenges. Imagining and enacting systems transformation in the public sector is transdisciplinary, creative, often subversive, and definitely daunting. We focus here on the Two Loops Model as a helpful archetype, a theory of change, and a creative prompt for systems transformation. Unlike many other models of

transformation that are ultimately oriented toward finding and scaling solutions, Two Loops shows the dominant and emergent systems in an oscillating dance with a clear space between. We found this space to be an overlooked and potent place of praxis in our work, perhaps particularly so in the public sector, which tends to perpetuate the dominant system even when "innovating." In this article, we dive deeply into this space to see what new and different perspectives it offers when working on complex challenges. We draw upon Black, Indigenous, queer, feminist, and decolonial scholars to help us think more deeply into this space, which is variously described as fugitive, wayward, hospice, Trickster, break, refusal, and snap. We then engage with this thinking in our own practice space—a public sector innovation lab inside local government. We visualize nine different views into and from this potent space-in-between and how we worked in, with, and from these views in our practice. Using engaged theory, reflective practice, images, metaphor, and poetic language, we aim to open up different possibilities for transformation efforts in the public and other sectors. We invite you to join us as we dwell in the messy, ambiguous, inner and outer work in this space, where we grapple with what we might need to do less of, and what we may need to do more of, in our efforts to move away from the dominant *what is*, and toward the emergent and resurgent *what must be/come*.

Keywords
transformative innovation, transformative research, systems change, Two Loops Model, public sector innovation, innovation lab

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Introduction

The public sector tends to be best known as slow-moving and risk averse, and is designed to be predictable, reliable, and stable. For many public sector responsibilities, this is appropriate—no one appreciates surprise increases in taxes or failures to provide essential infrastructure and services. At the same time, there are many pressures on the public sector to change and transform, rooted in different values and visions for what the public sector should, could, or must be, and informed by different histories and cultures of governance (e.g., Criado et al., 2025; de Vries et al., 2016; Goyal & Howlett, 2024; Lewis et al., 2020; Mu & Wang, 2022; Torfing et al., 2019). For example, the public sector is contending with increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous challenges where traditional approaches to public management and administration are no longer appropriate. There are also increasing pressures for the government to be made more efficient, less wasteful, and to behave more like a business. Many public sector organizations—from state-level governments to local school boards—are facing pressures to reckon with historic and present

inequities and injustices designed into their systems and cultures, including systemic racism, gender and racialized pay gaps, inaccessibility for people with differing abilities, transphobia, and ongoing colonization. "Innovators" are responding to these and other pressures in very different ways—some helpful and productive, and others catastrophic—the assessment of which can depend on the values underlying what "successful" innovations look like.

The transdisciplinary field of public innovation research, along with diverse and growing practice-based interventions and experiences, are generating a growing body of work to learn from (e.g., Wellstead et al., 2021). As researcher-practitioners, we have thought deeply about the paradigms, processes, theories of change, and practices we use in our public sector innovation work. Through our cycles of experimentation and learning during nine years of co-creating the City of Vancouver Solutions Lab, we noticed how the many models of innovation and transformation that we were using were often putting too much pressure on us to solve a problem, scale a solution, and generate and implement measurable results. These pressures were further amplified by the systems, structures, and behaviours of government as a whole that imposed very narrow measures of success. Perhaps we feel this more acutely than some other public sector innovators because the directionality of the innovation/transformation we are working toward is eco-social wellbeing, justice, and liberation. We were feeling trapped by this relentless solution-seeking drive and could see that it was keeping our innovations stuck within the dominant paradigms of governance.

In *Becoming-Story: A Decolonised Desire of a Colonised 'I'*, Judith Enriquez (2024) writes the following:

> The colonized mind attempts to "repair" the future with "what works," focusing on reliable outcomes and guaranteed answers. This 'best practice' approach, championed by the most literate scientists and scholars of the world, mirrors how we approach research inquiry—with ready-made answers based on the same logic that brought us to a state of disrepair in the first place. We have toolkits, models and frameworks for almost everything. We see the world as a problem to be solved… Part of the invitation of this work is to explore without the clarity of concepts as sedimented in the minds of scholars and theorists… it is a commitment to do the "shadow work"—to stay awhile in the less discernible, undefined—and to allow concepts to exhale another possibility of meaning, making, and becoming. (p. 18)

In our work, we needed a way out, an escape hatch, a place to rest for a moment—at least sometimes. Otherwise, we kept replicating what already is even when we were trying hard not to, perhaps with a little more novelty, efficiency, or user-friendliness than the way things were before our intervention.

We were able to make some deeper sense of the experience that we were having with the supportive and clear thinking of Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (also known as Vanessa Andreotti) in her book *Hospicing Modernity* (2021). In it,

she describes modernity/coloniality as a contested phenomenon with multiple definitions. She writes that "modernity cannot exist without expropriation, extraction, exploitation, militarization, dispossession, destitution, genocides, and ecocides… One hell of a trick of modernity/coloniality is making itself appear benevolently omnipresent, while rendering its violence and unsustainability invisible" (p. 18). Machado de Oliveira builds upon Audre Lorde's assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde, 2020, pp. 41–42).

In the preface to the book, Machado de Oliveira writes that she first encountered the word "hospice" through Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze's book *Walk Out, Walk On* (2011), meaning "acting with compassion to assist systems to die with grace, and to support people in the process of letting go—even when they are holding on for dear life to what is already gone" (p. xxii). She writes about modernity/coloniality as a *who*, or a multifaceted, living entity that is "stuck in self-infantilizing behavior; some see it recklessly crossing several tipping points leading to its decline; others see it as approaching or already past its expiration date. Some believe a genuinely new system is only possible if we are able to learn the lessons that modernity has to offer in its decline" (p. 17). In our experiences of stuckness in the Solutions Lab, these ideas and questions about hospicing the dominant system gathered resonance in our thinking and practice.

In this article, we focus on a very specific—and, in our view, under-examined or perhaps overlooked—praxis of transformation in the public (and likely other) sectors that hospicing pointed us toward: the space-in-between, fugitivity, the wayward, the Trickster, the snap, the refusal. We use the Berkana Institute's Two Loops Model, from Wheatley and Frieze's (2011) work, and then expand and explore our thinking into this space further by drawing upon Black, Indigenous, queer, feminist, and decolonial scholars. Through entangling this thinking with our own practice, we generate nine different views into this space-in-between, making for some rich descriptions of the liminal, ambiguous, uncomfortable, and creative spaces in systems transformation work in our context. We then share some ways we tended to these spaces through process design, facilitation, and learning work in our public sector innovation lab, sharing insights about what it looks—and feels—like to actively cultivate and try to hold these elsewheres while within the House of Modernity. As a result of this research, we believe that skillful work, navigation, ongoing learning, and reflection in this space-in-between are essential for researchers and practitioners to consider and integrate to help avoid the replication of problematic paradigms and patterns of *what is* while seeking solutions to complex challenges in the public sector and beyond. We hope our article will make a compelling contribution for others working toward transformation in different contexts and provide rigour and nuance to the design and facilitation of working in these spaces-in-between.

Our Research, Practice, and Learning Context

The Solutions Lab (SLab) is a public sector innovation lab (PSI lab) inside the City of Vancouver, Canada, that was established in 2016. SLab was created in response to the growing pressures on municipal governments to face urgent, complex, and often intractable challenges, such as climate change, growing inequity, and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, from within these increasingly unpredictable, high-pressure, and complex environments (City of Vancouver, 2018, 2022). SLab brings public servants and community collaborators together in creative and experimental processes to seek transformative solutions to some of the most complex challenges facing Vancouver. Its work focuses in four priority policy domains: Climate Change and Climate Justice; Zero Waste and Circularity; Equity; and Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

As co-authors, we were responsible for leading and continually imagining the Solutions Lab into being from 2016 to 2025. Lindsay founded and led the City of Vancouver Solutions Lab from 2016 to 2023. Lily worked with the Solutions Lab beginning in 2018 in a part-time role, and then took over as the Solutions Lab Manager from 2023 to 2025. Our roles were always as temporary City staff, an experience which informed our inside/outside and at-the-edge experiences shared here.

SLab is part of a growing movement of innovation labs inside public sector institutions around the world, sometimes also called policy labs, service design labs, living labs, social labs, or co-design labs. Carstensen and Bason (2012) describe PSI labs as innovation catalysts for host organizations that assist in the exploration phase of innovation, helping to drive the unfreezing processes of organizational change in collaboration with stakeholders and in response to a range of innovation barriers that exist in the day-to-day activities of the public sector. PSI labs have and seek permission to work differently than the rest of the public service and may sit within, alongside, or at the edge of their host organization. They are created for a variety of different purposes, such as digital transformation, improving citizen experiences, running real-world experiments, increasing efficiency and effectiveness, improving public or stakeholder engagement, sparking policy innovations, and generally adding public value (Blomkamp, 2018, 2021; de Vries et al., 2018; Ferreira & Botero, 2020; Lewis, 2021; Lewis et al., 2017, 2020; McGann et al., 2018; Puttick et al., 2014; Tõnurist et al., 2017; Wellstead et al., 2021). They use a large toolkit of innovation theories, processes, and methods, including design, systems thinking, creativity, experimentation, user-centredness, co-creation, and others not yet commonly used in the public sector.

As the number of PSI labs proliferates around the world, and as they mature in different ways in response to their unique contexts, different typologies are emerging (Cole, 2022; Cole & Hagen, 2024; Wellstead et al., 2021). The more specific orientation of SLab within this landscape is as a small, somewhat transient and underground public sector social innovation and transformative

learning lab, with the purpose of cultivating systems transformation toward socio-economic and ecological health, wellbeing, justice, and liberation. This orientation makes SLab a relatively unique manifestation of a PSI lab in the current global landscape. We will take a moment here to describe this typology via social innovation and transformative learning literature, as this helps to situate why we ended up seeking approaches to innovation and transformation that were not fully captured by the dominant systems, structures, behaviours, and paradigms of the settler-colonial form of governance in the Canadian public sector.

Westley and Antadze (2010) define social innovation as "a complex process of introducing new products, processes, or programs that profoundly change the basic routines, resource and authority flows, or beliefs of the social system in which the innovation occurs" (p. 2). Social innovations work to transform deep structures—hearts, minds, culture—with an intent to respond more skillfully and effectively to problems than is possible through approaches that are less likely to address root causes of wicked challenges (i.e., the "what is" described earlier) (Howaldt et al., 2016; Scharmer, 2016; Westley et al., 2011; Westley et al., 2017). Social innovations aim to shift social practices, ideas, beliefs, interests, power, and agency so that innovations are diffused, scaled (up, out, and deep), institutionalized, or otherwise integrated and made routine in respectful and reciprocal place-based ways. Our approach to transformative learning is as a metatheory, defined as "processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world" (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71) and that these changes have depth (or significant impact), breadth (or multi-contextual application), and stability (or stickiness of learning and change). The focus of our inquiry into the potential in the space-in-between what is and what might/must be/come, is also a question that transformative learning researchers in lineages of perspective (psychocritical) and social-emancipatory transformation are interested in (e.g., Freire, 1968/1970; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Hoggan, 2016; Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009; Melacarne & Nicolaides, 2019; Mezirow, 2000; O'Sullivan et al., 2002; Sim & Nicolaides, 2024; Taylor, 2009).

Social innovation and transformative learning provide helpful and flexible theories, processes, and methods to work toward systems transformation on complex challenges in a variety of contexts. In the public sector, all these approaches are still novel, marginal, unrecognized, and often resisted. The forces of the dominant systems, structures, and paradigms are strong—they are the water that most of us swim in, most of the time. We argue that they are particularly strong and very stuck, with the public sector often holding significant responsibility for perpetuating the "what is" in order to maintain stability, reliability, and predictability. Some of these social innovation and transformative learning scholars gesture toward this space-in-between in different but related ways, including shifting beliefs; scaling deep; cultivating disequilibrium; critical reflection about ways of thinking/knowing/being that no longer serve; reckoning with increasing complexity; moving toward justice; and

re-situating self in relation to others, to place, to land, and to more-than-human relations. In order to immerse ourselves more fully in the tempting, terrifying, and potent space-in-between we needed to stretch our thinking further and thus looked to Black, Indigenous, queer, feminist, and decolonial scholars and their perspectives and experiences in this space.

Before diving into this space-in-between, we want to briefly situate our own positionalities in relation to it, and to the dominant public sector paradigms, to enable reading our work with this in mind. Lindsay (she/her) is a scholar-practitioner of white, settler ancestry. She holds both visibly dominant and invisibly more marginalized identities and is actively practicing the integration of feminist, queer, Earth-centred, anti-oppressive, and decolonial ways of thinking, being, feeling, and knowing in her scholarship and life. After many years working in the social and public sectors as a practitioner, Lindsay returned to the academy to complete a mid-career Ph.D. She is now continuing her scholarship as both connected to and independent from the university and always rooted in practice.

Lily is an able-bodied woman of Black/Louisiana Creole, German, and Irish ancestry. Existing in a mixed Black body in highly racialized North America, she has been dancing with the both/and, ambiguity, and complexity of her own identity her whole life. Black feminist, decolonizing, and liberatory praxis informs her work as a systems transformation practitioner and researcher. She is guided by the question: Who and what do we—as individuals, relationships, communities, organizations and systems—need to become in order to cultivate well-being, joy, and liberation for current and future generations? Her work focuses on designing spaces of dialogue, learning, and creativity to navigate our communities' pressing complex challenges and co-imagine possible futures beyond them. She is an inquisitive practitioner, holding a researchers' orientation to her practice.

Falling Into the Space-in-Between

Public sector (and other) innovation researchers and practitioners use a variety of theories of change, models, frameworks, and processes to strategically understand, describe, and deliver their innovation work, including the Three Horizons Framework, Theory U, sustainability transitions frameworks like multi-level perspective, design, and the adaptive cycle (Buchanan, 2001; Geels, 2002, 2019; Gunderson & Holling, 2001; Scharmer, 2016; Sharpe et al., 2016). These are all important and helpful and offer deeply nuanced ideas about how change and transformation happen, and SLab engages with all of them in different ways. In this article, we specifically use the Two Loops Model to think with because it is a model that visualizes a clear break between the dominant system and the emergent system (simplified version in Figure 1).

Two Loops shows a dominant system and emergent system in an oscillating dance with one another. As the dominant system moves from its peak and toward decline, Two Loops shows a clear and potent gap between the ending of this

curve and the beginning of the emergent system. Words like "hospice," "compost," and "death" are used to describe the decline and end of the dominant system, and words like "pioneer," "connect," "name," and "edge-walking" are used to describe the beginning of the emergent system. But what of the specifics in and of that space?

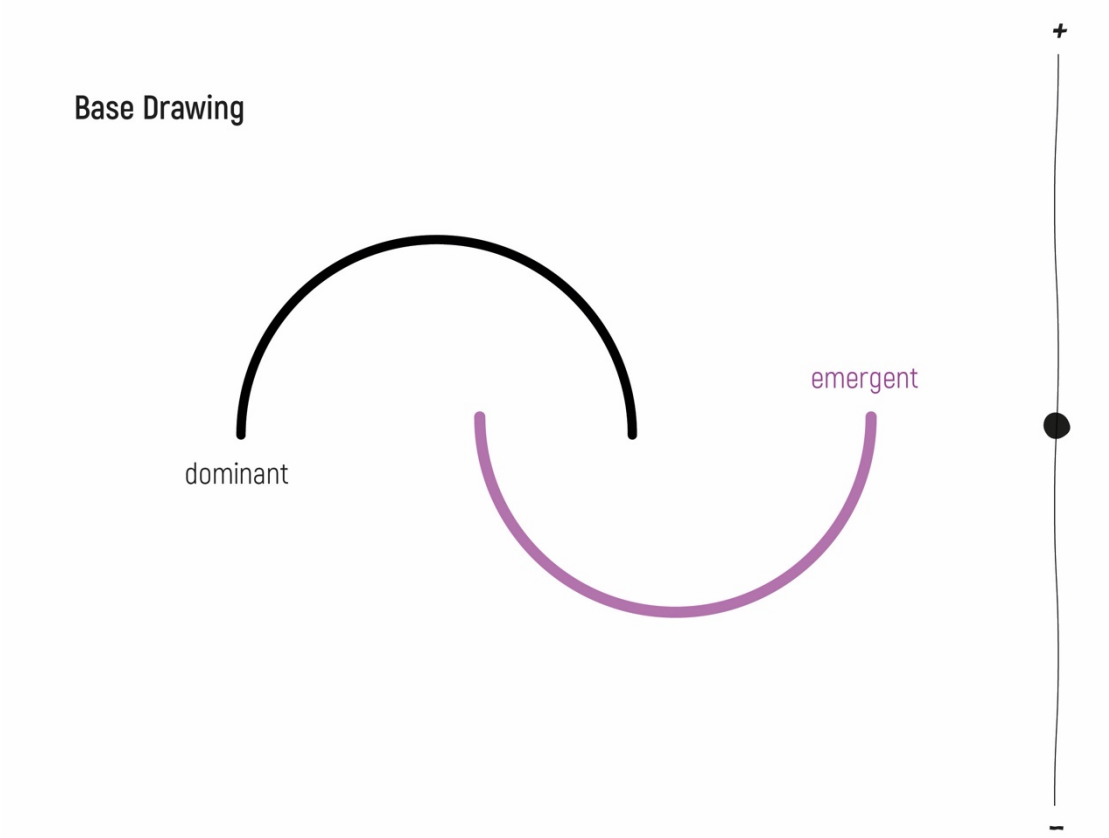

Figure 1: *Essence of the dominant and emergent system cycles as the base drawing for our explorations here, adapted from Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze's work at the Berkana Institute, and captured in their book Walk Out, Walk On (2011). With gratitude to Marcia Higuchi, who has created the visualizations in this article.*

Black, Indigenous, queer, feminist, and decolonial scholars describe the essential nature of this break from distinct perspectives. In these different lineages, a clear point is made—and one that is absent or marginal in more Western theories of change and transformation—that without this space-in-between, it is impossible to not recreate what already exists in some form, thus replicating and perpetuating problematic patterns of dominant systems even when we think we may be doing something different. This break is described variously as a space for fugitivity, as a crack, for portals to adjacent possibles, for the work of the Trickster, for resistance, and for rest. These diverse descriptions were essential for us in growing our understanding of the possibility and vitality that resides here. We will spend some time dwelling with several scholars whose thinking about this we found particularly resonant in our context, noting that

these are but glimpses into vast thinking that we hope lights sparks to explore further.

There are a variety of entry points that give us a felt sense of the potency and possibility of these spaces, and we'll begin by returning to Machado de Oliveira (2021), who describes the essentiality of dwelling in the muck if we are to hospice and let die the problematic systems of modernity and coloniality. She says that we must dwell here for much longer than is desirable or comfortable, and to let go of "solutioning." She says that this is essential work to do because if we don't pause, rest, flail, or wallow here then we will continue to replicate and re-create what already is. Tricia Hersey (2022) describes a different energetic orientation to this space: "I don't want a seat at the table of the oppressor. I want a blanket and pillow down by the ocean. I want to rest" (p. 125). She understands rest as a portal to liberation that the dominant systems cannot imagine or provide. Roger Robinson's poem, *A Portable Paradise*, speaks to a pocket-sized portal: "And if I speak of Paradise / then I'm speaking of my grandmother / who told me to carry it always / on my person, concealed, so / no one else would know but me. / That way they can't steal it, she'd say" (Robinson, 2019).

Báyò Akómoláfé (2023) describes this as a space where energetic spirits live in the cracks—full of Trickster and fugitive energy, with much to (un)learn, see, and experience. He says that the cracks themselves are worlds within worlds of possibility and portals to multiple elsewheres. Akómoláfé says that this work is "not about preaching to power as if power were some stable thing, but it's about sitting with and within the cracks and listening with big ears to what the world wants to tell us and learn with us" (Koenig et al., 2024, pp. 233–234). Saidiya Hartman (2019) provides rich descriptions of wayward fugitivity based on the experiences of young, Black women in the US in the early 20th century. She describes wayward as:

> Errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild. Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. It is the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies… Waywardness is a practice of possibility at a time when all roads, except the ones created by smashing out, are foreclosed. Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of what might be. (pp. 228–229)

What Hartman calls "smashing out" is perhaps what Sarah Ahmed (2017) describes as break or snap, writing that "Perhaps we need to develop a different orientation to breaking… Breaking need not be understood only as the loss of the integrity of something, but as the acquisition of something else, whatever that else might be" (p. 180)... "By snapping you are saying: I will not reproduce a world I cannot bear, a world I do not think should be borne" (p. 199). In describing a surprising turn during a community event, Injairu Kulundu-Bolus (Koenig et al., 2024) says, "It was such an emotional crack, an emotional crack in

all the status and stuff that we do and all the choreography that we know. It completely changed who we were in the moment and what we were witnessing… All the protocols and everything just got completely smashed in that moment. I felt like there was something so powerfully transgressive in that moment" (p. 228). Aurora Levins Morales (2024) describes this breaking as a portal in a physical, embodied way from her experiences as a woman living with disability:

When my body feels as if it's tearing itself apart, when I'm in the nightmare condition, shaking and nauseated, my vision full of flashing lights, my legs too weak to stand, the only path out is deeper… And going in, going deeper, allowing the pain, there is the moment when I come clear: this isn't just a tale of damage. It's also a chart of where we need to go. The transformation of the planet into a sustaining and sustainable ecosocial system moves along pathways we can't entirely see, but with their hungers and injuries and amazing capacity for renewal. (pp. 86–87)

Maynard and Simpson (2022) share intimate dialogue with one another on their praxis of world-(un)making from their Black and Indigenous lineages. Maynard writes:

> All world-endings are not tragic. There are some world-endings that I am comfortable with… I believe that world-ending and world-making can occur, are occurring, have always occurred, simultaneously. Given that racial and ecological violence are interwoven and inextricable from one another, more now than ever, Black and Indigenous communities—who are globally positioned as "first to die" within the climate crisis—are also on the front lines of world-making practices that threaten to overthrow the current (death-making) order of things. Put otherwise, our communities, quite literally the post-apocalyptic survivors of world-endings already, are best positioned to imagine what this may be. (pp. 25–26)

In Simpson's more recent work (2025), she thinks with shorelines as physical locations of overlap and in-betweenness—of water, land, and sky, and the beings that traverse them She writes:

> I think once again that worlds existing in between spaces are diverse and generative places. Beings that travel between, build between, exist in interstitial spaces are portals to other worlds; and the portals themselves are worlds on their own too. (p. 94)

These thinkers (and many others) provide rich description and deep, embodied intelligences about this space-in-between from different perspectives and lineages. Each has enhanced our thinking, languaging, and enactment of innovation in our public sector lab as we work to translate some of these ideas into this context. We have found that spending time in these spaces, exploring the potentials that they contain, and designing and facilitating processes of transformation that hold ourselves and others—generatively and generously—

within them is a promising approach in our PSI lab context. Next, we will share the methodology that we used to engage with this literature in our own practice and generate the insights that follow.

Methodology

A methodological bricolage was used in this research, designed to keep us engaged in constant dialogue between theoretical rigour and practice-based groundings in our context, while continuously holding an imaginative sense of (im)possibility that the space-in-between requires (Freeman, 2017; Kincheloe et al., 2017; Yardley, 2019). Perhaps a better description than bricolage is a weaving, braiding, or a stitching together of a critically reflexive, iterative, and non-linear research inquiry over time that is continually re-grounded in our practice, and in being of service and in good relations with each other and those whom this research and our practice aims to support (Andrew & Karetai, 2022; Jimmy et al., 2019; Kovach, 2021; Simpson, 2017; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). This bricolage had two core methodologies that oriented the overall approach: ongoing critical, dialogic reflection on our space-in-between praxis in SLab, and poetical thinking to turn these experiences into the higher level insights shared later in this article, each of which is described further next.

We worked to hold a transformative, transgressive, and fugitive space for ourselves in engaging with this theory in our practice, working relentlessly and respectfully to hold our own methodological space-in-between as we worked to see, make, understand, and describe this space in our work (Gross-Wyrtzen & Moulton, 2023; Koenig et al., 2024; Lewis, 2023; Strega & Brown, 2015). While working to hold this fugitive space with and for each other as co-authors and in SLab, we took great care to respectfully engage with the Black, Indigenous, queer, feminist, and decolonial scholarship about the space-in-between while working within the House of Modernity. This is not an easy place to dance with and tend—nor should it be. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2025) writes:

> I believe that there must be a shift away from making Indigenous Knowledge knowable, legible and shareable by the state and its actors; instead, we must refocus this knowledge towards liberation… Indigenous Knowledge is regularly captured by elites—some working in the academy, some working for state bureaucracies—who separate our knowledge from our bodies, from our peoples and from political projects and, too often now, deploy it in the service of neoliberalism… sharing Indigenous Knowledge with the state primarily serves the state, and invests in sustaining the present colonial system of knowledge… But this knowledge quickly becomes recursive because these same people understand "our presently ecocidal and genocidal world as normal and unalterable." They tell me that their inclusion of me and my knowledge—on their terms—makes their work more ethical and robust. What it really does is elide and remove the

> liberatory potential of Indigenous knowledge systems, recasting our knowledge in service of our current "ecocidal and genocidal" world. Indigenous Knowledge should be about our liberation—by which I mean not just the liberation of Indigenous people but the liberation of the planet and all the living systems that make up the earth. (pp. 144–146)

We remain uncertain and humble in our attempts to engage with the scholarship that we have learned from here, while working within the public sector on cultivating systems transformation toward socio-economic and ecological health, wellbeing, justice, and liberation. We held close to Potts and Brown (2015) writing:

> Anti-oppressive work, including research, is not contingent upon location. Social justice work can happen anywhere, including in dominant institutions such as governments… Anti-oppressive research is a commitment to a set of principles, values, and ways of working, and can be carried out anywhere—it's a matter of choice amidst various constraints. We ask that you believe in your capacity for agency: you can act in ways that alter the relations of oppression in your own world. (pp. 24–25)

We think that scholars and practitioners of multitudinous identities have important work to do in co-creating transformative, transgressive, and fugitive spaces of praxis, and that this work is necessarily different based on these identities. In our own experiences, we know that we are perpetual learners who will make missteps and mistakes as we continually return to working in these ways, and that over time, and with committed practice, we will try to get better at doing this liberatory work in appropriate, respectful, and accountable ways.

We did not intentionally begin inquiring into this space-in-between and then go out to study it. Rather, this research emerged through our dialogic praxis with each other as we designed and delivered multiple processes in SLab and noticed that we kept pushing up against the problematic pattern of seeking "innovative solutions" that were recreating the dominant system rather than transforming it. At this point, as practitioners, we started exploring different ways of thinking about the cracks, the fugitive, the Trickster, and other descriptions of these spaces-in-between, and integrated this into SLab processes that we designed and facilitated. As we continued to work these theories into our practice in Solutions Lab in ongoing conversation with each other, we wanted to make sense of what we were doing and learning in our practice to be able to understand it more fully ourselves, share it with our community of SLab colleagues and partners, and share more broadly with the field of researchers and practitioners working in and with these spaces-in-between.

The nature of this inquiry resisted coding or other forms of categorization when making sense of the diverse data generated in our practice. Our practice-based research is great for generating rich, contextual, data grounded in the

lived realities of practitioners, and also, because of this groundedness, it/we can be at risk of reinforcing the dominant systems of what already is. We required an approach to sensemaking that creatively expanded our ways of thinking about, making sense of, and then sharing what was happening in this work, and came to using a poetic mode of thinking.

Freeman (2017) describes the meta-methodology of poetic thinking as allowing researchers to:

> (1) Penetrate the felt and difficult-to-grasp regions of experiential life; (2) Reach beyond meaning and keep understanding in flow; (3) Create expressions of encounters that expand and challenge the imagination; and (4) Critique what is, by creating what is not yet thought possible. (p. 86)

Freeman also says that poetical thinking is:

> *Felt* experience… A move away from an epistemological and representational form of knowing to an ontological one. Poetical thinking is non-representational thinking. It does not concern itself with portraying an experience, understanding, or event as evidence of something else; it is *itself* an experience, and understanding, an event. (p. 72)

We used learning from our fugitive, dialogic practice and poetical thinking together, practically, using three main strategies: (1) regular, ongoing critically reflexive dialogue with each other (and other practitioner collaborators) that danced between the very practical, experiential, and applied to the imaginative, speculative, and (im)possible and back again; (2) multiple experiments with different forms of expressing the difficult-to-grasp in our more recent SLab activities, including embodiment and somatic practices, speculative fiction writing, sketching and painting, journalling, invocation of poets, musicians and other artists, and land- and place-based practices; and (3) actively cultivating an openness and readiness, a desire—an aliveness—to being transformed ourselves by dynamically staying in- and with multiple encounters and articulations of meaning. Working iteratively with these practices, and holding an intent to gather up something that could describe, represent, and share what we were trying and learning about these spaces-in-between, we generated the visualizations and poetic descriptions of nine views into the spaces, shared next.

Visualizing and Describing Nine Views Into the Spaces-in-Between

We have written these nine views into/from the spaces-in-between, using Two Loops as our orienting model to improvise from. We begin with all nine views shown together (Figure 2). We then move through each one, first zooming out to take in the whole, then zooming into the space-in-between, and finally back out

again through the series of nine views. The vertical bar on the right helps to orient readers to this zooming in and out. We have also suggested a viewpoint/perspective (dots) and a view cone (dotted lines) to help stay oriented as we travel. Each image is paired with a text description of what it looks and feels like from there. We have also provided four brief practice vignettes as examples of how we have worked with these spaces-in-between in SLab (noting that they do not map neatly onto any one specific view). We have attempted to find some tidiness and distinctness to each of these different ways of being in the spaces to aid thinking. And we also want to remind ourselves and our readers that this is a messy and ambiguous space to be, and to try and act/be from within. This tidiness of nine views is very likely a transitory landing place at this moment in time.

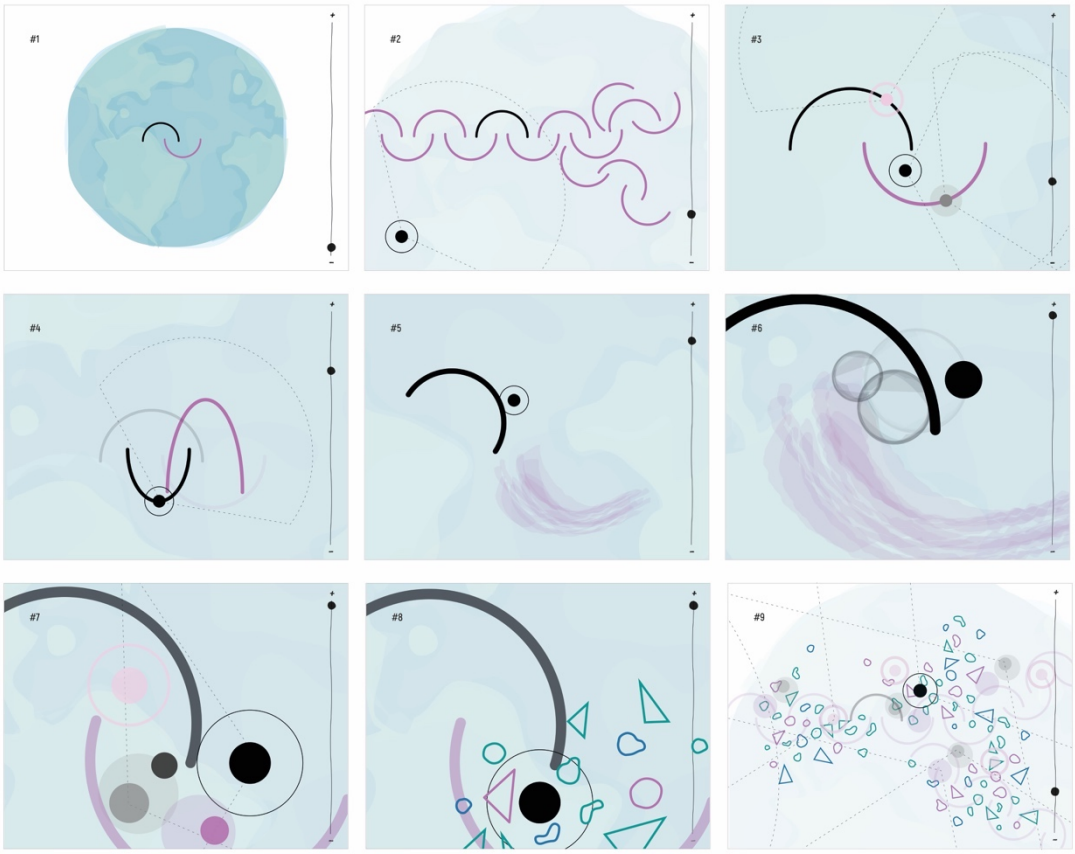

Figure 2: *Nine distinct views into the potent and creative spaces-in-between, using the Two Loops Model as an orienting framework for improvisation.*

View 1: Everything Is Dependent Upon Earth

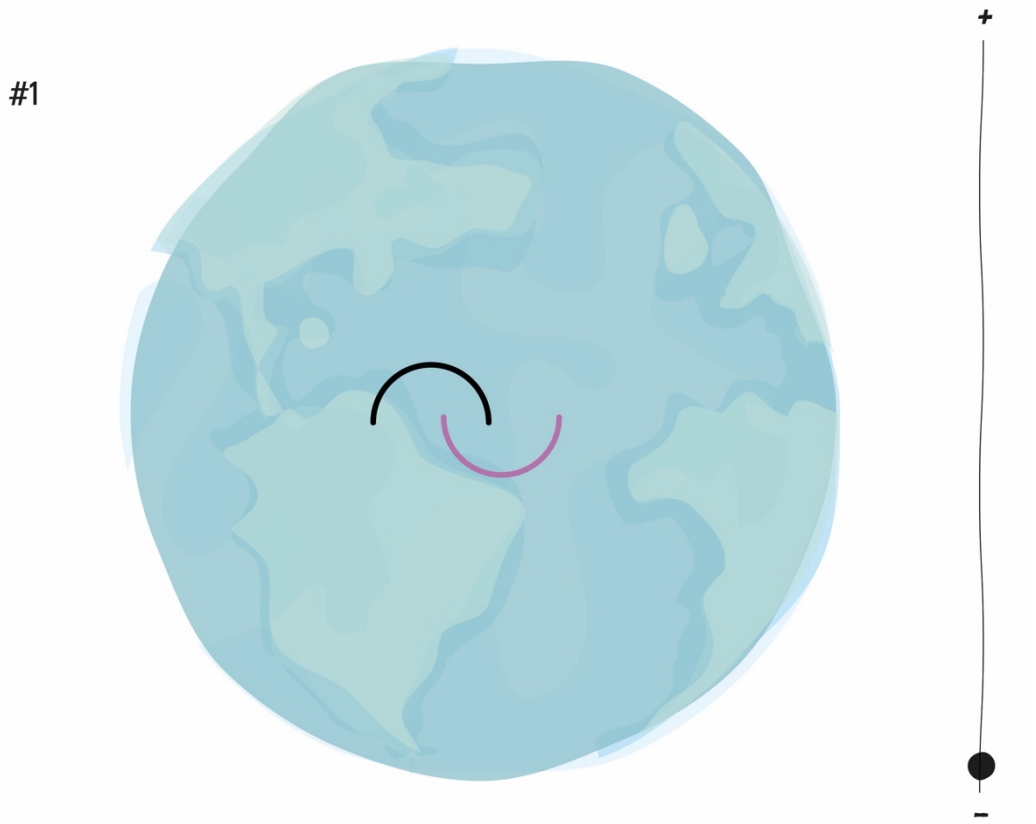

Figure 3: *We are in and of Earth. The great container of these different realities, moving cyclically and traveling simultaneously. Living and dying all at once. All of this is because Earth is.*

Western and European settler colonial paradigms and institutions frequently create models of sustainability in which economy and society are separate systems that overlap with ecosystems, rather than entirely embedded within them. Innovators in multiple sectors also fall into this trap, sometimes setting up competitive relationships between social justice, ecosystem health, and/or economic resilience. The current world-changing potential of artificial intelligence is a good example, with all the ink spilled in its description and analysis usually omitting the fact that we are each living bodies, living in relation to other living bodies, on a living planet Earth. It is important that all the models and frameworks that we use to aid our theory, thinking, and practice are in and of Earth. This is factual, as well as ethical, conceptual, and a choice that we must actively and consistently make. And it changes everything to ensure that our thinking and practice are always, honestly, authentically, rooted and situated in this way.

View 2: Not Everything Is New or Novel; Much of What We Are Looking for Has Already Been/Already Is

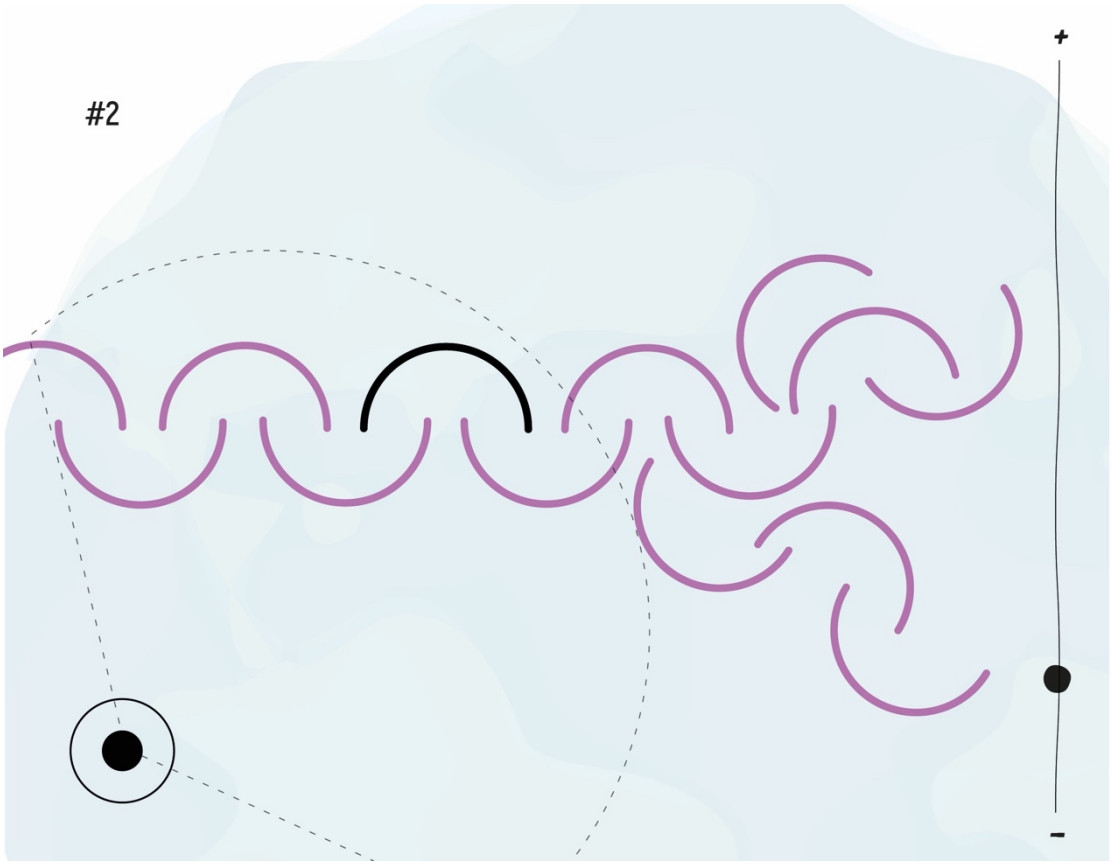

Figure 4: *There are beautiful lineages already here, waiting for us to follow. They are lineages of imagination, of different ancestral and thriving futures, of unfolding possibilities.*

Dominant ways of knowing and being tend to tell very short and narrow stories of history, usually from the perspectives of those who hold/impose societal power and privilege. We will not get into the why of this here; instead, we will focus on the implications and consequences for systems transformation processes. There are deep, rich, nuanced, and place-based histories that are essential stories of now, and stories of becoming. For us, in the very specific place where we live and where our work takes place, we have learned from lands and waters, plant and animal kin, the seasons, Indigenous artists and knowledge keepers, each other, and our ancestors, amongst others. This is the domain of resurgence—the loops that came before and that are still present (and perhaps marginalized)—and what these teach us about how to be in right relationship with place and each other into the future. As public sector innovators existing in institutions shaped by a short and narrow story of history, we orient our lab practices to this (un)learning and work to explore these deeper stories, sources, relationships, and situatedness in respectful, reciprocal, and non-extractive ways. If we return these older loops back into our models and practices, we will realize that there are rich historic, present, and resurgent ways of knowing, being, and doing to

ground in and learn from in revealing potential futures beyond the stuck and problematic paradigms that having only two loops tells us is possible.

Practice Vignette: During the Climate Justice Field School (CJFS), we took our 25 participants outside to learn with the lands, waters, histories, and presents of where this work was happening. Meeting about climate justice inside institutional City walls blocks our capacities to fully experience the risks and potentials of how climate change is affecting aliveness in the city. We began in a community garden with a long and radical history of community work, sitting together in circle under a tree, sharing stories and songs with each other. We visited Chinatown, reflected on the tidal mudflats buried in concrete underneath our feet and about Sínulhk̲ay—the two-headed sea serpent of Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Indigenous cultures who lives there. We visited the trees, plants, and bird life living in Stanley Park and considered what the forest and the Indigenous land holders had to teach us about just climate futures (based on writing by Cole & Kozak, 2024).

View 3: We Each Have Unique Experiences in/With These Spaces

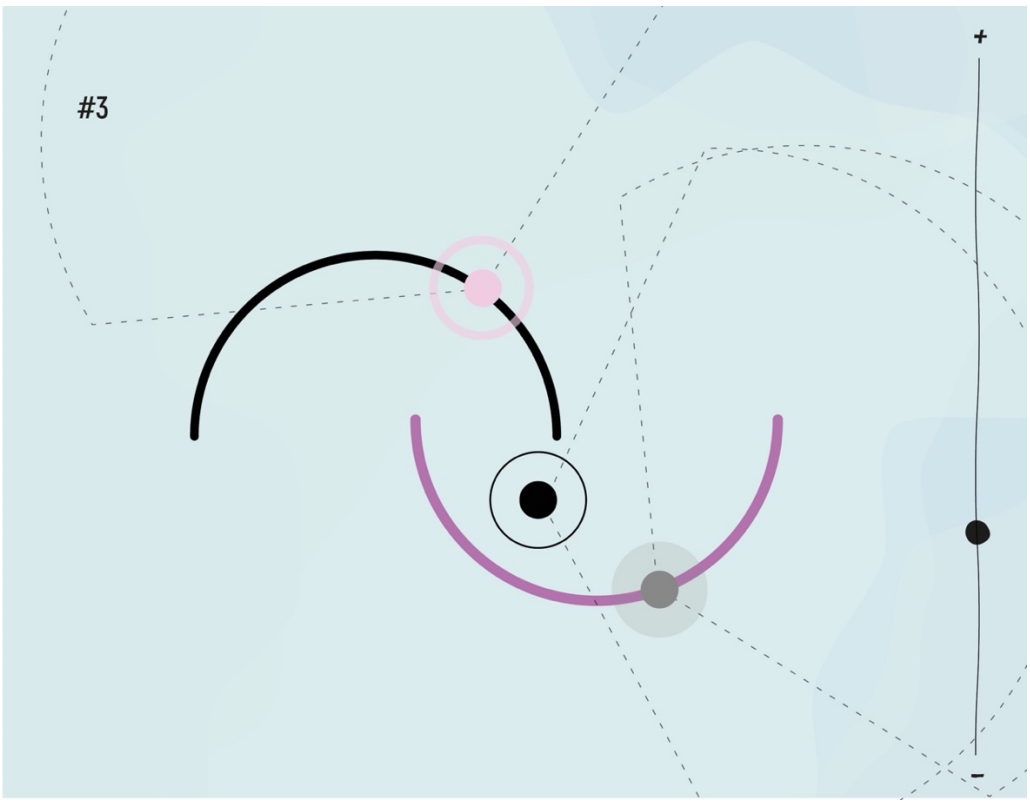

Figure 5: *We are simultaneously in- and outside of the system. Our lineages, experiences, and positionalities shape our lenses. This lens can adapt and evolve.*

We all have different histories, lineages, lived experiences, world views, and ethical orientations that shape how we see and experience a model like this. Even though we have this helpful schematic, we will all see each aspect of the model in our own ways. Some will use their lenses more like telescopes—to look way into the past and/or way into the future. Some will use magnification, focused on the here and now. Some may have a rose or technicolour tint, some may see things in black and white, and others in varying shades of gray. These perspectives can all be helpful if they are explored, listened to deeply, and held with care and curiosity. Some of the most potent moments of transformative potential may come when the system and its actors start to see it/ourselves and more deeply understand each other's experiences. There are many ways to see, feel, and experience systems, and there is much to learn and to teach from these different experiences. At the same time, there are experiences that are less centred, marginalized, oppressed, and actively resisted and experiences that tend to dominate and overrule the others. Active rebalancing is needed to correct this dynamic.

Practice Vignette: A core SLab practice is something that we call self-in-system mapping. We do this early on, before the more familiar, outward-oriented systems mapping happens. Self-in-system facilitates reflective inner work necessary to better understand our own positionalities, multitudinous identities, and inner complexities that inform the lenses, biases, and blind spots that shape how we understand and make meaning of the outer systems that we're trying to change. We support this reflective work by introducing wisdom about equity, anti-racism, anti-oppression, power, decoloniality, and other helpful frameworks. As people continue through lab processes, we regularly return to this self-in-system foundation, building from it to support people in stretching their learning goals, their understandings of agency and accountability, and to build stronger relational webs rooted in this deeper knowing (Transforming Cities, 2025).

View 4: Moving Away From the Dominant System Is a Steep Climb

Figure 6: *From where we are, this is a slow, long, steep, exhausting crevice to climb out of.*

When the loops are inverted in this way, they tell us a different energetic story. Instead of the dominant system being a pinnacle of achievement, it is instead a deep trough that is very difficult to get out of. Instead of a downhill slide from the dominant and into the emergent system, it is a steep climb out of what is, and another steep climb into what we are moving toward. When in the trough of the dominant system (rather than at the peak in the other version of this model, shown as faded out in Figure 6), you may not even be able to see that there are adjacent possibles; all you can see are walls on every side. Energetically, this version of the model is truer to how it often feels to do this work—it is a relentlessly steep mountain that is easy to be pulled back/slide/fall down from. It requires training, practice, relentless dedication, commitment, and support to be able to make it up. This view shows us how small we can feel when faced with this climb. It shows us that we need to find and construct footholds for ourselves, and for those that come after us, and that deeply transformative work is intergenerational work to do.

View 5: The Gap Is Big, Treacherous, and May Seem Insurmountable

Figure 7: *From where we are, it is a massive and treacherous leap into the unknown.*

This view shows us that the solutions we are seeking are not just a short step or jump away. Not only is the gap massive, but it is also very foggy on the other side. What might it look like over there, and how far away is it? Will we land on something treacherous, will we get snagged in midair by something from the dominant system that tries to prevent us from making the leap? Contemplating this view and taking this kind of leap requires a great deal of courage. This isn't a small, every day, easy, and straightforward thing to do. All the preparatory work that we may do to imagine and enact what may be on the other side - ideation, creative processes, experimenting - will never be anything like what it looks and feels like to make the jump and choose a different path or approach. This view tells us that sometimes we jump and the gap is too big and we fall/fail, likely more often than we make it across. In addition to courage there is sacrifice here, contending with big risks and likely failures, and how this feels in a deep way. Yet we do this over and over. We sign up for this work knowing that it is going to be scary, difficult, and dangerous.

View 6: We Can't Be Light Enough for the Leap Until We Let Go

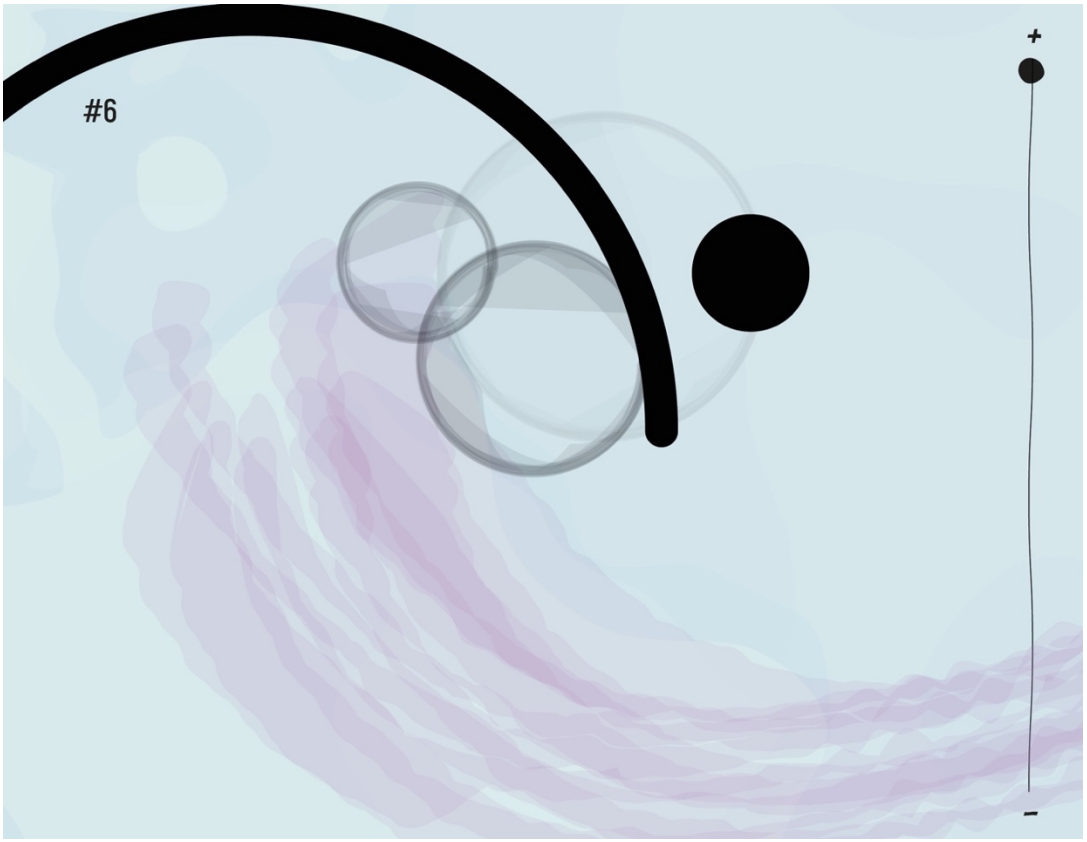

Figure 8: *The weights of the dominant system are so heavy—generational even. There is so much to release and relieve ourselves of, as preparation for leaping.*

This view tells us that the effective strategy is not always to add more tools, knowledge, experiences, to our backpacks. The growth and accumulation obsession that capitalism has taught us may not help us here - more is not always better. Sometimes we must shed things that we think we know and leave them behind so that we are light enough to make the leap. We need to make room for something else to emerge - different relationships, social configurations, ways of being and knowing. If we are too cluttered, filled up, sated, comfortable, and have all the things that we think that we want and need at the ready, we will be too heavy to make the jump. This release is vulnerable. It requires that we (re)open ourselves up to a beginner's mind, to true openness and curiosity about what might be on the other side. This view actively invites hospice, compost, decay - a breaking down of what we think we know, also named in the original Two Loops model. The short-lived but destructive project of modernity has nothing more to give. We need to let it decay, let it die in order to nurture that which is already growing elsewhere.

Practice Vignette: As the first iteration of SLab came to a close, and we conducted a developmental evaluation of our work, we noticed that including a transformative learning purpose in our theory of change was likely to result in more significant, durable, and expansive impacts than our time- and issue-bound lab work would on its own. We added a community of practice (CoP) to our SLab activities at that point to encourage and enable our most committed City colleagues to learn and practice SLab theories and methods. Transformative learning cultivates a disorienting dilemma, and then—through experimentation and practice—supports the integration of new paradigms, worldviews, and practices that are better suited to the complex challenges that people are grappling with. CoP members crafted a creative question that mattered to them in their work and established their own learning goals. SLab then supported their work by hosting learning sessions, inviting specific practices, coaching, and community building (City of Vancouver, 2018, 2022).

View 7: Tend and Surrender to What Is

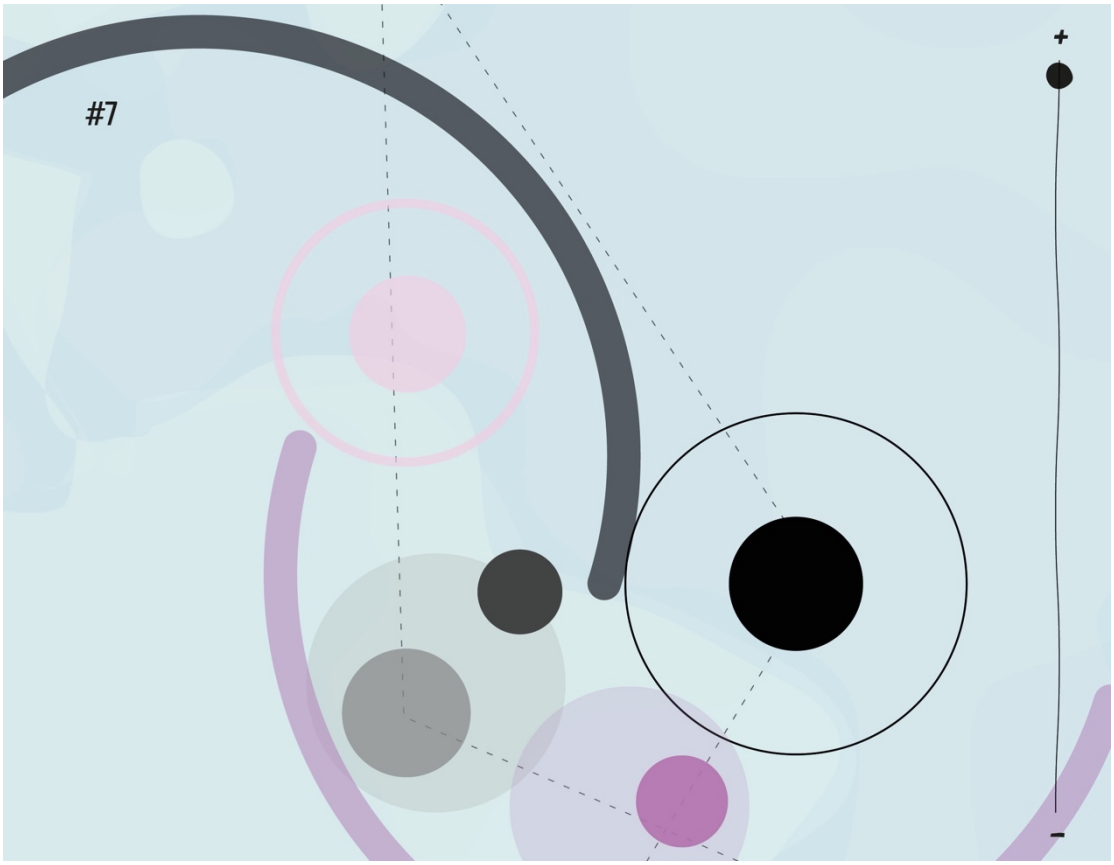

Figure 9: *In the cracks, things seem endless and impossible; and even still, in this space, moments of surrender and refusal can be tended.*

Innovative processes can feel especially hard when we resist what is happening. We do this for many reasons—perhaps out of fear of the unknown, or because we're not ready to let go of the things keeping us comfortable that prop up the dominant system. In this view, the antidote is to linger in the cracks and surrender to what is. Tending to our humanness serves as a wayfinder in understanding how unraveling, detangling, and (not so) simply being-in and being-with are necessary for transformation. Through deep listening and observation, we can attune to different levels and kinds of readiness for transformation. Rest can be a powerful and essential act of refusal and refuge in the face of dominant systems of oppression (Hersey, 2022). Tending to the individual and collective body and nervous system can be a powerful point of intervention. If we can stay connected to our bodies, then we can figure out what needs to happen next. If we are aware of what is happening relationally between us and the dominant system, we may see where to find/make some breathing room. From here, we may then see what stuck paradigms or patterns are governing a person or a group of people and that may be getting in the way of seeing what is happening more clearly. There is also grieving and healing work to do here. What trauma or harm is present? What has already been lost, destroyed, or foreclosed? What needs to be healed within and between us, and within the larger collective?

View 8: There Are Portals in the Cracks to Pluriversal Possibilities

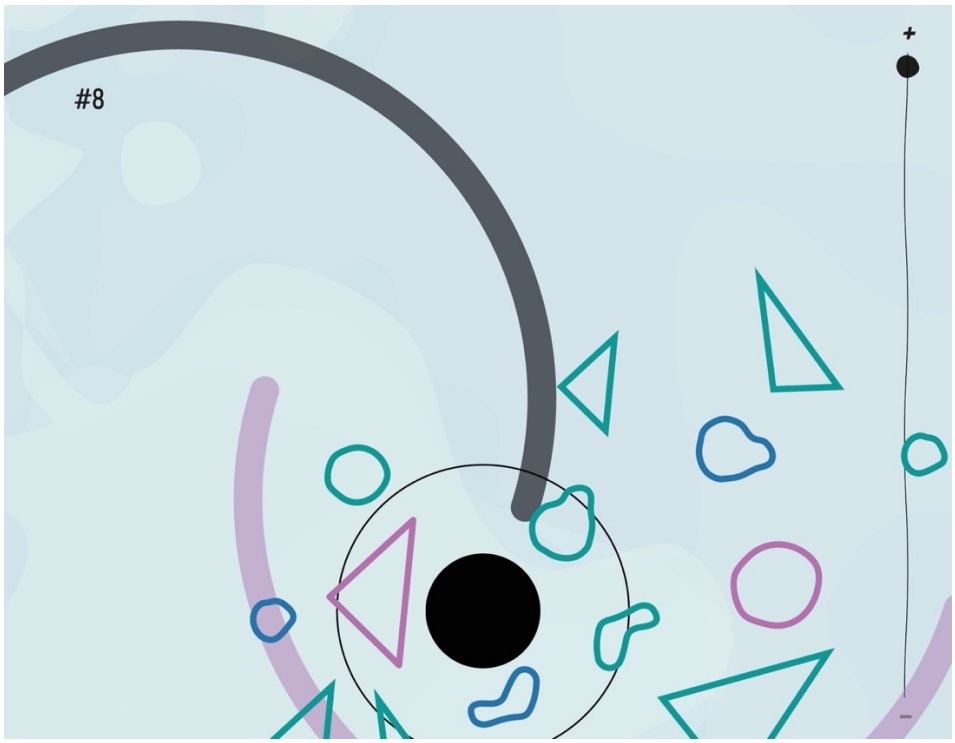

Figure 10: *The crack is itself a portal if we let ourselves surrender to it. There are beautiful portals along the way that continue to reveal themselves. There are multitudinous exits, doorways, and yesses to follow.*

The dominant systems are so powerful that when we think we are imagining and enacting a desirable emergent future, we are quite probably still recreating a slight variation of what already is (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). This view tells us that there are pluriversal portals in the space-in-between, and that what we need is to make/be ported entirely elsewhere(s) (Escobar, 2018). This view reminds us that we are not hemmed in to always reacting and tending to the dominant what-is but can instead attend to parallel also-realities. A powerful intervention for transformation is to dance at the edges of places that we may not even be able to imagine from here. Simply thinking about, knowing, and trusting that a portal might reveal itself or be made is itself an act of transformation. We conjure portals, and when we find them, we figure out what is needed to hold them open and to try to speak, sing, dance, (w)rest the portal into being. Trusting and following the yesses within ourselves and in others, and being of service to those who are ready and wanting transformation, can help to open up these views. Being even more ambitious with our theories of transformation and articulating this clearly and courageously can help move us away from path dependencies and make visible new tracks to follow.

View 9: There Are Fractal, Diverse, and Multitudinous Possible Futures

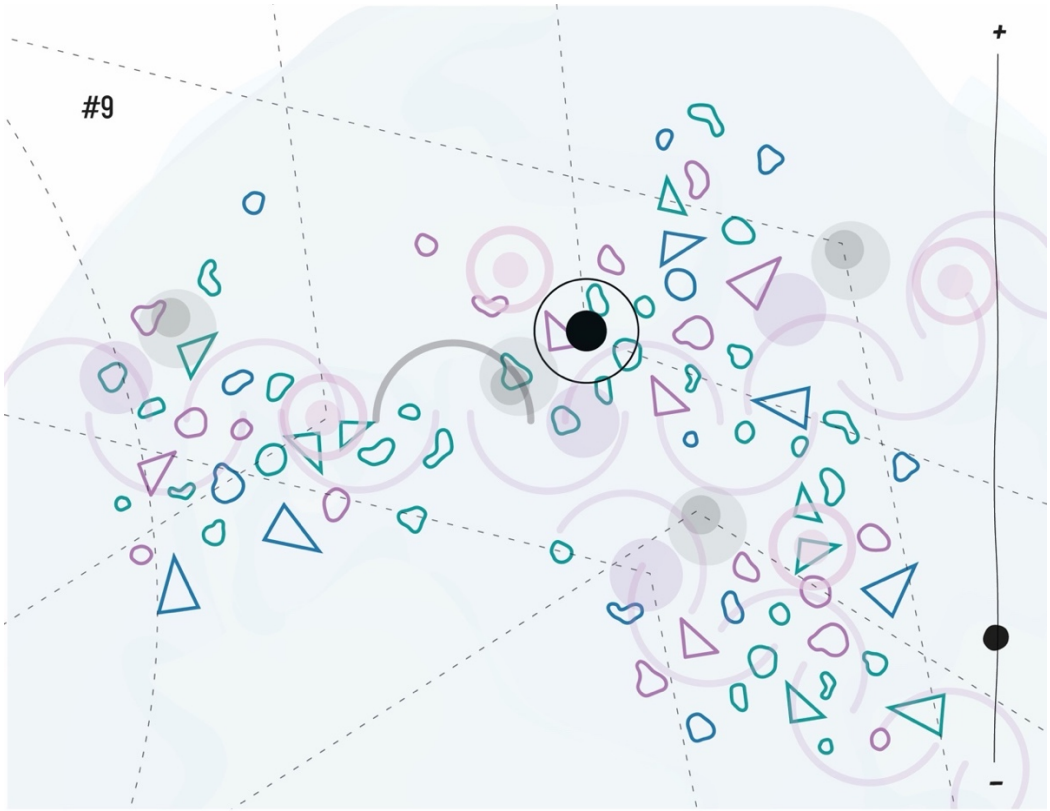

Figure 11: *The futures are multiple. They are happening now. Just as there were many entry points into the hospice, letting go, compost, and decay of the spaces-in-between, there are many ways out of them.*

Nature teaches us that diversity is essential for wellbeing and thriving. When we open ourselves up to the idea that a healthy future for all is something that we don't have a clear roadmap to, we need to open up, explore, and experiment with diverse options, ideas, and possibilities. Nature is experimenting all the time. Life begets more life. That is how we've come from single-celled, water-dwelling creatures to the massive proliferation of life and death that we see around us every day. Showing multiple possible future fractals reminds us that we are fecund, abundant, bountiful. It helps us counter experiences of scarcity and the ideas that come along with that—competition, survival of the fittest, fear, hurriedness. It invites creativity, multiple ways of knowing and being, multitudinousness, generosity, and non-attachment. That there isn't one single dominant, correct, desirable version of what we want our futures to be.

> **Practice Vignette:** As time went on in SLab, we began to get more courageous and experimental with some of the theories and methods that we used in our practice—we wanted to cultivate opportunities for bigger stretches into the unknown. More traditional ideation or brainstorming activities were feeling stuck and expected, so we began to include speculative fiction writing workshops in our lab processes (Imarisha, 2015). We led people through a series of writing prompts to create characters, build worlds, and explore protopic ideas, and then share their imagined worlds with each other. We actively hosted space for rest as radical resistance (Hersey, 2022). Sometimes this was inside a typical City meeting room that we did our best to transform into a depressurized hangout space to talk about the things that were weighing heavily on people over a cup of tea and some snacks. Sometimes we were able to stretch further, having intentional rest experiences in City parks and other spaces, with mats, blankets, music, poetry readings, and candles. Actively practicing rest as a portal.

What we Learned About Dancing and Tending the Spaces-in-Between

We now want to re-ground that deep dive into the spaces-in-between in our own public sector innovation experiences. We find it helpful to think about this work as dancing and tending the fugitive, wayward, hospice spaces into being, and holding them for just long enough for us to glimpse another way of knowing and being—even if, in contexts like the public sector, firmly in the House of Modernity, we don't yet know where this might lead us. Dancing asks us: What practices specific to the public sector context might be useful to embody? What gestures and moves have we found ourselves making in SLab over the many iterations of our work? Tending asks us: What does it mean to attune and attend to this complexity? How are we holding spaces to think and feel our way into hospicing modernity and letting more equitable, just worlds come through? We

suggest nine dance moves for working with all of the views shared in the previous section, based on our own rehearsals—knowing and hoping that there are many more to be invented, improvised, and honed.

Less Talking < More Listening

We step out of our analytical, problem-solving brains and spend more time being slow and quiet. As Arundhati Roy (2005) says, "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing" (p. 86). When we spend more time listening to the land, each other, even the noise of the daunting challenge we're working on, we invite other worlds to introduce themselves to us. We have used methods such as generative listening from the Presencing Institute, place-based attunement through sit spots, and rest/meditative practices to create conditions for more listening.

Less Answering/Knowing < More Asking/Questioning

We recall Simpson's Theory of Water: "When knowledge is enclosed, it is incomplete" (2025, p. 96). We're shedding reliance on predictability and fixed notions of knowledge and expertise. To imagine otherwise from the in-between spaces, we must be guided by curiosity. We apply methods such as developmental evaluation to help us query why what we're noticing is important, and what next moves we might make. We continuously iterate how we're framing the problem and develop creative questions ("how might we?" and "what if?") to surface different directions in the spaces. When our brains are looking for the comfort that comes with certainty, we dig for more potent questions. Releasing attachment to completeness when it comes to what is "known", we continuously ask, "What else might be possible?"

Less Doing < More Being

Conventional public sector organizational culture is highly fixated on actioning. There is an expectation for measurable, tactile, discrete outcomes to always exist. When designing transformative processes in SLab, we think about how to create moments of simply being together. We create enough of a pause to allow us to become aware of and start to inhabit the in-between space. We release and relieve ourselves of the relentless quest to be productive at all times. This can look like making and sharing meals together, walking in the woods, listening to music, making art, resting, and sharing stories.

Less Perfecting < More Trying

Public sector organizations and staff hold expectations of neat, tidy, and organizationally recognized and rewarded results or solutions to be generated at

all times. In Slab, we practice being in-process, partial, and incomplete. In SLab, we use prototyping as an iterative process of experimentation-as-learning. Prototyping complex, emergent challenges within stuck dominant systems means that "solutions" will never be fixed, finite, or finished as they are in more traditional design processes. Instead, we practice prototyping to reveal new and better questions, provide different ways of framing and understanding complex challenges, to learn, and to shift paradigms, values, and purpose of the work.

Less Hubris < More Humility

We are regularly working at transmuting the inclination towards excessive confidence and performative expertise that can show up in public sector (and) innovation spaces. Drawing on scholars of fugitivity and liberation, humility is our mooring as we tend to the risk of marginalized peoples' journeys towards liberation being co-opted or extracted by the dominant system. We take up practices such as critical self-reflexivity, systems mapping, learning journeys, and dialogues/deep listening so that we may recognize our perspective is incomplete, one of many, and ever-changing—if we allow it to be. We practice a beginner's mind which enables us to let the hubris to subside, to fall away.

Less Planning and Futuring < More Worldmaking as a Daily Praxis

We are working to shed the tendency of the dominant system to marginalize visionary futures as intangible, far-away impossibilities that are not feasible or realistic. Invoking the Trickster and the everyday experimentation and creativity of Black women in the 20th century, as Saidiya Hartman (2019) writes, we try to make new worlds in everyday interactions. Gestures of transformation are not always overhauling or revolutionary, but can be soft, joyous, and kind. This can look like visionary and speculative writing and drawing, small moments of connection at the beginning of team meetings, or taking our work analog and outdoors with a small and porous group of colleagues.

Less Power-Over < More Power-In, -With, -For

We're hospicing hierarchical structures and conditions that reinforce status quo power imbalances. We design SLab processes to have multiple accountabilities through multi-sectoral partnerships and collaborations, which helps distribute power and privilege and also enables us to hold space for pluriversal perspectives. We convene spaces where non-dominant knowledges are centred, including Black, Indigenous, feminist, queer, and young people. We create permissive spaces so that those of us from non-dominant identities can lead with the knowledges and practices that are often otherwise marginalized in our work contexts.

Less Linear < More Cycling, Seasonal

We work to shed constructs of linearity and forward progress, and instead design with the cycles and seasons that are alive all around us. Orienting our process design to seasonal rhythms, we follow the lead of what the plants, animals, land, and waters are doing at different points in the year in our context. In the relentless pressures of public sector work to be highly productive in spring and summer at all times, we remember to also bring the energy, pacing, rhythm, and lessons from autumn and winter into the design and facilitation of our work.

Less Head < More Heart-Body-Spirit-Hands

Moving away from analytical thinking, we practice showing up with our whole selves. We respectfully make space for moments of ceremony, guided by culture keepers in making offerings that honour the land and spirits, as well as the sacredness of the work and coming together. We bring in fundamental human practices of making, gift-giving, and music. As part of tending and surrendering to what is, we create moments for nervous system regulation, so that we may show up to the difficult transformative work from a place of internal safety. We hold transformative work as the work of love.

In Closing

As practitioners in a public sector innovation lab, we have tried many ways to dance and tend to fugitive spaces inside the House of Modernity. We have sought practices that cultivate a creative break in the hopes that we might stretch further into the space-in-between what is and what might be. Just as the views themselves are not discrete or complete, nor are the process design and facilitation choices we make in SLab. Here, we have picked some threads apart in order to see, describe, and make sense of what we attune to, but in practice they're woven together, and it is more a matter of what we emphasize or focus on at a moment in a process than discrete, fixed activities. Like DJs, we are continuously moving the dial in response to what the moment is asking more or less of. At the conclusion of writing this, we hold the complexity of the (im)possibility of hospicing modernity through nurturing fugitive spaces inside modernity's house. We also hold the essential and ongoing practice of continuing to try.

We hold questions for ourselves, for other practitioners and researchers who also find this a potent space of praxis to cultivate in the public sector. We ask: What needs composting—and are we composting the right things? What needs to be resisted, and what is needed for the long haul? What and who needs nourishment? What beliefs, mindsets, and cultural norms are wrapped around us? What stuck patterns need to be broken down and transmuted? We stay with these questions and others, knowing they are incomplete, reminding ourselves that transformation work is intergenerational. The life–death cycles in the cracks

are ongoing, and there is a constant dancing and tending in the spaces-in-between in order to give life to that which comes next.

In closing, this practice-poem written by Lily serves as an invocation to inhabit the space in-between and to what it means to grapple with and tend to the hospicing of modernity from within the public sector.

Untitled

Feel the sludge.
Feel yourself.
Feel where you and the sludge meet.
Do you feel how it moves in response to your movement?

Feel your ankle bones create pockets in the sludge.
Try the same thing with your knees and elbows.
Send out love every time the hard, crusty matter scrapes your skin.
Love is the throughline. Love will cure all.

Rest when you need to.
May the movements get easier.
May the pockets become so spacious that you can dance fully.
We're not just going for wiggle room. That would be skimpy.

May your dancing melt the hardness.
May all turn to muddy water.
Return the mud to the earth.
Be the cleaner of your own mess.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest or competing interests.

Ethics Statement

Although this specific paper was not the result of one research project and durational over time, as co-authors we have taken care to ensure ethical research processes have been used in our research and writing throughout. Here are some ways that we have done that. From 2017-2021, Lindsay's research with SLab

was done during her doctoral studies and managed under UBC's Behavioural Research Ethics Board. From 2022 - 2024, both Lily and Lindsay's work on the Climate Justice Field School (one of the projects that SLab was working on), was managed by the Research Ethics Board of Emily Carr University of Art and Design (where Lindsay was a postdoctoral fellow at the time). Because we are both researcher-practitioners who have had staff roles in the Solutions Lab, in the writing of this paper and our choice of methodology we have been very careful throughout to only share our own experiences, interpretations, and perspectives and not use data/tell stories that have come from others to ensure that the rights, privacy, and confidentiality of our colleagues is protected.

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Book Review

His Failures Have Served Us Well:

A Review of *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement* (Kahane, 2025)

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Adam Kahane has long been the go-to guy for leading teams attempting transformations of very thorny complex problems. He didn't invent collaborative multistakeholder engagement, but he and his colleagues have taken it deep with great success.

If we've heard of Adam's work, we're familiar with the account of his remarkable accomplishments. We know that at the age of 30 he served as the chief facilitator at the first post-apartheid sit down of White and Black political leaders in South Africa in 1990 which miraculously managed to avert widely predicted bloodshed. We've read on the back covers of his best-selling books that he followed that up with decades of impressive efforts in 50 countries, working with "executives, politicians, generals and guerillas, civil servants, community activists, trade unionists, and artists" (Kahane, 2017, back cover).

So, clearly, Adam's got C-suite cred *and* street cred. All of which is why I was more than a little shocked when he said to me a couple of months back in his most deadpan, reflective manner: "I've come to view all of my work as failures" (A. Kahane, personal communication, February 2025).

After recovering from the shock at this assessment I quickly assumed it was hyperbole or false modesty. Surely there has been benefit in this body of work, as evidenced by the vast array of fans among high level leaders across the globe.

But it wasn't hyperbole or false modesty. In this moment Adam was acknowledging the reality that complex systems, particularly those made up of human beings, are fickle and not easily coaxed out of their bad habits and harmful impacts. Also, the reality that complex systems are constantly changing, so what might have "transformed" them at one moment wouldn't necessarily head off future problems.

It is in Adam's response to these realities that we encounter the foundational qualities for his successful engagements *and* for this new book *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement* (Kahane, 2025). These qualities begin with a perspective that joins enduring curiosity with a near total lack of territoriality. In pursuing his efforts to help, he is relentlessly listening, assessing and re-assessing past failures and successes, then synthesizing new approaches to discover more effective action for the next moment's challenge.

Curiosity, openness, the natural ability to listen deeply, and a wicked, wry sense of humor. These were the qualities that stood out to me when I first met Adam in the early years of the Authentic Leadership in Action Institute (nee Shambhala Institute) conferences held annually in Halifax, Nova Scotia beginning in 2001. ALIA was the brainstorm of the brilliant Michael Chender and a group of friends who were investigating the intersection of leadership and contemplative practices. They were reading Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990) and got the idea of hosting a conference to more deeply explore these themes. Peter graciously agreed not only to speak at the first several conferences but to bring along some of his colleagues, including Adam, Meg Wheatley, Art Kleiner, Otto Scharmer, Wendy Palmer, Juanita Brown, and many important others. The "secret sauce" was the cross-pollination of systems change experts with teachers of mindfulness meditation, the contemplative arts, and the creative processes. Imagine Woodstock for systems change, but with meditation cushions instead of tie-dyed tee shirts.

Luckily for me, Adam became curious about the *Art of War* work I'd been doing for some decades (Sun Tzu, 2001). Sun Tzu's 5th century BC best-selling leadership classic is widely misconstrued as a book about deception and ruthless winning at all costs. It is in fact a profound handbook on systems transformation, rich with transformative guidance on working with conflict by "taking whole." The central theme of *know oneself* and *know the other* confirmed a contemplative bent and relationship-based change making, with learnable habits for dealing with the type of hard things that Adam specializes in. This tied the room

together for Adam and me to explore our different approaches which has served as part of our ongoing conversation these past 25 years.

So, I am not surprised to see that curiosity, openness, and the natural ability to listen deeply are also the qualities that now bring us Adam's latest book, *Everyday Habits*. But here, these qualities serve in a different way than with Adam's previous works. In this book they are not underlying the lessons gleaned from his own projects, though he mines those rich stories to illustrate each habit. When Adam discovered that there were things about systems transformations that he didn't know, he turned to the people who work on them every day all over the world.

Everyday Habits is the result of Adam's inquiry. It's meta-data—crowd sourced wisdom synthesized from those dedicated to systems change through hundreds of interviews and engaging hundreds of practitioners in real time co-creation. From that starting point follows the rest of the quintessential Kahane process. He reviewed the data, relentlessly assessed and summarized, then shared it with contributors to make sure he got it right, and refined the result. And then he did that all over again.

As a result of these efforts, *Everyday Habits* distills all this received wisdom and experience into 7 ways of being and acting that Adam tells us can shift and maybe even transform the systems we are part of. The promise of this volume is that if we manage to adopt these practices—starting with any one of them—and they become habits, then we will be engaging in ways of being, relating, and acting that better enable us to help make the world a better place.

Everyday Habits gives each of these 7 ways its own chapter, with titles sending clear and often familiar messages of the pathway forward: *Acting Responsibly, Relating in Three Dimensions, Looking for What's Unseen, Working with Cracks, Experimenting a Way Forward, Collaborating with Unlike Others,* and *Persevering and Resting*. The chapters are artfully designed to be both progressive and independent. Each chapter builds on the learning that came before, and each can be read on its own with great reward. All chapters are richly illustrated with stories from Adam's own big world projects and end by giving the reader a short practice to learn how to try it out, though these practice sections may be the least robust part of this book.

For a more intimate and engaged exploration of these 7 habits, I invited accomplished systems change professional Gabrielle Donnelly to share her reflections on one. This is her story.

"Systems change work will break your heart," a dear friend and colleague, Tuesday Rivera, often remarks. In Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems, Adam Kahane offers a field guide for walking through the inevitable challenges, disappointments, and heartbreaks, drawing on insights from leaders invested in the long arc of change.

When Jim Gimian invited me to reflect on one of Kahane's seven habits for this review, many resonated. In this season of my life and work, though, Habit 7—Persevering and Resting—stands out. It is both the most unassuming and perhaps the most radical of the invitations in this book.

I first encountered Adam in my early twenties, when I was idealistic and inexperienced. Adam was teaching at ALIA (Authentic Leadership in Action), a week-long institute in Halifax, Nova Scotia/Mi'kma'ki, where systems change met mindfulness and the arts. I was one of many young people at the edges of those circles, absorbing it all. Many of us later launched consulting agencies together, fumbling our way. Collaboration felt like an answer, and I was eager to try these methods in the real world.

Within a few years, my work carried me into consulting roles both locally and internationally. I joined initiatives across sectors—from climate and education to healthcare and municipal renewal. Later, I worked with teams reimagining child and family services in a major U.S. city and humanitarian relief efforts in conflict and disaster zones around the globe. The urgency was undeniable, and I poured myself into the work.

For the first fifteen years of my career, I persevered—driven by urgency, buoyed by possibility. And then, slowly, I unraveled. Burnout crept in quietly until it hollowed me out, culminating in a hard-to-diagnose autoimmune condition that left me unable to walk steadily through my own life. For over three years, I lived in that collapse, forced by necessity to step away from my work as a professor and systems change practitioner—work I loved. What had once fueled me was no longer life-giving. It had worn my body down completely.

This is why Habit 7 rings with such clarity for me, carrying the reminder that, as Kahane (2023) writes, "A healthy movement towards healthy futures requires healthy people" (p. 36). Health is not a fixed state but a direction we can nurture in ourselves and our communities. Movements only endure when the people within them are sustained. Perseverance without rest extracts not only from the planet and our communities, but from ourselves. Rest is the rhythm that allows us to return, renewed.

Through both my personal experience and my role as a professor, I see how quickly young people can burn out. The desire to make change often collides with systemic resistance, leaving them caught between exhaustion and protective apathy. From those who have laboured at this work for decades, we can learn the quieter rhythm between perseverance and rest—the discernment of what is needed, and when. It is the leadership of knowing when to persevere, and when the counter-cultural act of pausing or resting is the deeper contribution.

> For me, rest was not optional. Being forced to step back fully, tending to the most basic rhythms of my body—and through it, a revelation of root causes—was what allowed me to recover. That deep retreat was an important part of what gave me back my vitality, and with it, the capacity to return to the work I love. But I return differently now. I return with a fierce commitment not to sacrifice myself in the same way again or ask others to do the same. I return with a renewed ability to touch into joy—the straightforward enjoyment of being alive and in relationship—in the midst of work.

The 7 habits, while the star of the show, are importantly supported throughout the book by the connective tissue of Adam's underlying view from which these practices can arise. Chief among this is what he calls "radical engagement," the deeply relational orientation that conveys the central role that the interconnectedness of things, or "all my relations," has to this work. Adam's contribution on this point alone is worth far more than the price of the book. Another equally important theme is that each of us have the seeds of these practices already within us, thereby undercutting the dualistic struggle, as if we were trying to annex foreign territory and integrate it into our dominant culture.

Contemplating the 7 habits and how they become new ways of being surfaced questions and "wonderings" for me. It's like when a cabinet maker passes their fingertips along the surface of a nearly finished piece to see if there are burrs or slivers that require more sanding. I'll share a few of my burrs here, not as definitive assessments of this work but as encouragement to the reader to engage and deeply contemplate the considerable wisdom this book offers.

One such burr arose for me with some of the names and descriptions of the 7 habits. They range from simple to more complicated. For example, *Looking for What's Unseen* is self-evident from the title and leads to inspired action all on its own. *Relating in Three Dimensions*, though instructive, feels at times too complicated to easily employ. It's as if it may have forgotten that complex systems are most successfully engaged through simple rules. If you think of *Everyday Habits* as instructions to the cook, when reading this chapter I lost the sense of how the dish was supposed to taste by the time I got through reading the recipe.

Clearly systems transformation is hard work in the easiest of times, and especially tough in extreme times like ours, when stress and aggression diminish our ability to thoughtfully respond rather than react. Even the best leadership manuals, if they aren't simple and self-evident enough to digest and embody, can take on the quality of a "strategy" or a "plan" and can fall apart when we don't have time to consult the handbook. As the boxing champion Mike Tyson famously simplified a very old leadership maxim: "Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the face."

Looking for What's Unseen is evocative, like a poetic and pithy slogan, and it's an example of the many places where *Everyday Habits* sings. Good slogans

unlock the energy of emotion, wonder, and aspiration in the mind and in the body. They help us "keep it simple" by recalling a world of understanding in an instant and then inspiring us to discover new actions.

Mostly, after finishing this book, I was left wondering about habit change. We know it's possible, and we know it's not easy; we can't just decide to have new habits. We know there are science-based apps to help us. But still I wonder, which pathway best supports habit change? Even more critically, how does it happen in the enduring way necessary for us to meet the challenges of generative systems transformation in what seems a particularly degenerative time? Where do we find and engage in a genuine effort?

Obviously, it's helpful to start with a list of ways of acting that will, in fact, give rise to the change we want to see in the world—in this case, generative systems transformation. Here, Adam and his colleagues have provided us with the most helpful foundation. Even with early stage "fake it till you make it," a long-established path of learning, embodying these 7 habits goes far beyond "do no harm."

Further, Adam tells us that habit change involves shifting to a new way of being. So the question arises: how does engaging in even the best ways of acting bring us to a different way of being—a way that deeply impacts the systems we're in?

One way of looking at this is to consider the difference between imitating and emulating. Imitating is following outward behaviors, working from the outside in. If you want to learn new habits, imitating is an important first step. Emulating, on the other hand, works from the inside out. It requires embodying the mindset that gives rise to the desired behaviors as natural gestures. You no longer have to think about which dance step comes next. The kind of habit change that empowers generative systems transformation in difficult times emerges when idealized ways of acting are joined with some kind of contemplative discipline that supports a mindset shift. Here I am using the term "contemplative" in its broader, original meaning of carving out space for seeing clearly. This includes whatever practices help integrate a *gap* in our routine, creating space to see clearly beyond our assumptions and projections and thereby find effective action.

Many in the community of systems transformation work have incorporated disciplines of integrating a gap into their processes. But the brain is a tricky thing and we're working with millions of years of the brain's evolution. Just when we think we're getting out of clinging to limiting frameworks, the brain pulls us back in. Even the most seasoned veterans of the generative systems transformation work, for example, can sometimes be extolling the virtues of deep listening while still assuming that every question in the discussion is meant for them solely to give the definitive answer. These tough times call for tough approaches to habit change, so we can create the space to see things that don't confirm the deeply held bias our brains can't help generating, including the biases we develop in favor of our system-change systems.

Finally, we are living in another "historic" era, a time of significant transformation of our social and political systems. It's occurring worldwide, rapidly, and will result in fundamental changes that may be hard to shift back from. And it's happening in a manner that many readers drawn to this book would not describe as generative. I wonder about the best way that these seven habits can serve us in such a time.

What habits would work best for those already engaged in this work and employing these habits yet feel exhausted, powerless, and disheartened. And especially when others in the systems they're trying to transform aren't only playing by different rules but are playing in different universes? Why does autocratic, top-down systems change seem so easy and generative systems transformation feel so hard?

Times like these require a fundamental shift in how we view things and what we consider appropriate action. The 7 everyday habits presented here are important ways for changemakers to be and transform the systems we're part of. Their additional benefit may be how they establish the ground enabling us to take the extraordinary actions required for transformation in these times.

Notwithstanding these "wonderings," my prevailing conviction is that *Everyday Habits* fills an important place in the literature, and will benefit those who study it closely. It's not that these habits will necessarily be new to readers, as Adam admits to us at the outset, since they describe the ways in which many readers are already working. But one important gift of *Everyday Habits* is that both those habits we recognize as our own and those new to us are synthesized into one seamless whole, a way of being that is neither foreign nor external but is already known to us.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the many contributors who shared their hard-earned skills and wisdom that fill out the muscle mass of this book. Adam has shown in his own work the ability to learn from failure to embody these skills and gives us these 7 habits he has distilled to show us doorways into that way of being. In that way, Adam has earned all those bona fides. With *Everyday Habits*, we see the ways his failures have served him–and the readers of this book–very well.

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Book Review

Sowing Seeds of Change:

A Review of Pres*encing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business* (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025)

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> When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to elevate the entire system to a higher order.
> – Ilya Prigogine (in Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025, p. 11)

You, the reader, are invited to become one of these islands.

In a world marked by accelerating breakdowns—ecological, social, and spiritual—*Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business* (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2025) arrives as both a timely guide and a profound, enticing invitation. Scharmer and Kaufer do not merely diagnose the malaise of our times; they offer a living, breathing pathway for those who sense that another future is possible and are ready to become agents of its emergence. This book is not just for theorists or practitioners of systems change, but for any human being whose heart feels the call to participate in the great work of our era: the cultivation of the social soil from which new forms of life, work, and community can grow. This is a book for those hopeful gardeners.

I first encountered Theory U after fifteen years of working in international development, collaborating with think tanks, NGOs, and government agencies committed to evidence-informed policy. Despite extensive research, capacity-building, and on-the-ground efforts, I kept running into the same systemic bottlenecks that stalled meaningful change. I sensed that the real obstacles were rooted in invisible dynamics—factors we acknowledged but struggled to address without feeling exposed to criticism or resistance, or even risking being seen as outliers in the field. Theory U offered a way forward: an organic, courageous approach to creating spaces for reflection and co-creation, where we could open not only our minds but, more importantly, our hearts and will to allow the new to emerge. Through iterative practice, I learned to harness its power to spark collective intelligence and enable conversations that shifted how we spoke, felt, and acted around persistent challenges.

Presencing builds on these foundations, introducing seven practical disciplines that help individuals and groups cultivate the "social soil" from which regenerative futures can grow. These practices are not abstract ideals—they are actionable tools for anyone seeking to lead change from a place of deep awareness. Like many others featured in this book, I have experimented with them alongside colleagues, discovering how they can transform not only processes but relationships, unlocking possibilities that once seemed out of reach.

The Pando Metaphor: Interconnectedness and Hidden Strength

One of the book's most evocative contributions is the pando metaphor. The Pando is a vast grove of aspens in Utah, covering over 100 acres, which appears to be a forest of individual trees but is, in fact, a single organism connected by an immense, invisible root system. This metaphor captures the essence of the planetary movement for deep change: while our efforts may seem isolated, beneath the surface we are already connected—part of a living network whose strength and resilience far exceed what is visible.

The authors invite us to see ourselves as part of this pando: a global, subterranean web of changemakers, innovators, and communities who, by nurturing their own patch of social soil, contribute to the flourishing of the whole. The pando metaphor is not just poetic; it is practical. It reminds us that the most important work often happens out of sight—in the quality of our attention, our relationships, and our willingness to hold space for the new to emerge.

Islands of Coherence: Readers as Catalysts

Building on Prigogine's insight, we can consider ourselves as part of an archipelago of "islands of coherence". In times of chaos and uncertainty, it is easy to feel insignificant or powerless. Yet, as the authors show through both theory and example, small groups—indeed, even individuals—can become nodes of

stability and creativity that help lift entire systems to a higher order. These islands of coherence are not abstract; they are the readers, the practitioners, and the communities who choose to embody the seven practices and, in doing so, become catalysts for transformation.

This is not a call for heroics but for presence. The book gently yet persistently returns to the idea that the smallest unit of change is the self and that by aligning our attention, intention, and agency, we participate in the emergence of new realities. The invitation is clear: you are not just reading about change—you are invited to become it.

The Social Soil: Making the Invisible Visible

A central theme of the book is the social soil—the invisible substrate of relationships, trust, and awareness that underpins all visible outcomes in society. Drawing on the metaphor of regenerative agriculture, the authors argue that just as healthy soil is the foundation for flourishing ecosystems, so too is the quality of the social soil foundational for sustainable change.

This insight is particularly resonant for those investing in social change, designing and implementing social change projects, and/or working in fields like monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), where the focus is often on tangible, above-the-surface results. The book challenges us to look deeper—to attend to the "roots" and "soil" that sustain visible outcomes. It offers a compelling critique of approaches that neglect the invisible dimensions of change and provides practical guidance for nurturing the social soil through the seven practices.

The Seven Practices: A Pathway for Agency

At the heart of the book are the seven practices of eco-system leadership:

- Becoming Aware: Bending the beam of attention back onto ourselves; cultivating mindfulness and self-reflection.
- Listening: Holding the space within; listening with mind and heart wide open.
- Dialogue: Creating spaces for systems to see and sense themselves.
- Presencing: Meeting the future that remains in need of us in the now.
- Co-imagining: Crystallizing the future we want to create.
- Co-creating: Exploring the future by doing; prototyping and iterating.
- Eco-system Governance: Coordinating around shared intention.

Each practice is described not as a rigid technique but as a living capacity that can be cultivated individually and collectively. The book is rich with real

stories, practical tools, and concrete exercises that make these practices accessible and actionable. Importantly, the authors emphasize that these are not linear steps but interdependent capacities that, together, enable the emergence of new possibilities.

Openness to the Underrated: Not-Knowing, Discomfort, and Non-Action

A distinctive feature of the book is its openness to the underrated dimensions of change. Scharmer and Kaufer invite us to embrace not-knowing, discomfort, and non-action—not as obstacles but as gateways to deeper transformation. This is a radical stance in a culture that prizes certainty, comfort, and relentless activity.

The book draws on the wisdom of Francisco Varela and others to show that accessing our ignorance, leaning into discomfort, and allowing space for stillness are essential for sensing what wants to emerge. These "underrated things" are not merely philosophical; they are practical capacities that can be developed through the seven practices. By cultivating humility, love, and stillness, we open ourselves to the future that is seeking to be born through us.

Global South Perspectives: Evidence of Change

One of the book's great strengths is its inclusion of examples and stories from the Global South. Too often, narratives of change are dominated by experiences from the Global North, with little attention to the unique challenges and innovations emerging elsewhere. Scharmer and Kaufer correct this imbalance by offering rich case studies from Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

These stories are not mere illustrations; they are evidence that the seven practices are not only possible but already happening—often in contexts of profound adversity. The Ecosystem Leadership Program in Latin America, the IDEAS initiative in Indonesia, and work with Indigenous communities are just a few examples of how awareness-based change is taking root and flourishing in diverse settings. These cases demonstrate that the practices are adaptable, scalable, and capable of generating real, lasting impact.

Reach and Impact: A Pando of Practice

The reach of the seven practices is both global and local. Through initiatives like the u.lab at MIT, the Presencing Institute, and countless grassroots hubs, the book documents a pando-like network of practitioners and communities who are experimenting with, adapting, and spreading these practices. The evidence is compelling: over 260,000 participants from 194 countries have engaged with u.lab; hundreds of local hubs have emerged; and new forms of governance, business, and education are being prototyped and scaled.

What is most striking is the diversity of contexts in which these practices are being applied—from UN leadership labs to rural cooperatives, from climate negotiations to neighborhood dialogues. The book makes a persuasive case that awareness-based change is not a niche concern but a movement with the potential to transform systems at every level. The best is yet to come.

Theory U Revisited: From Framework to Living Practice

While the book is deeply rooted in Theory U, it goes beyond theory to offer a living, evolving practice. The authors are candid about the challenges and limitations of their earlier work and respond with humility and openness to feedback. The result is a book that feels both grounded and generative—a field guide for those who want to move from knowing to doing, from intention to action.

The integration of the "islands of coherence" and "pando" metaphors, the emphasis on the social soil, and the practical articulation of the seven practices represent significant advances in the field of awareness-based change. The book is not content to rest on past achievements; it is a call to ongoing experimentation, learning, and co-creation.

Why Read This Book? Why Now?

Presencing is more than a book; it is an invitation to participate in the most important work of our time. For researchers, it offers a robust, evidence-based framework for understanding and facilitating deep change. For practitioners, it provides concrete tools, stories, and practices that can be applied in any context. For funders, policymakers, and evaluators, it challenges prevailing assumptions about what counts as "impact" and points to the invisible dimensions that sustain real transformation.

Perhaps most importantly, the book speaks to the reader as an agent of change. It does not promise easy answers or quick fixes. Instead, it offers a pathway—a set of practices, metaphors, and stories—that can help each of us become an island of coherence, a node in the global pando, a cultivator of the social soil.

The timing could not be more urgent. As the authors note, we are living in a threshold moment—a time when the old systems are breaking down and the new is struggling to be born (though its signs are increasingly visible, as the included cases and stories reveal). The book does not shy away from the enormity of the challenges but refuses to succumb to despair. Instead, it offers hope grounded in practice, evidence, and a deep trust in the capacity of individuals and communities to rise to the occasion.

How to Use This Book: Becoming Agents of Change

The true power of *Presencing* lies in its practical orientation. This is not a book to be read and shelved; it is a companion for the journey of change. The seven practices are accessible to anyone, regardless of role or context. Whether you are a researcher, a practitioner, a policymaker, or a concerned citizen, the book offers tools and guidance for cultivating your own patch of social soil.

The stories and examples provide inspiration, but the real work begins when you apply the practices in your own life and work. Start with becoming aware—notice your patterns of attention and intention. Practice listening—hold space for others with an open mind and heart. Engage in dialogue—create spaces where systems can see and sense themselves. Experiment with presencing—allow the future to speak through you. Co-imagine and co-create—prototype new possibilities, however small. And participate in eco-system governance—coordinate with others around shared intention; there are many waiting for connection.

The book is clear: no one can do this alone. The work of transformation is collective, relational, and ongoing. But each of us has a role to play, and each small action contributes to the emergence of a new system.

Nurturing the Social Soil: A Closing Reflection

As the review draws to a close, it is fitting to return to the metaphor of the social soil. The health of our societies, organizations, and communities depends on the quality of the soil in which they are rooted. This soil is not given; it is cultivated—through attention, intention, relationship, and practice. And each of us is a gardener: we can choose how to treat our surrounding social soil, day by day, decision by decision.

The book ends with a call to protect the flame—to nurture the inner and outer conditions that allow the highest future possibilities to emerge. This is not a solitary task, but a collective endeavor. The pando, the islands of coherence, the global movement for awareness-based change—all depend on the willingness of individuals and groups to tend the soil, to hold space for the new, and to trust in the power of small beginnings.

Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society, and Business is a gift to all who are engaged in the work of change. It is rigorous, inspiring, and deeply practical. It honors the complexity of our times without losing sight of the simplicity at the heart of transformation: the alignment of attention, intention, and agency. And it resides within each of us.

To the reader: you are the island of coherence. By engaging with this book, by practicing its teachings, by nurturing your own patch of social soil, you become part of the pando—a living network of change that is already elevating the system to a higher order. The future is not something that happens to us; it

is something that emerges through us when we are willing to be present, to listen, and to act.

Now is the time to cultivate the soil. Now is the time to be the change we want to see in the world.

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Innovation in Praxis

Creating the Middle Space:

A Story of Three Metaphors

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Abstract
Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Gunyaŋara and the surrounding Homelands in North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia are the home to Yolŋu people and have been for time immemorial. For Yolŋu, metaphor is powerful and living. Metaphors have been used in this region to theorise and apply Yolŋu knowledge systems. It is a way that Yolŋu have communicated a sophisticated meaning making process to explain Yolŋu concepts and ways of being, knowing, and doing. This paper tells the story of three metaphors and how they have created the space for Yolŋu knowledge systems and ways of working to emerge in the context of our work. These place-based metaphors are not static concepts but living theories and practices. They have helped us to forge middle spaces and

move closer to shared understandings with tools that the community see as relevant and meaningful. They acknowledge who we are and what we want to influence. They require Yolŋu to lead and, importantly, they are orientated towards the *right* action.

Keywords
metaphor, middle spaces, systems change, knowledge systems

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How We Have Written this Article Together

When we met to co-develop this paper, we wanted to articulate and share the importance of gurruṯu (relationship) as this is the foundation of our ways of working. We have intentionally created space to discuss, negotiate meaning and consolidate shared priorities in the work that we have done together and in the writing of this story. Therefore, we decided to write this paper as a collective *we*. With heartfelt acknowledgement of those who have been on the journey with us (including Yalmay Yunupiŋu, Djalinda Yunupiŋu, Andrea Kingston, Eve Millar, Lisa Walker, Sarah Rogers and many others), we write this as a set of reflections from Rarrtjiwuy, Claire and Fiona. We offer this story as an imperfect *work in progress* with the hope that it resonates with others seeking to create middle spaces together.

Setting the Scene

The setting for our story is North East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Gunyaŋara and the surrounding Homelands are the home to Yolŋu people and have been for time immemorial. For many years, Yolŋu have worked to set their agenda and create change whilst navigating Western frameworks, policies, and practices as well as Yolŋu governance. This includes the unprecedented and famous Yirrkala bark petitions, Näku Dhäruk, created in 1963 at Yirrkala and presented to the Australian Government in opposition to bauxite mining in Yolŋu Homelands. It includes pioneering efforts to develop and embed bicultural and bilingual learning within the education system, even when English was being imposed as the mandatory language. The Homelands movement in the 1970 was another case of Yolŋu leading the way in self-determination and actively having control of their lives.

Djalkiri Foundation (Djalkiri) was created in this context, with a focus on creating space and continuing Yolŋu-led vision, ideas and djäma (purposeful work). As the Manapanami (the term for connector rather than CEO), Yolŋu woman, Rarrtjiwuy Melanie Herdman led the work with the community to set up Djalkiri. Djalkiri is a Yolŋu led organisation committed to creating space by providing support, guidance, and advocacy for Yolŋu to support them to lead empowered lives and make meaningful contributions to their communities. There was also the Western element of setting up an organisation, going into the space of a western mindset—ensuring the organisation was viable and sustainable to do the work. As the Manapanami, Rarrtjiwuy plays a critical role in making sure Djalkiri focuses on community priorities and that the control of the organisation is in the hands of Yolŋu.

Growing up around strong leaders, Rarrtjiwuy wanted to create a space of conversation to contribute and support towards the vision of ŋaḻapaḻ (elders) and leaders across her communities and Homelands. In this space she questioned how do "we" as young Yolŋu show our ŋaḻapaḻ (elders) that we are here to support their vision and to continue the djäma (work) guided by them. For her, the Djalkiri Foundation has represented a way to lead meaningful action by challenging systems, working alongside communities, and disrupting the deficit discourse that fails to see the strengths of communities.

Claire Rafferty, Girriḏaŋ'thunami (Co-design Lead), Djalkiri Foundation, has close ties to the community and taught in the region for many years. She first came to the community as a practicum teacher and, after completing her studies, she returned and worked between Yirrkala Bilingual School and Laynhapuy Homelands Schools. During her time working closely with Yolŋu, she witnessed inspiring models of education in the region and how transformational this was when Yolŋu led and included their own knowledge systems in learning. She was interested in exploring this further and wanted to analyse the conditions that made community-based learning possible, so she worked alongside many community members (including Rarrtjiwuy) to complete her PhD. The thesis titled *Relationships Matter: Yolŋu Models of Community-Centred Education* (Rafferty, 2022) highlights the importance of gurruṯu and collaboration, work that is often overlooked and misunderstood. Rarrtjiwuy and Claire had long term connections as gurruṯu (kinship system), and through this relationship she began working at Djalkiri Foundation from the beginning. Together they have taken this opportunity to put the PhD, which was a collaborative effort with the community, into practice.

In 2024, we connected with Fiona McKenzie. Fiona is the Founder of Orange Compass, a for-purpose systems change consultancy, and has a background in human geography. Knowing she had been supporting change makers in deep co-design and collaboration, we thought she might be able to take up the role of a thought partner who could walk alongside us. Since then, Fiona and the Orange Compass team (Lisa Walker, Sarah Rogers and Eve Millar) have been supporting the Djalkiri team in our efforts to develop innovative and unique approaches that

are aligned to Yolŋu ways of being, knowing and doing while at the same time meeting (and often challenging) Western (Balanda system) constructs of success. For Fiona, this *bridging work* has been a two-way learning journey, with new learning and insights occurring every day that she has worked with the Djalkiri team.

Gurruṯu: Working in Relationship

Djalkiri's work is relational and based on gurruṯu—the kinship system that links all Yolŋu people with each other and with everything in the universe. Gurruṯu is "the foundation of the Yolngu social system and system of governance" (Morphy, 2008, p.122), comprised of complex kinship networks that connect groups and individuals and also include the "more-than-human" (Bawaka Country et al., 2016, p. 460; see also Rafferty, 2022). Often the word "gurruṯu" is translated in English to mean "kinship", however, it is more than that. Gurruṯu is inclusive of multiple relationships between people, place, animals; it is through gurruṯu that Yolŋu make meaning.

Gurruṯu is the foundation of our work at Djalkiri. Gurruṯu clearly defines relationships and responsibilities to each other. We believe that each of us becomes stronger when we understand our roles and contributions in our workplaces, families, and communities. It is important to recognise that we are never working alone, rather we need to work collaboratively to strengthen Yolŋu priorities.

To help embody the interconnectedness of gurruṯu, and to enable ourselves and those we partner with to reflect on their role, responsibilities, and to be accountable, we have developed a range of tools that support critical reflexivity and the deeper examining of positionality across different layers of the system. Gurruṯu is for Yolŋu. It is an invitation for non-Yolŋu to recognise and embody the work of relationality, and to acknowledge the threads of connections between people, place, and knowledge systems. We believe that by accepting the invitation to centre relationships, new understandings can be unlocked, inclusive and accountable action can be taken, and commitment to change can occur. As Verran and Christie (2011) explain, we need to make an effort to show ourselves how to work in good faith with respect to the disparate epistemic (or knowledge) practice involved. In the intercultural context we work in, recognising different knowledge systems is critical. Gurruṯu is an invitation to centre relationships in our work, and metaphor can help shape how Yolŋu and Western knowledges and ways of working can co-exist.

Metaphor: A Way to Recognise Knowledge Systems

Metaphors have helped to bring understanding and clarity to this shared work and we use the story of metaphor co-creation to capture our work in the middle space. For Yolŋu, metaphor is powerful and living. Metaphors have been used in this region to theorise and apply Yolŋu knowledge systems. It is a way that

Yolŋu have communicated a sophisticated meaning making process to explain Yolŋu concepts and ways of being, knowing, and doing. “Leaching the Poison” is a powerful paper written by Yolŋu community leaders and Elders including Djalkiri Board members to explain the importance of getting processes and relationships right—and to face history in order to co-create (Marika et al., 2009).

This article tells the story of three metaphors and how they created the space for Yolŋu knowledge systems and ways of working to emerge in the context of our work. These place-based metaphors acknowledge who we are and what we want to influence; this requires that Yolŋu lead this approach but importantly, they are orientated towards the *right* action. In writing about metaphor, we have struggled to convey the *aliveness* and *wholeness* of metaphor. These metaphors are not static concepts but living theories and practices. We recognised that we each were bringing deeply diverse worldviews (McKenzie & Seneque, 2024) and the metaphors have helped us to find shared understandings and create tools that the community see as relevant and meaningful.

Through our active engagement with community three metaphors emerged:

WÄRRKARR – Onion Lily (crinum angustifolium) - how to be in relationship

MUNYDUTJ – Green Plum (buchanania obovate) - how to be in partnership

BULMUYUK – A fire that has gone out - How to reflect on the system

Each metaphor and the frameworks that emerged from them were carefully co-created with the support of our Elders and knowledge holders to help frame and support systems change at multiple levels, from the individual through to wider government institutions and social change. We continue to keep evolving the frameworks as we work alongside community.

Story of Wärrkarr (onion lily)

The Emergence of the Metaphor

As discussed, our work requires us to be in relationship with others. To help guide us in the workplace and community, we felt we needed a way to deepen relationships in professional contexts in a way that could better reflect gurruṯu. To help drive conversations about what it takes to be in relationship, we developed (in collaboration with the community) the Ðilimuŋgu Gakal’ Framework (or values framework). This framework is built on the metaphor of wärrkarr. Wärrkarr is the onion lily and is a seasonal indicator that signals the right time to hunt certain bush foods. The wärrkarr metaphor is about relationship and collaboration. It recognises that generative relationships are critical to meaningful engagement. The wärrkarr cycle is about regrowth. We know that connecting, relating, and working together is an evolving process that

requires commitment, trust and reflection. The wärrkarr encourages the importance of continued learning, sense making and our connection to each other. When the wärrkarr is burnt to the ground during work (the intentional use of fire that supports regrowth) we are reminded of the opportunities for new growth and regeneration.

We use the wärrkarr metaphor to encourage us to reflect on the ways we show up for each other and how this impacts those around us. Self-reflection has the potential to be self-indulgent, however the ability to critically reflect is required to correct bias (Fricker, 2007; Mezirow, 2003). To address the complexities in adult life, critically reflecting on underlying assumptions and power dynamics that frame practice and influence our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions is essential (Brookfield, 2009). In the middle spaces we work in, we believe it is necessary to critically engage with the bias and assumptions as these impact the way we relate to people and place. The wärrkarr provides a framework for this.

Ongoing Co-creation

The wärrkarr framework is for both Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu. We worked alongside ŋaḻapaḻ (elders) and knowledge holders to capture the deeper meaning of the framework. We created a video script in Dhaŋu (a Yolŋu clan language), as this is the language that Rarrtjiwuy speaks. We worked with the Grow Love Project (a media company) and Brenna Quinlan who helped us to create a video animation and bring this to life in a way that would tell the story of the wärrkarr. The process of editing the script with ŋaḻapaḻ and other language speakers and experts took time as language work needs intentional and careful consideration, and ongoing discussions and negotiations. For example, while the animation was in Dhaŋu we worked with community members to record them saying each gakal' (ways of working). However, all of these young people spoke different languages and therefore each gakal' needed to be translated into their own languages so that it made sense to them.

This process was an outcome in itself as it prioritised Yolŋu languages. It is also an example of the multilingual nature of our work. Instead of the default approach of communicating from English and then translating into Yolŋu matha, we began with Yolŋu matha and Yolŋu concepts. It showcased an alternative and challenged the *easy path* of working in English or attempting a translation of English concepts. The dominance and *normalisation* of English as a mode of communication in our region is a bias that often goes unaddressed and reinforces an unbalanced power structure. It also reduces the meaning of concepts and impacts engagement.

The Metaphor in Practice

Today, the wärrkarr (Ðilimuŋgu Gakal' Framework) is used in almost every partnership and engagement we have. It has become a starting place to talk

about respect and reciprocity. We have also used it to aid individuals to critically reflect on their ways of being. Importantly, it reminds us to practise these gakal'—working through and embracing the messy space, working through challenges and barriers, reminding and resetting the way we show up in these spaces. The English version below helps to show the types of conversations this encourages around creating and holding the complexity of middle spaces

Gawayu ga dhaḻakarr wekaŋu bukmakku	Create space
Märr-ŋamathinyami milkuŋu bukmakku	Practice Humility
Birrka'yu ga waŋi latjuyu ŋayaŋuyu	Communicate open and honestly with each other
Mulki bäy-ḻakanhami rom	Take responsibilities for your actions
Ralpa milkuŋu gakal ' nhuŋuway nhe wäŋaŋu ga djämaŋu.	Show up authentically

***Figure 1**: Ḏilimuŋgu Gakal' Framework – with Wärrkarr (onion lily) illustration and ways of working in Yolŋu matha and English.*

A Story of the Munydutj

The Emergence of the Metaphor

Djalkiri has been working to develop community-based approaches to both generating and understanding social impact that are meaningful for community and reflect Yolŋu ways of being, knowing, and doing. One way Djalkiri has been progressing this work is to explore both Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu framing of systems change and finding ways to integrate both by creating frameworks that are inclusive and will resonate with the community.

In the case of the munydjutj (green plum) we met several times online and in-person to try to find ways to think differently about how to measure the work we do. With the insights of our Ḏurruyirr'yunami (Board Members), mentors and ŋaḻapaḻ (elders), Yalmay Yunupuyŋu and Djalinda Yunupuyŋu, we eventually landed on the concept of the munydjutj. This emerged in our conversations about

change and how Djalkiri might evaluate impact in ways that make sense and are meaningful for Yolŋu. It was during our time together in dialogue that our ŋaḻapaḻ suggested exploring the metaphor of the developmental stages of the munydjutj; a possible framing for talking with community members about how change and learning will happen. They explained why it was a suitable metaphor for the Yolŋu context as munydjutj grow everywhere and everyone in the community knows its different stages of development and how to collect the fruit. Additionally, it is a non-judgemental depiction of ongoing cycles of flowering to ripeness and regrowth, rather than simple stages of linear progress, reflecting the growth, development and re-growth of people, relationships and systems. Lastly, it represents a shared and *surface* level of Yolŋu knowledge that is unlikely to present any tension. Yolŋu need to lead these processes and conversations especially when Yolŋu knowledge is included, as there are layers of complexities regarding surface layers and deeper layers of knowledge that non-Yolŋu will not understand. It cannot be assumed that these metaphors and processes can be taken and applied in other contexts without Yolŋu being actively engaged with implementing and being accountable to their communities.

Ongoing Co-creation

Once the idea of the Munydjutj emerged, we began to unpack and test the applicability of the metaphor as way of measuring meaningful learning. When we introduced the munydjutj in a range of workshops Yolŋu immediately engaged with this way of learning and measuring. It was through this metaphor that we could begin to develop a new community-based framework that started with Yolŋu knowledge systems—noting while we use the term unique, we also do not mean new—we were building upon decades of work by the ŋaḻapaḻ and community.

We began working through four phases of the Munydjutj, including borwu (new flower buds), muḻkurr borum (initial fruit bud), mirŋguy (unripe fruit), and balwur' (ripe fruit). When we took these concepts out to community to test further, we applied it to individual's understanding of hunting guku (honey). People reflected on what they knew about hunting guku such as the different types of trees, the tools required, seasonal indicators, and elaborated further to include manikay (songlines), miny'tji (clan art and design) and buŋgul (ceremony), the difference between Yirritja and Dhuwa guku; the deeper layers of knowledge. By starting with a Yolŋu concept and applying it to munydjutj, the process becomes clear and Yolŋu knowledge was validated. It created a safe space for Yolŋu to recognise the different layers of learning and knowledge and how this could be mapped to a framework. The space was created to support and move from the known to the unknown, and demonstrated how knowledge can be at different stages as the munydjutj metaphor explains. It also gave an opportunity to weave knowledges together and supported Yolŋu to recognise their own learning journey and metaphors connected to their bäpurru (clan).

The Metaphor in Practice

Since its creation, we have taken the Munydutj Framework and expanded its use and application. We have also expanded it to become a reflection tool and a rubric for shared accountability.

During 2024, we began working with the Australian Government's "Stronger Places Stronger People (SPSP) Initiative." To encourage shared accountability with government partners, we created a *partnership rubric*. Essentially, it was a tool for collaboration and for collectively engaging in critical reflection about roles, actions, and accountability. The rubric weaved together priorities and ways of knowing for Yolŋu, with existing elements of the SPSP Initiative. We were hoping to work with them to develop a deeper partnership based on accountability and action. Drawing on the metaphor of the munydjutj to think about phases of readiness and growth, the rubric described the development of the partnership for each partner (Djalkiri as well as the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Governments). This was driven by a need to better understand and map how the SPSP partners would take a role in supporting local priorities and communities. It was also driven by the challenging question "how can all partners work collectively to ensure that it is not another government agenda that fails to positively impact outcomes?" Importantly, co-creating the descriptions of what each phase might mean in practice was a key part of the work. While the munydutj phases provided a starting point, bringing each phase to life required practical examples of *what this looks like* for each partner. This anchoring in practical action was essential to the rubric. For us, this was another way to step into the middle space together in an attempt to develop shared understandings and find common ground.

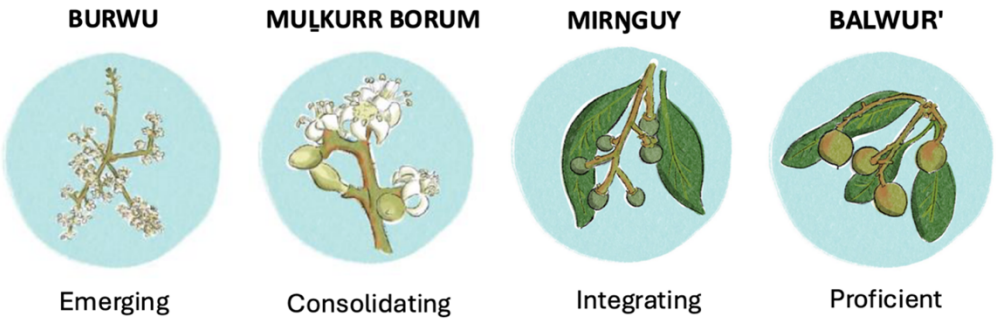

Figure 2: *Munydjutj Indicator*

The munydjutj is an applied framework with a Yolŋu theoretical foundation that can be used in a variety of contexts for individual reflection and adult learning. We have applied the indicators in learning and leadership workshops with Yolŋu participants in range in of contexts. We have used the indicator to engage in the co-design and mapping of multiple skills and knowledges. We have

found that Yolŋu participants are engaging with confidence with this tool and are willing to identify where they are and the learning journey they might need to go on. This framework focusses on strength and moves away from the deficit lens that is often used in these contexts. Deficit discourse has been described by Fogarty et al. (2018) as the:

> discourse that represents people or groups in terms of deficiency—absence, lack or failure. It particularly denotes discourse that narrowly situates responsibility for problems with the affected individuals or communities, overlooking the larger socio-economic structures in which they are embedded. It is implicated with race-based stereotypes. (p. vii)

By showing strength-based indicators connected to knowledge and skills, we are attempting to challenge embedded bias that only Western knowledge is valid.

A Story of Bulmuyuk

The Emergence of the Metaphor

Bulmuyuk means "a fire that has gone out." For example, if a fire has gone out it has become "bulmuyuk". This metaphor emerged when we met with community to discuss a regional forum on community priorities and ways of working. To ensure that we were creating an inclusive middle space we spent a lot of time talking and unpacking as we worked with organisations, groups and individuals. The metaphor of bulmuyuk was introduced by an elder who asked "how do we as Yolŋu know when we are in control of the solutions for our communities, knowing that there are some things like Balanda (western) policies and changing government agendas that are bulmuyuk? How do we understand Balanda decisions processes and have equal input into making change?". It was during this conversation that he shared the metaphor of bulmuyuk—he was saying that there are unknown spaces that we need to understand. There was a clear sense that bulmuyuk existed at different layers, and we need to understand some of the deeper systems and challenges that are influencing community priorities and outcomes.

We asked for (and were granted) permission to work with bulmuyuk as a metaphor. In our conversations, we realised there were parallels with the well-known *iceberg model*. However, we felt the concept of bulmuyuk better reflected the idea of a dynamic and constantly changing context where many actors, interconnections and interventions are often in the dark, in the unknown. Drawing upon the layers of the well-known *iceberg model*, we adapted it to create a *Bulmuyuk* activity that asked participants to:

"Think about a lighthouse and how the light shines on one area at a time. There are areas that are hidden or might be seen briefly and then go back into the dark. We need to understand systems and stories to gain a deeper sense of what's important, including root causes. In this activity, we will take the lighthouse and think about:

- What feels important to 'make visible' and shine a light on?
- What sits underneath in the dark?
- How do we take accountability and keep the light on?"

The Metaphor in Practice

In May 2025, Djalkiri hosted a Community Forum that was attended by over 70 participants from 26 different organisations from across the Gove Peninsula. The first day was a Yolŋu forum and the second day include organisational representatives. Importantly, the Forum included a mix of Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu participants. The majority of non-Yolŋu did not speak Yolŋu matha and for most Yolŋu, English is a second language. By using this metaphor, we could create a middle space where all participants could engage confidently and equally on challenges and opportunities in the region. The concept of bulmuyuk was used to help participants map the visible and invisible. As facilitators, we set the scene, describing how the lighthouse light moves around, shining in different places and there are places in the dark that we cannot see. The purpose of this activity was to shine a light on the hidden attitudes, beliefs, and power holding behaviours and patterns in place. We created a simple handout which we modified from a Presencing Institute iceberg framework (Presencing Institute, 2022).

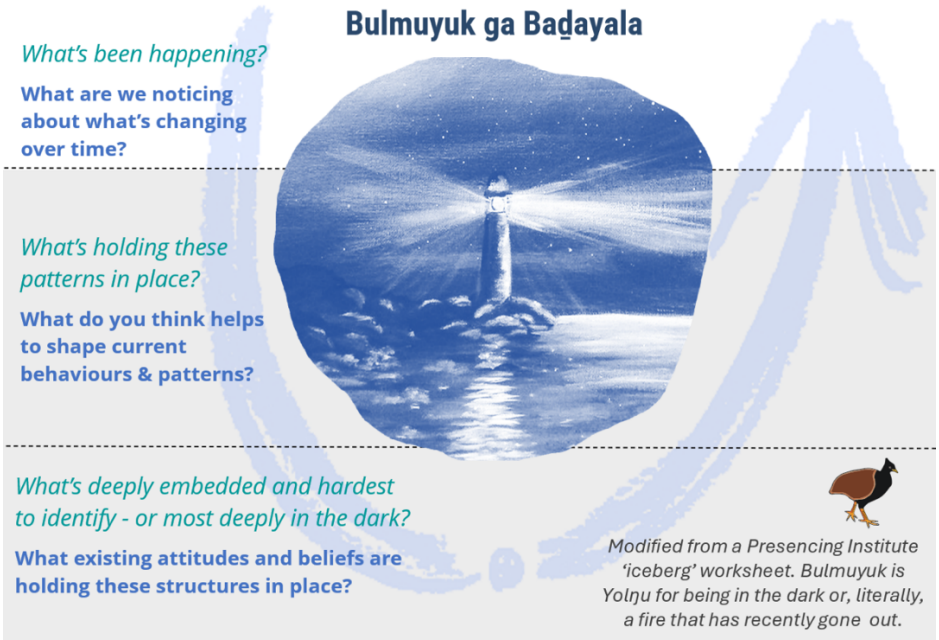

Figure 3: *Bulmuyuk ga Baḏayala: Lighthouse activity - mapping the dark.*

This metaphor provided a middle space for diverse organisations and individuals to discover shared understanding and agendas about the Gove Peninsula and surrounding Homelands. In the Community Forum, it became the framing for deep dives into eight themes that participants chose to group themselves around and *unpack* further in small group dialogue. Many people spoke to us afterwards about the level of energy in the room and the degree of deeper conversation at a regional level that is rarely prioritised. It was reinforced that when the conditions are carefully built to bring people together in dialogue, deeper discussion and engagement that creates space for Yolŋu voices can occur. Having brought two bodies of knowledge together in the framework, we were relieved to see it validated by both Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu in the room. For this framework to be practical and support community-led priorities, we continue to have discussions on how to unpack and articulate these challenges together. Through the process of bulmuyuk we can start to move beyond what is visible into the deeper layers of complexity to understand some of the reasons things are as they are. This process starts to bring out areas of shared accountability and levers for change, recognising that we are all part of the system. There is a temptation to label challenges as easily *solvable*, and the responsibility for addressing those challenges is placed on the community rather than understanding the interconnected systemic factors and policy agendas that are contributing to the bulmuyuk.

The Middle Space

In reflecting on the Munydjutj (green plum), Wärrkarr (onion lily), and Bulmuyuk (a fire gone out), we acknowledge that we are building tools and frameworks that have essentially emerged from the community and the powerful tradition of metaphor in the Yolŋu context. We also know that metaphor is much more than a story. It is the act of co-creating knowledge and engaging in critical reflection.

We do not romanticise the middle space. Humans are complex. Knowledge systems and sensemaking systems are complex. Meeting in the middle is a way to articulate the diverse understandings and ideas from the work, based on our own perspectives and world views. The metaphors themselves are not the end product. They are enablers of reflection and of getting closer to shared understanding (though we may never reach full sharing) as a collective, not just as individuals. By using metaphor we can attempt to collectively hold stories that require accountability back to the group. They become stories and ways of working that belong to the whole and need to be held within, and not taken out of, context.

As others have discovered, holding the middle space is not easy and *thinking together* does not always work out the way we anticipated (Isaacs, 1999; Srivastava, 2025). There are often tensions and misunderstandings as we try to make some kind of collective sense of the different ways of understanding the world. Many Yolŋu have been very engaged with the development and

application of these metaphors as they are specific to place. In our experience, local approaches that emerge from place often don't progress to a stage where there is sustained engagement and ongoing learning. We need to remain cognisant that a disconnect between theory and practise can occur in the middle space. It is one thing to understand and acknowledge the metaphor and another to apply it in context, especially when those in the middle space have very different worldviews and values. We found that some non-Yolŋu struggled more than others to engage in the co-creation of meaning, and find ourselves wondering if this is due to Western traditions of getting the *content right* and abstracting it to be *broadly applicable*, rather than engaging in the messiness of negotiated sensemaking in a deeply embedded relational context.

We have also hypothesised that perhaps meaning making is still not seen as the work, and that the messy middle space is seen as a fleeting state before the real work happens. But it is here in the middle space where relationships are being developed and reinforced, and trust is either being strengthened or eroded. Perhaps some Yolŋu (we are not generalising to say all) are more comfortable in the messy middle because relationships are the fabric of life for many people, and many are moving between very different work and home lives.

We have also observed an ingrained preference of many, not least in government roles, to work with *answers* rather than grapple with questions. Our fear is that, in this context, the tools and frameworks we have developed become seen as completed or static artefacts and recipes that can be extracted for other uses and agendas. Or, are themselves seen as too abstract or difficult because they involve a process of conversation and meaning making rather than a quick solution or answer.

Perhaps we are holding too many fears, but we feel the need to emphasise these metaphors and frameworks not as content but as invitations to *step into the middle space* and actively engage with the messiness and uncertainty of negotiated meaning. Our wish is for these metaphors to enable everyone to feel both explorer and expert at the same time. We want people to remember that context is critical—and that metaphors are not for extraction but rather embeddedness.

We are deeply grateful to the non-Yolŋu who have genuinely sought to stand in the middle space with us. This is where change happens and hope is possible. However, perhaps the hardest conversations have been with those that seek to engage and who feel they are *stepping into the middle space*—but do not seem to arrive with the same sense of reciprocity or shared accountability. Time and again, we have seen Yolŋu grasp the intent of the work, and step in to engage and make meaning. We have seen Yolŋu take and adapt the Wärrkarr and Munydjutj and then present it back with confidence to elders and supervisors. In contrast, we have been in workshops and meetings with non-Yolŋu professionals who read our work, nod in agreement, and wait for the next agenda item to be addressed.

What Allowed us to Step in Together?

In writing this article, we realised that part of the story required reflection about how we have been able to work together in this way. Each of us bring vastly different experiences and exposures. We could bring that learning with us as we negotiated the middle space together. Through conversations, we discovered some common threads that we offer below:

- **Growing up in small rural and remote communities** – while in deeply different contexts, we have each lived part of our lives in rural and remote Australia, in small country communities, where relationships are intergenerational and collective memory is embedded. We know the power and responsibility of being deeply connected by place and purpose. These are not shaped by transient jobs or postings, but by deeper roles that are taken up and held in community, where you do not have the luxury of walking away if things do not work. Rather, you have to stay in relationship and work things through.
- **Shared values and trust** – Claire and Rarrtjiwuy could recall some of their earliest conversations, decades ago, where they were seeking to understand each other's values. There was something in the alignment of purpose and valuing of respect and reciprocity, that led them to a lifelong connection based on gurruṯu and deep trust that has enabled working and moving through the good times and the hard. This became a safe space for supporting each other, exploring difficult questions and being vulnerable. When we've experienced or seen clashes in ways of being that do not align with our own values, we've become a place for each other to sense check, reset and keep going (or to remove ourselves and put our energy into what we believe will make a difference).
- **Guide not guru** – the way we see ourselves is not as *experts* or *leaders* but rather, lifelong learners. We see our role as supporting, guiding, and helping build the capability of ourselves, our peers, and the communities in which we work. We value how we can role model, demonstrate, and engage behind the scenes to help others figure out for themselves how to make meaning and have agency in their lives. It is perhaps the idea of being *an enabler* that has freed us up from feeling we have to know the answers to everything. We seek to support the collective rather than advance the individual cause. We each are prepared to swim in the unknown and welcome discoveries of new knowledge and learning, even when that means we get told there are things that we don't know. We all found we had *done*

work to better understand ourselves (we hope!) and always seek to bring our best version (flaws and all) of ourselves to the work. We engage in different practices of self-reflection with a commitment to ongoing learning, knowing we still have so much to discover. This meant that when we arrived together, it was with a sense of having found fellow travellers.

- **Ability to see and move between worlds** – There is something special in the ability to move across worlds—from the school room, boardroom, government building and NGO office through to navigating health, housing and education systems. We might be sitting under a tree in community in the morning, and conducting online meetings across Australia in the afternoon. Being able to adapt in how we show up, zoom out and see across systems, worlds and worldviews, as well as zoom in and hold relationships in diverse and difficult spaces is something that we have each learnt to do over time. It isn't easy, but we do it because it is how we can best serve the communities we support and hold space for the relationships that underpin our work. We can often see where the gaps are and where those entering news spaces and worlds might need more support. We try to intentionally create a space for collaboration across sectors and worldviews. This ability has been noticed and sought out by others, which further enables our work.
- **Seeing the world as dynamic, not static, where everything is interconnected** – perhaps it was growing up close the nature, in North East Arnhem Land (Rarrtjiwuy) and on farms (Claire and Fiona) that taught us that no season is ever the same. There is no such luxury as trying the same thing every year. We see the world as dynamic, interconnected and ever changing, and so lean into adaptive stances, and embrace ambiguity without feeling the need for rigid, over-planned responses and certainty.
- **Relationships as reciprocal spaces** – the work of deep relating is never easy. It can be raw, confronting and sometimes, tempting to walk away. It would be easier to draw boundaries or give up but, for whatever reason, we are each willing to keep stepping into middle spaces in the hope that others will join us. This is not to say we are pushovers, but rather we seek and understand the power of working relationally, through respect and reciprocity. We see vulnerability as strength and each have experienced powerful working relationships, where supporting each other and being vulnerable proves to be the path to change and impact. We are

> constantly assessing where it might be worth us creating relational or middle spaces.

None of this is to say that the three of us own or solely created these metaphors or this work. Nor do we suggest this is the only starting place. As mentioned above, our work does not arise from a blank canvas. It is deeply embedded in culture and Yolŋu living theory. Some of our biggest influences have been people, rather than books or papers. We are building upon decades of dialogue and work between many Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu over the years—including many Yolŋu that are no longer with us but whose vision and commitment for change live on, especially Mandawuy Yunupingu and Raymattja Marika, and extraordinarily dedicated people like Leon White and many more. We still refer to their writings to guide as we add a contemporary lens to the work (see for example Marika, 1999).

We also acknowledge here the work of others, including published in this *Journal*, such as John Stubley's (2023) paper on the creation of metaphors as part of a process of social poetry and imagination that brings into perception both current and future realities. We also acknowledge the seminal work on metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). However, in our context, we are working with metaphor less as a concept or tool of perception, and more as an invitation to co-creation and a meeting place of diverse worldviews.

Lasting Questions

It is often assumed that knowledge is universal, however, there are many ways of understanding the world. It is time to find ways to engage in middle spaces outside the certainty of pre-defined paradigms, policies, and programs that have been imposed by Western systems.

Like the roots of a tree, we are working with metaphors as the veins of our connections and we know they run deep. We share our insights and attempts at creating middle spaces as an incomplete work in progress. Sometimes when we think we have understood or have the answers, more questions arise and bias and blind spots are uncovered; consequently, humility is required. We are continually curious about what is next and what there is to learn.

We will continue to build spaces for conversations, one where Yolŋu systems and ways of working are centred and embedded, starting from a place of strength rather than exclusion. While we hope we are making progress, we know that we have a long way to go. But through initiating these small steps towards meaningful change, guided by our communities, we hope to create a connected space to support meaning making for bukmak (everyone).

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All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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We confirm that all co-authors of our submitted article followed ethical principles in publishing.

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