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Special Issue

**Intergenerational Dialogue for Well-Being
Futures: Theories, Practices, and Policy
Pathways**

Guest Editors:

Prof Patrice Brodeur
Prof Emeritus Abby Day
Prof Scherto R. Gill
Prof Emeritus Iftikhar H. Malik
Dr Ryan O'Byrne
Dr Ola Osman
Prof Garrett Thomson
Prof Paul Weller

2026

Volume 14



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David



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The Journal of Dialogue Studies is a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed academic journal published once a year. Its aim is to study the theory and practice of dialogue, understood provisionally as: meaningful interaction and exchange between people (often of different social, cultural, political, religious or professional groups) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding. The Journal is published by the Institute for Dialogue Studies, the academic platform of the Dialogue Society.

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Editorial Introduction:

Hope is Between Us: Intergenerational Dialogue as Futures-Forming

Scherto R. Gill¹, Guest Editor

Abstract: The future is commonly imagined as a time ahead of us, separate from the past and not yet reached by the present. This typical temporal image is accompanied by a linear conception of generations. In this construction, knowledge and wisdom are understood to move in one direction, from older to younger people.

The papers gathered here in Vol. 14² of *Journal of Dialogue Studies* unsettle these assumptions about time. Across diverse geographical, cultural, and disciplinary contexts, they show how the past can remain active in communal memories and silences, human bodies, cultural narratives, social structures, and institutional practices, as well as in the more-than-human worlds. They also suggest that futures already orient relationships and action in the present. Taken together, these contributions invite us to reconceptualise intergenerational dialogue beyond the transmission of a completed inheritance. As a relational process, intergenerational dialogue allows memories, wounds, wisdom, and hopes to be received, questioned, refused, renewed, and transformed.

This editorial first reconsiders what is meant by intergenerational dialogue and argues that relations across generations stretch conventional assumptions of co-presence and reciprocity, while the characterisation of generation itself defies chronological age. It then develops futures-forming as a conceptual framework for understanding how inherited conditions, present challenges, and anticipated possibilities interact. According to the articles, effects of intergenerational dialogue are neither ensured nor inherently benign, and the encounter itself carries no guarantee of repair. What it does bring into view is where hope resides. Hope may be felt by individuals and communities, but the conditions that sustain or interrupt hope are structural, relational, and active: what seems possible depends upon whether we listen, whether institutions recognise our claims, and whether inherited practices remain available to draw upon.

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² This volume is the second of two Special Issues arising from the *Journal of Dialogue Studies* call for papers on *Intergenerational Dialogue for Well-Being Futures: Theories, Practices, and Policy Pathways*, launched in early 2025. The call generated 31 papers selected for publication across Volumes 13 and 14, with their development supported through two academic workshops held at Mansfield College, University of Oxford. Volume 13 was published at the end of 2025; the present volume continues and extends that inquiry.

Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue; futures-forming; temporality; generations; epistemic justice; collective healing; hope

What Matters Now?

What, at this moment in history, should we care about, and why does such caring matter for the world we are helping to bring into being? The question appears simple. Yet it places a demand upon scholarship that description alone cannot meet. We are not short of information about what is wrong with our world. Clearly, humanity is fully aware of our confronting ecological instability, armed conflict, widening inequalities, colonial and racialised legacies, cultural and linguistic erosion, and the weakening of social trust. Nor do we lack analyses to explain the causes of these crises.

Yet, description, even causal analysis, does not tell us what is important. An account of ecological degradation does not by itself establish which forms of life are desirable and ought to be protected. Knowledge of historical injustice does not settle how that history should be remembered, what kinds of losses should be recognised, or what repair might require. Nor can technological forecasting decide which transformations ought to be welcomed, which reforms should be resisted, and which dimensions of human and more-than-human life should be safeguarded against efficiency, novelty, or control. The question is therefore axiological before it is strategic. What we regard as valuable shapes what we attend to. Values cannot be applied after knowledge has been produced. They should already orient knowledge, institutions, and collective action.

Knowing what we ought to care matters because the reach of the present extends beyond itself. We inhabit relationships, institutions and ecologies shaped by decisions we did not make. We also participate in forming conditions that others will inherit without having chosen them. Younger generations already live within consequences generated before their birth, while generations yet unborn will encounter worlds partly constituted through present choices.

Humans have, after all, never ceased to shape futures. Colonial expansion, extractive economic systems, racialised institutions, industrial and technological warfare, and ecological depletion have all been powerful processes of building futures. Are we aware of the fact that these activities are future shaping? If so, the more difficult question concerns discernment: what futures are our present ways of living already forming? Through which relationships, systems, and practices? According to what kind of vision, and towards what forms of shared life? In his opening remarks for this volume, Alvarez Pereira (2026) frames this question at a planetary scale and locates

intergenerational responsibility as a key to moving towards more peaceful ecological civilisations.

Indeed, it is within this wider inquiry that intergenerational dialogue acquires its significance. The papers gathered here attend to the spaces between generations as sites whereby societies remember and forget, preserve and contest cultural meanings, reproduce and interrupt harm, and open or close possibilities for shared life. Reading them together requires us to look again at the terms that organise the field: dialogue, generation, and intergenerational dialogue.

Rethinking Dialogue Across Generations

Dialogue is often understood as more than conversation or the exchange of information. At its strongest, it entails address and response, attentiveness to another, and a willingness to remain open to being changed (even transformed) by the encounter (Buber 1923; Gadamer 1960). Although reciprocity does not imply symmetry, dialogue is commonly conceived as involving an exchange. These conceptions are complicated by the articles in this volume. For some contributors, intergenerational dialogue suggests that those implicated in the encounter are not always co-present, cannot always respond directly, and are rarely equally positioned (also see Levinas 1961; Thompson 2020). They point out that ancestors cannot answer in an ordinary conversational sense; those yet to be born cannot participate in decisions that will shape the conditions of their lives. Even for the generations currently living, dialogue may differ in authority, credibility, and their stake in what is being learned, understood, or decided. These cases create a well-recognised problem of non-reciprocity for theories of intergenerational justice (Thompson 2009; Gardiner 2009). As illustrated in this volume, participatory video, seeds, land, arts, memories, and folklores are precisely the mediations that allow response and attention where conversational reciprocity is not possible. They show that more than a reciprocally responding interlocutor, dialogue requires a relational continuity in which what is inherited remains available for attention, interpretation, questioning and response.

The contributions further remind us that some non-western traditions articulate intergenerational responsibility through relationships among the living dead, the living, and the yet-to-be-born, while also extending obligations to the natural world, such as land and river, and its non-human inhabitants (Kelbessa 2024). The latter may therefore enter intergenerational responsibility without becoming human interlocutors, raising further questions about representation and ecological justice (Lawrence 2022).

Generational positions are always already relational. One becomes an elder, descendant, ancestor, parent, child, inheritor, or predecessor in relation to others (Man-

nheim 1928; Thompson 2009). Yet, these positions are culturally and politically organised: age categories describe stages of life, but more importantly, such categorisation determines the distribution of authority, recognition, and voice. Younger people may be celebrated rhetorically as ‘the future’ while being excluded from meaningful participation in present decision-making (Lundy 2007). Older persons, conversely, may be idealised as bearers of wisdom while being subjected to assumptions about diminished competence, adaptability, or capacity for change (North & Fiske 2012).

The category of generation is varyingly challenged by the contributions in this volume. For some, it denotes age cohorts, as in designed programmes involving younger and older participants. For others, it refers to migration cohorts shaped by different countries, languages, and educational systems; to bearers of collective historical memory; to biological and epigenetic descent; or to ancestral and ecological continuity. These usages are not interchangeable. What they share is a relational connection across time in which people inherit conditions, meanings, practices, or harms they did not choose.

Furthermore, the papers raise questions about reciprocity. They evoke that intergenerational relations may require forms, practices, and mediations to enable response and attention where ordinary conversational reciprocity is insufficient. They also apply caution to our understanding of silence. Across this volume, silence may register injury, shame, protection, refusal, managed opacity, or inherited prohibition. It cannot therefore be treated simply as an absence of dialogue. Nor can it be assumed that speaking always is always preferable. Likewise, work with land, rivers, seeds, or oceans should not be romanticised as ‘giving voice’ to those who do not speak in human language. What such practices may alter is how human participants might learn to notice and acknowledge and what they might take responsibility for.

Intergenerational dialogue, understood in this way, is a contextualised relational process through which persons and communities differently situated in time encounter inherited worlds and one another. It may sustain continuity, interrupt repetition, generate new understanding, or fail to do any of these. Its value cannot be assumed in advance.

From Futurity to Futures-Forming

The reframing of intergenerational dialogue also introduces a question about time. If inheritances remain active in present relations, and if present encounters alter what can be carried forward, then intergenerational dialogue is already implicated in the formation of futures. To understand how, we need a conception of futurity.

The familiar image of time is linear. The past lies behind us, the present is the point we currently occupy, and the future is somewhere ahead. Such a temporal ordering has obvious practical uses, but it is less adequate as an account of how human beings experience and inhabit time (Al-Saji 2004), and should not be universalised. Hartog's (2016) account of regimes of historicity reminds us that societies organise relations among past, present, and future differently. For instance, Rameka's (2016) discussion of the Māori expression *ka mua*, *ka muri* offers one orientation to temporal relation: moving into what is to come while remaining turned towards what has been. Instead of a temporal location left behind, for the Māoris, the past provides a field of knowledge and orientation to approach future. The west African notion of *Sankofa* carries a different emphasis. As discussed by Temple (2010), *Sankofa* centres on the practice of returning to the past to retrieve what has been neglected or lost so that what remains of value can be carried forward. The *ka mua*, *ka mu* reorients the spatial relationship between past and future; *Sankofa* embodies an ethical practice of retrieval and renewal. Each shows, in a different way, how relations to the past can be integral to forming what becomes possible in the future.

Collective remembering is another way to link past, present, and future. Bergson's (1896) account of memory helps explain that the past remains active in lived experience rather than sitting behind the present as a completed segment of time. Yet, remembering is a multifarious process, through family relationships, knowledge and wisdom, languages and habits, identities, material environments and social institutions (Gill 2023). On that, Ricoeur (1988, 2004) offers an important guardrail against collapsing temporal differences altogether. He points out that historical events are irreversible, but the ways they are remembered, narrated, and carried forward remain subject to interpretation and responsibility.

The papers in this volume suggest that future can also persist through absence (of remembering): an archive destroyed, a language suppressed, histories denied, or an experience for which there is no adequate shared vocabulary. In particular, this volume draws our attention to indigenous futurities scholarship to help extend this argument and add to it an explicitly political dimension. Montgomery and Pezzarossi (2026), for example, challenge linear accounts that consign Indigenous peoples and knowledges to the past. They draw attention to relational temporalities connecting ancestors and descendants, human and more-than-human worlds, and those yet to be born. Temporal orderings, on this account, are not neutral. They can authorise certain visions of progress, marginalise other histories, and ways of knowing, and make some visions of future legitimate or unintelligible.

Bringing these perspectives together, they suggest that temporality may be lived and understood as layered, recursive, ecological, and emergent. They do not offer inter-

changeable accounts of futurity; nor should they be reduced to a naïve opposition between linearity and circularity in conceptualising time. Their significance lies in highlighting how different ways to understand past, present, and future bear upon one another, and how intergenerational dialogue, knowing, and wisdom-sharing can make these relations explicable. This is particularly important for this volume. Read alongside one another, the papers provide a fertile ground for developing the idea of *futures-forming*.

The grammatical movement from noun (futurity) to verb (forming futures) is not itself novel. Take Ramose's (1999) reading of *ubu-ntu* as an example. In this reading, *ubu-*, the prefix, represents being in general. It is the abstract, enfolded state of universe-wide existence before it manifests into specific forms. So *ubu-* is the ontological dimension. In contrast, *-ntu*, the stem, represents being in a lived form. It is the concrete, knowable, visible manifestation of being. Together, *ubu-ntu* points towards being and becoming as a unified process, non-static, in a continuous 'flow', and subsequently subjected to change (Ojimba 2023; Gill 2025a).

Correspondingly, there is an instructive parallel in philosophical accounts of hope. Bloch (1986), Marcel (1951), and Martin (2014), in different ways, resist treating hope as passive expectation, desire, or optimism. Ernst Bloch's hope as *Not-Yet* (Noch-Nicht) invites possibilities immanent within present conditions. In the not-yet, hope becomes a verb, an open-ended process of becoming. For Gabriel Marcel, hope is an active and fundamentally relational orientation. Adrienne Martin further shows how hope becomes incorporated into practical agency in imagining, planning, and acting. Then Freire (1994) locates hope differently again, as an ontological need inseparable from struggle. Freire argues that hope detached from action is waiting; action without hope cannot sustain itself.

Across these accounts, hope, as a verb, or hoping, does not project us towards an absent future. Hope enters present experience when people orient themselves and act in relation to what may become. That is to say, if *futures-forming* names how possibilities are opened, foreclosed and transformed, hope concerns whether and how those possibilities can remain alive within relations and structures. *Futures-forming* is broader than hoping. It does not carry a positive ethical judgement in itself. In other words, not everything that forms futures is hopeful. As seen, silence forms futures; inequality forms futures; unjust institutional arrangements form futures; denial, exclusion and ecological destruction form futures. Conversely, remembering, resistance, care, intergenerational dialogue, cocreation, and imagination may interrupt inherited trajectories and make other emergencies available.

For this volume, we may therefore provisionally define *futures-forming* as the ongoing processes through which differently situated people and generations engage in-

herited memories, knowledges, wisdom, wounds and possibilities. In doing so, the futures-forming reconfigures our relationships with one another and with the wider living world. Futures-forming happens whether or not those involved are conscious of the futures they are helping to shape. The framework developed here makes these processes available for inquiry. It asks us to examine how futures are being formed, what hopeful possibilities are being opened or foreclosed, and what kinds of futures our relations and structures are conceivable.

Four interconnected characteristics provide lenses to allow such futures-forming can be examined.

First, futures-forming is contested. There is no singular future towards which all societies advance. Escobar (2018) terms this the *pluriverse*. According to Gomez (2023), pluriverse is directly originated from the political philosophy and slogans of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, which was an Indigenous insurgent group in Chiapas, Mexico. They announced their vision for global justice in this phrase: '*Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*', translated as 'a world where many worlds fit'. Pluriverse is set against the single developmental trajectory that modernity provides as inevitable. Present choices can keep some possibilities open and others closed. A technological future valued by one group may diminish cultural continuity or ecological integrity for another. The language of '*the future*' can obscure such contestation by presenting one trajectory of progress as universal or inevitable. Thus, for our discussion, the notion of future is plural.

Second, futures-forming is relational. Futures do not arise from isolated sovereign agents, but through dynamic relational processes in which persons and opportunities take shape (Gergen 2009). What becomes possible is shaped through the dynamic interconnections among memory and anticipation, agency and authority, dependence and conflict, recognition and refusal. Past, present, and future, while distinct, are not rigidly separate from one another. The quality of these relationships already embodies something of the worlds being formed (Escobar 2018; Gergen 2009).

Third, futures-forming involves valuing. Every practice that invites the future tends to carry, explicitly or implicitly, evaluative claims about what is good and why it matters. Andean articulations of *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir* make what they value visible. These point to the good life through reciprocity, communal well-being, and right relationship with the living world (Gudynas 2011). Evaluative claims need not be treated as competing visions of the future. They can invite dialogue about the goods towards which collective life ought to be oriented. Recognising that futures are continually being formed, therefore, raises an inescapably ethical question: what is worth carrying forward, nurturing, and making possible?

Fourth, futures-forming is structurally mediated. Futures are not constituted solely in interpersonal encounters. The relational dimension evokes immediate encounter, and the structural dimension concerns the socioeconomic and political arrangements that outlast any particular encounter. The structural continues to configure relations when no one is in the room. Institutions, laws, economies, technologies, educational systems, and political processes define relationships and shape which futures become materially available (Gill 2025b). Quijano's (2000) account of the coloniality of power describes precisely this form of mediation: hierarchies of labour, racism, and epistemic domination established through colonial rule can persist within institutions after formal colonial arrangements have ended. Intergenerational dialogue may therefore alter understandings without, by itself, transforming the conditions that perpetuate historical harm or inequality.

These four lenses are analytically distinguishable but empirically entangled: what is contested is shaped by relations, relations are structured by institutions, and both are sustained by judgements about what is valued. These characteristics do not necessarily make futures-forming inherently positive and hopeful. Futures may be formed through domination, exclusion, ecological destruction, and the reproduction of inherited harm as well as through care, dialogue and imagination. The value of the framework lies in making such processes more visible and available to critical inquiry.

In the context of this special issue, that inquiry is normatively oriented towards well-being futures. When applying these lenses, we can observe that the future(s) is/are neither something that happens to us nor something sovereign agents manufacture at will. We participate in its formation while being formed by inherited histories, present relationships, and situations not entirely of our choosing. Nevertheless, futures-forming through intergenerational dialogue draws attention both to such a process and to the ethical questions it raises about relations, institutions, and structures. In this sense, hope is also an act of forming well-being futures. To hope is to participate in the formation of possibilities, orienting our relation and action towards co-creating desirable structural conditions. What is desirable, in this volume, is the kinds of conditions that can enable persons, communities, cultural and the wider living worlds to flourish.

Intergenerational dialogue as futures-forming across the volume

The framework developed here is not intended as a theoretical container into which the contributions of this Special Issue should be placed. Indeed, the papers in this volume do not share a single language, method, or normative position. In part, their

significance lies in how they resist easy synthesis. Organised under thematic constellations, they illuminate several sites in which futures-forming through intergenerational dialogue becomes visible, and discernible. As discussed below, they further expose where the framework itself is insufficient.

Memories, silence, and repair

A first constellation concerns the ways historical experience continues to define present relations.

Lu and Zhang (2026) show how the violence of Japan's wartime military sexual slavery persists through institutionalised strategies of denial, displacement, and reversal. The issue is more than that survivors have failed to speak; at the core of their analysis is that political structures have repeatedly refused recognition. Memory here is both temporal/transgenerational and political: what is denied in the present helps determine what can be publicly inherited in the future.

Karagkouni (2026) approaches temporal continuity through law. Her analysis of sanctions shows that harm may reverberate beyond those directly exposed to an original policy. Material deprivation, disrupted relationships, psychological effects, and historical trauma, even as conventional legal categories, these struggle to establish causation across generations. The problem concerns both memory and institutional intelligibility. Some harms continue because the structures charged with recognising them are organised around discrete events and identifiable victims.

García-Gavilanes and colleagues (2026) locate a different form of temporal inheritance in persistent silence around sexual and reproductive health. Across nine countries, this eighteen-year longitudinal study unfolds how caregivers' silence or reluctance to discuss sexuality has shaped what girls are able to know and to ask. It recognises how important intergenerational dialogue is in enabling girls to have better understanding of sexuality and well-being. In turn, such knowledge and understanding is key to protecting themselves from harm when they become young women. Breaking intergenerational silence becomes a task of better futures for girls.

Sohdi (2026), by contrast, cautions against treating all silence as deprivation. Under conditions of colonial violence, silence may also function as protection, refusal, or resistance. This complicates futures-forming in an important way. If refusal can close some possibilities while protecting others, then openness itself cannot serve as the framework's ethical criterion. Silence can be a form of resistance. Each case is subject to interpretation whether intergenerational silence reproduces domination or constitutes necessary protection. Such interpretation requires further ethical judgement about history, power, consent, and purpose.

Two further papers bring interpretation itself into view. Amir (2026) shows how South Asian folklore can carry romanticised readings of female sacrifice. Conversely, it can also be a resource for feminist reinterpretation and spiritual sovereignty. Gupta's (2026) reading of Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver' challenges any assurance that intergenerational relation culminates in mutual understanding.

Together, these papers show that inheritance is neither a settled possession nor necessarily reparative. What is carried forward may be renewed, resisted, or reproduced. Futures-forming therefore gives no guarantee of healing without inclusive dialogue and genuine co-inquiry. Repair becomes possible only when histories are encountered in such ways that do not reproduce the relations of domination. Here, the conditions of hope may be barred by political refusal, legal unintelligibility, or demands for disclosure under inequality. They begin to reopen where histories and claims can become recognisable without making speech or reconciliation compulsory.

Belonging, knowledge and authority

A second constellation concerns what belonging means, who is regarded as a credible knower, and who may speak with authority about inherited worlds.

Raza and Hussey (2026) show belonging in the Pakistani diaspora to be continually negotiated through selective disclosure, code-switching, and what they call 'managed opacity'. Their theorisation of dialogic strain, dialogic legibility, and conditional belonging captures the cost of making oneself understandable across generational and cultural difference without surrendering control over what becomes visible.

Chan (2026) reaches a related conclusion by reflecting on belonging in UK-Chinese migrant families. Shared ethnicity does not imply shared cultural experience. What appears from outside as transmission a single cultural tradition is, from within, a continuing negotiation among differently socialised generations. Her notion of intergenerational interculturality makes visible cultural difference within apparent sameness. The paper challenges the assumption that one generation automatically carries culture forward to the next.

Longkumer and Thomas (2026) locate the question of belonging institutionally. Among Naga students from Nagaland to Bangalore and Delhi for higher education, tribal student unions function as *dialogical infrastructure*. They involve intergenerational engagement as an ordinary condition of collective life. Within these, inherited narratives of conflict and identity are renegotiated through the present experience. The notion of narrative sovereignty is introduced to capture the capacity to encounter what is inherited. However, under pressure both from external misrecogni-

tion and from within inherited narratives, inherited claims to universality dissolve on contact with other tribal accounts. The paper problematises non-reciprocity and raises questions about the structures that sustain inherited voices.

Koskina (2026) adds digital mediation to this picture. On Instagram, Orthodox religious authority is redistributed among institutional status, experiential knowledge, and claims to authenticity. At the same time, digital platform architecture shapes what becomes visible and credible. The paper shows that authority between generations is mediated by technological systems that no single participant controls.

In different ways, these papers extend epistemic justice beyond the question of whether more voices are included. They ask what conditions make a voice intelligible, authoritative, or safe to offer at all. Fricker's (2007) distinction between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice remains useful here, but the contributions add a relational and intergenerational dimension: knowledge is already formed within histories of belonging, migration, authority, and mediation. Here, the conditions of hope concern whether people can belong and be recognised as knowers without surrendering difference, opacity, or authority; and whether as knowers, they can participate in shaping what becomes possible.

Embodied, artistic, and more-than-human relations

A third constellation expands on how intergenerational relation is understood and futures made possible.

Campo and colleagues (2026) show participatory video functioning as a relational practice that changes who speaks, what becomes visible, and how territorial knowledge is encountered. Rather than recording or documenting, the medium helps create a shared space of inquiry.

Canela (2026) and Cuissard (2026) examine the same New Futures Arts Collaborative, but from different conceptual apertures. Canela treats arts-based practice as an infrastructure for intergenerational epistemologies across time, place, and more-than-human relations. Cuissard approaches artistic practice with the question of common sense, understood as relational and collective sense-making. Both are situated within Johannesburg's colonial, racial, and extractive histories. That one site produces two different conceptual readings is itself instructive. Epistemic plurality adds perspectives to an unchanged framework while changing what the framework can notice.

Capanema (2026) takes up the challenge by presenting seeds as carrying histories of cultivation, adaptation, and ecological relation. Although not attributing human

speech to them is an innovation perspective, their greatest significance lies in recognising that material and ecological inheritances participate in shaping what communities can remember and become.

These contributions invite a wider account of intergenerational dialogue. Generations are conceived to be beyond the human ancestors, the living, and those people yet to come. Meaning may be generated through images, movement, artistic practice, material inheritance, place, and ecological attention beyond mere verbal exchange. Hope is provoked in practices that enlarge and expand on what can be perceived, related to, and imagined.

However, this expansion requires discipline. Land, rivers, seeds, and oceans should not be absorbed into human conversational metaphors, the papers warn. Their presence instead calls for epistemic humility about the forms of relating through which human beings become answerable to a wider living world.

Shared worlds, healing, and peace

A fourth constellation turns towards relations that can enable well-being futures to take form and shared worlds to become liveable.

Hadjis van Thiel, Bromley and Burr (2026) arrive at this question through the practical evolution of their intergenerational workshops. They began by assuming that co-creation, collaborative problem-solving, and tangible outputs would drive participation. Instead, they discover that relationships had to come first. As facilitators relinquished some control, allowing participants time to feel safe, listen without judgement, and shape the direction of conversation, intergenerational dialogue deepened and learning moved more freely across generations. What one older participant called ‘joyful connection in the moment’ suggests that relationship itself is constitutive of well-being; and dialogue requires relational ground for other emergencies to become possible.

Walton, Livingstone, and Bureau (2026) press this relational claim further in their reflection on the case of New Paradigm Navigators (NPN) dialogues. NPN’s participatory approach shifts intergenerational dialogue from one-directional knowledge transfer to it becoming a shared inquiry. The practice features experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical ways of knowing. The emphasis on trust, deep listening, vulnerability, and ‘not knowing’ matters because participants are not required to move quickly towards agreement or predetermined outcomes. The dialogues also encounter their own limits, including age-based assumptions about authority, differences hidden beneath apparently shared language, and the question of whether relational spaces can address material and structural constraints.

Thomson and Silva (2026), analysing intergenerational dialogues in Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in Colombia, shift our attention from relational process to what collective healing may require. Their concept of spiritual harm names profound damage beyond material deprivation or psychological trauma, including colonisation, enslavement, displacement, and continuing racism. By spiritual harm, they paper suggests that it may damage people's relations to what they hold to be sacred and to the non-instrumental value of themselves, others, community, and land. Importantly, the paper does not treat this harm as culturally uniform. Different historical relations to territory, displacement, spirituality, and community engender different recognition of harm, and configurations of healing practices. Their methodological conclusion follows from this: intergenerational dialogue must, first and foremost, allow communities themselves to make the relevant meanings and forms of repair intelligible.

Posada-Tellez and colleagues (2026) extend the question of liveable relations from community practice to regional peace. Their study begins from a striking gap between the Pacific *Ocean of Peace* Declaration and participants' accounts of peace as lived through everyday relations, livelihoods, ecological care, inclusion, and justice. Instead of asking people to endorse or reject the Declaration, *Talanoa* and collaborative poetry enabled younger people and community members to question whose peace it represented and what would be required to bring it 'down to the ground'. The intergenerational dimension of *Talanoa* is especially important: younger participants used creative and dialogical spaces to articulate concerns that elders had not always heard. Dialogue sometimes shifted who was able to speak and who was prepared to listen. 'Peace must be lived, not declared' thus makes regional aspiration answerable to the people, relationships, and ecological conditions that are key to sustain peace.

As demonstrated by these contributions, hope has not been deferred to a future outcome. In joyful connection, shared inquiry, culturally meaningful healing, and dialogue practices that seek to translate political aspirations into lived realities, something of the world being hoped for can already become present in the relations themselves. At the same time, these papers resist reducing relations, healing, and peace to interpersonal connection alone. Relational spaces require appropriate conditions; harms must be understood in their historical, cultural, and structural specificity; and declarations require institutional and material practices capable of sustaining what they promise. Collective healing and global peace therefore appear less as end-states to be reached than as qualities and conditions of shared life that must be continually enacted and renewed.

Hope is Between Us

Across these constellations, hope emerges less as a discrete theme than as a question of what remains possible, and under what conditions. Possibilities are foreclosed where histories are denied, harms rendered unintelligible, belonging made conditional, or inherited relations organised through domination. They are opened where people are recognised but without being assimilated, where different forms of knowing enlarge what can be perceived and imagined, and where just relations become present in practice. Hope may be experienced by persons, yet the conditions that sustain hope are always relational and structural. This is why the volume's emphasis on lived relation matters. Its case studies, narratives, and methodological insights show both how possibilities are constrained and how, in encounters and dialogues, something of a hoped-for world can already become liveable.

We can now return to the question with which this editorial began. The framework offers no blueprint for an ideal tomorrow, nor should it. If futures are plural, and if generations yet to come must retain the capacity to question what they inherit, no present generation can legitimately define a completed world on their behalf. Does this imply ethical neutrality? Of course not. Futures are continually formed in our understanding of what is good and worth sustaining. The ethical question is therefore what kinds of common life enable persons, communities, and the wider living world to thrive in their interdependence.

For the contributors of this volume, shared flourishing names such a horizon: one in which people can engage in meaningful relationships, belong to their cultural worlds, and participate in shaping the conditions of common life. Dignity, mutuality, attunement, and ecological responsibility converge within it rather than being traded against one another.

Perhaps this is what it means to take intergenerational dialogue seriously. The question before us is: what can be possible when we recognise that generations are already implicated in one another's becoming and flourishing. Instead of pre-determining the future for those who come after us, the responsibility this recognition brings is to leave them such worlds in which they can question what they inherit, renew what they value, and imagine what can be possible for themselves.

Futures are formed in dialogue. Hope is between us.

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Memories, Silence and Repair

Earth-Humanity Reconciliation: Towards Peaceful Ecological Civilisations Through Plural Pathways

Keynote by Carlos Alvarez Pereira¹

Abstract: This article, inspired by a January 2026 Oxford workshop on intergenerational dialogue and well-being futures, is structured around five reflective themes: Vertigo, Anxiety, Aspiration, Envisioning, and Hope. The author argues humanity is living close to large-scale collapse, driven by an interlocking ‘poly-crisis’ (climate breakdown, inequality, displacement, reckless digitalisation) that the West, in particular, fails to confront due to mental and perceptual ‘gridlocks’. It contrasts Western pessimism about the future with growing optimism in countries like China and revisits the Club of Rome’s legacy (*The Limits to Growth, No Limits to Learning*) to argue the crisis is not just metabolic but cultural and epistemological: Western modernity was built on separation (mind/matter, Us/Them), producing inequality, extraction, and an ‘otherisation’ that blocks collective solidarity.

As a way forward, the author calls for recognising genuine plurality of worldviews, favouring multilateral collaboration over competition and domination, and embracing authentic intergenerational leadership, giving younger generations a real co-creative role in decision making rather than a token one. It references The Fifth Element programme of the Club of Rome and the project No Limits to Hope as concrete examples of this approach in practice. The piece closes with a call for combined material and cultural transformations toward what it terms ‘Planetary Peace’, grounded in active hope rather than fear.

The workshop organised by the Journal of Dialogue Studies in January 2026 at the University of Oxford had a suggestive title: *Intergenerational Dialogue for Well-Being Futures*. In a short expression it invokes four essential themes:

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- What is our relationship to time, and, in particular, to the future?
- What is a good life? What does our aspiration to well-being mean?
- How important is dialogue for the realisation of better futures?
- What is the role of young generations in shaping the present and the future?

This article proposes some reflections around these four questions. It is not a conventional research paper, but rather a series of thoughtful meanders, building on the experience and previous publications of the author in the last 10 years, in a journey that might be helpful to shed light on relevant blind spots. These, in our view, are preventing the emergence of a stronger momentum towards the reconciliation of humanity with herself and with Mother Earth, from which we are all born.

Vertigo: Do We Know Where We Are?

We humans do not have direct access to ‘reality’, whatever this may mean. We receive countless perceptions through our senses, but how we make sense of them is mediated by mental frameworks of which we are barely aware. This explains why seemingly identical facts can have so many interpretations by different people. And this is not a problem searching for a solution; it seems to be how our mind works. Those mental frameworks select what is important and what not and what meanings we associate with what correlations. By construction, the process of selection creates blind spots, aspects of reality that we are not able to see. And this goes beyond the limitations of our senses. Interestingly, we have many blind spots coming from our unwillingness to actually see what we are seeing, or from our incapacity to interpret it.

In order to keep our sanity and be able to live in society, our mind excludes, more or less consciously, aspects of reality that are not invisible but might be too painful to see or would simply be too heavy to deal with. We protect ourselves as much as we can from what we consider obscene, which of course makes sense individually, but collectively it will not leave us unharmed. To mention just an extreme case, the killing in Palestine of thousands of children has been excluded from the lenses of dominant media as if it were not relevant to define where we are and, worse, where we could go. Other blind spots are even more surprising: the lavish style of the leisure class is profusely exhibited as a call to middle-classes-to-be, while its obscenity, in contrast with what most of humanity can afford, is not recognised. These examples tell us, among other signals, how far we are from achieving any kind of well-being futures and give some hints on the nature of the challenges we need to address to bridge the gap.

If one observes the evolution of global affairs in the fifty-year period from the mid-1970s until now, maybe the first thing that becomes obvious is the lack of clarity about where we are and where we are going (Latour 2017 & 2021). For many observers, uncertainty is at an all-time high. This is not surprising since the contrast is stark with where we think we are coming from. The first half of that period was marked by the strong momentum of an Anglo-American globalisation that was supposed to provide a clear pathway forward to liberal prosperity for all and even to 'the end of History' (Fukuyama 199). However, the second half of the period, up to today, is largely marked by the demise of that narrative to an extent that creates confusion about what comes next, at least from the position of the Anglosphere and, in general, the West.

In the last quarter of a century, disruption has replaced stability as the dominant characteristic of so-called 'developed' countries. And due to globalisation, disruptions originating in the centre of the global system often have an impact everywhere else. The century was inaugurated by the attacks of September 11 and their consequences, then a global financial meltdown started in 2008, multiple health crises culminated in the first global pandemic of Covid-19, the war in Ukraine started in 2022, preceded and followed by multiple wars and extermination campaigns all over the Middle East, and now geopolitics is being framed as the confrontation between the USA and China, between (in the eyes of many) a declining hegemon and a pluri-millennial civilisation coming back to centre stage. Of course, there were many other disruptions in previous periods, and many more conflicts have been ongoing, especially in the periphery of the global system, but it is a new feature that disruptions and instability have also become the dominant characteristic of the centre of the global system itself (Klein 2008).

We can add to such headline-catching disruptions the more gradual but no less impactful ones, among humans and in our relationship with the ecosystem. Climate destabilisation, biodiversity loss, the acceleration of economic dislocations and deepening of inequalities and social fractures, massive displacements of population, the erosion of political systems, food insecurity, over-financialisation and an increasingly dominant rentier economy, fast-moving digitalisation and AI, and more. The accumulation is impressive, and it makes convincing the interpretation that the multiple aspects of this 'poly-crisis' we live in and their deep entanglements have become a truly existential threat to humanity. By this I mean that we can name many ways in which human societies, even and especially the most technically sophisticated, could collapse, bringing large-scale suffering and tragedies, to the extent that recovery would be seriously compromised.

We even lived through the first global collapse of society with the Covid-19 pandemic. Technically speaking we recovered from it, but did we learn enough about the fragility of modern civilisations and its consequences? Not to mention how our existence has become an existential threat to others, human and non-human, on which our existence depends! The global system in which we live is creating more and deeper tensions than it can absorb, which is a symptom of incoming breakdown. All in all, there are good reasons to think that *we live right now in the vicinity of large-scale collapse*. We are flirting with the abyss.

This is a dangerous place to be since, as I said above, our mental inertia is strong and will make us reluctant to see where we truly are and to change ahead of collapse. While *learning in anticipation* is imaginable (we will come back to this later), practising it is more difficult. To start with, where you are in relation to collapse makes a big difference: if suffering directly from it, as a victim of any of the crises we face, you have no other option but to learn and adapt. Meanwhile, if you are just aware of the crises, and especially if you are far away and well protected, learning becomes an exercise of responsibility that is easily procrastinated. The asymmetry of social status has been growing with the dominant economic model of recent decades, and this impacts decisively on how crises and opportunities are perceived. The elites, both public and private, are experiencing the momentum of the system as largely favourable to their interests, rather than the consequences of collapse. Hence, their framing of what reforms are needed is biased towards the preservation of a totally unfair *status quo*, and many crucial decisions to rebalance societies are left to tomorrow or simply excluded.

This creates a paradox: we are not *learning what we already know* (Bardi & Alvarez Pereira 2022). Society is, of course, changing and doing so fast. But is speed the imperative when we do not know where we are? Where are we going so fast? If our journey is not informed by a perception of the existential crises, the destination could very well be collapse itself. And yet we seem to be in a *high-speed gridlock of perception and thinking*. Drowned as we are by an endless deluge of information and gossip, our mind goes up and down with the trending topics of ‘social networks’ and thinking in perspective becomes very difficult: if we connect to the frenzy and ephemeral sensing of ‘reality’, we are not able to think; if we disconnect from it, will our thinking be valuable or even heard by society? As anticipated by TS Eliot many decades ago, we can ask today, ‘Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?’ (Eliot 1934).

It is not that alternative thinking and ways of living do not exist. They are probably stronger and have more potential than ever, but we pay scarce attention to them. They can even become part of the show, in ways imagined by Guy Debord (Debord

1967), but in many dimensions of our individual and collective lives we are not so interested in learning relevant knowledge when it is contrary to the high-speed mainstream. Conversely, we seem to be more able to unlearn some wise lessons acquired at a high cost in the past, for instance, that preparing for war does not bring peace, it brings more war (Legaz 2025).

For the West, there is a sour blockage in thinking to overcome: the persistent belief that ‘developed’ countries are the vanguard of humanity and signal the path for the whole world. This linear and still colonial narrative has crumbled, particularly in the eyes of almost everyone else but the West. Are we ready to recognise that other countries are determined to develop their own sovereignty and strategic agency, affirming their own pathways to better futures, or at least to futures of their own? Are we ready to accept that this process is happening to a growing extent without the participation of the West, or only as a trading partner, not as the dominant actor it has been? For anyone still believing in the coming of universal prosperity led by the West, this reality is frightening, it brings a sense of loss that nurtures regressive feelings.

Can the still powerful West make peace with that loss and accept pluriversal futures, yet to be sketched out, in which it no longer has the leading role? Other societies, including those that are already on the other side of collapse, might actually have more chances to reinvent themselves and signal the way forward in these times of existential fragility. For all the vertigo we feel, could we for once learn from others?

Anxiety: Questioning the Future

The evolution of life on Earth has made us capable of imagination, through which we project ourselves into the future, and we also conceive different futures. For those of you with children, you would probably agree that there is nothing more relevant, nothing else for which you would be ready to pay the highest price, than their future. Our connection and concern about the future is not an abstract capacity, it is very personal and intimate; it is part of the realisation of life itself. In this sense, our perception of the future shapes how we live the present and what we are motivated to do now. And then it is crucial to realise that in many countries, millions of people have concluded that the lives of their children will be worse than their own (Wike 2025). This is not a universal sentiment, but it is widespread enough, in ‘developed’ countries too, to be deeply disturbing and affecting the overall evolution of those societies and, indirectly, of all others.

Interestingly, the perception of the future is now more positive in many so-called ‘developing’ countries than in the ‘developed’ ones. For billions of people, in Asia and elsewhere, the momentum of their societies provides confidence that a better

future is on its way. China has multiplied its GDP *per capita* by 65 in 40 years, a trajectory without any precedent in the history of humankind. This is a signal that economic development could be achievable for the world majority that had been left behind by centuries of modernity and colonisation. Even more, by adopting the goal of becoming an 'ecological civilisation', the explicit aspiration of China is to make welfare for its citizens compatible with the health of the ecosystem. That aspiration is far from realised, neither in China nor elsewhere, but at least it defines a positive guiding star.

At the same time, in the Western countries, where it was supposed to be the bedrock of institutions and culture, the idea of civilisational progress seems to be disappearing, as if all utopian visions of the realisation of a better humanity through science, technology, education, peace, and democracy have been relinquished. What is left, following the news in North America and Europe, is an exhibition of all kinds of fears, expressed in domestic and international fractures, confrontation and war-mongering, racism and exclusion, and even large-scale massacres practised in the name of civilisation!

In short, it looks like the West is perplexed and afraid of the future. It is reacting by closing its borders and practising wide-scale violence, massively against other countries and peoples but also against its own citizens, breaking with the foundations of what it defined itself as 'progress' and 'civilisation', and dangerously flirting with the risk of a worldwide conflagration with horrific consequences. The resonances with what happened in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s are not reassuring.

Back in the 1970s, the Club of Rome (CoR 1968) was among the early explorers deliberately asking some uncomfortable questions about the future, in a way that used leading edge conceptual and technical developments as well as the best evidence to build structured responses. Is development for all humans on Earth achievable given the planet's finite resources? Might development, as it was understood at the time, lead to collapse? The first report to the Club, *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows 1972) explored these questions. It had a huge impact that led, among other effects, to the conception of 'sustainable development' (UN 1987).

At the same time, it was deliberately misinterpreted as a doomsday prophecy. The book warned that 'progress', as it was conceived then and still today, could lead to the collapse of human civilisations due to the combined exhaustion of natural resources and accumulation of waste and pollution. This warning created a shock that we have not yet been able to respond to. Yet, the book contained no prophecies at all but a multiplicity of scenarios, and, in substance and spirit, it was also an invitation to learn how to make possible the convergence of human and planetary health and wellbeing.

Nowadays we can say that, for all the impact it had, *The Limits to Growth* did not trigger the collective learning required to balance human development with our planetary boundaries. What has happened since its publication has rather been an acceleration of the trend towards the *gridlock of metabolism* by which our consumerist society of uneconomic growth and waste, driven by the materialistic lifestyle of the leisure class, increases the pace of exhaustion of non-renewable resources and multiple sources of pollution (including GHG emissions). In the long term the metabolic crisis is the most critical of all our existential issues, since not solving it makes the collapse of human civilisations inevitable.

Now we know that more than scientific knowledge is needed to change our course. The civilisation of Western modernity has been so effective in its technical achievements (for both the construction of material comfort and the destruction, often extremely violent, of people and ecosystems) that it has become blind to their consequences. This was also recognised in another report to the Club of Rome, *No Limits to Learning* (Botkin et al. 1979): there is a 'human gap' to be bridged between our capacity to act upon others (human or not) to transform our ecosystem and our capacity to understand and deal responsibly with the consequences of our actions.

Even more than when the Club of Rome was created, humanity sits at a crossroad between tragedy and transformation. Yet, an unsettling paradox has been unfolding. Our knowledge and capacities of all kinds have never been so developed. Hence, we could try a panoply of means to pave the way for the reconciliation of Earth and humanity. Caring for our fellow humans and non-humans and making that the other definition of a good life might not take a huge effort. And yet the countries that in the second half of the twentieth century went farthest in developing scientific and technical capabilities and, at the same time, are most experienced in the economic, political and moral foundations of human dignity (at least within their borders) are the most scared of the future and are suffering from a *gridlock of will*. It seems we are mentally jailed, not daring to use our imagination to create a transformative way out to better futures.

Therefore, the crisis becomes civilisational, it is *metabolic and cultural* at the same time. We are not using our capacity to learn at the depth that is required. A culture of modernity supposedly grounded in science is not able to change according to what science is telling us. Nowadays, the West is not in denial of the severity of the crisis we live in, but it does deny logical consequences if it were to abide by the values on which Western modernity pretends to be built. One part of the elites is reacting against science and in favour of violent solutions to 'make the West great again.' This is brutal but has the merit of being clear enough. Another part of the Western elites is trying to do the '*grand écart*', the impossible balancing act by which learnings from

science would be taken on and at the same time the status quo, at both domestic and international levels, is preserved.

Both attitudes share the unwillingness to change at the depth required and are driven by the fear of loss. This recalls Greek tragedies where the protagonist, by reacting fearfully to a fateful oracle, accelerates the conditions for the tragedy to happen. Is this not exactly what is happening now when we hear so many calls to be better equipped for more violence and war? When facing the issues that our own science signals, we collectively react with incredulity and denial, pretty much as when, at the personal level, we face ageing and death. It is time to ask some better questions to get out of the multiple gridlocks.

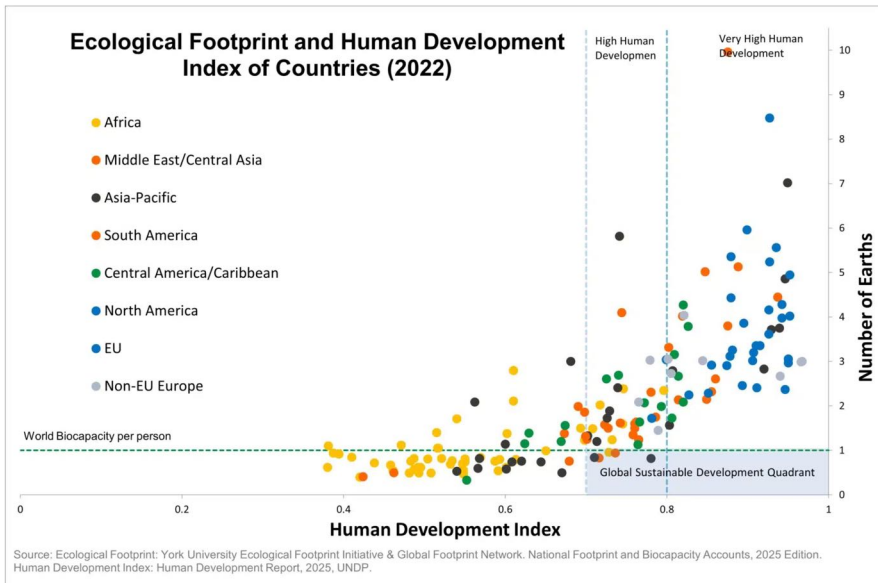
Aspiration: What is a Good Life?

This question has, of course, been present in all human cultures in one way or another since the dawn of organised societies. With the onset of Western modernity in the eighteenth century came attempts to make explicit the response and give legitimacy to what was perceived as natural aspirations of individuals, in contrast with traditional societies where those aspirations were constrained by the subordination of human affairs to divine order. The Constitution of the USA is one of those attempts when it starts by saying that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, and that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’ (USA 1787). Today, a widespread understanding and practice across many societies, Western or not, is that the pursuit of happiness is an individual or a family endeavour directly related to achieving growing levels of material comfort and social status. This is the substrate of how economies have been designed to work, especially since consumerism and the race to higher levels of ‘development’ started becoming dominant from the 1950s on.

In a structured initiative to measure and monitor what ‘human development’ is and how it evolves at national level, the UN created the Human Development Index (HDI) that integrates three dimensions: health, education and affluence (GDP *per capita*). Now, if we confront that concept with our ‘ecological footprint’, measured by how many planets we need to obtain the resources we use in our way of life (Wackernagel & Rees 1996), we obtain a telling representation of our civilisational dilemma.

The following graph is a simplistic representation of a complex matter, but it shows to what extent humanity is at conflict with the Earth. All the dots we see (representing countries) should be in the quadrant of sustainable development on the lower right, an area combining high levels of human development with ecological foot-

prints compatible with the planet. Yet, very few dots are there, representing some countries in Latin America and Southeast Asia. All the countries in North America, Europe, or Asia-Pacific that we consider the most ‘advanced’ economies have very high footprints, equivalent to 3 planets or more. Conversely, many countries, most of them in Africa, have low footprints but also low levels of human development, a situation from which they aspire to escape.



An animation of this same graph would show that the evolution of countries whose economies are growing, such as China, is moving them from areas of low HDI and low footprint towards high HDI and high footprint, instead of leading them into the desirable quadrant. So, the aspiration to a prosperity for all that is respectful of the ecosystem seems to be an oxymoron and the course of development a dilemma for proper governance. How could all the dots converge into the quadrant? At a minimum, this question looks very different depending on where you are: many countries need to increase their levels of human development while not increasing their footprints too much, and others, the so-called ‘developed’ ones, need to reduce their footprints dramatically while not losing their levels of human development. This is a good argument to say that there will be no universal recipe for sustainable development for all, but rather a plurality of pathways.

There are answers to that dilemma, at least at the conceptual level. In recent years, evidence has been accumulating that the key issue is the highly uneven distribution

of wealth and consumption. The Earth can provide for everybody to have a decent life if inequality is contained at a lower level than today (Millward-Hopkins 2022). With its Earth for All programme, the Club of Rome and partners have elaborated on the policies that would operationalise such a vision (CoR 2020). The empowerment of women and girls, a determined push for energy transition and regenerative agriculture, strong measures to tackle inequality, and specific developmental pathways for those countries needing it the most, all of these policies combined could make possible '*global equity for a peaceful and healthy planet*', an expression that the Club of Rome adopted in 2025 as its guiding star (CoR 2025b). However, the availability of responses does not guarantee their implementation. Are we able to put in place the types of policies mentioned? At what level do we need to learn to get out of the civilisational dilemma?

A good case to address these questions is climate change. Scientific evidence linking it to the massive use of fossil fuels is well established, although plenty of details still require investigation, which is now being retarded by powerful denialists. Moreover, addressing the issue requires global collaboration and coordination at an unprecedented level, which is impossible in the present geopolitical circumstances. Even without those daunting obstacles, the question remains of how to achieve the full transition to decarbonisation of energy production and industrial processes, since there are no precedents to such a shift. The massive adoption of renewable energies seems to be the straightforward response to the issue. And then the challenge would be of a techno-economic nature, a matter of public regulation and incentives together with market mechanisms to mobilise resources, develop the appropriate technologies, and deploy the necessary investments.

Curiously, this is also a domain in which the West, for a while the worldwide champion of energy transition, is now stuck or going backward, while most of the efforts in renewable energies are happening elsewhere, singularly in China and other countries in Asia or Africa. But also, some questions remain unexplored. There are actually no precedents of 'energy transition' in the sense we are using this expression, since previous changes in energy sources proceeded by accumulation rather than substitution, in terms of consumption of the different energy-providing materials (Fressoz 2024). Absolute consumptions of wood, coal, oil, and gas keep growing because their use is inextricably intertwined with the development of an industrial base whose economic logic looks for perpetual growth.

This means that something else is missing in our approach to energy transition to escape from climate change. There is no questioning of what kind or how much energy we need, nor of the huge imbalance in patterns of consumption between 'developed' and 'developing' countries. It is assumed that the trajectory leading to hu-

man well-being requires an ever-growing amount of energy *per capita*, particularly for the largest part of world's population to 'catch up'. It is assumed that outrageously high levels of energy consumption are legitimate, provided there is money to pay for them. Under this framing, the idea that human wellbeing could be compatible with a dramatic reduction in the total consumption of energy is simply unthinkable. But in that case humanity is doomed anyway: for all the merits of renewable energies, they still do not allow for infinite growth on a finite planet (Valero 2015). By tying our wellbeing to growing levels of energy consumption, humanity is reduced to its metabolism; rather than a function, energy consumption becomes a role, in which maximisation is given a positive meaning. This is not how nature works.

Other formulations could be tried for this fundamental challenge. We could ask what drives human health and wellbeing. The obsession of Western modernity with the maximisation of production and consumption makes us ignore that our health and sense of a meaningful life are not driven by consumerism. Science has rediscovered what we know since the beginning of time: the secret of a good life is in the quality of our relationships with other humans, with the nature from which we are born, and with past and future generations (Mineo 2017). This crucial point could lead to other ways of innovating and learning, in which relationships would play the dominant role. But it is close to impossible to explore these ways while using the dominant frameworks. Too many stakes (financial, industrial, geopolitical) would be at risk in any scenario of dramatic reduction of energy consumption, and the appropriate questions can barely be asked in existing research disciplines. And yet, it is in our relations to others, human and non-human, that our individual and collective futures are at stake.

Envisioning: In and Out, Us and Them

For almost all of us, the starting ground of our existence is the relationship with our mother, and in the vast majority of cases it is shaped by unconditional love. At the same time, we learn quite quickly to distinguish others, human and non-human, who populate our lives. We learn about the existence of circles that structure our social interactions. The first principle of social organisation is still to establish who are 'Us' and 'Them'. There is an 'In' of the different circles of people (family, friends, communities, and so on) that we treat by default with respect, trust, and generosity. Those circles build on and expand the foundational experience of a mother caring for her children. Then there is an 'Out' of everybody else. People (and living beings) that are Out are treated differently than those who are In. They do not have the same rights, even if we pretend so. How different the treatments are and how they have evolved over time are defining characteristics of civilisations.

In comparison with other cultures, Western modernity was built on emphasising separation. Many of the conceptual and practical instruments of modernity and in particular of the Scientific Revolution and the political economy born at the same time, are based on separating what are, *a priori*, inseparable realities. The separation of mind and matter ('dualism'), of the observer from the object observed ('objectivity') and of reason from emotions ('rationalism'), were considered pre-requisites of the scientific method. All of them are being questioned by science itself, but they nevertheless continue to frame our ways of thinking. The splitting of complex systems into pieces ('reductionism') and the conception of society as a collection of separated individuals ('there is no such thing as society', as affirmed by Mrs Thatcher) remain common traits (Alvarez Pereira 2024).

The concept of ('capital' itself, strongly promoted in times of land enclosures in the England of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is based on separation, on drawing a line that distinguishes what is In and what is Out, and making the difference between Us (the owners) and Them (the rest). Moreover, heritage is still based on kinship, and we conceive the individual as an independent microcosm. Not only did we create artificial boundaries for countries from the seventeenth century, and much more strongly in the twenty-first, we also routinely take for granted that moral superiority comes with nationhood. On those boundaries we practise discrimination, avoiding the responsibility for the many forms of injustice and exploitation we impose on Them. This mechanism even allows us to practise genocide in the name of civilisation!

Altogether, these concepts form a specific epistemology, a certain way of thinking about us and our place in the world. Such epistemology has been extremely effective since it largely created the world we live in today. By building institutions, social behaviours, and conceptual tools based on separation, we have been able to legitimise productivity as a central tenet of our culture and expand processes of extraction, exploitation, and accumulation, basically putting everything and everyone to work for the sake of creation of economic value. This historical process was disruptive and violent, and ultimately it created the inequalities and the ecological conundrum in which we are, but we cannot deny its effectiveness and momentum, which are still dominant today.

Coming back to our place in the world, for sure others are not us, but distinction ('you are not me'), separation ('you don't belong to my circle'), and exclusion ('I don't have to care about you') are not the same, and we override their differences all the time. After generations of development of all kinds of institutions and societal arrangements focused on separation, it seems we have created an obsessive-compulsive disorder driven by our anxiety to define clear boundaries (between humans, aspects

of life, countries, and so on) and to accumulate individually. The perception that society is made of isolated individuals, competing with each other more than collaborating, necessarily creates a sense of fundamental loneliness, a feeling literally destroying life, and deep anxiety.

Fear being the most overwhelming of our emotions, especially when combined with imagination, it is easy to follow the trail going from separation to the feeling of isolation, then to the acceptance that 'man is a wolf to man', a belief widespread in Western culture but not in others. The logical outcome is the idea that we compete for scarce resources, hence we (wrongly) identify competition as the main driver of natural evolution and social life. The perception of scarcity created by competition drives our fearful obsession with individual performance and accumulation. Scarcity combined with the promise of material abundance for high performing individuals, is indeed a contradictory combination that captures our social attention and how we define success in life. The whole process is performative and self-reinforcing. As in the prisoner's dilemma, the best collective option is to be generous and collaborate. But if we believe that everybody else is selfish, we also choose the selfish option, and then we engage in a vicious circle that is worse for the collective. Our obsession with scarcity is deeply rooted in the woundedness of lonely souls, constantly reinforced by the dominant traits of modern culture.

With this reality in the background, what could the word 'dialogue' truly mean in the twenty-first century? It could provide a mechanism to overcome the excess of separation and its effects. And this starts with our own position. As a matter of fact, addressing topics like the ones described in this article separates Us, a very small minority exploring other ways of being in the world and relating with each other and with nature, from Them. Most people do not enjoy the privilege that we have of indulging ourselves in these reflections. This article is critical of the elites, and at the same time it is an elitist expression. The imperialism of the present hijacks so much time, so many minds, and so much energy that in many cases it creates the incapacity to change. Helplessness and pessimism about the future are now widespread in Western countries, and they often lead to diagnostics and responses far away from what is here proposed. By necessity, the minority exploring other ways to be in the world needs to ask how to promote a shift that so many people, for whatever reasons, would not endorse. Should we go forward without having Them in mind?

This is just one instance of a process which is all-pervading. The binary framing of 'Us versus Them' leads to a sense of moral superiority and very easily to a supremacist stance, whether explicit or not, whether intentional or not. Indeed, it is often psychologically reassuring to frame our reflections and actions within that framing. The narrative offers a sense of clarity and control, yet it is ultimately a trap, one rooted in

the process of ‘otherisation’, whereby certain groups or individuals are cast as fundamentally different or inferior in order to reinforce a stable sense of identity, belonging, or moral superiority. Scholars such as Edward Said and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Said 1978, Trouillot 1995) have noted that otherisation is not only a cultural mechanism but also a political one, used to justify exclusion, dominance, and the denial of shared responsibility.

Thus, the illusion that we can separate ourselves from Them, whether referring to other humans, institutions, or even nature itself, is deeply embedded in the very structures that have created the crises of today. And exclusion is particularly at work when facing crises. Most often we identify those we consider guilty of the tensions and crises as an obstacle to a better world, and we blame and fight them. We have at hand all kinds of excuses for that: their voluntary blindness, vested interests, power privileges, outdated values, strangeness of aspect or habits, sheer ignorance (in our view), or the simple fact that they are not from ‘here’ (whatever that means).

This can fall into a circular logic, in which both sides in any confrontation are reinforcing each other into a double bind leading to escalation. The trends we see in many countries and in geopolitics today are a terrible example of that. We keep thinking that war might be the proper way to address the issues we face, including war itself. This is obscene. Except for the technological sophistication of our weapons, it seems we have not learned anything from history, even the most recent. We can also think that the issue lies with the elites in power, and we aspire to get to power to transform everything from there. But we have learned that without deeper changes, acquiring power might compromise the essence of the shift we intend to promote.

All this calls for both depth and humility in our approach to what could be a meaningful dialogue for better futures. The way we make sense of the crises is what makes the difference in what we could learn from them. In truth, ‘we’ are also ‘them’. Terence, a playwright born in Africa and brought as a slave to Rome, made clear two millennia ago that ‘nothing human is alien to me’, and this should inform our approach to dialogue. But then, some difficult questions arise. How might we understand that the actions by Us and Them are expressions of joint collective patterns whose transformation requires something more than just confrontation? How do we shift from practices of confrontation and punishment to a collective emergence and reconciliation across divides both enabled by and enabling deeper learning?

Hope: Intergenerational Leadership

Aware in the late 1970s that the warning of *The Limits to Growth* would not be sufficient to change the course of human affairs, the Club of Rome was keen on propos-

ing ambitious and yet hopeful visions to navigate the complexity of our challenges. The first step was to formulate these in an original manner, as a gigantic learning exercise, and then to appeal to our capacity to learn beyond conventional settings. *No Limits to Learning* was published in 1979 as a report to the Club of Rome deliberately addressing, starting with its title, the conundrum exposed by *The Limits to Growth* in a way that would be both hopeful and provide guidance for practical steps forward.

The content of *No Limits to Learning* is directly connected to the relationship between generations. While nurtured by the advice of experienced scholars, three of whom wrote the book, it did something unexpected: it recognised that collective learning, in particular in the ways practised by educational institutions, was actually failing because of the blindness of older generations. By limiting education to the vertical transmission of already established knowledge ('maintenance learning'), educational institutions were (and still are) ignoring the evolution of human societies and their challenges. So much so that, when the challenges translate into crises, we were (and are) condemned to practise 'catastrophe learning,' understanding something new when it is already too late to avoid its harmful consequences.

At the same time, the book strongly advocated that we can do better than that. It signalled an opportunity to be grasped in unlocking the human potential to learn in ways that would be participatory, anticipatory, integrative, and innovative, all at the same time. Such a transformation of learning capacities would lead to a genuine 'human revolution,' a shift in mindsets to make us reconnect with our own humanity and with the ecosystem on which we depend, as envisioned by Aurelio Peccei and Daisaku Ikeda a few years later (Peccei & Ikeda 1984).

Whether or not inspired by these works, that ambitious vision of realising the full potential of humans to learn in resonance with their environment, human and not, has been made real by many practitioners in thousands of places around the world (Alvarez Pereira et al. 2026). However, those experiments, many of them long-standing realities by now, generally do not make the headlines, and most educational institutions have not been transformed in that direction. If we look at how societal learning happens, or does not happen, we inevitably perceive 'logic bubbles' – of academia, government, business, finance, civil society, culture, geopolitics, and so on – that individually make sense while their fragmentation blocks our capacity to learn at the level of depth required.

The absence of learning is not due to the scarcity of conversations. Global fora such as the UNGA Week, G20 and G7 meetings, the different CoPs, the World Economic Forum (WEF), multiple Climate and Impact Weeks around the world and so on, keep addressing our existential challenges. But these global conversations do not al-

low themselves to question why we are not learning. They exemplify the chasm between power and learning: those fora convene powerful people with capacities for decision making who live far away from the consequences of our existential crises and do not get out of their golden jails to question their own status quo. Where most decisions are made, the chasm between power and learning persists, anchored in lock-ins that create the feverish inertia, the high-speed gridlocks that we see all around, manifestations of the strategy stating that ‘everything must change so that everything can stay the same’ (Lampedusa 1958). Many sense-making but fragmented realities add up to a nonsensical whole, so we keep running faster and faster towards the suicide of the species.

How could new generations play a different role? First, by being allowed to engage in collective learning processes in a different manner. What we need is more than the transmission of established knowledge. We often hear that we know what the solutions to our challenges are, we just lack the political will to apply them. But if such is the case, those ‘solutions’ are not so. We face questions for which the processes of elaboration of the responses are at least as critical as their contents. Younger generations bring new lenses, that can illuminate blind spots ignored by the current status quo, and then learning can become mutual, a real co-creation between different generations.

To be clear, youth does not provide by itself any guarantee of thinking or acting differently in the long run from older generations. Giving a stronger role to youth can also be done in a biased way, so that only those that are better equipped, materially or intellectually, are active and heard, reinforcing *de facto* the *status quo* with yet another inequality. At the same time, half of the world population is under 30 years of age. The future we are talking about will only be experienced by the young generations of today and those to come, and there is evidence of their growing awareness and concern about the big challenges we face. By construction, they are less trapped in the *status quo*, and there is less dissonance between what is existential for them and what is existential for humanity. Potentially, they can deliver an energy for learning and change that is badly needed. Not least, young people fervently aspire, across all countries and cultures, to a future in peace (Youth Talks 2023).

That said, for obvious reasons the author of this article is not qualified to speak on behalf of youth, nor to define precisely the characteristics of their engagement for transformation. The Club of Rome decided to engage in mutual learning and co-creation by providing support to a platform (The 50 Percent 2022) that is led by youth. Engaging them in tokenised ways or just consulting them is insufficient if we are thinking of a concept like intergenerational leadership. This calls for bringing the full potential of youth into learning processes that will shape the decision-making

agendas. This is not happening yet, but it could happen. Otherwise, the aspirations of youth will turn into more anxiety and frustration and then contribute to the path towards collapse.

Overall, engagement with the young generations is part of the vision of The Fifth Element programme of the Club of Rome (CoR 2022): working with people from different cultures, geographies, sectors, disciplines, status, and generations is an attempt at recognising the barriers that block learning and change, and at exploring how to overcome them. It is our way to promote mutual learning across chasms. In the spirit of *No Limits to Learning*, the project *No Limits to Hope* shows that an existential opportunity is emerging in many places around the world and that this provides concrete arguments for hope, as an active attitude towards meaningful lives and better futures (Alvarez Pereira et al. 2026).

Emergence: Plural Pathways to Reconciliation

As in the 1970s, the Club of Rome is betting that there are other ways to react to present crises. First by recognising that, if we address them from hope rather than fear, the crises open the space of possibilities. While we see a lot of fear combined with blind arrogance, humility is a pre-requisite for civilisational learning for the reconciliation of Earth and humanity. For other decisions to be made, questioning how we make sense of our presence on Earth and our relationship to all others and to time is a necessity: new meanings leading to new types of actions, for the emergence of better futures, starting with making peace among ourselves and with the Earth, a concept that the Club of Rome calls Planetary Peace (CoR 2025a). But how can we enable that to happen?

The path forward is created by bifurcation: several branches can lead us out of our critical situation, but not all of them are desirable. Understanding that the bifurcation is here, that we live in it, is the first step. This is not granted in the Western world, which is thinking in terms of resilience rather than transformation or bifurcation. The West is focused on how to return to the dominant position it once had. Resilience can make sense at the level of providing relief to suffering people, but it is inadequate to the task of facing our self-inflicted existential threats. There is a growing gap in the approach of different segments of humanity in facing this issue, and this gap largely explains the growing geopolitical tensions we are experiencing. Most of the world is longing for deep change, at the very least in the distribution of power. And, as we know since at least *The Limits to Growth*, the bifurcation will happen anyway, whether we like it or not. At this critical point, the terms of the debate should be reframed to get out of the gridlocks in the direction of a better world.

Yet, emergence cannot be planned *ex-ante* in a detailed manner. What we can and should do is to reflect and try to create the conditions for a positive emergence to happen. One condition is to recognise the *genuine plurality of worldviews*, abandoning for good the preconception of one superior civilisation replacing the others. Morally speaking, the Western idea of universality never lived up to its ambition, and it often manifested as a neo-colonial imposition in a world that is not accepting that anymore.

This leads to welcoming the richness of humanity, not as a landscape for competition, domination, and a fight for hegemony, but as an enabler of *multilateral collaboration and emulation* to address our civilisational challenges. And while there is obvious urgency to address these, the anxiety for fast-forward solutions is generally misleading. Until we address the blind spots veiling our resistance to learn at the level required, as well as the opportunity that could come with learning, we will not liberate the mental energy to shift our course. This also means that both material and cultural transformations are crucial aspects to be addressed together, as eloquently announced by Erich Fromm:

For the first time in history the physical survival of the human race depends on a radical change of the human heart. However, a change of the human heart is possible only to the extent that drastic economic and social changes occur that give the human heart the chance for change and the courage and the vision to achieve it. (Fromm 1976)

The momentum for transformation needs to be created from the combined strength of existing sources of momentum and committed actors, such as social movements, communities of wisdom and regeneration at local levels, youth movements, regenerative entrepreneurship, and the potential of research and innovation if properly re-framed to serve people and the planet.

Overall, these elements combined make this approach unique. They are attractive enough to mobilise actors willing to reverse the momentum towards collapse but not necessarily finding the right spaces and framings to do it. They contribute to creating the appropriate kind of collective energy for the reconciliation of Earth and humanity. Let us start dreaming then: what if an initial group of committed actors could collectively engage in understanding the conditions for the kind of sense making and decision making that we would like to see in the world at large? If that happens, a new source of mental energy would be created, and such a starting point could ignite the processes of resonance, potentially leading to collective learning at the level and scale of Earth-humanity reconciliation.

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Blocked Memory, Broken Peace: How Japan's Memory Defence Mechanisms Erase the Recognition of "Comfort Women"

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Abstract: This study investigates how the memory of 'comfort women' has been suppressed within Japan's post-war memory politics and how this memory has managed to break through, with a special focus on survivors from China and South Korea. Drawing on Alexander's cultural trauma theory, Smelser's framework of memory defence mechanisms, and feminist scholarship on wartime sexual violence, the analysis employs critical discourse analysis to examine Japanese official and public discourse from 1945 to the present. The findings reveal that Japan has blocked acknowledgment of the trauma of 'comfort women' through four interlocking mechanisms, denial, reversal, displacement, and acting out, which are amplified by pre-existing patriarchal structures of shame and silence surrounding sexual violence against women. With the combined operation of these four memory defence mechanisms, Japan has maintained a 'negative peace' that erases survivors from public memory. However, these mechanisms are not monolithic but operate in states of partial failure. Fissures have emerged in the 'in-between' space between individual experiences and collective narrative, through which survivors have challenged official containment via legal action, digital testimony preservation, documentary filmmaking, academic research, and transnational advocacy, opening possibilities for 'positive peace'. This study, therefore, calls for creating a 'safe space' for survivors to tell their stories and receive the recognition and dignity they deserve. It also highlights the double bind faced by Chinese survivors, who must navigate both Japan's official denial and the marginalisation of their voices within dominant South Korea-centred narratives of the 'comfort women' issue.

Keywords: Comfort women; cultural trauma; memory defence mechanisms; critical discourse analysis; gendered violence; patriarchal shame; negative peace

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Introduction

‘I was not a “comfort woman” and I never comforted any Japanese troops! I came forward to tell people how the Japanese troops abducted me and forced me to be their sex slave. I want the world to know the cruel atrocities the Japanese soldiers perpetrated on Chinese people, and I want justice for all the women who suffered as I did.’ (Qiu et al. 2013, 125)

Her name was Wan Aihua (万爱花), an ordinary woman from China. Yet she was also a survivor of the Japanese ‘comfort women’ system. At the age of fourteen, in 1943, she was forced into military strongholds and tortured and gang-raped for months. The brutality of the Japanese military left her with permanent physical injuries. Her hip and ribs were fractured in multiple places, her height shrank from 165 centimetres to 147 centimetres, her arm was dislocated, and she was left infertile for life. On October 30, 1998, Wan and nine other victims of Japanese military sexual violence filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government at the Tokyo District Court, but their case was dismissed in 1999. Her health deteriorated over the next few years, and she died on September 4, 2013, having waited her entire life for an apology from the Japanese government that never came.

Wan’s experience was in fact not an isolated case. From 1931 to 1945, during the Asia-Pacific War, the Japanese military established a large-scale network of military brothels, euphemistically termed ‘comfort stations’ (ianjo, 慰安所), in the areas it occupied, forcing women – referred to by the equally euphemistic term ‘comfort women’ (ianfu, 慰安婦) – from China, Korea, the Philippines, and over a dozen other occupied territories across Asia and the Pacific² (Yoshimi 2000, 91) into sexual slavery. Unlike Japan’s pre-existing licensed prostitution system, the ‘comfort women’ system was a state-organised programme of forced sexual servitude in which women were abducted, deceived, or trafficked and confined under military control with no freedom to leave (Yoshimi 2000, 103–113). Among all the affected countries, China and Korea had the largest number of victims. Yoshimi estimates that there were between 170,000 and 200,000 Korean victims (Yoshimi 2000, 91), while research by

² The full list of territories from which women were recruited includes China, Hong Kong, French Indochina, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, British Borneo, the Dutch East Indies, Burma, Thailand, New Guinea, the Okinawan archipelago, the Bonin Islands, Hokkaido, the Kurile Islands, and Sakhalin (Yoshimi 2000, 91). Yoshimi lists Hong Kong separately, likely reflecting its status as a British colony at the time, which lasted until its return to China on July 1, 1997.

Su and other Chinese scholars indicates that at least 200,000 Chinese women were also victimised, though some estimates suggest the number could be as high as 400,000 (Qiu et al. 2013, 6). The Chinese figure remains contested, partly because Japan destroyed most relevant documents at the end of the war and partly because early international research largely overlooked Chinese victims. Many did not survive. Those who did lived with physical and psychological scars for the rest of their lives (Lee 2018). However, this massive war crime was covered up for nearly fifty years after the war (Brownmiller 2002, xv) for a combination of reasons, including the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal's near-total neglect of the issue (Henry 2013), the Japanese government's destruction of relevant documents (Yoshimi 2000, 33), and the social stigma that forced survivors into silence (Soh 2008).

It was not until August 14, 1991, that the silence was broken, when Korean survivor³ Kim Hak-sun (김학순) became the first comfort woman to speak to the media under her real name (Soh 2008, 67; Brownmiller 2002, xv). In December, she and two other survivors sued the Japanese government, seeking a formal apology and compensation, but the case was dismissed by Japan's Supreme Court in 2004 after more than a decade of litigation. Nevertheless, this lawsuit ignited the survivors' pursuit of legal justice, with more and more survivors from South Korea, China, the Philippines, and Indonesia increasingly willing to come forward to denounce Japan's war-time atrocities.

While survivors continued to speak out, the Japanese government's official position remained ambiguous. In 1992, historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki's discovery of military documents linking the state directly to the comfort station system prompted a government investigation that uncovered 127 additional official records (Saito 2017). This discovery led to a series of significant governmental responses. In 1993, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kono Yohei issued the 'Kono Statement' without formal Cabinet approval. In this statement, the Japanese government acknowledged that 'the Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations' and expressed 'sincere apologies and remorse to all those [comfort women]' (MOFA 1993). However, this statement acknowledged only 'moral responsibility', not legal responsibility (Ramaj 2022, 484), and the Japanese government refused to provide state-level compensation (Haggard 2015). Since then, conservative forces within Japan have sought to downplay or deny the

³ The women conscripted from the Korean Peninsula were taken during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), before the peninsula's postwar division. The post-1945 division of Korea meant that survivors came to reside on both sides of the border. Accordingly, the phrase 'Korean survivors' in this study refers to women conscripted from the Korean Peninsula as a whole.

system of ‘comfort women’. Some politicians, including former Prime Minister Abe and Diet Member Yuzuru Nishida, have publicly claimed that ‘comfort women’ were voluntary prostitutes rather than forcibly conscripted sex slaves (Mizoguchi and Dudden 2007; Tabuchi 2007). References to ‘comfort women’ in textbooks have been gradually removed (Nozaki 2008). The Japanese government has also repeatedly demanded the removal of ‘comfort women’ statues and memorials in South Korea, the United States, and elsewhere (Morris-Suzuki 2014).

The analysis thus traces how the memory of ‘comfort women’ has been suppressed within Japan’s post-war memory politics and how survivors have managed to break through, with a particular focus on survivors from China and South Korea. Central to this analysis is the concept of memory defence mechanisms, referring to the collective-level strategies through which a society blocks a threatening history from entering public memory. The study addresses the following three related questions: (1) what memory defence mechanisms Japan has employed to prevent public acknowledgment of this issue, (2) why these mechanisms have been particularly effective against sexual violence trauma, and (3) whether and how survivors have breached this wall to bring their traumatic experiences into public recognition. To answer these questions, this study draws on Alexander’s cultural trauma theory (2004) and Smelser’s framework of memory defence mechanisms (2004), supplemented by feminist scholarship on wartime sexual violence (Pheterson 1993; Enloe 2000; Ueno 2004; Rajiva and Takševa 2021), as its theoretical framework, and uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as its methodology.

Drawing on this framework, this study traces Japanese government statements, history textbooks, and diplomatic documents from 1945 to the present to identify the discursive strategies Japan has used to block the ‘comfort women’ memory. Importantly, this study does not treat survivors as passive objects, but as agents of resistance. While existing scholarship has documented forms of resistance such as documentary filmmaking (Zhang and Fang 2024; Deng 2023), testimony practices (Kimura 2016), and transnational advocacy (Ling 2009), this study focuses on two recent developments: breakthroughs in the legal arena (Columbia Law School n.d.; Gao 2024) and the emergence of AI-driven digital testimony preservation (USC Shoah Foundation n.d.; CARE n.d.). By analysing both state-level suppression and survivor-led resistance, the aim is to reveal how the two interact within the politics of memory and to explore how the recognition of trauma can serve as a precondition for moving beyond what Galtung (1969, 183) terms ‘negative peace’ – the mere absence of direct violence that leaves underlying structural injustices intact – toward ‘positive peace’, which requires the active pursuit of justice, recognition, and the removal of structural violence.

Literature Review

From the introduction above, we can see that this issue has moved beyond a historical legacy and has become an ongoing battlefield of memory politics. On this battlefield, survivors try to gain recognition, an official apology, and reparations from Japan, but they continue to confront resistance from the Japanese state. A substantial body of scholarship has emerged around this struggle, with most studies focusing on Korean survivors and the development of Korean social movements (Min 2021; Soh 2008; Yoneyama 2016). Korean 'comfort women' have become the dominant symbol of this wartime atrocity, to the point that some scholars frame the issue as primarily a Korean one. The University of Chicago Press's description of Soh's *The Comfort Women* (2008), for instance, claims that they are 'mostly Korean women' (UCP n.d.). Even Soh herself, in the book, states with certainty that 'Korean women constituted the great majority' of victims, while hedging that 'it is believed that large numbers of Chinese women were also victimised' (p. xii). Such a characterisation is irresponsible, as it downplays the scale of Chinese victimisation through a hedged, passive formulation, even though the figures discussed above make that scale clear. Seo (2008) attributes this disparity to the fact that the Korean 'comfort women' memory entered public discussion through feminist and pro-democracy movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In China, however, the trajectory was different. During the 1990s and early 2000s, as Vickers points out, the Chinese government prioritised Sino-Japanese relations and discouraged researchers from addressing this issue (Vickers 2019). It was not until 2013 that Qiu, Su, and Chen's *Chinese Comfort Women* (2013) first systematically presented Chinese survivors' oral testimonies to the English-speaking academic world.

While survivors from both China and Korea have struggled to bring their experiences into public memory, Japan's denial of the coercive nature of the 'comfort women' system continues to obstruct all survivors' efforts to gain recognition. As Ogata (2023, 1) points out, rightist narratives in Japan's official and public spheres that deny the 'comfort women' issue are becoming more numerous and vocal. Scholars have traced how such denial operates across the following domains. First, on the textbook front, Nozaki (2008) traces how content about 'comfort women' temporarily made its way into Japanese textbooks in the mid-1990s but was completely taken out by the early 2000s. Ogata (2023) refers to this strategy as 'omission', in which Japan, rather than issuing an explicit denial, engaged in 'simply withdrawing references to it'. Second, on the political front, Yamaguchi (2018) examines Japan's largest right-wing organisation, Nippon Kaigi. She argues that Nippon Kaigi is not just an external pressure group but also firmly rooted in the political system. Hashimoto (2015) contends that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have emerged as the predominant trauma narrative in post-war Japan, systematically

evading recognition of Japan's identity as a perpetrator, while Yoneyama (1999) shows that the state has suppressed *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivor) testimony itself, revealing a broader pattern of controlling which voices are heard. Third, on the academic front, Ramseyer's (2021) article, written by a US-based legal scholar, is perhaps the most extreme example. He reframes 'comfort women' as voluntary contract workers who entered into equal contractual arrangements, thereby denying the existence of military sexual slavery. Such claims drew widespread criticism from scholars and sparked a crisis of historical denialism and academic integrity (Stanley et al. 2021; Dudden 2021). Although Ramseyer is based in the United States, his arguments have been widely cited by Japanese right-wing groups to legitimise domestic denial. Fourth, on the diplomatic front, the Japanese government has repeatedly demanded the removal of 'comfort women' memorials erected in the United States, the Philippines, and Germany, among other countries. Ushiyama (2021), Ward and Lay (2019), and Hasunuma and McCarthy (2019) analyse this phenomenon through the lenses of state diplomatic policy, memorial politics, and communal memory building, respectively. The studies reviewed above illuminate Japan's responses to 'comfort women' history from different angles, but each tends to focus on its own domain, rarely examining how these phenomena connect.

While the studies mentioned above focus on Japan's denial from various institutional angles, a growing number of scholars have turned their attention to the survivors themselves to examine how they have fought back and made their voices heard. These studies can be grouped into three main areas. First, in the legal arena, Chinkin (2001) analyses how the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, held in Tokyo in 2000, a symbolic tribunal organised by civil society, found Japan guilty of crimes against humanity. Dolgopol (2011) argues that the Tokyo Trial's neglect of comfort women-related sexual violence became the root of decades of injustice. Ling (2009) broadens the discourse to the international sphere and shows how the 'comfort women' movement used human rights discourse to bring survivors' claims to international legal platforms. Second, in the area of testimony research, Kimura (2016, 23) conceptualises survivors' testimonies as 'the site where women recover and gain their voices and agencies', arguing that the act of testifying itself enables survivors to restore their subjectivity and challenge existing social norms. Third, some scholars have also turned to documentaries and films about 'comfort women' as their entry point. For instance, Zhang and Fang (2024) and Deng (2023) examine China's documentary *Twenty-Two* (2017) and South Korea's feature film *Spirits' Homecoming* (2016), respectively, revealing how these films simultaneously carry nationalist narratives and survivors' individual memories.

Building on this observation, this study asks: do textbook revisions, political denial, and diplomatic pressure work together as a system? And how do survivors respond

to this system as a whole? Moreover, as noted earlier, Chinese survivors have long occupied a marginal position in 'comfort women' research. While the 'comfort women' system victimised women across Asia, the focus falls on Chinese and Korean survivors because these two countries had the largest number of victims and have been the primary targets of Japan's defence mechanisms, as evidenced by ongoing diplomatic disputes over memorials and official apologies. They are therefore examined together to understand how Japan's memory defence mechanisms operate in these two significant cases. At the same time, this study acknowledges that survivors from the Philippines, Indonesia, and other occupied territories deserve separate scholarly attention, and it seeks to lay the groundwork for future research into the specific situation of Chinese survivors. By placing Japan's memory defence practices and survivors' breakthrough actions within the same analytical framework, this analysis explores the interaction between them and how this interaction affects Chinese and Korean survivors' efforts to gain historical recognition.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses cultural trauma theory (Alexander 2004, 1–31) and Smelser's (Smelser 2004, 31–59) psychological defence mechanism framework to analyse Japan's domestic memory defence mechanisms against the recognition of 'comfort women' as a collective victim group, with particular attention to Chinese and Korean survivors. Unlike the psychological understanding of individual trauma, cultural trauma elevates trauma to the social level, arguing that 'trauma is a socially mediated attribution' (Alexander 2004, 8). This means that when members of a group experience a devastating event, it does not automatically become inscribed in their collective consciousness. Instead, different carrier groups, such as politicians, intellectuals, media, and victim advocates, compete for control over the dominant narrative of the trauma (Alexander 2004, 11). This competition unfolds across four battlegrounds. Carrier groups must first compete for the power to define 'the nature of the pain' (Alexander 2004, 13) by articulating what exactly happened to the victims and how severe their suffering was, so that this experience can enter public discussion. They then move to define 'the nature of the victim' (Alexander 2004, 13), seeking to persuade the public that these individuals are legitimate victims who deserve sympathy. However, dominant groups can undermine a trauma narrative by stigmatising and marginalising the victims, and recasting them as 'willing participants' or 'collaborators', which strips their suffering of its moral significance. Carrier groups must therefore go further to construct 'the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience' (Alexander 2004, 14) in order to convince the public that this suffering is not the experience of distant others but a matter connected to their own social order and value system. When this connection is established, carrier groups turn to the final battleground, namely the 'attribution of responsibility' (Alexander 2004, 15), push-

ing further to define who is responsible for the suffering and who should bear historical and moral accountability. In essence, these four battlegrounds all revolve around the question of power: only those with sufficient 'resources, authority, or interpretive competence' (Alexander 2004, 27) can have their trauma claims recognised as cultural trauma. However, while Alexander's cultural trauma theory provides an important framework for understanding how trauma can gain public recognition through social struggle, his analysis focuses mainly on traumas that have ultimately succeeded in entering collective memory and pays less attention to how societies actively resist the entry of certain traumas into public memory. To understand the memory predicament of the 'comfort women' issue, we need a theoretical tool that can explain this mechanism of resistance. Smelser's theory provides precisely this supplement by extending psychoanalytic defence mechanisms to the collective level (Smelser 2004, 44–47), arguing that societies respond to threatening historical events much as individuals respond to personal threats. At the individual level, he identifies the following four psychological mechanisms of defence:

- (1) to block the threatening intrusion, (2) to reverse the threatening intrusion into its opposite, (3) to shift the reference of the threatening intrusion, and (4) to insulate the threatening intrusion from its associative connections. (Smelser 2004, 45)

While Smelser suggests that these defence mechanisms may also have corresponding manifestations at the collective level (Smelser 2004, 47), he does not systematically classify how they operate at the collective level. Instead, he only discusses some related collective phenomena, such as collective denial, collective forgetting, and blame and scapegoating (Smelser 2004, 51–53). Following Smelser's logic, the analysis combines his four psychological mechanisms with the collective phenomena he discusses to examine how Japan resists the recognition of 'comfort women' trauma through specific discursive strategies.

However, it is worth noting that, while both frameworks provide important tools for understanding the social construction of trauma from a cultural trauma perspective, as Britt and Hammett (2024) point out, cultural trauma theory remains 'sorely missing' a feminist perspective. Alexander's framework implicitly presupposes a relatively gender-neutral public sphere in which carrier groups compete on equal discursive terms. Yet, feminist scholars have long argued that the public sphere itself is a gendered structure (Fraser 1990; Pateman 1988) in which access to discursive resources, what Alexander calls 'resources, authority, or interpretive competence' (2004, 27), is unequally distributed along gender lines. This means that female victims of sexual violence face not only the general challenge of gaining public recognition for their trauma but also the additional barrier of a public sphere that systemat-

ically devalues their testimony. Such a perspective is crucial for this study, as the 'comfort women' issue is not merely a wartime atrocity, but a case of gendered sexual violence, which carries its own structure of silence. Feminist scholars have shown that sexual violence reverses the direction of shame from perpetrator to victim (Pheterson 1993), that militarisation relies on gendered ideas of femininity and masculinity to sustain its operations (Enloe 2000), and that in the Japanese context specifically, nationalist discourse and patriarchal norms of female chastity work in tandem to foreclose recognition of military sexual slavery (Ueno 2004). This study therefore adds a feminist analytical layer, arguing that the four mechanisms derive much of their particular efficacy from their articulation with patriarchal gender norms.

Methodology

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which views discourse not as a neutral communication medium but as a locus of power relations and 'an analytical framework for studying connections between language, power, and ideology' (Fairclough 2010, 25). CDA is highly compatible with cultural trauma theory's emphasis on carrier groups deploying 'discursive talents' (Alexander 2004, 11) to compete for interpretive control over trauma narratives, enabling the analysis to investigate how the Japanese state and survivors contest the 'comfort women' narrative through official statements, textbooks, and legal challenges.

The textual sources were selected through purposive sampling to capture the key discursive sites through which these defensive strategies operate. The corpus includes: (1) official government statements, most notably the 1993 Kono Statement (MOFA 1993) and the 2017 amicus brief submitted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) (MOFA 2017); (2) right-wing advocacy materials, particularly the 'Committee for Historical Facts' advertisement published in *The Washington Post* in 2007; (3) media discourse, exemplified by *The Japan Times*'s 2018 revision of its 'comfort women' definition (Romo 2018); and (4) documentation of textbook revisions and diplomatic communications related to memorial controversies (Nozaki 2008; Selden and Nozaki 2009; Ushiyama 2021). These texts were selected because they represent different institutional domains – executive, legislative, educational, media, and diplomatic – and different historical moments from the mid-1990s to the present, thereby enabling the analysis to trace how Japan's memory defence mechanisms operate across multiple sites and over time.

Drawing on this analytical framework, the analysis proceeds in two stages. The first stage combines CDA with Smelser's four psychological defence mechanisms to ex-

amine Japan's state-level discursive practices. The sources include government statements, right-wing advocacy materials, media discourse, and diplomatic communications between Japan, South Korea, and China. The second stage examines how survivors and their allies have challenged Japan's official narrative through legal action and digital testimony preservation, conceptualised here as counter-discursive practices. Since these are lived practices of resistance rather than texts available for close discourse analysis, this stage does not apply CDA. Instead, it analyses how these actions open up possibilities for contesting Japan's defence mechanisms.

Findings

Through analysing Japanese government statements, textbooks, and diplomatic documents, the study reveals that Japan has not simply 'forgotten' the history of 'comfort women' but has actively constructed a memory defence system that systematically excludes this traumatic history from public memory. Drawing on Smelser's framework of memory defence mechanisms, the analysis identifies the following four main mechanisms.

Denial: 'comfort women' as 'voluntary prostitutes'

Smelser's first defence mechanism is 'to block the threatening intrusion' (Smelser 2004, 45), which manifests as denial at the individual level. Smelser suggests that this mechanism has its collective-level counterpart in 'collective denial' and 'collective forgetting' (Smelser 2004, 51–53). On June 14, 2007, a Japanese conservative group called the 'Committee for Historical Facts' published a full-page advertisement titled 'The Facts' in *The Washington Post* to prevent the US House of Representatives from passing a resolution, *H.Res. 121*, which called on Japan to formally apologise for forcing women into sexual slavery (FeND 2021). The advertisement employed two interrelated strategies to deny the coercive nature of the 'comfort women' system. The advertisement's first 'fact' stated that

No historical document has ever been found by historians or research organisations that positively demonstrates that women were forced against their will into prostitution by the Japanese army. (Committee for Historical Facts 2007)

To support this claim, the advertisement further cited Army Memorandum No. 2197 of March 4, 1938, which 'explicitly prohibited the recruitment of women by deceiving them using the name of the military or by kidnapping' (Committee for Historical Facts 2007). The advertisement thus concluded that since the military had issued an order prohibiting forced recruitment, forced recruitment itself could not have existed. However, this reasoning inadvertently reveals the very fact that it seeks

to conceal: if forced recruitment had never occurred, why would the military need to issue an order prohibiting it? The very existence of such a prohibition indicates that forced recruitment was a real problem at the time (Yoshimi 2000, 42–59; Hayashi 2008).

This denialist discourse was not confined to public opinion but also appeared at the highest executive level. In fact, just three months before the advertisement was released, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had already claimed that 'there is no evidence to prove coercion' in the recruitment of 'comfort women' (Mizoguchi and Dudden 2007). As VAWW-NET Japan (2007) pointed out in its protest letter, Abe's position rested on an extremely narrow definition of coercion, implying that only cases where 'government officials broke into private homes and took people away like kidnappers' (Yoshimi 2000, 58–61, 113–115) were considered coercion. However, the recruitment of 'comfort women' was often carried out through other forms of coercion, such as deception, intimidation, and trafficking, which did not qualify as coercion at all under Abe's definition. Though their approaches differ, both the advertisement and Abe produce what Alexander calls a denial of 'the nature of the pain' (Alexander 2004, 13), namely a refusal to acknowledge the coercive nature of the 'comfort women' recruitment process.

Beyond denying coercion, the advertisement also redefined the 'nature of the victim' (Alexander 2004, 13). As Alexander points out, public recognition of trauma depends on establishing the affected group as legitimate victims deserving of sympathy (Alexander 2004, 13). The advertisement did the opposite. In its fifth 'fact', it claimed that 'comfort women' 'were not "sex slaves," as is commonly reported', but were 'working under a system of licensed prostitution that was commonplace around the world at the time' (Committee for Historical Facts 2007). In doing so, the advertisement transformed the victims into voluntary participants and thus eliminated the moral basis for the public's recognition of them as legitimate victims. This reclassification works because of what Pheterson (1993, 39) calls the 'whore stigma', in which any woman labelled a prostitute loses her moral standing and becomes undeserving of public sympathy. This stigma does not apply to men, as male forced labourers or prisoners of war are judged by their suffering alone, not by their sexual history. The denial mechanism thus does more than dispute historical evidence; it also enacts a gendered moral framework that makes the victim undeserving of recognition. Moreover, this advertisement was not an isolated act by fringe nationalists, as its signatories ranged from dozens of Diet Members from both the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the opposition Democratic Party to scholars such as Fujioka Nobukatsu (FeND 2021). All these examples indicate that denial of the 'comfort women' system is no longer the ideology of a single party, but a collective memory defence strategy shared across Japan's political spectrum.

Reversal: textbooks and sanitised language

Smelser's second defence mechanism is 'to reverse the threatening intrusion into its opposite' (Smelser 2004, 45). At the individual level, this mechanism takes the form of psychological reversal, in which the individual rewrites an unbearable fact as its opposite to defuse the threat. Through a critical discourse analysis of the gradual erasure of 'comfort women' content from Japanese textbooks and *The Japan Times's* 2018 revision of its 'comfort women' definition, Japan has enacted this reversal mechanism at the collective level as well. Rather than claiming that coercion never occurred, as denial does, reversal rewrites documented historical facts into their opposite through institutionalised discursive practices.

Japan's gradual removal of 'comfort women' content from textbooks is an early manifestation of this reversal mechanism. The struggle over textbook content has deep roots. As early as 1965, historian Ienaga Saburō launched a series of lawsuits against the Ministry of Education after it censored his textbook for including accounts of Japanese wartime atrocities, including the 'comfort women' system, challenging the constitutionality of Japan's textbook screening system (Nozaki 2008). Despite these challenges, state control over historical narratives in education persisted. After the 1993 Kono Statement officially acknowledged the military's involvement, all seven junior high school history textbooks included references to 'comfort women' by 1997. Among them, one textbook stated that 'many young women were also sent to the battlefields against their will to work as comfort women' (Sasayama et al. 1997, 261, cited in Nozaki 2013, 180). However, from 1996 onward, neo-nationalist organisations led by Fujioka Nobukatsu's Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukurukai), together with conservative lawmakers within the Liberal Democratic Party led by Abe Shinzo, launched a nationwide campaign to remove content on 'comfort women' from textbooks (Selden and Nozaki 2009, 12). Publishers gradually yielded to this pressure. Whereas all seven textbooks had referred to 'comfort women' in the 1997 editions, only three did so in the 2002 editions (Selden and Nozaki 2009, 12–14). The Japanese government took a further step in 2021. The Cabinet designated the term 'military "comfort women"' as 'inappropriate terminology for textbooks' and required revisions to existing teaching materials (Zhang 2025). In doing so, the Japanese government has erased this history, obstructing any opportunity for future generations to learn about and acknowledge the victims of the 'comfort women' system.

Meanwhile, a similar reversal occurred in media discussions. In November 2018, *The Japan Times*, Japan's oldest English-language newspaper, revised its definition of 'comfort women' from 'women who were forced to provide sex for Japanese troops before and during World War II' to 'women who worked in wartime brothels, in-

cluding those who did so against their will, to provide sex to Japanese soldiers' (Romo 2018). Even though 'against their will' remains in the new definition, the new wording implements more fundamental reversals: the victims have shifted from those who were forced into sexual slavery to those who worked in wartime brothels; the perpetrator has shifted from 'Japanese troops', a term that implies an organised military institution, to 'Japanese soldiers', which disaggregates state responsibility into the actions of individual servicemen; and coercion has shifted from the defining feature of the system to an individual exception, which has distanced the Japanese state from accountability. As Sung-Yoon Lee, a professor of Korean studies at Tufts University, told NPR, the revised description 'leaves out any implication of government involvement, or that the government ran the system' (Romo 2018). Through these reversals, documented history has been rewritten into its opposite at both the educational and media levels. This reversal is especially effective because of the gendered nature of the trauma it rewrites. Unlike other forms of trauma, sexual violence is more likely to make victims subject to moral judgment (Brownmiller 1975). This reversal exploits that vulnerability. When the language shifts from 'forced' to 'worked', survivors are not only stripped of their victim status but also pushed into a logic of victim-blaming (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994) in which they must prove that they did not participate willingly. For survivors of sexual violence, this demand for self-justification is itself a form of re-victimisation. Institutional rewriting and the pre-existing silence around sexual violence thus reinforce each other, accelerating the disappearance of this history from public memory and raising the threshold for survivors to break their silence.

Displacement: 'anti-Japan propaganda'

While denial and reversal weaken the 'comfort women' narrative within Japan's domestic discourse, the third mechanism, displacement, takes the defence further by redirecting the debate itself. Smelser defines this mechanism as 'to shift the reference of the threatening intrusion' (Smelser 2004, 45), in which a person redirects attention from the original source of the threat to an external target. At the collective level, he describes this form of redirection as 'blame and scapegoating' (Smelser 2004, 51–53), observing that whenever disasters or public disgraces occur, 'an almost inevitable first (and even continuing) response is to assign responsibility and blame' (Smelser 2004, 52). Through an analysis of official Japanese statements and right-wing discourse, Japan not only weakens discussion of the 'comfort women' issue through denial and reversal, but also employs this displacement mechanism by systematically labelling criticism of the 'comfort women' system as 'anti-Japanese propaganda' in order to evade historical responsibility.

The Wednesday Demonstration in South Korea provides a typical case for observing this mechanism. Since 1992, the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan has organised weekly protests in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul to demand a formal apology, and in 2011, on the occasion of the 1,000th demonstration, the Statue of Peace was erected across from the embassy. Despite the continuing protests, Japanese officials have refused to address the survivors' demands. Instead, they have framed the Statue of Peace as a one-sided attack on Japan that harms its international standing (Ushiyama 2021, 1255). By doing so, Japanese officials shifted the focus of the debate from the historical fact of the 'comfort women' system to the question of whether South Korea is using this issue to attack Japan. Such displacement is also directed at China, but with even stronger language. Sakurai Yoshiko described the 'comfort women' issue as 'a full-fledged information war, with China as the main opponent' (Yamaguchi 2020, 234). Here, criticism is no longer framed merely as a political attack but as an act of war, and the critic, China, is cast as an enemy.

Right-wing intellectual Fujioka Nobukatsu takes this displacement even further. As a founding member of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (Tsukurukai), Fujioka has long campaigned to remove references to 'comfort women' from Japanese textbooks (Nozaki 2008; Ogata 2023, 8). In 1996, when the Ministry of Education announced that all seven publishers of junior high school history textbooks had included content on 'comfort women,' Fujioka declared:

[The military 'comfort women' issue] is being disseminated by anti-Japanese forces inside and outside Japan in order to **deliver a decisive blow** that will spiritually cripple the Japanese state. In short, this is a **grand conspiracy** abetted by outside forces to **destroy Japan**. (Fujioka 1996, cited in Ogata 2023, 9)

Fujioka's response to the inclusion of 'comfort women' content in textbooks pushes this displacement further in two ways. First, unlike the earlier examples, where Japanese officials labelled critics from South Korea and China as external hostile forces, Fujioka expands the scope of the enemy to include domestic critics as well, creating an image of enemies colluding from within and without. Second, he uses phrases such as 'deliver a decisive blow', 'grand conspiracy', and 'destroy Japan' (Fujioka 1996, cited in Ogata 2023, 9) to escalate the threat to an existential level. At this point, the displacement is complete, as the debate is no longer about what Japan did to these women but about what its enemies are doing to Japan. In the process, the systematic sexual enslavement of women gives way to the masculinised language of national security and geopolitical rivalry (Enloe 2000). This gendered displacement is particularly effective because it activates what Ueno (2004) identifies as

the complicit structure between nationalism and patriarchy. When the 'comfort women' issue is reframed as a matter of national defence, recognising gendered violence becomes incompatible with loyalty to the nation. Survivors' demands are no longer merely irrelevant but threatening to the national interest, and the framing that elevates public security over private bodily harm ensures that sexual violence disappears from view. Any response to survivors' demands thus becomes a surrender to the enemy, and silence and refusal become acts of patriotism. Through the progressive displacement illustrated by these three examples, Japan has moved the discussion further away from the historical suffering of 'comfort women' and deeper into the language of national defence.

Acting out: the memorial controversies

In Smelser's framework, 'acting out' has been categorised as a behavioural manifestation of the 'insulation' mode, in which psychological threats are externalised into concrete behaviour, or what Smelser calls 'engaging in ritual protections against the threat' (Smelser 2004, 47). Unlike the first three mechanisms, which operate primarily at the discursive level, acting out takes the form of physical actions. Although Smelser does not systematically elaborate on the collective-level counterpart of this mechanism, the concept of 'acting out' can be effectively applied to the analysis of the 'comfort women' issue, as the Japanese government has also taken material action to repeatedly pressure other countries to remove 'comfort women' statues and monuments, seeking to erase the material carriers of those women's trauma from the international public sphere.

The controversy surrounding the 'comfort women' Peace Monument in Glendale is one of the most prominent examples of this 'acting out'. In 2013, the local Korean American community in Glendale erected the Peace Monument, a replica of the statue in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul (Ushiyama 2021, 1262). Shortly after, a pro-Japan group called the Global Alliance for Historical Truth (GAHT) filed a lawsuit in 2014 to remove the Peace Monument, which was dismissed by both the district court and the court of appeals. However, in 2017, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted an amicus brief to the US Supreme Court, in which it reframed the memorial entirely within the logic of diplomatic relations rather than historical justice. It stated:

The monument in Glendale Central Park presents a significant impediment to Japan's **diplomatic efforts** on this issue. Because the monument is not in line with the spirit of the 2015 Agreement between Japan and the Republic of Korea, it has also been an *impediment* to smooth *implementation* of the Agreement. (MOFA 2017, 3–4)

The expression ‘smooth implementation’ is revealing because it presupposes that the ‘comfort women’ issue has already been resolved and that the Agreement merely needs to be implemented, leaving no room for further debate. Yet the memorial, as a material form standing in public space, cannot simply be redefined or dissolved through discourse, which is why Japan had to resort to concrete ‘acting out’ to remove it. Even so, the US Supreme Court’s refusal to take on the case meant that the Peace Monument remained in place. Similar patterns appeared in other countries, and some achieved the result Japan desired. For instance, in 2018, the ‘comfort women’ statue in Manila was quickly removed under Japanese diplomatic pressure. In 2020, the Statue of Peace in Berlin was temporarily ordered to be removed after the Japanese embassy intervened (Ushiyama 2021, 1265; Mladenova 2022). It is worth noting that the Statue of Peace is a distinctly gendered memorial – a young woman seated in a chair – that makes visible the female body at the centre of this history. Unlike a textual monument or a diplomatic communiqué, her physical presence in public space directly counters the patriarchal logic of shame and silence that confines sexual violence to the private sphere. Japan’s efforts to remove these statues therefore seek to erase not only historical memory but also the specifically gendered dimension of this violence from the international public sphere, which is why Japan’s response escalates from discourse to material action. However, almost all overseas memorial disputes were led by Korean diaspora communities, and Chinese voices were nearly absent. China does have domestic memorial sites, such as the Nanjing Lijixiang Comfort Station Site Museum, established in 2015. But China has not erected ‘comfort women’ statues overseas. This means Japan’s action-based mechanism did not even need to target Chinese ‘comfort women’ memories specifically, since these memories have not yet gained enough international visibility to threaten Japan’s official narrative.

In summary, Japan has constructed a systematic defence mechanism through these four mechanisms, which gradually excludes the ‘comfort women’ from Japan’s public memory. The four mechanisms work together and reinforce each other at different levels. Specifically, denial rejects the coercive nature of the ‘comfort women’ system and exploits patriarchal moral judgment of female sexuality to strip victims of their claim to sympathy. Reversal goes further by rewriting the historical record and pushing survivors into a logic of victim-blaming in which they must prove they did not participate willingly. Displacement reframes criticism as a political attack, erasing the gendered dimension of the issue entirely. Acting out seeks to remove the material carriers of this memory by pressuring other countries to take down ‘comfort women’ memorials. Across all four mechanisms, the gendered nature of sexual violence trauma – particularly the stigmatisation of female sexuality that Pheterson (1993) terms the ‘whore stigma’ – provides the pre-existing structures of shame and silence upon which state-level defence mechanisms build. Under the combined operation of

these four mechanisms, Japan has maintained a 'negative peace' (Galtung 1969, 183) that erases 'comfort women' from public memory. Yet, many survivors have passed away still waiting for acknowledgment. Japan has never recognised their trauma. Japan has never addressed the injustice.

Discussion

The findings above show that Japan systematically excludes the trauma of 'comfort women' from public memory through four intertwined defensive strategies. These mechanisms have not affected all survivors equally. In South Korea, a broader feminist movement provided survivors with an organised carrier group (Seo 2008), whereas in China, the absence of such a movement deepened their silence. However, such mechanisms are not monolithic, as survivors and their advocates have always sought ways to break through. Rajiva and Takševa (2021, 416) argue that traumatic memories often emerge in the 'in-between space' between individual and collective memories, where survivors' accounts inevitably cross the boundaries between private and public and generate new meaning. This insight is relevant to the 'comfort women' case, where survivors' individual testimonies have similarly had to navigate between personal suffering and the nationalist, diplomatic, and legal frameworks through which that suffering is interpreted or silenced. Informed by this perspective, the subsequent analysis will investigate how survivors have contested this official containment through these 'in-between spaces' and opened possibilities for 'positive peace' (Galtung 1969, 183).

Breaking through: survivor resistance

While Japan's defensive strategies have formed a dominant narrative at the state level, cultural trauma theory suggests that non-dominant narratives are not erased but marginalised, retaining the potential to re-enter competition. 'Comfort women' survivors and their allies have seized this potential through the 'in-between spaces' discussed above. These actions can be interpreted as 'counter-discourse' (Terdiman 1985), persistently challenging and seeking to destabilise the dominant narrative. A critical discourse analysis of these survivor-led actions shows that these counter-discursive practices challenge the memory defence mechanisms on multiple fronts, including legal struggles (Chinkin 2001; Dolgopol 2011; Ling 2009), testimony practices (Kimura 2016), documentary filmmaking (Zhang and Fang 2024; Deng 2023), and sustained protests (Lee 2023; Yayo 2012), as discussed in the literature review. The discussion will, therefore, not repeat these analyses, but will instead focus on two recent developments that deserve particular attention: breakthroughs in the legal arena and the emergence of digital testimony preservation.

On the legal front, ‘comfort women’ survivors have used the courtroom as a counter-discursive force against Japan’s official denial of the coercive nature of the ‘comfort women’ system. As mentioned earlier, Korean survivor Kim Hak-sun’s public testimony in 1991 marked the beginning of this breakthrough. Unfortunately, many of these early lawsuits in Japanese courts were dismissed on sovereign immunity grounds. The breakthrough came instead in Korean courts. In January 2021, the Seoul Central District Court ruled that Japan was not entitled to sovereign immunity and ordered it to pay 100 million Korean won (approximately US\$91,000) to each of the 12 former ‘comfort women’ and their bereaved families who filed the lawsuit (Columbia Law School n.d.). While the ruling came from a Korean court, it broke through Japan’s long-standing shield of sovereign immunity, allowing survivors to win their first legal victory. Chinese survivors also turned to the courts, though, unlike their Korean counterparts, they filed lawsuits in Japanese courts. In 1995, 14 Chinese war victims, including four former ‘comfort women,’ sued the Japanese government in the Tokyo District Court, marking the first time Chinese citizens pursued war reparations against Japan through individual litigation. Though these lawsuits all ended in failure, the legal process itself still ‘carved out an official space for knowledge transmission and recognition’ (Hao 2021, 1). In other words, survivors’ testimonies inscribed into judicial records the very historical facts that Japan sought to deny. These records constitute what Fairclough (2010, 59) calls ‘a material form of discourse,’ and, once entered into the official record, such facts cannot be easily erased. In 2024, the descendants of 18 deceased Chinese survivors filed a lawsuit against the Japanese government in a Chinese court (Gao 2024). Though the case is still in progress, it marks the first time that a Chinese domestic court has accepted such a case, which may open a new chapter for Chinese survivors seeking judicial justice.

South Korea and China have also turned to digital technology as a new form of counter-discursive practice, preserving the testimonies of ‘comfort women’ to counter Japan’s continued denial of this history. This technology builds on the USC Shoah Foundation’s ‘Dimensions in Testimony’ program, which since 2012 has used artificial intelligence to preserve Holocaust survivor testimony (USC Shoah Foundation n.d.). South Korea launched its own ‘Eternal Testimony’ project (CARE n.d.) in 2018, using holographic technology to enable visitors to ask questions and hear survivors’ responses in real time. China followed in 2019, with an international team recording the testimony of survivor Peng Zhuying at the Nanjing Lijixiang Comfort Station Site Museum. Japan’s defensive apparatus rests on an implicit premise: time. As survivors gradually pass away, the voices that directly counter denial discourse will eventually disappear. This technology breaks such temporal logic by detaching the survivor’s voice from the body and turning it into a counter-discursive tool. Survivors can continue to participate in narrative competition long after their deaths.

The incorporation of technology reconstructs what Felman and Laub (1992) call 'the structure of witnessing', in which the completion of testimony requires not only a speaker but also an actively engaged listener. Japan's suppression mechanism has severed the emotional connection between younger generations and victims through textbook deletions and sanitised language. This interactive technology recreates a dialogic space between the two, enabling emotional connections to continue in the 'postmemory' (Hirsch 2012) era. In this sense, these digital testimony projects constitute a form of intergenerational dialogue (Gobodo-Madikizela 2016), in which younger generations are no longer passive recipients of historical knowledge but active participants in the ongoing process of witnessing. Such intergenerational dialogue is crucial for breaking the cycle of suppression, as it creates the conditions under which traumatic memory can be transmitted across generations despite the state's efforts to sever this connection. However, regardless of the form they take, these counter-discursive practices all transform survivors' individual experiences into public records that cannot be easily erased, and in doing so, enable survivors to refuse the shame structure that had long silenced them and reclaim their bodily dignity. These breakthroughs represent important steps toward achieving recognition and justice for survivors.

Conclusion

This study draws on Alexander's cultural trauma theory, Smelser's framework of memory defence mechanisms, and feminist scholarship on wartime sexual violence to examine the struggle over 'comfort women' memory in post-war Japan. Unlike previous research, which tends to examine political denial, textbook revision, and diplomatic pressure as isolated elements of Japan's response to the issue, this analysis treats them as an interconnected whole and subjects them to a unified critical discourse analysis. In doing so, it demonstrates not only that the four mechanisms operate as a coordinated whole, but also that their efficacy is inseparable from the gendered power structures in which they operate, a dimension that existing studies of Japan's memory politics have largely overlooked.

However, this study also finds that these mechanisms are not impenetrable. Instead, fissures have emerged in the 'in-between space' between individual experience and collective narrative. It is within these spaces that survivors and their allies have challenged Japanese official containment through legal action, documentary filmmaking, academic research, digital testimony preservation, and transnational advocacy networks. In doing so, they have not only transformed individual experiences into public memory, but also challenged the patriarchal norms of shame and silence that kept them voiceless for decades, bringing the 'comfort women' issue back into domestic and international public discourse.

The analysis also has certain limitations. It places Chinese and Korean survivors within the same analytical framework. Yet, as the literature review points out, Chinese survivors face unique structural constraints. First, they must not only confront Japan's long-standing official denial, but also struggle for a voice within an international discourse system centred on Korean experiences. Second, research on the 'comfort women' issue in China began relatively late, further limiting Chinese survivors' access to public attention. Third, traditional Confucian values link a woman's dignity to her sexual purity, which has caused many Chinese survivors to remain silent in shame throughout their lives. These constraints call for more research into how to give Chinese survivors greater visibility within international memory politics and human rights discourse.

Finally, the defensive strategies identified here are not unique to the 'comfort women' issue. In fact, in today's world, from Gaza to Iran, from Congo to Sudan, survivors of wartime sexual violence are still struggling against state-level denial and institutional silence in their fight for recognition. The same pattern appeared in post-1945 Berlin, where mass sexual violence against German women was suppressed for decades under Cold War geopolitics and patriarchal shame (Grossmann 1995), suggesting that these mechanisms reflect a broader patriarchal pattern rather than one specific to East Asia. This study hopes that the framework developed here can offer other researchers a transferable perspective for examining how other societies block traumatic memories and how survivors resist. As the Kono Statement and the 1990s textbook reforms demonstrate, these mechanisms are not irreversible, and Japan has shown the capacity to move toward acknowledgment. It is only through such sustained scholarly attention and public engagement that the conditions for 'positive peace' – one built on recognition, justice, and accountability – can begin to take shape.

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Invisible Wounds in International Law: Sanctions, Intergenerational Harm, and the Role of Dialogue

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Abstract: Economic sanctions are commonly framed as a less harmful alternative to the use of armed force. However, while their immediate humanitarian consequences have been increasingly documented, far less attention has been paid to their intergenerational effects. Drawing on frameworks from different disciplinary traditions, including developmental psychology, psychiatry and epigenetics, and Indigenous scholarship on historical trauma, this article first explores how trauma may be transmitted across generations, affecting individuals who have not directly experienced the original harmful event. It then analyses how international law conceptualises harm, with particular reference to the work of the Beyond Compliance Consortium and examines the extent to which elements of intergenerational harm have begun to emerge in the reparations jurisprudence of international criminal and regional human rights courts and tribunals.

The article argues that securing redress for intergenerational harm caused by sanctions remains highly constrained due to the contested legal nature of sanctions, the challenges of establishing a causal nexus across generations, and the structural limitations of existing reparation regimes. In light of these constraints, it explores the potential of intergenerational dialogue as a complementary mechanism through which inherited experiences of harm may be narrated, recognised, and socially acknowledged where formal legal processes remain limited. Such dialogue may serve both preventive and restorative functions by informing future sanctions policy and facilitating the transmission of resilience across generations.

Keywords: Economic sanctions; intergenerational harm; international law; indirect victims; redress; intergenerational dialogue

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Introduction

In June 2025, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) announced the data on civilian deaths in armed conflict for 2024 and the numbers are appalling; civilian deaths in conflict surged 40% globally. This translates into at least 48,384 people killed according to casualties recorded (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2025). Yet, this way of accounting civilian deaths or victims of an armed conflict, tends to ignore any accounting ‘available to victims of a war waged via exchange rates, inflation and interest rates’ – in other words the victims of sanctions (Whyte 2023). This is because a common misconception persists that harm can only be caused by or stem from armed confrontations between states and armed groups or armed groups among themselves, relegating to a secondary position those inflicted by policies that do not appear to violate international law (Cismas et al. 2025, 25). Economic sanctions are commonly framed as an alternative to (Lopez and Cortright 1995), and distinct form of, the use of force and military intervention, as they are supposed to spare civilians from the ravages of armed conflict, yet limited attention is paid to the underlying motives behind their use (Jones and Portela 2020; Elliott 2009, 86).

While stakeholders imposing sanctions emphasise that their primary aim is to generate compliance, this ostensibly innocent tool carries significant humanitarian consequences. The negative impact unilateral sanctions have on the enjoyment of human rights has been extensively documented, with numerous reports highlighting their adverse effects on the rights to health, food, and an adequate standard of living (Annual thematic reports Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures, n.d.; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021; Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2019; Coalición de Organizaciones por el Derecho a la Salud y a la Vida (CodeVida) and Programa Venezolano de Educación Acción en Derechos Humanos (Provea) 2018; Delgado 2025; Weisbrot and Sachs 2019, 16; Bennis 2020; Gordon 2011, 315; Mueller and Mueller 1999, 49–50; Halliday 1999, 30; World Food Programme 2020, 3). Whether such impacts amount to violations of international human rights law (IHRL) remains contested, as an interference with human rights does not necessarily mean that these rights were violated, as it depends on the goals sanctions pursue and the effects they cause (Milanovic 2025). What the evidence consistently demonstrates, however, is that sanctions frequently impede humanitarian operations and undermine civilians’ ability to access essential goods and services (Sutton and Gillard 2022, 5), producing conditions of harm that are well-documented even where their legal characterisation remains disputed. Furthermore, their disastrous and catastrophic impact on innocent civilian populations, is often labelled as ‘unintended consequences’, a euphemism that unequivocally understates the extent of harm they inflict (Gordon 2023; Rodríguez 2023).

These controversies surrounding sanctions are not new (Tzanakopoulos 2021, 787). Historical and contemporary examples, including Iraq and Venezuela, have fuelled longstanding debates regarding both their effectiveness and humanitarian consequences (Karagiannidou 2019, 91; ‘United Nations Security Council, Letter Dated 20 March 1991 From The Secretary-General Addressed To The President Of The Security Council, S/22366’, 1991, para. 8). While studies (Rodríguez, Rendón, and Weisbrot 2025) and newly established mechanisms (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.) focus on sanctions’ humanitarian impact in the present, far less attention has been paid to whether the harms associated with sanctions may persist across generations. Existing scholarship has largely focused on the humanitarian effects of sanctions on affected populations (either immediate or long-term) but has rarely examined whether such effects may contribute to forms of intergenerational harm experienced by individuals who did not directly live through the sanctions themselves. If it is accepted that sanctions are capable of producing various forms of harm, it becomes necessary to consider whether such harm may extend beyond those directly exposed to sanctions. This article addresses this gap by examining the relationship between sanctions and intergenerational harm and by arguing that sanctions, due to their harmful consequences, are capable of producing intergenerational harm to people who have not directly experienced the original sanctions regime.

It first draws on theories from developmental psychology, psychiatry and epigenetics, and Indigenous perspectives on historical trauma to explain how intergenerational harm is transmitted across generations. It then analyses how international law conceptualises ‘harm’, drawing from Beyond Compliance Consortium’s research (Beyond Compliance Consortium, n.d.), before assessing the extent to which different international courts and tribunals have proved themselves capable of capturing intergenerational harm. The article concludes by arguing that the limitations of international legal remedies to capture intergenerational harm caused by sanctions require complementary approaches. It therefore explores whether intergenerational dialogue may have a complementary role in addressing inherited forms of suffering where formal legal frameworks remain insufficient.

Intergenerational Trauma and Sanctions

A recent study published in the *Lancet* estimated that unilateral sanctions are responsible for over half a million deaths every year, a figure exceeding annual battle-related casualties worldwide (Rodríguez, Rendón, and Weisbrot 2025). Economic sanctions severely impact the mental health and wellbeing of affected populations by intensifying anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders, which in turn contribute to premature deaths (Chaufan, Yousefi, and Zaman 2023, 216–232).

Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) shows that during the sanctions period in Iran (2011–2014), deaths due to self-harm and interpersonal violence increased almost one percent (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003). Notably, self-harm related deaths declined in 2016, a year after sanctions were lifted (Aloosh, Salavati, and Aloosh 2019). Therefore, research shows that sanctions are capable of producing conditions of sustained psychological adversity.

Trauma is generally defined as a challenging emotional experience that living through a distressing event can have for an individual (The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health n.d.). For some individuals, exposure to traumatic events can have profound and lasting consequences. These may include feelings of helplessness, dissociation, confusion, fear, or long-term disruptions to behaviour and functioning (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Initial trauma may manifest as denial or shock, but its long-term effects can include unpredictable emotions, changes in behavioural patterns, increased interpersonal conflict, and even psychosomatic symptoms such as nausea and chest pain (American Psychological Association 2013).

Holmes notes that mental harm produced by traumatic events does not adhere to temporal limitations, as its emergence can be delayed, surfacing long after the original event (Holmes 2024). Critically, such harm may also extend beyond those who directly experience it. Reverberating psychological harm carries the potential for intergenerational transmission, affecting individuals who were never themselves exposed to the original conditions of adversity. When parents are exposed to trauma, research shows that its effects may be transmitted to subsequent generations, often unintentionally and without awareness of the original source (O' Neill et al. 2016, 173–174). Intergenerational trauma can therefore be understood as the transmission of trauma-related effects to related individuals who have not directly experienced the initial traumatic event (Danieli 1988, 219–238).

As Morrisette and Naden note, intergenerational trauma can be better understood as a process where the personal trauma of an individual extends beyond the direct victim and affects the lives of others, spouses and offspring (Morrisette and Naden 1998, 45). Research on the intergenerational effects of war has focused on several contexts, including Israeli adolescents (Last and Klein 1984, 267), offspring of Holocaust survivors, children of US war veterans (Castro-Vale et al. 2019; Yager, Gerszberg, and Dohrenwend 2016), populations affected by colonisation (Atkinson 2002), and conflicts in Asia, such as the Cambodian genocide (Sack, Clarke, and Seeley 1996).

A number of theoretical frameworks seek to explain how loss and trauma may produce intergenerational effects, where descendants 'may encounter experiential psychological, social or behavioral challenges' (Bowe, Thomas, and Mackey 2025, 3).

The following analysis will focus on three key theories in relevant scholarship that explain how intergenerational trauma can arise: (i) attachment theory, (ii) epigenetic transmission theory, and (iii) Indigenous perspectives on historical trauma. The attachment theory asserts that children require a secure attachment relationship with their caregivers for their healthy emotional development. In situations of stress, the child perceives the caregiver as a 'safe haven,' enabling children to regulate stress through attachment behaviours (Kolvenbach 2019, 21). These early attachment patterns often persist into adulthood and shape future relational dynamics (Bowlby 1969). Where a parent has been exposed to trauma, their ability to provide consistent emotional support may be compromised, increasing the likelihood of insecure attachment. As a result, trauma may be transmitted across generations through disrupted caregiving relationships and parenting practices (Bowlby 1979, 637–638).

The epigenetic transmission theory provides a biological perspective on intergenerational trauma. It explains how gene expression can be modified without altering the underlying DNA sequence (Akça et al. 2025). From this perspective, the effects of trauma and loss are not only emotional or behavioural but may also be biological. Maternal stress, for instance, can influence the prenatal environment and affect the foetus' development (Weinstock 2005, 296–308). Stressors such as nutritional deficiencies, exposure to toxins, and psychosocial stress, like anxiety, and experiences of trauma and violence, may affect biological systems involved in development (Mulligan et al. 2025; Chan, Nugent, and Bale 2017, 886). Research also suggests that stress experienced by either parent prior to conception may affect germ cells, potentially influencing development in subsequent generations and contributing to intergenerational effects (Chan, Nugent, and Bale 2017).

Indigenous perspectives offer a broader and more holistic understanding of intergenerational (or historical) trauma. While Indigenous communities are heterogeneous (Cole et al. 2025, 1402), a central shared premise is that such trauma reflects the enduring legacy of colonialism (Evans-Campbell 2008). Colonial processes, such as land dispossession, forced assimilation, deliberate de-culturalisation (O' Neill et al. 2016, 173-186) have affected entire communities across generations. These experiences placed communities in a constant state of grief, which could not be adequately resolved, as traditional mourning practices were prohibited or suppressed across numerous colonial contexts worldwide (for the Aboriginal peoples in Canada, see Roy 2019, 220). Critically, such harm on these communities cannot be understood through an individualised lens. Violence of this kind is structural and systematic, and an account focused on individual suffering risks obscuring its collective dimensions (Kirmayer, Brass, and Tait 2000, 613). Importantly, within these frameworks, historical trauma is not understood as a closed chapter; contemporary experiences of structural inequality, systemic discrimination, and ongoing racialised

policies are seen as continuous manifestations of colonial harm rather than distinct or separate phenomena (Beltrán and Begun 2014).

Within these frameworks trauma is conceptualised as affecting multiple interconnected dimensions of life, including spiritual wellbeing, physical health, community cohesion, cultural identity, and relationships with land and ancestors. Consequently, it is not only viewed as a mental health issue, but as a holistic ‘bio-psycho-social-cultural-spiritual’ phenomenon (Beltrán and Begun 2014). The transmission of historical trauma is understood to occur through several mechanisms, such as the preservation of ancestral pain within collective and community memory, whereby traumatic experiences become embedded in communal narratives and identities (Sotero 2006, 100), or through the disruption or suppression of cultural narratives through assimilation and deculturalisation policies (Battiste 2000, 192–208). These processes embed trauma within both individual and collective experiences, enabling its persistence across generations.

This section has outlined key theoretical frameworks explaining the nature of intergenerational trauma and the mechanisms through which it is transmitted across generations. These frameworks emerge from different disciplinary traditions, including developmental psychology (attachment theory), psychiatry and epigenetics (epigenetic transmission theory), and Indigenous scholarship on historical trauma. The next section therefore examines whether international law is capable of recognising such forms of harm and harm arising from sanctions.

Conceptualisation of ‘Harm’ under International Law

This section examines how international law conceptualises harm and, consequently, whether harms arising from sanctions and intergenerational harm fall within the categories that existing legal frameworks recognise. This question is central to the present research; before asking whether affected individuals may bring legal claims or seek reparations², it is necessary to establish whether harm produced by sanctions is legally cognisable at all. Drawing from research conducted by the Beyond Compliance Consortium, the term ‘civilian harm’ is often used to describe the different kinds of negative effects experienced by civilian communities living in war (Cismas et al. 2025, 15).

The concept of civilian harm is often narrowly defined and considered through the lens of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). As a result, its material scope is restricted, focusing primarily on direct physical threats and violence to life and bodily

² These questions are addressed in the following section.

integrity caused by military operations (Cismas et al. 2025, 22). In this framing, civilian harm is understood as encompassing civilian deaths, civilian physical injuries (*Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*, 1977, Articles 48, 50–51), and the damage or destruction of civilian objects (Kleinfeld 2025). This perspective, though, tends to overlook the broader range of harms that civilian populations may experience during armed conflict.

For instance, it often fails to account for harms arising from the governance practices of armed actors and their everyday interactions with civilian populations. Check-points operated by state or non-state armed actors illustrate this dynamic, as they may restrict freedom of movement and expose civilians and humanitarian workers to significant risks (Kleinfeld 2025). Moreover, this narrow conception excludes harms that arise as indirect or reverberating effects of conflict. For example, the ‘Protection Needs Overview within the Whole of Syria Needs Assessment’ (2015) recorded that the loss or absence of civil documentation in Syria exposed civilians to numerous protection risks, including harassment, exploitation, and restrictions on freedom of movement (OCHA 2015; Fortin 2021, 29–30). Finally, such a narrow framing fails to capture the broader mental (Holmes 2024) or spiritual (Parisi 2024) dimensions of civilian harm.

Conceptualising ‘civilian harm’ narrowly also restricts its personal scope. Under IHL, individuals are generally categorised through a binary distinction (Sutton 2020) between civilians, who do not participate in hostilities and should not be the object of attack (Casey-Maslen and Vestner 2022; Protocol I, Article 51; International Committee of the Red Cross 2005, Rule 5), and combatants, who constitute the members of the armed forces and are entitled to take part in the hostilities (Protocol I, Article 43(2); Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Third Geneva Convention), 1949, Article 4A(1)). However, this binary conception often overlooks the harm experienced by specific categories of individuals, such as persons *hors de combat* (Galea 2022; Protocol I, Article 41)³ or specific groups of fighters – including child soldiers (Provost 2016; Rosen 2007) and female combatants (Weber 2021), who, despite participating in hostilities, may have distinct protection needs.

³ In simple terms the protective status of *hors de combat* is given during an armed conflict to specific individuals, who are considered unable to fight for various reasons. While this status offers a general protection under customary international humanitarian law, there are still grey areas, for example, in relation to the commencement of the status, to the spectrum of injuries one suffered, and to the subjectivity of the decision makers considerations. Finally, the protective status for *hors de combat* is much less detailed in comparison to the one afforded to civilians.

Furthermore, in fluid and fragmented conflicts⁴, this binary conceptual division between civilians and combatants does not always reflect realities on the ground. For instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone observed in its report that members of different armed groups (i.e., including the RUF, the Kamajors, the CDF) frequently acted independently of formal leadership structures, disobeyed orders, or switched allegiances, with some individuals alternating between periods of armed participation and civilian life (Report of the Sierra Leone Truth & Reconciliation Commission 2004, 12, 44, 147, 187, 202, 281, 520, 542). Such dynamics demonstrate that participation in the conflict was often fluid rather than fixed and, most importantly, that rigid civilian-combatant classification may fail to capture the complexity of roles and identities in contemporary armed conflicts (Kinsella 2011, 190).

A narrow conceptualisation of ‘civilian harm’ also limits its temporal and spatial scope. Research conducted by the Beyond Compliance Consortium suggests that harm is often understood as arising only from discrete incidents of violence, rather than from policies that produce harm over time (Cismas et al. 2025, 25), such as the denial of humanitarian relief operations or the imposition of sanctions. Sanctions are frequently presented as a policy tool that offers an alternative to war. They are frequently presented as capable of influencing the behaviour of parties, while being perceived as less coercive than the use of military force (Damrosch 1994). Yet, as Kanfash notes (Kanfash 2025a), numerous examples demonstrate the severe humanitarian consequences that sanctions may have on civilian populations living under sanctions regimes, many times impeding humanitarian operations (Kanfash 2025b, 238–264). These deaths would not generally be captured by the traditional civilian harm framing under IHL because they do not stem from ‘attacks’ in the traditional sense.

Furthermore, a narrow conceptualisation of civilian harm tends to measure harm at a single moment in time, overlooking the ways in which present losses are connected to both past and future harms (Cismas et al. 2025, 25). For example, the destruction or loss of cultural heritage reflects damage to the past, while losses of livelihood, opportunity, or hope may undermine future wellbeing (Cismas et al. 2025, 25). Finally, this narrow framing fails to account for the reverberating (Kanetake 2022)⁵ and long-term effects of certain harms, such as intergenerational trauma, as harm is fre-

⁴ Fluid conflicts could be described broadly as conflicts of which the nature changes rapidly based on the changing character of the parties involved or the involvement of additional parties, from an international to a non-international one and vice versa.

⁵ Reverberating effects refer to the indirect, long-term, and cascading consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations that are a by-product of the attack.

quently only conceptualised as a present loss, overlooking how it could affect the offspring that have not yet been born at the time of the original harmful event (Karagkouni 2025; Betancourt 2015).

From the foregoing analysis, it becomes evident that the harms produced by policies such as sanctions, remain largely excluded from the narrow understanding of harm commonly reflected in international legal frameworks. As this conception prioritises direct physical violence to civilians and civilian infrastructure, it risks overlooking forms of harm that arise and are experienced in an indirect, diffuse, temporal, or intergenerational way. The following section examines whether international criminal and regional human rights courts and tribunals have begun to move beyond these limitations and considers the extent to which intergenerational harm has been recognised in their jurisprudence.

Intergenerational Harm in International Law: Emerging Recognition and Persistent Limitations

Having established that international legal frameworks lack the conceptual categories to capture harm that is indirect, diffuse, or intergenerational in nature⁶, a second and related question arises: whether and how different international and regional courts and tribunals have nevertheless begun to engage with intergenerational harm in their jurisprudence. This section examines the extent to which international criminal and regional human rights courts and tribunals have recognised – or failed to recognise – intergenerational harm, tracing an emerging but still limited and inconsistent body of practice.

⁶ As illustrated in the previous section, IHL does not recognise harm that is intergenerational in nature. Furthermore, none of the UN committees mentions the concept of intergenerational harm in their reparations decisions (i.e., the Human Rights Committee (HRC), the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Committee against Torture (CAT), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (CMW), the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED)). It is important to clarify, as a preliminary point, that the principle of ‘intergenerational equity’ is used in the context of the rights of future generations and climate change. Unlike intergenerational harm, intergenerational equity is a general principle of international law (Manbeck 2025, 201) which addresses the moral and legal obligation incumbent on current generations to ‘pass on (to future generations) the natural, and cultural resources of the planet in no worse condition than received’ (Brown Weiss 1988, 37–38).

There is currently limited recognition of intergenerational harm under international law. The International Criminal Court (ICC) in its early case law did not engage with this concept; rather it developed the categories of ‘direct’ and ‘indirect victims’ in its reparation decisions. Generally, the Court is empowered to award reparations to victims (International Criminal Court 2013, Rules 75, 94–99) as long as certain specific conditions are met. Two of these conditions are that (i) the harm caused to direct or indirect victims has to be clearly defined, and (ii) that there exists a link between the harm that the victims are suffering and the crimes for which the accused is convicted (*causal nexus*). In the 2009 *Lubanga Decision on ‘indirect victims’* (International Criminal Court 2009a), the Court established that the category of ‘indirect victims’ includes individuals who suffer harm as a result of the harm inflicted upon direct victims (para. 44).⁷ The Court further emphasised that a causal link must exist between the crimes charged and the harm alleged (para. 45) and that indirect victims must establish that they suffer harm due to their relationship with direct victims (para. 44, 49). This is in line with Rule 85(a) of Rules of Procedure and Evidence of the Court, according to which a causal nexus cannot be established, where the harm does not stem from the criminal conduct charged. While the Court made particular reference to the close personal relationship between offspring and parents – thereby allowing the former to qualify as indirect victims – it did not clarify the extent to which other (family) members may fall within this category (International Criminal Court 2009b, para. 52).

In 2017 in the *Katanga Reparation Decision*, the ICC explicitly addressed the issue of intergenerational harm for the first time (International Criminal Court 2017a). The applicants seeking reparations were five individuals who were born after the attack on Bogoro, a village in the DRC, during which the attackers ‘began an indiscriminate spree’, killing civilians, abducting and sexually enslaving women and detaining survivors alongside corpses. These applicants claimed to be victims of intergenerational harm, resulting from Katanga’s conduct (International Criminal Court 2017). They argued that the consequences of the Bogoro attack had extended into them through the trauma suffered by their parents and family members, affect-

⁷ Thomas Lubanga Dyilo was one of the founding members and the President of the non-state armed group *Union des Patriotes Congolais* (UPC) and the founder of the military wing of UPC the *Force Patriotique pour la Libération du Congo* (FPLC). He was convicted of the war crimes of conscripting and enlisting children under the age of 15 years old and using them to participate in hostilities.

ing their upbringing, behaviour, and educational opportunities (International Criminal Court 2015, paras 7, 11).⁸

While the Court acknowledged that the '(a)pplicants are, in all likelihood, suffering from transgenerational psychological harm', it seemed to embrace the defence's argument that there is insufficient evidence to establish a close link between the crimes for which Mr. Katanga was convicted and the harm endured by individuals born after the attack (para. 133–134). Therefore, the Court rejected their claims on the basis that the requisite causal nexus had not been established (para. 176). This reasoning appears to reflect a more restrictive approach to causation than that adopted elsewhere in the Court's reparations jurisprudence (see, e.g., the *Reparations Order in Al Mahdi*, International Criminal Court 2017b, paras 39, 44). The ICC has consistently assessed causation on a case-by-case basis and has recognised that reparations may extend beyond direct harm and the immediate consequences of the crime (International Criminal Court 2012, para. 249). In this light, the Court's reluctance to recognise a sufficient causal nexus in relation to intergenerational harm appears difficult to reconcile with its otherwise flexible approach to causation.

The applicants seeking reparations for intergenerational harm brought their claims before the Appeals Chamber, which rejected the arguments advanced by the victims' legal representatives (International Criminal Court 2018). In particular the Chamber declined to accept that the trauma suffered by the applicants originated from their parents' specific experiences of the Bogoro attack, even though the latter's psychological harm had been expressly recognised as connected to the attack (para. 23). The Appeals Chamber ultimately adopted a restrictive approach, dismissing the applicants' claims on the basis that they had failed to establish the requisite causal link between the crimes and the harm suffered (para. 17). Furthermore, the Chamber appeared to acknowledge as victims of intergenerational harm only the first-generation victims, suggesting that the closer the applicant's date of birth was to the date of the attack, the more likely it was that the events had a demonstrable impact on that individual (para. 29).

Some years later, in 2021, the ICC seemed more open to recognising harm caused across the generations when facing a similar issue in the *Ntaganda Reparations Decision* (International Criminal Court 2021). In this decision, the Trial Chamber maintained the distinction between direct victims, as those who suffer harm because of the commission of the crime (para. 34) and indirect ones, as those who suffer harm due to the harm inflicted upon direct victims (para. 35). The significance of

⁸ It needs to be mentioned that the document submitted by the alleged victims of intergenerational harm is classified as confidential (ICC-01/04-01/07-3585-Conf-tENG) and the assessment of their claims has taken place through the Defence's Response.

this decision though, lies in the Trial Chamber's recognition that the damage caused transcended not one, but two generations who were both unborn when the crimes were committed (Lostal 2021). The Trial Chamber specifically acknowledged that 'children of the direct victims may have suffered transgenerational trauma regardless of the date when they were born' – dismissing the argumentation adopted in the *Katanga Reparations Decision* by the Appeals Chamber – and found that 'although children born out of rape are considered direct victims, they may have also suffered transgenerational harm as indirect victims' (para. 182). Accordingly, the category of 'indirect victims' would include family members of the direct victims, even those who were not born at the time of the commission of the crime, provided they are able to establish the existence of intergenerational harm (paras. 36, 73, 183(d)(vi)).

The fact that neither the earlier International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), nor the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) had referred to the concept of indirect victims or intergenerational harm can be partly explained because their justice was primarily retributive with limited restorative elements, as these courts did not have a mechanism whereby they could directly provide reparations. Similarly, the jurisprudence of the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC) does not engage with these concepts. By contrast, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), in the *Prosecutor v. Ayyash et al.* (Special Tribunal for Lebanon (Trial Chamber) 2012), defined the victim as 'a natural person who has suffered physical, material, or mental harm as a direct result of an attack within the Tribunal's jurisdiction'. Yet it emphasised that this definition encompasses both 'direct' and 'indirect' victims who have suffered harm as a result of the attack (para. 794). The STL conceptualised victims broadly, emphasising that the participating victims in this case included among others the 'relatives of those who died' (para. 796). It further recognised that acts of terrorism affect primary, secondary and vicarious victims (para. 800–1), thereby explicitly acknowledging the existence of indirect victims. Yet, it did not mention the intergenerational consequences of the harm suffered.

Although in a different legal context, namely that of IHRL, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) has also recognised the harm suffered by indirect victims, without, however, explicitly invoking the concept of 'intergenerational harm'. Úbeda de Torres, in her analysis of the jurisprudence of the IACtHR, explains that 'indirect victims' may be divided into two categories: those who suffer harm as a result of the damage caused to the direct victim, which usually includes the next of kin or close family members, and the so-called 'potential victims' (de Torres 2011, 114). She defines the latter as individuals who may suffer harm in the sequence of events following the original illegal conduct. Nevertheless, she does not provide con-

crete examples of who may fall within this category and whether individuals claiming to suffer from intergenerational harm could be considered potential victims (de Torres 2011, 114; Rincón et al. 2022, 5.2.1).

In *Ituango Massacres v. Colombia* (2006), the Court examined the events that occurred in the Municipality of Ituango between June 1996 and October 1997, where paramilitary groups carried out attacks against the civilian population, killing many, looting property, and forcibly displacing others, with the acquiescence or the tolerance of state agents (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2006). In his Separate Opinion, Judge Sergio García Ramírez observed that the category of indirect victims encompasses individuals who are affected by harm inflicted upon direct victims, even though they do not experience that harm ‘immediately, directly and deliberately’ (Separate Opinion Of Judge Sergio García Ramírez 2006, para. 11). He further noted that the violations affecting such individuals may differ in nature and occur successively, reflecting the fact that different rights may be violated (Separate Opinion Of Judge Sergio García Ramírez 2006, para. 12). These observations regarding the definition of ‘indirect victims’ seem wide enough to potentially capture the harm experienced across generations, including the harm suffered by children as a consequence of violations inflicted upon their parents.

In the *Gudiel Alvarez et al. (Military Diary) v. Guatemala case* (2012), the IACtHR went further still by recognising the suffering of children and grandchildren linked to violations committed against their parents and grandparents, including individuals who were not yet born when the violation took place (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2012). The case concerned the enforced disappearance of 26 individuals and the abduction and torture of another victim as a child. The Court explained that in the context of enforced disappearances, harm extends beyond parents, offspring, and spouses to include siblings of the disappeared, unless proven otherwise. Most importantly, it also recognised harm suffered by offspring not yet born at the time of the disappearance (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2012, para. 287), as well as harm suffered by nieces, nephews, and grandchildren of the disappeared victims (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2012, para. 288). This is particularly significant as the Court acknowledged suffering experienced by individuals who did not directly witness or experience the original violation, thereby explicitly recognising that the effects of grave human rights abuses may persist across generations. The aforementioned analysis indicates while the IACtHR has not explicitly invoked the concept of ‘intergenerational harm’ in its case law, its jurisprudence adopts an approach that is sufficiently broad to encompass forms of harm experienced across generations.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) primarily distinguishes between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ victims. The latter are defined in the *Vallianatos and others v. Greece*, as those ‘to whom the violation would cause harm or who would have a valid and personal interest in seeing it brought to an end’ (European Court of Human Rights (Grand Chamber) 2013, para. 47). The standing of these individuals as indirect victims

depend(s) on the existence of special factors which gives the suffering of the applicant a dimension and character distinct from the emotional distress which may be regarded as inevitably caused to relatives of a victim of a serious human rights violation. (European Court of Human Rights 1999, para. 98)

Yet, when faced with alleged violations that are not closely linked to a death or disappearance the Court has adopted a more restrictive approach towards indirect victims and has reiterated that some rights are ‘non-transferable’ to other relatives (European Court of Human Rights 2025). In any case, the Court has not yet addressed trauma experienced or transmitted across generations, nor has it recognised intergenerational harm as such. Rather, in climate-related litigation, such as *Verein Klima Seniorinnen Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland* and *Duarte Agostinho and others against Portugal and 32 others* (see European Court of Human Rights (Grand Chamber) 2024 and European Court of Human Rights 2024) the Court’s concern has primarily been with preventing future harm or disproportionate burdens on future generations, rather than with addressing any psychological or emotional injuries carried across generations.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that international criminal and regional human rights courts and tribunals have solely engaged with the concept of ‘intergenerational harm’ in their reparations decisions, where they discuss the concept of ‘indirect victims’ and seem reluctant to award reparations in situations involving a potentially vast number of claimants.

Several factors help explain this position. As illustrated above, intergenerational harm has not yet been recognised as a distinct category of harm under international law, and there are serious legal challenges in establishing sufficient evidence of a causal nexus between the suffering of descendants and the original wrongdoing, especially because of the passage of time. Judicial practice typically recognises the immediate claims of the direct victims and their next-of-kin, relegating the claims of subsequent generations to a secondary position (Gribetz and Reig 2009, 115–142). Compensatory justice, thus, seems suitable to acknowledge the harm caused solely to direct victims and, potentially, to their next-of-kin, invisibilising the harm passed to subsequent generations (Moffett and Schwarz, 2018).

Furthermore, judicial practice does not seem prepared to set out explicit criteria or propose potential factors that could indicate the existence of a causal nexus between intergenerational harm and the crime for which the accused is convicted. So far, in every reparations decision before the ICC in which the claim of intergenerational harm has been raised, the Court has rejected those claims on the basis that the causal nexus requirement was not satisfied, without providing clear criteria upon which future claimants could rely.

The limitations identified in international criminal and human rights jurisprudence become even more pronounced when considering the possibility of securing redress for intergenerational harm caused by sanctions. The reasons for this are multifold. First, as was shown earlier in the article, international legal frameworks remain better equipped to address immediate and physically identifiable forms of injury than diffuse and long-term harms arising from policies such as sanctions. A further complication is that the (il)legality of sanctions remains contested, further complicating the possibility of legal remedies. While sanctions are often described as a form of economic ‘warfare’ (Neff 1988, 113), it is questioned whether IHL provides an appropriate framework for their regulation. Scholarly opinion remains divided on this question (Sassòli 2001, 244–246; International Court of Justice 1949; Tilahun and Okafor 2024, 7–16), and no unified approach has emerged. Some indicate that IHL may apply indirectly, either through the development of similar rules (Cohen 2009, 139–147) or through the application of exceptions found in IHL (O’Connell 2002; Reinisch 2002, 860).

With regard to IHRL, numerous UN Human Rights Council Resolutions, UN Special Rapporteurs and scholars have highlighted the adverse effects of unilateral sanctions on human rights, including the rights to life, health, medical care, and adequate housing, as well as the principle that individuals should not be deprived of their means of subsistence (Reisman and Stevick 1998; Bossuyt 2012; Human Rights Council 2017, Preamble, para. 12; Human Rights Council 2020, Preamble; Human Rights Council, 2022; Douhan 2025). Nevertheless, the extent to which such impacts amount to violations of IHRL remains contested. Some scholars argue that interference with human rights does not necessarily establish a legal violation (Milanovic 2025). Others contend that sanctioning states generally owe no human rights obligations to populations residing outside their territory or jurisdiction and, given the continuing controversy surrounding the extraterritorial application of human rights obligations, sanctions will not ordinarily constitute violations of IHRL vis-à-vis affected populations abroad (Fellmeth 2023). As a result, even where sanctions generate serious and long-lasting forms of suffering, including potentially intergenerational harm, the extent to which IHRL can recognise and address such harm remains contested.

A further distinction must be drawn between UN and unilateral sanctions. Under Articles 39, 41 and 42 of the United Nations Charter (United Nations 1945), the UN Security Council is empowered to adopt measures necessary for the maintenance of international peace and security, including measures not involving the use of armed force, including economic restrictions. Although the term ‘sanctions’ does not explicitly appear in the Charter, measures adopted by the UNSC under Article 41 are generally considered lawful expressions of the Council’s collective security mandate and are binding on all Member States under Article 25 of the Charter (Farall 2009). Consequently, even where such measures produce significant harm, avenues for legal redress remain extremely limited. The legality of unilateral sanctions is far more contested. Unlike UN sanctions, they are grounded in the foreign policy choices of individual states or organisations (Schmidt 2022, 60). Some justify them as lawful countermeasures (Fellmeth 2023) adopted when an obligation *erga omnes* is violated as long as they are proportionate (International Law Commission 2001, Articles 50–52). Others though argue they may amount to unlawful economic coercion (Douhan 2023) and violate the principle of non-intervention (Tzanakopoulos 2021, 787), with the absence of a universally accepted definition further compounding this uncertainty (Douhan 2021).

The inadequacy of existing legal frameworks to recognise and remedy intergenerational harm stemming from sanctions does not mean that they should remain unaddressed. Rather, it points towards the need for complementary approaches – among which intergenerational dialogue, examined in the following sections, offers particular promise.

Beyond Legal Remedies: Intergenerational Dialogue and the Recognition of Harm

In 2004, Kofi Annan, then-Secretary-General of the UN, observed that societies affected by large-scale abuses require a range of processes and mechanisms capable of addressing past harms, including both judicial and non-judicial approaches (United Nations Security Council 2004, para. 8). It was shown above that existing legal frameworks remain ill-equipped to address the intergenerational harm that may arise from sanctions regimes. Reporative mechanisms require an internationally wrongful act (Permanent Court of International Justice 1928, para. 125) and a causal nexus between conduct and injury suffered. Such requirements become especially difficult in cases involving intergenerational harm (Moffett 2023, 20; Ochi 2025, 294), where individuals may not yet have existed at the time of the original wrongdoing and where harm manifests across extended temporal periods (Moffett and Schwarz 2018, 9).

Where legal frameworks do not suffice to recognise or provide repair for intergenerational harm, research indicates that dialogue-based approaches may provide complementary tools through which experiences of suffering may be articulated and socially acknowledged. Drawing on insights from transitional justice scholarship, where dialogue has increasingly been understood as a process through which previously silenced harms may become visible and recognised (UNESCO 2026), dialogue may offer value in sanctions contexts. In such contexts, affected communities face comparable dynamics of silence and where the harm they suffer is either legally unrecognised or dismissed as an unintended by-product of foreign policy. As Scherto documents, silence is a common feature of communities torn by historical mass atrocities, functioning either as a form of self-protection and coping mechanism, or as defence against the effects of traumatic experience (Gill 2025, 155). Similar dynamics may emerge in contexts shaped by prolonged sanction regimes, where lived experiences of suffering frequently remain marginalised or are reduced to the status of unintended consequences. In such cases, rather than replacing legal accountability, such dialogue may create tools capable of addressing forms of suffering that exceed the temporal and evidentiary limits of formal legal processes. Reckoning with sanctions is not merely an exercise of revisiting past events, but an opportunity to examine who bears their costs and whose suffering is rendered invisible (Leogrande 1996). In doing so, dialogue may foster a more informed understanding of the human costs of sanctions and create the conditions under which affected communities can articulate their experiences and demand accountability.

Where communities subjected to prolonged sanctions regimes carry forms of inherited suffering, intergenerational dialogue may create processes within a victim community where such experiences can be narrated and socially acknowledged in ways that legal processes cannot. Oral history projects have long served as important vehicles for documenting and recognising experiences of mass violence. Testimony in particular has played an important role in formal truth commissions and transitional justice processes, where victims and survivors provide accounts to commissioners or other authorised bodies tasked with establishing a historical record of past harm and promoting acknowledgment and reconciliation (United Nations General Assembly 2013). Testimonies shared through less formal settings, including community archives or oral history initiatives may reshape social relations by enabling individuals to articulate experiences of suffering and by fostering a renewed sense of belonging within their communities, as members of the communities may share similar experiences and coping strategies. Similarly, in contexts of prolonged sanction regimes, public testimony may similarly create opportunities to articulate inherited dimensions of harm that often remain beyond the reach of existing legal frameworks (International Organization for Peacebuilding (Interpeace) 2025). Such testimonies may also challenge the tendency to reduce the effects of sanctions to abstract discus-

sions of ‘unintended consequences’. They foreground instead the real experiences of individuals and communities navigating prolonged conditions of deprivation and uncertainty. In doing so, they may contribute to broader recognition of inherited harm, including within future discussions concerning reparations and accountability.

Within peacebuilding scholarship, dialogue has been understood not merely as a retrospective exercise but as a forward-looking mechanism capable of interrupting cycles of harm (The Hammar skjöld Foundation 2019). In this context, dialogue has emerged as a means of addressing the legacies of conflict, rebuilding trust, and fostering a shared vision for a peaceful and sustainable future. Historical dialogue may contribute to shaping future responses by informing policy decisions, educational initiatives and preventive approaches (Barkan, Goschler, and Waller 2020). These insights, and especially the potential role of dialogue, may also be relevant for communities living under sanctions regimes. Narratives emerging through intergenerational dialogue and shared widely among relevant stakeholders may contribute to broader discussions concerning how the cumulative and inherited consequences of sanctions are understood, documented, and evaluated in future policymaking (International Crisis Group 2023; Tilahun and Okafor 2024).

Intergenerational dialogue facilitates the transmission of more than suffering. Just as trauma may be transmitted across generations, so too may the knowledge, coping strategies, and forms of resilience communities develop in response (Mello and Fiks 2012). Resilience is not produced in isolation. Rather, it is shaped by cultural, communal, and relational resources transmitted over time (Bonanno 2021; Southwick et al. 2014). In communities subjected to prolonged sanctions regimes, such resources may take varied forms – strategies for navigating economic scarcity, practices of solidarity, or ways of maintaining family, cultural, and social life under conditions of structural deprivation (Sadeqi Mohammadi and Weaver 2025). Research on the transmission of intergenerational trauma highlights the role of resilience, demonstrating that factors such as parenting style and open family communication can function as protective mechanisms against the transmission of trauma to subsequent generation (Giladi and Bell 2013, 384). In this context, resilience should not be understood as the absence of harm or a return to a pre-trauma state, but rather as the capacity to adapt and function despite the enduring effects of trauma (Litvak-Hirsch and Bar-On 2006, 465–483). Therefore, where resilience strategies exist, they represent a form of inherited knowledge that risks being lost if the experiences of those who lived through sanctions are not actively transmitted to subsequent generations (Hirsch 2008). Where such transmission does not occur, communities may find themselves not only carrying inherited harm, but also losing access to the collective resources that previous generations developed in response to it.

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that intergenerational dialogue may offer something that legal frameworks alone cannot: a process in which inherited suffering may be named, socially acknowledged, and collectively worked through. Recognition of harm and intergenerational harm itself carries significance, particularly in contexts where formal legal recognition remains unavailable. Finally, beyond recognition, such dialogue may serve a preventive function by informing future sanctions policy, and a restorative one by facilitating the transmission of collective resilience alongside inherited harm. In this sense, intergenerational dialogue is not merely a supplement to legal remedies but a valuable response to forms of suffering that legal frameworks, as presently constituted, cannot adequately address.

Conclusion

This article has examined a dimension of sanctions that existing legal and policy frameworks have so far largely failed to confront: their capacity to produce forms of harm that extend beyond the immediate and visible effects, that extend across generations, affecting individuals who never directly experienced the original coercive measures. Drawing on frameworks from developmental psychology (attachment theory), psychiatry and epigenetics (epigenetic transmission theory), and Indigenous scholarship on historical trauma, it has demonstrated that intergenerational harm is not a peripheral or speculative phenomenon, but a documented and theoretically grounded form of suffering with profound consequences for affected communities.

International law, as this article has shown, remains ill-equipped to address such harm on three levels. First, the conceptual categories through which harm is recognised, shaped primarily by IHL's focus on direct physical violence, lack the capacity to capture harm experienced in times of armed conflict that is indirect, diffuse, temporal, or intergenerational in character. Second, even where such harm is acknowledged, the causation requirements embedded in international legal doctrine around reparations present formidable obstacles to recognition and redress. While international criminal and human rights courts have begun to engage with intergenerational harm through the category of indirect victims, this engagement remains inconsistent and cautious. The prospect of legal redress for intergenerational harm caused by sanctions is therefore exceptionally remote, as international law does not conceptualise sanctions as unlawful *per se*, let alone recognise a harm that is diffuse and transmitted across generations by its nature.

Yet the trajectory of international jurisprudence suggests that this may change. As courts and tribunals become more willing to engage with intergenerational harm, as the *Ntaganda Decision* indicates, claims of intergenerational harm may increasingly find their way into future reparations proceedings. Whether such claims will succeed

remains uncertain, but their emergence would itself represent a significant shift in how international law engages with intergenerational harm. Nevertheless, even an expanded jurisprudence on intergenerational harm would leave the fundamental obstacles specific to sanctions largely unresolved, pointing toward the need for complementary mechanisms capable of operating where formal legal processes encounter evidentiary and temporal constraints. In this respect, intergenerational dialogue, this article has argued, offers an important avenue through which experiences of inherited harm may be narrated and socially acknowledged. By facilitating testimony, collective remembering, and the exchange of experiences, dialogue may contribute not only to recognition of suffering, but also to the transmission of resilience, coping strategies and community knowledge developed in response to prolonged hardship (Volkan 2025, 77). Intergenerational dialogue will not resolve the legal and political questions this article has raised, but it may be one of the spaces in which they begin to be asked, and in which the experiences of those who carry the weight of sanctions across generations are finally taken seriously.

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‘My Parents Don’t Want to Tell Me Such Things’: Girls’ Calls for Greater Intergenerational Dialogue on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Wellbeing

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Abstract: This paper explores girls' calls for greater intergenerational dialogue on sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing, drawing on data from Plan International's qualitative, longitudinal study with girls and their caregivers in nine countries (Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda, and Vietnam). The study followed the lives of 142 girls from their birth in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024, offering a unique opportunity to explore how families talk about sex and sexuality as girls grow up. Despite increasing awareness in research and policy that intergenerational dialogue is vital to promoting sexual and reproductive health and that comprehensive sexuality education is vital to achieving gender justice, we consistently found across time and very different contexts that caregivers were reluctant to discuss sex and sexuality with their children. Many felt girls already accessed this information from school, religious institutions, or the internet, while others gave their daughters vague warnings about not getting too close to boys and men. Girls themselves, by contrast, consistently expressed a desire for more information about menstruation, puberty, and sex, including preventing pregnancy, and they wanted to be able to discuss these topics within their families. They viewed such discussions as necessary to enabling them to make informed decisions and protect themselves from harm. The findings demonstrate a need to empower caregivers to discuss these topics with their daughters and, more broadly, the need for greater intergenerational dialogue in support of efforts to achieve gender equality.

Keywords: Girls, sexual and reproductive health and rights; intergenerational dialogue; intergenerational silence; gender equality; sexuality education

Introduction

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is widely acknowledged to be crucial to efforts to promote more gender equitable societies, in enabling men and women to experience physical, social, emotional, and mental wellbeing, enjoy their full rights and bodily autonomy, and be free from fear of violence, coercion, and discrimination (Punjani et al. 2025a, 1). CSE is vital to the advancement of gender equality (Grose et al. 2014, 751; Sell et al. 2023, 59) and parents² play a vital role in young people's education about sexuality (Beckett et al. 2010, 35). Yet, sexuality has historically been, and continues to be in most contexts globally, considered an inappropriate or irrelevant topic for children, who are all too frequently not given the information they need to make informed choices about sex and relationships (Robinson et al. 2017, 333).

The relevant academic literatures reveal a number of dominant discourses that shape and constrain intergenerational dialogue on sexuality. The first is of childhood innocence, in which children are seen as not yet developmentally mature enough to understand or deal appropriately with information about sexuality, despite concurrent panics about sexualisation in the media and the sexual imagery children inevitably

² In this paper, we use 'parents' as a shorthand to include parents and anyone in a caregiving role.

are exposed to (Robinson et al. 2017, 342). The second is the cycle of intergenerational silence on sexuality, in which adults raised in environments where sexuality was considered shameful do not feel comfortable to discuss it with their own children (Alcade and Quelopana 2013, 292; Punjani et al. 2025a, 4). Third is a discourse surrounding (especially adolescent) sexuality which constructs it as something to be feared, with any information given to children framed in terms of danger, disease, damage, and risk (Bay-Cheng et al. 2010, 1168; Bastien et al. 2011, 10; Mullis et al. 2021, 397; Ngabaza and Shefer 2019, 424). Finally, a fourth discourse surrounding adolescent sexuality has been labelled ‘responsibilisation’, in which adolescent girls are positioned as responsible for managing the ‘risks’ of male irresponsibility and desire, and indeed, for ‘upholding the moralities of the wider society’ (Ngabaza et al. 2016, 76). This discourse neglects conversations about consent, respectful relationships, and pleasure – positioning adolescent girls’ sexuality as something that must be tightly controlled (Goicolea et al. 2012).

Within these framings of adolescent sexuality as a ‘risk’ to be managed, a source of shame, or a subject of silence, there is a clear need to understand in greater depth how caregivers and their children do or do not communicate about sexuality, and what conversations adolescents would like to be having. In this article, we explore this topic drawing on data from Plan International’s qualitative, longitudinal study *Real Choices, Real Lives*. The study followed the lives of 142 girls in nine countries from their births in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024. Located across three regions, these countries are: Benin, Togo, and Uganda in Africa, Brazil, Dominican Republic, and El Salvador in the Americas, and Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam in Southeast Asia.

The core *Real Choices, Real Lives* research methodology was based on annual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with girls (from the age of seven in 2013) and their caregivers (from the start of the study in 2006). Caregivers were usually the girl’s mother, but in some cases the father, grandmother, an aunt, or other family member who was responsible for her care. Girls were interviewed using participatory and age-appropriate activities such as drawing and play exercises. While 142 girls in total participated in the study, in this research we excluded any girls who withdrew from the study, migrated, or died before the age of 15, in order to capture views as the girls progressed through adolescence. This left us with a sample of 104 of the girls and their caregivers from across the nine countries. It is important to note that while the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study was focused on countries from these three regions, our literature review (below) found many examples of sexual taboos and intergenerational silences in North America, Europe, and Oceania as well. Therefore, while the findings we report here relate to nine specific contexts, we see them as relevant globally.

We adopt a broadly feminist and poststructuralist framework to this research, in analysing how young people's sexuality education is 'constituted in socio-cultural, historical discourses, especially those underpinning dominant understandings of childhood and sexuality, and subject to the relations of power inherent within these multiple discourses' (Robinson et al. 2017, 337). Reproductive and sexual health are constantly produced and reproduced through broader gendered discourses that shape the acceptable behaviours, beliefs, and 'scripts' that men and women are expected to perform (Grose et al. 2014, 743). These scripts are almost always heteronormative and marginalise female sexual agency and consent (Nkani and Bhana 2016), while positioning women and girls as responsible for navigating the constant threat of male sexual violence (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). We are interested in understanding how dominant discourses of sexuality are produced and reproduced through parent-child dialogue and in exploring the possibilities for rupture (Renold and Ringrose 2008). Consistent with a feminist, poststructuralist theoretical framework, we approach the research with an explicit commitment to contributing to 'increasing the numbers of ways girls can "be"' (Jones 1993, 162). We therefore adopt the stance that every child has a right to learn in age-appropriate ways about sexuality and reproduction and that assumptions of childhood innocence '[rob children] of the opportunity to discuss and receive support in the sexualised world they inhabit' (McLaughlin et al. 2015, 212). Further, children learn gender roles through the family whether topics are explicitly discussed or not: 'Children learn about sexuality through both parents' acts and omissions' (OECD 2020, 2). Intergenerational silence on sexuality can teach young people that their bodies and desires are shameful and immoral, while depriving them of the information they need to stay healthy and safe.

The interview transcripts were coded by a team of seven researchers, who each produced summaries of a girl and her caregivers' views each year. The findings and themes discussed below reflect dominant discourses we saw reflected across all nine contexts. While we do not seek to generalise from this small number of rich, highly contextualised accounts, or to suggest that they reflect *all* girls' experiences, the recurrence of themes across nine different cultures and their resonance with themes emerging from the literature more broadly would suggest that for many parents and girls around the world, stigma and taboo still shape cultures of intergenerational silence on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Through analysis of this unique dataset, we are able to explore caregiver-girl relationships over the course of 18 years and to understand in-depth what information girls

were given, and how that influenced their experiences as they grew up.³ A number of our findings align with previous research showing that caregivers felt they lacked the knowledge and confidence to talk to their children about sex (e.g., Alcade and Quelopana 2013); that they were heavily influenced by the lack of sex education they had received as children themselves (e.g. Punjani et al. 2025a, 4); and that they worried about seeming to encourage their children to engage in sexual relationships. The qualitative, longitudinal data allows us to explore some of these topics in more depth or in different ways to previous research and this article makes a number of contributions. Firstly, through analysis of the girls' and caregivers' words over time, we can clearly show how caregivers' silence – no matter how well-intentioned – left some girls navigating puberty and adolescence with very little understanding of their bodies and the lifelong consequences this had for girls. Secondly, while previous studies have shown that caregivers often delay conversations about sex because they perceive their children to be too young, we can show how many caregivers consistently did so, year after year, even when their daughters were close to adulthood and in some cases, already in a long-term partnership with a boy or man. Thirdly, we discuss the girls' own views. While previous studies have been mixed on who it is that adolescents themselves would like to learn about sex from, we show both that the girls consistently expressed a desire for more information on sex and relationships, and that they wanted to gain this information from caregivers. Finally, through the caregivers' voices, we are also able to recognise the structural barriers influencing how they engage with intergenerational dialogue about sexuality. The findings reveal a crucial need to support caregivers and children to engage in healthy and open dialogue about sex and sexuality, to help ensure that girls have the information they need to navigate their adolescence safely, happily, and healthily.

The Importance of Comprehensive Sexuality Education for Gender Justice

Academic literature on CSE frequently makes the case that it is a vital tool in efforts to achieve gender justice (Ferfolia & Ullman 2017; Ngabaza et al. 2016), by which is meant societies in which people of all genders are treated with dignity and respect, based on values of 'freedom, tolerance and shared responsibility' grounded in relationships of solidarity (Cornwall and Rivas 2015, 411). CSE centres principles of

³ We recognise that annual interviews about gender norms with researchers from Plan International will have shaped the girls' and their families' decision making and attitudes. Consistent with our poststructuralist approach, we recognise this as another set of gender discourses the girls and their caregivers are negotiating. In many ways, the fact that caregivers did not engage in dialogues about SRHR, despite being asked if they did every year by a girls' rights NGO, makes the findings even more striking.

youth autonomy and decision making and provides young people with the information and skills they need to navigate healthy and ethical relationships (Elia and Tokunaga 2015, 107–8). Contrary to moral and religious panics about CSE, it has consistently been shown across a wide range of contexts to be more effective than abstinence-only education in supporting adolescents to delay their sexual debut until they feel physically and emotionally ready (Mullis et al. 2021, 387; Ogle et al. 2008, 283), and at reducing STIs and unwanted adolescent pregnancies (Ngabaza and Shefer 2019, 425; Punjani et al. 2025a, 2; Avellaneda and Dávalos 2017).

CSE programming has also been shown to have a positive effect on attitudes towards gender equality overall, including providing young people with a better understanding of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and human rights more broadly, and a greater understanding of sexual and emotional wellbeing (Sell et al. 2023, 59). When implemented fully, CSE programming also incorporates 'developmentally and culturally relevant, science-based, medically accurate information on a wide range of topics, including human development, gender identity, sexual behaviours, communication skills, empathy and mutual respect' (Rollston et al. 2020, 149). A key aim of CSE is to explore intimacy, desire, and pleasure alongside biological and health information, promoting the idea that young people have a right to enjoy healthy and satisfying relationships. One study with adolescents who had received CSE found that they held fewer 'rape-supportive beliefs' as a result of participating in the programme (Grose et al. 2014, 743), while the OECD argues that CSE can have a protective effect against gender-based violence because 'adolescents may more easily resist pressures to engage in sexual activity that they do not feel comfortable with when the expectation is for relationships to be pleasant for all parties' (2020, 8). Proponents of CSE also argue that it has a protective effect against child sexual abuse because it is much easier for a child to identify an abusive situation and tell a trusted adult if they can correctly name body parts, have the skills to communicate about them, and understand their own bodily autonomy (Schneider and Hirsch 2020, 447–8).

CSE also has wider benefits for young people in terms of their relationships and communication. Evidence suggests that those families who do feel comfortable discussing sexuality openly and consistently throughout childhood report better communication overall, with adolescents feeling closer to their parents, suggesting a strong link between CSE and parent-child dialogue (Beckett et al. 2010, 35; Poffenberger et al. 2025, 2). Further, research has shown a link between this open communication within the family and a young person's ability to communicate effectively with a sexual partner, which in turn leads to a greater ability to negotiate use of contraceptives (Ogle et al. 2008, 283; Robinson et al. 2017, 96; Singh 2025, 122). Finally, one 10-year longitudinal study with young women found that talking openly

with their parents about sexuality, and the resulting positive impacts on their communication and self-efficacy overall, enabled them to establish healthier relationships with others and had a positive impact on their self-esteem and happiness (Poffenberger et al. 2025, 10).

Despite the extensive and encouraging body of evidence on the benefits of CSE, and on the ‘essential’ role that parents and caregivers can play in promoting adolescents’ sexual health and wellbeing (Punjani et al. 2025a, 2), as we now go on to discuss, a culture of intergenerational silence still dominates (Alcade and Quelopana 2013, 292).

Intergenerational Silence on Sexual and Reproductive Health

Research across a range of contexts and regions has consistently shown that caregiver-child dialogue on sexuality is limited. Parents and caregivers find it difficult to talk about this topic with their children, beyond threats and warnings of dire consequences for failing to remain abstinent (e.g., Bastien et al. 2011, 8; Plan International 2022). Despite many caregivers feeling they have a responsibility to discuss this topic with their children (Robinson et al. 2017, 342), many still do not initiate such conversations. For example, one survey in Canada found that while 95% of parents agreed that parents should share responsibility for sex education with schools, most respondents had not discussed the topic with their children (Yu 2010, 190). Research in California in the US found that nearly two thirds of boys had not been taught how to use a condom before they first engaged in sexual intercourse, with half of parents saying they had not discussed this with their sons (Beckett et al. 2010, 38–9). Research in Australia has shown that while parents there want their children to receive better sex education than they themselves received as children, they still find it difficult navigating sexual taboos in openly discussing the topic (Robinson et al. 2017, 334–6).

Studies have found that parents are keen for schools to deliver information on the biological aspects of sexual reproduction and on preventing pregnancy and STIs and that they consider this to be sufficient information (e.g., Rios-Ellis 2011, 178). However, there are many issues with this approach. Along with the clear benefits of parent-child communication discussed above, there are also concerns related to leaving sexual education entirely up to schools. While many parents wish for schools to teach the issue, schools themselves are frequently fearful of parental backlash, omitting topics that they believe may cause controversy (Ferfolja and Ullman 2017, 239). School curriculum content depends on national or state-level policy and can be very inconsistent (Poffenberger et al. 2025, 1), while even where a government mandate

for sexuality education does exist, the delivery will vary widely depending on the beliefs, knowledge, confidence, and comfort levels of teachers (Bantebya-Kyomuhendo et al. 2013, 34). In many cases, school-based sexuality education can reinforce binary gender roles (Elia and Tokunaga 2015, 117; Ferfolja and Ullman 2018, 237), focus on a risk-based framing and omit discussions of love and pleasure (Nilsson et al. 2020, 9), reproduce heteronormative and pro-family discourse and rest on 'continued assumptions of adult authority underpinned by a desire to 'civilise' young people' (Ngabaza and Shefer 2019, 423–4). Further, school-based sex education frequently reproduces discourses that see girls as responsible for managing their behaviour and boys' desire for their bodies (Llwag et al. 1998, 14; Ngabaza et al. 2016, 75–6). Thus, parents cannot necessarily rely on schools to provide a comfortable space for girls to discuss respectful relationships and emotions beyond purely biological content about sex and birth.

While some parents and caregivers believe sexuality is already being taught at school, many others do want to discuss the topic with their children but feel unable. The literature identifies a number of barriers to open parent-child dialogue, many of which can be traced back to the parents' lack of education on the topic when they were children (Mullis et al. 2021, 397; Punjani et al. 2025a, 7; Jerves et al. 2014). Parents across a range of contexts report not having the knowledge or the confidence to discuss sexuality with their children (Alcade and Quelopana 2013). They further cite religious and cultural taboos as a barrier to open communication (Punjani et al. 2025b, 2; Mullis et al. 2021, 391; Jerves et al. 2014), and yet, as discussed above, this seems to be a phenomenon that is widespread across cultures and therefore cannot be attributed to any particular culture alone. Further, parents frequently struggle to identify the appropriate age to discuss these topics with their children, always believing their children are too young (Nelson et al. 2014).

Where the literature is less clear is on the subject of whether adolescents themselves want to discuss this topic with their parents. One study in the US of Latina intergenerational family relationships found that young people wanted their parents to be given support and more resources to discuss these topics with them (Rios-Ellis 2011, 178). However, another study in Scotland found parents reporting that children were very reluctant to discuss sexuality with them (Ogle et al. 2008, 286).

The intergenerational silence on sexual and reproductive health is also shaped by historical and social context. Despite their significant differences, the nine postcolonial nations discussed in this analysis carry common legacies. In many contexts across the globe, colonialism imposed a binary gender system that enforces the subjugation of females by males (Lugones 2008, 86) and the tight control of women's sexuality (Lugones 2010, 745). Colonialism also had an impact through the imposi-

tion of new forms of knowledge (Quijano 2007, 169–170), that is, how individuals make sense of their own gender, race, and subjectivities. These legacies systematically dismantled the structures through which information about bodies, sexuality, and reproduction had historically been transmitted between generations. In that sense, the silences reproduced across generations are shaped by colonial inheritance.

In the analysis sections that follow, we explore all these themes in relation to the *Real Choices, Real Lives* girls and their caregivers. While our findings are consistent with existing literature on the barriers to intergenerational dialogue on SRHR, we are able to explore in depth how parents and daughters experience these barriers and the consequences they have for girls over time. Crucially, we define intergenerational dialogue as much more than an absence of intergenerational silence. While education and the transmission of knowledge are needed to help adolescents to better understand their bodies, we see intergenerational dialogue in the context of CSE as a reciprocal form of communication in which family members across generations gain skills and knowledge, co-construct meanings and cultivate collective agency (Gill 2026; Mannion 2016). This requires adults to move beyond adultist framings of CSE that see adults as transmitting knowledge to young people, an approach which is especially pertinent to our research, given the clear findings that many adults feel they do not have this knowledge themselves (Vaccarino-Ruiz et al. 2026). Rather, intergenerational dialogue on SRHR requires adults to recognise age-related imbalances and discriminations, and to recognise young people's knowledge, identities, and experiences as 'worthy of respect and serious consideration' (Taft 2014, 462; Overton 2026). While the literature on intergenerational dialogue warns that such an approach is challenging across many contexts and topics, our findings below would suggest that parents and adolescents would need a great deal of support to even begin to engage in reciprocal dialogue on sex and sexuality.

Barriers to Intergenerational Communication on SRHR

Lack of parental knowledge

In many cases, the cohort parents wanted to provide their daughters with more information on sex and sexuality – even if this was often framed in terms of abstinence and risk management – but felt unable to because of their own lack of knowledge. Parents overwhelmingly reported that they had not been taught about the topic themselves, and many mothers expressed a desire to help their daughter avoid becoming pregnant as young as they themselves did. However, even as adults, many still felt they did not have enough understanding to pass on.

It is in this way that the lack of parental knowledge is a long-term, generational characteristic reproduced over time. For example, in the Philippines in 2012, Jocelyn's

mother revealed in an interview that she first got her period aged 16, but did not know what it was:

Interviewer: Do you remember when you had your first menstruation? What was your age then?

Jocelyn's mother: Yes. 16!

Interviewer: What did you feel?

Jocelyn's mother: Bad, because I was shocked, 'And why was it that way?'

Interviewer: Did you know it was coming or you just discovered it?

Jocelyn's mother: I didn't know it was coming like that, because we were just playing then.

Interviewer: What did you do then?

Jocelyn's mother: I was told, 'Oy, your skirt has blood stain!' I went home like that. My mother said, 'There it is!' I said, 'There's blood!' Of course I was 16! There, we were told, 'That's what is called menstruation!'

In the same year, she said that she did not consider how many children she wanted, but her husband always said four. When asked if she and her husband discussed family planning, she said, 'We agreed to practice withdrawal when we had only two children. Ah, it didn't work; I got pregnant!' At this point, the couple had six children. The interviewer pointed out that Jocelyn's mother was still of childbearing age and asked what steps they were taking to avoid more pregnancies, and she responded 'We will have contact when I am about to have menstruation. It is safe, they say, when the menstruation is about to arrive, to have contact.' By the following year, Jocelyn's mother was pregnant again. This example clearly illustrates themes we observed across the cohort, where mothers themselves do not always have the information they need about fertility and contraception across their own childbearing lifetimes, leaving them unable to inform their daughters. In another example from the Philippines, in 2024, Mahalia was one of just two girls from the cohort of 104 to start dating another girl during her adolescence. That year, her mother told the interviewer she was not sure what she needed to advise her daughter because 'when it comes to pregnancy, I am not sure because they are women.'

In Dominican Republic, Valerie's mother has repeatedly deferred conversations with her daughter about SRHR, likely due to her own lack of confidence and limited knowledge: 'I have never spoken to her about it [...] because I haven't; maybe I haven't got the right information to talk to her about that' (2019). This persisted into the following year: at age 14 Valerie was still uninformed. 'Well, I can't say she's well informed about sex because she hasn't been given, how can I say? She hasn't been given details about that' (2020). In 2019, Valerie's mother revealed that Valerie had not even told her mother when she first started menstruating, illustrating how a lack of intergenerational dialogue on the topic can limit the support a girl has access to at key moments in her adolescence.

In El Salvador, Bessy's grandmother told the interviewer in 2021, when Bessy was 15 years old, that she assumed Bessy had been taught about puberty and sex at school, and that she had advised her how to behave around boys and men. Like several other parents across the cohort, Bessy's grandmother was open about her lack of confidence and knowledge in discussing the topic and even asked the interviewer for guidance: 'We don't know anything right, compared to an educated person, for example like you, who understands more, as you're better educated, you can develop their minds more, with advice and all that. You can guide them, by talking to them about good things and bad things' (2021). Similarly, in El Salvador, Karen's mother said, 'I'd like someone who knows about that to come to explain to us what it is so we know what to tell our daughters' (2021). Several parents, including Griselda's father in Dominican Republic, expressed the view that their teenage daughters were probably more knowledgeable than they were about the topic, given their access to phones and the internet. This is particularly notable from Griselda's father, as Griselda had entered into a union by the age of 13.

The caregivers' desire to engage in dialogue but inability to do so suggests that parental lack of knowledge is shaped by structural barriers. This is what Fricker defines as hermeneutical injustice, which occurs 'when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences' (2007, 2). Karen's mother's plea for someone to talk to 'us' about SRHR, Jocelyn's mother's lack of understanding of how to control her own fertility, and some parents' perceptions that their daughters were more knowledgeable than they were, all clearly illustrate the need to move beyond adultist framings of adults educating girls on sexuality. Rather, adults and adolescents need the resources to engage in collective, reciprocal conversations.

Cultural and religious taboos

Across the cohort, cultural and religious taboos made parents feel it would be inappropriate to discuss sexuality with their daughters. For example, in the Philippines in

2024, when Chesa was 18, her mother found it very difficult to talk about 'obscene' topics with her and linked this directly to the culture of her community:

Interviewer: Do you talk to her about sex and puberty?

Chesa's Mother: She talks about things. Whatever she shares in school, she also tells it to me.

Interviewer: What are the stories?

Chesa's Mother: The one about... about... about sex. [The interviewer noted she looked uncomfortable and very reluctant to say the word sex.] The lessons, that's all.

Interviewer: Are you open to talking about things other than what you said you are talking about? For example, information about puberty or sex?

Chesa's Mother: No. [*Laughs*]

Interviewer: Why?

Chesa's Mother: We're not used to it, not in our culture.

Interviewer: Do you think other parents in your community talk to their daughters about sex and puberty?

Chesa's Mother: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Chesa's Mother: There is no obscene conversation in our village.

Interviewer: Do you think talking about sex is obscene?

Chesa's Mother: Yes.

Interviewer: But do you think that children and parents should talk about sex, about adolescence?

Chesa's Mother: Yes. So that they can also learn how to avoid getting pregnant.

In some communities, cultural practices that had historically ensured that adolescents were given information on puberty were gradually eroding, without parents

necessarily stepping in to fill the knowledge gap. For example, in Uganda, Dembe's father told the interviewer in 2021 that 'it is a practice of long that it is always the aunt of the girl who is to speak to the girl about sex and puberty', and, when asked why, replied, 'I think it is just our culture and also because parents feel shy to speak to their children.' However, he noted that parents should also discuss the topic with their children and was critical of those who did not. In 2016, in Uganda, Beti – aged ten – stated that 'she had not been taught anything about the topic and that her aunt had never had a conversation with her because she stays very far.' While changing social and economic factors – like Beti's aunt needing to live far away for work – were impacting on the strength of kinship bonds and eroding traditional ways of passing knowledge down, taboos and stigma were preventing young women from gaining that information through other means.

In several of the cohort countries, religious institutions had a key influence on caregivers' approach to girls' sexuality. For example, Lelem's grandmother in Togo (2021) used teachings from the church to shape her own communication with her grandchildren on sex. Alice's mother in Benin believed that Alice had received all the information she needed on SRHR from church. Alice herself explained aged 12 that 'our church teaches us that girls should remain virgins until they marry' (2017). In Dominican Republic, Dariana's mother described telling her daughter that 'God always rewards patience. When you get married, God wants you to be pure, a virgin. I always talk to her about that' (2020). In many cases, parents felt that it was the duty of religious institutions to teach young people about sexuality because their understanding of the topic should be framed in terms of religion, morality, and abstinence. In that sense, religious framings of sexuality can act as a barrier to open intergenerational dialogue and keep reproducing gender inequalities across generations.

Fear of encouraging sexual experimentation

Consistent with the literature, many of the parents across the cohort reported that they feared that if they discussed sex and sexuality with their daughters, they would encourage them to experiment with sexual activity. For example, Gabriela's father in El Salvador said, 'I felt that if I talk to her about it, I'll spread her wings' (2020). In Cambodia, Nakry's mother said in 2021, 'I have never talked to her about sexual health because I thought it was unnecessary [...] I'm afraid that the others will laugh at me and I'm afraid that the girls would try it out of curiosity.' Raisa's mother in Dominican Republic explained that 'sometimes you start by saying "this is how it's done, men do this, men do that". And we talk about sex and then I think that it encourages her more. As long as I don't talk to her, she's calmer' (2020). Margaret's mother in Benin not only chose not to discuss the topic at home, but also forbade

her daughter from going to a workshop run by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) on SRHR 'because over there they would talk about everything positive and negative, and the child in turn would only keep the negative side and act on it' (2024). Across the examples, the caregivers held strong views that talking about sex and sexuality would imply permission for their daughters to engage in sexual relationships, and so parents sought to delay a perceived inevitability.

Mannion (2016, 14) suggests that for some topics, intergenerational learning might require engaging 'adults and young people separately and together'. Margaret's mother's fears about the NGO workshop content above again hint at the possibilities for collective conversations to help overcome stigma and fear. Without denying the importance for adolescents of being able to discuss these topics amongst themselves, creating spaces for intergenerational conversations might also alleviate parental fears. Perhaps Margaret's mother might be prepared to let Margaret attend the workshop if she was also part of the conversation.

It is worth noting that many of the girls' caregivers had themselves entered unions or become pregnant before the age of eighteen. They too had lacked access to the education, language, and tools needed to navigate sexuality, a historically reproduced absence that continues to influence what they feel equipped to communicate to the girls. The avoidance of dialogue is not only an individual matter, but a reflection of gendered power structures that have long governed what girls and women are entitled to know about their own bodies and sexual lives. Rather than disrupting this pattern, caregivers appear to reinforce it. The fear of encouraging sexual experimentation reproduces the same silence and secrecy that the caregivers experienced themselves.

Perceptions of innocence and age-appropriateness

For many of the caregivers in the cohort, their daughters were never considered old enough to receive information on sex and puberty, even when they had started menstruating, were in a union with a boy or man, or even in a small number of cases, had become a mother.

In Vietnam, Ly's mother consistently told the interviewer that she did not talk to her daughter about sex yet because she was too young, and her interviews indicate a number of missed moments for dialogue due to this belief. She planned to talk to her about reproductive health when she was 15 or 16. When Ly first started menstruating in 2019, at age 13, she shared with the interviewer that she had been too embarrassed to tell her mother. That same year, her mother reported that when she learned that Ly had begun menstruating, she told her that 'I would kill her if she had a boyfriend.' Yet, at the same time, Ly's mother still did not appear to consider Ly old

enough to learn about how to protect herself from pregnancy, saying, 'I have not ever talked about pregnancy or [birth] with her because she is still very little and has not known much.' Despite earlier stating that she planned to discuss the topic with Ly when she was 15 or 16, in 2024, when Ly was 18, Ly's mother stated that she thought Ly got information about her body from 'her friends and teacher.' When asked if she spoke with her on the topic, Ly's mother replied, 'Well, yes, I also said to let her take care of herself.' This response reflects the often-vague ways in which parents described such conversations, typically framing them by placing a responsibility on a girl to manage her sexuality and behaviour.

In more than one family, caregivers continued to consider their daughters too young to learn about sex and pregnancy, even after their older sisters had become pregnant and in a small number of tragic cases, died in childbirth. For example, in 2016, Nimisha's father explained that one of Nimisha's older sisters had left to get married, and 'I just saw her one day with a child.' In 2019, he explained that another of Nimisha's sisters had died that year while giving birth. Yet, in the same year, when Nimisha was 12 years old, he stated in relation to sex and puberty, 'I don't talk to her about such things.' When asked where children should learn about these topics, he responded, 'I think we the parents are in a better position to teach them such things, but the problem is that when we look at our children, we often think that they are still young to be taught such things. This makes it difficult for us to teach them.' Nimisha herself told the interviewer in 2020 that girls in her community were badly affected by 'a lack of information on their health and reproductive rights', and in 2024, then aged 17, stated she had only learnt about sex at school but would like to learn more. When asked if she had heard of contraceptives, she replied simply, 'No'. Even when faced with the tragic consequences of adolescents' limited information, some caregivers still perceived talking about the topic as inappropriate.

In the Dominican Republic, Chantal's mother mentioned that she hadn't spoken about sex to her 10-year-old daughter yet because she had not started menstruating, 'There is no point in speaking to a child about that, if they still don't have what they call the moon' (2017). The conversation was planned to be reactive, rather than pre-emptive or ongoing. Yet, two years later, Chantal's mother dismissed having a conversation because 'they tell them about that at school'; however, her father expressed planning to have a conversation when Chantal was older: 'we have to tackle it with her one day so that she doesn't get... She doesn't get led astray [...]. You can talk openly with a 16-year-old kid and tell them what's what' (2019). Even though Chantal's mother first gave birth aged fifteen, both parents seemed to prefer to delay the conversation until Chantal reached a perceived appropriate age. At age 13, Chantal shared that she had experienced menarche that year, but had not spoken to her parents about it: 'I did it myself [...] one of my aunts got her period before I did,

I used to sleep with her and she would use [a sanitary product] and I saw how' (2020). And so, the postponement of dialogue based on imagined, changing milestones – upon menarche, when school educates them, at age 16 – resulted in Chantal taking it upon herself to learn how to manage her menstrual hygiene. As seen in the literature (Punjani et al. 2025b; Mullis et al. 2021; Robinson et al. 2017; Jerves et al. 2014), many caregivers recognise the importance of sexuality education but miss the opportunity to have these discussions with their daughters. This example illustrates the resourcefulness that girls must develop to find out important information about taking care of their bodies. As the following section illustrates, some girls still felt they did not have this information, even after they themselves had become mothers.

Consequences for Girls of a Lack of Intergenerational Dialogue

The *Real Choices, Real Lives* data set allows us to explore in-depth how many of these barriers to intergenerational dialogue can have serious and sometimes lifelong implications for a girl's health and wellbeing.

For example, Doris in El Salvador consistently lacked information on sex and pregnancy, even after she became pregnant at 15. Aged 12, when asked what she knew about reproductive health, Doris explained that her mother told her that when she got her period, 'I must look after myself, that no one can touch me' (2019). Doris added that she did not know anything about sexuality, but that it would be important for girls to learn about the topic, 'so they don't get pregnant' (2019). Doris's mother described giving her warnings about pregnancy and its consequences, but not any information on how pregnancy occurs or how to prevent it. She said she told Doris, 'that pregnancy is a commitment, I tell her to be careful, because they leave us... I tell her she can have a boyfriend when she's older' (2019).

As we frequently saw across the cohort, Doris's mother felt that silence, vague threats, and warnings were the appropriate approach to the topic, which cumulatively produced effects that ran counter to their intended purpose. When asked in 2020 if she talked to her daughter about sex and puberty, she replied, 'I tell her she has to be careful, yes' (2020). However, in 2021, when asked if she had been taught about the topic, Doris replied 'no'. Then, by 2022, Doris told the interviewer that she was pregnant. In 2024, 17-year-old Doris was now a mother, and though she said she still did not know much about puberty and menstruation, it was at this point that she sought to break the cycle of intergenerational silence. She stressed the importance of receiving sexuality education and mentioned that those who should talk to girls are 'the mothers, because the mothers have to be truthful with them' (2024).

She said that girls needed information about contraceptives: ‘Why? So they don’t get pregnant, because raising children is hard, this life’ (2024).

Huong’s story in Vietnam illustrates the risk to girls’ health if they do not understand their bodies. In 2017, Huong – aged 10 – told the interviewer, ‘I don’t know what menses is.’ Her mother in the same year told the interviewer, ‘When we have a bath together, I show her what changes could be and the menstruation and tell her how to care her body.’ Huong’s mother was clearly supportive of the idea of talking to Huong about the topic and was trying to improve on her own experience as an adolescent: ‘My mother didn’t tell me that as she was busy with her business.’ However, in 2018, Huong explained that her mother had talked to her about periods once, ‘a long time ago’, but that her mother talked about the topic only ‘rarely’. Her mother seemed to feel uncomfortable discussing the topic and deemed one conversation to be sufficient. This left Huong with limited understanding, as illustrated by one of her responses in 2019, when she was 12 years old. The interviewer asked her if it was good or bad for children to be taught about menstruation at school. Huong replied, ‘It’s good because I will learn how to prevent it.’

In 2021, when Huong was 14, she had started menstruating but was experiencing very irregular periods, sometimes once every three months. When she went to her mother for help, her mother’s first response was to worry about pregnancy: ‘My mom was worried and asked me, “Did you do something?”’ Meanwhile, Huong described anxiously researching the issue herself, ‘I read on the internet that I could be infertile.’ When asked if her parents talked to her about sex and puberty, she replied, ‘No, my parents don’t want to tell me such things. I have to search online for myself. Because my mother is afraid that I think something crazy.’ When asked if she would like more information, she said, ‘Yes. My body has menstrual disorders, so I want to find out. But I don’t have time to find out what medicine to take or go to the hospital.’ In 2024, aged 17, when asked who should teach girls about sex and puberty, Huong stated she thought it should be parents. She added,

If I were a parent, I also want me to teach my kids those things. I feel like my mom, she didn’t talk much about how I have to protect my body, so I want my kids to know more. Because the previous generation here kind of didn’t know or people didn’t care. So I also want my child to know more. I want to be an elementary school teacher, so I’m going to tell them.

From Huong’s words, we can see how limited caregiver-child dialogue had left Huong managing a menstrual disorder alone. Because of this, Huong planned to educate not only her own children, but also the young children she hoped to teach in her career, about their bodies early. However, what is unclear at this point, is whether

she herself will have the knowledge to do so. While some of the girls expressed a commitment to breaking cycles of intergenerational silence on SRHR, it is not clear whether they will be able to do so.

Another example of the lifelong consequences of a lack of information is the story of Folami in Togo, who had a baby aged 14 in 2020. Folami's grandmother told the interviewer that same year, 'She was beginning puberty, she had only one period before she became pregnant', demonstrating an acute missed moment in which early information could have made a critical difference. In 2017 and 2018 (aged 11 and 12), Folami responded to questions about her knowledge or thoughts on sex and puberty with 'I don't know.' In 2019, she was able to share some basic information on menstruation, learnt from her sister. Over these years, Folami's mother consistently reported that she never spoke to Folami about these matters: 'I can't lie, I've never talked to her about it' (2017). She was, however, happy for teachers to discuss it with her daughter: 'It would be good to teach this at school, it could prevent lots of pregnancies' (2017). By 2019, Folami's mother shared that 'I'm afraid if she learns about it, she will become sexually active' (2019). In 2020, her grandmother stated that Folami 'has more knowledge about sex and puberty, the proof is that she is 5 months pregnant.' However, she then went on to contradict this, conceding that 'if she'd had sufficient information, she wouldn't be pregnant' (2020). The following year, Folami's mother told the interviewer that it is 'up to a mother to educate her daughter about health and her body', but also said of her daughter, who was now a mother, 'I don't think she has enough information because she's still small.' Folami herself clearly indicated that the pregnancy had been unplanned. She described experiencing a great deal of stigma because of her pregnancy and motherhood, telling the interviewer, 'I don't have any friends anymore; they were gossips and traitors [...] I've given up school because I have to look after my son.' Folami used retrospection to recognise the role of information in influencing sexual decision making. When asked if girls should learn about sex and pregnancy, she replied, 'Yes, so that girls won't make a mistake that ends in pregnancy which would stop them attending school, like me actually' (2021).

In these three cases, the girls were left unable to make informed decisions about their lives and their bodies, with potentially serious and lifelong consequences. Two of the girls were mothers aged 14 and 16, while one girl was left unsure how to manage a menstrual disorder and unsure if she might be infertile. Furthermore, even after becoming mothers, as is Doris's case, they still had not received enough information about their own bodies, sexuality, and reproduction. In all these cases, the parents believed that they were discussing SRHR with their children to some degree, and yet the adultist framing of these conversations, with a focus on conveying threats and warnings, left the girls unsure how to manage their health and wellbeing.

Girls' Calls for Increased Intergenerational Dialogue on SRHR

As the above case studies illustrate, while parents were unsure or unwilling to speak to girls about sexual and reproductive health, girls themselves were clearly demanding increased dialogue, breaking the cycle of intergenerational silence. We found that 86 of the 104 girls had at some point in their childhood or adolescence expressed a need for girls to have more and better education on sex and sexuality. Their reasoning for this varied. Some, like Nimisha in Uganda and Anti-Yara in Togo, had seen their sisters lose their lives in childbirth and wanted greater control over if and when they became pregnant. Some, like Huong, wanted to understand their bodies better in order to deal with menstruation or menstrual disorders. Reaksmei in Cambodia – like Doris in El Salvador and Folami in Togo – became pregnant during adolescence, in her words, ‘by chance.’ She described herself as ‘happy and unhappy at the same time’, but felt, just like Doris and Folami, that girls need greater education on SRHR so that they can avoid unplanned pregnancies (2024). Gabriela in Dominican Republic felt that girls needed more information on sexuality, so that they would not ‘allow anyone to touch them without their consent’ (2024), mirroring research showing that CSE can help children to avoid, or remove themselves, from abusive situations.

Whatever their reasons for wanting more and better sexuality education, girls across three different regions and nine very different contexts consistently stated that they would like more of this dialogue to happen at home. There was a clear trend that caregivers would tell us that the girls were too young while, in parallel, the girls would either express a desire for more information or demonstrate a clear lack of knowledge at a critical stage in which they were beginning to experience puberty. We repeatedly saw girls telling interviewers that they would feel most comfortable discussing this topic with their caregivers, typically mothers or other female family members. We include brief quotes here from girls in all nine countries to illustrate how prevalent this finding was across all nine countries.

In Togo, Azia said that girls need to learn about sex and puberty ‘so they can protect themselves’, and that ‘their mothers should teach girls because they’re closer to them’ (2021). In Uganda, Namazzi told the interviewer that girls ‘should be taught methods of preventing pregnancy’, and when asked by whom, she said, ‘I think mothers’ (2024). Layla in Benin felt that girls should be taught about sex and puberty by their mothers, aunts and married older sisters (2024).

Kyla in the Philippines told the interviewer in 2017 that she would like to learn about reproductive health and pregnancy from ‘my mother’ when she was 12 or 13.

However, her mother was a priest and told the interviewer in 2020 that Kyla learnt about the topic at school, and that at home, 'most of what we communicate on is about the Bible.' Kannitha in Cambodia said that girls should be taught about sex and pregnancy in order 'to protect themselves', and that the information should come from 'parents and teachers because these two actors can be close to them' (2024). Tien in Vietnam said in 2019 that if she could choose who to receive information on menstruation, sex, and pregnancy from, 'I choose my grandmother.'

In Brazil, Bianca also expressed a desire to hear about sex and puberty from both 'the parents and the school' (2021), despite her mother appearing to be unsure what puberty meant and telling the interviewer she thought that Bianca had already learnt about it at school (2020). Raquel in El Salvador thought that girls should be taught about SRHR from their mothers because 'I feel that there is more trust between a mother and a daughter' (2024). Gabriela in Dominican Republic specifically referenced parents' 'responsibility' to 'inform their children, without any kind of nicknames for their children's private parts' (2024).

While some of the girls in these examples are calling on both school and parents to take responsibility for CSE, in many cases girls specifically asked to learn about the topic from their female caregivers. Notably, across the global cohort none of the girls were opposed to parents being a source of information about CSE. This raises a number of issues, given the evidence both in the literature and in the case studies we have discussed here about parents' lack of confidence, knowledge, and, in some cases, willingness to discuss the topic with their daughters. The findings clearly show a considerable gap between daughters' desire for intergenerational dialogue on sexuality and parents' ability to engage in it.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this article clearly show an urgent need for girls everywhere to receive more and quality comprehensive sexuality education, in response to long-term, generational patterns of withholding/lacking information on the topic. Across regions and very different cultural settings, we have shown that girls are left to find out information for themselves about sex and pregnancy and frequently to manage their periods and related health issues without parental support. While many caregivers support the idea of girls learning about SRHR and often frame this in terms of wanting to provide more information than they themselves were given as children, they frequently lack the knowledge and confidence to discuss the topic or feel constrained by cultural and religious taboos. The longitudinal data allows us to explore in depth the potentially dangerous and lifelong consequences of intergenerational silence on adolescent girls' sexual health and wellbeing. The findings clearly

show the link between CSE and gender equality more broadly, with girls' unplanned pregnancies impacting on their health, wellbeing, education, and economic fortunes. Furthermore, the girls' call for more dialogue opens the possibility of breaking a cycle of epistemic injustice where knowledge about sexuality and reproduction has been historically restricted.

Where the findings differ from previous research is in showing a clear and consistent desire from girls across very different contexts to engage in greater intergenerational learning on SRHR within their households and families. While previous research has suggested that children might be embarrassed to discuss the topic with their parents, we have shown that the girls from the *Real Choices, Real Lives* study consistently called for caregivers, especially mothers and female family members, to teach girls about menstruation and preventing pregnancy.

The findings clearly show a need for greater support for caregivers to engage confidently in conversations about sexuality with their daughters, breaking cycles of intergenerational silence. Caregivers need greater information on contraception and pregnancy, and they also need advice on how to engage in these conversations in age-appropriate ways, to avoid them continuously deferring the conversation because their daughter is 'too small.' While for parents, these conversations are still shrouded in fear, stigma and taboo, adolescent girls themselves are clear that the responsibility is on parents – and caregivers more broadly – to help them understand how to stay happy, safe, and healthy in their relationships as adolescents. The findings clearly speak to a need to move away from adultist framings of parent-child 'education', and towards facilitating more collective forms of dialogue, in which all members of the family can learn together and from each other, rooted in a shared commitment to epistemic justice. In the context of cultural and religious taboo, and the dominance of adultist framings, creating such spaces would not be easy. However, the words and stories of the *Real Choices Real Lives* cohort girls make clear that they are urgently needed.

Author Contributions

Belen Garcia-Gavilanes: conceptualisation; funding acquisition; literature reviews; methodology; writing – original draft preparation; writing – review and editing.

Rosie Walters: conceptualisation; funding acquisition; literature reviews; methodology; project administration; writing – original draft preparation; writing – review and editing.

Keya Khandaker: data curation; funding acquisition; methodology; project administration; writing – review and editing.

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Intergenerational Dialogue as a Decolonial Praxis of Healing

Reece Sohdi¹

Abstract: This paper explores intergenerational dialogue as a decolonial praxis of healing in communities marked by colonial trauma and systemic injustice. Framed by the decolonial thought of Fanon (1967), Mignolo (2009), and Walsh (2018), it argues that intergenerational encounters grounded in oral storytelling, testimony, and memory practices are not only pedagogical but reparative. Dialogue between elders and youth enables the reclamation of silenced histories and suppressed ways of knowing, constituting what Maldonado-Torres (2007) terms an ‘ethics of decolonial being.’ Drawing on Indigenous and Afro-diasporic communities engaged in cultural revitalisation and truth-telling practices, the paper examines how transgenerational trauma can be addressed through relational healing frameworks. Practices such as land-based storytelling, communal remembrance rituals, and ancestral pedagogy offer counter-hegemonic alternatives to Eurocentric models of wellbeing and education (Smith 2021; Archibald 2008). The paper will also consider the emotional labour and risks of re-traumatisation inherent in dialogues, calling for ethical, situated, and community-led facilitation.

Ultimately, the paper positions intergenerational dialogue as a site of epistemic justice and transformative potential. It challenges dominant framings of dialogue as neutral exchange, instead framing it as an insurgent, healing act that connects memory, resistance, and futurity.

Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue; intergenerational healing; decolonial praxis; epistemic justice; cultural regeneration; relational ethics

Introduction

Intergenerational dialogue is increasingly positioned within global policy discourses as essential to addressing sustainability, peacebuilding, and collective wellbeing. Frameworks aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

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(2015–2030) and the Pact for the Future (2024) present dialogue between younger and older generations as a corrective to political short-termism, generational inequity, and social fragmentation. Within such narratives, dialogue is frequently framed as inherently constructive: a space for mutual understanding, the transmission of wisdom, and the co-creation of shared futures.

However, these framings risk obscuring the historical conditions under which intergenerational relations have been formed. They often assume continuity where rupture has occurred, reciprocity where asymmetries persist, and inclusion where structural inequalities remain embedded. As sociological and critical scholarship has long argued, generational relations are not neutral but shaped by broader configurations of power, including race, coloniality, and epistemic hierarchy (Mannheim 1952; Phillips, Ajrouch and Hillcoat-Nallétamby 2010). Intergenerational dialogue, therefore, cannot be understood simply as communicative exchange; it must be situated within the historical conditions that shape who speaks, who is heard, and whose knowledge is legitimised. These conditions are not determined solely by colonial histories but are also mediated through culturally and, in many contexts, religiously informed understandings of authority, kinship, respect and generational responsibility. Such traditions vary considerably across societies and frequently intersect with colonial legacies in distinct ways, reminding us that intergenerational dialogue is always contextually situated rather than governed by a universal model of generational relations.

Colonial disruption and fractured genealogies

From a decolonial perspective, these asymmetries are not incidental but constitutive of intergenerational relations in many contexts. Colonialism did not only reorganise economies and territories; it fundamentally disrupted the relational and temporal structures through which knowledge was transmitted across generations. It fractured genealogies of knowledge, understood as the historically accumulated and relational transmission of ways of knowing, being, and interpreting the world, while displacing ancestral pedagogies rooted in oral, embodied, and land-based practices (Smith 2021; Battiste 2013).

At the same time, coloniality imposed enduring epistemic hierarchies that privileged Western rationality, linear temporality, and institutionalised knowledge systems, rendering Indigenous, Afro-diasporic, and other subjugated knowledges marginal or illegible (Mignolo 2011). Fanon's (1967) account of colonial violence further illuminates how these processes operate at the psychic and relational level, disrupting intergenerational trust, reconfiguring identity, and severing affective connections to language, culture, and memory. Intergenerational dialogue, in such contexts, unfolds

across histories of silencing, misrecognition, and unresolved trauma, rather than within conditions of mutual symmetry and equitability.

Dialogue as decolonial praxis

These conditions necessitate a shift in how intergenerational dialogue is conceptualised. Rather than approaching dialogue as a neutral procedure or communicative tool, decolonial thought repositions it as engaging in a relational process shaped by power, history, and ethical responsibility (Sohdi 2026). Mignolo's (2009) notion of epistemic disobedience calls for a refusal of Western modernity as the singular horizon of knowledge, while Walsh (2018) conceptualises decoloniality as lived, embodied, and enacted through everyday practices of resistance and relationality.

Within this framing, intergenerational dialogue becomes a site of epistemic struggle and possibility. It is not simply about exchanging perspectives but about contesting whose knowledge is authorised, restoring suppressed ways of knowing, and reconstituting relationships fractured by colonial histories. This reframing also foregrounds the limits of dialogue: understanding is not guaranteed, and consensus is neither necessary nor always desirable. Instead, dialogue operates as a space in which difference, tension, and partial understanding are negotiated rather than resolved (Medina 2012).

Memory, storytelling, and the possibility of repair

Central to this reorientation is the role of memory. Colonial regimes relied on enforced forgetting through the suppression of language, criminalisation of cultural practices, and devaluation of oral histories. Intergenerational dialogue grounded in storytelling, testimony, and remembrance can challenge this epistemic violence by reactivating suppressed knowledge and reconnecting fragmented genealogies (Assmann 2011; Hirsch 2008).

Indigenous scholarship has long emphasised the pedagogical and relational dimensions of storytelling. Archibald's (2008) concept of Indigenous storywork positions storytelling as an integrative practice engaging the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of learning. Such approaches disrupt Eurocentric separations between cognition and emotion, knowledge and spirituality, and individual and collective experience. Within intergenerational dialogue, storytelling becomes not the transmission of static traditions but a dynamic process through which belonging, identity, and continuity are negotiated across generations.

Yet the potential for repair must be approached cautiously. Inviting the narration of histories shaped by colonial violence, displacement, or marginalisation entails emo-

tional and ethical risks. As Smith (2021) and Tuck and Yang (2014) argue, practices framed as ‘giving voice’ can reproduce extractive dynamics when they prioritise visibility and output over relational care. Storytelling, in this sense, is never neutral; it is shaped by conditions of consent, purpose, and ongoing responsibility. It is also shaped by the intentions with which stories are invited, shared, and received. Participants may recount experiences in ways that seek recognition, influence, protection, or persuasion, while others may withhold or question narratives where trust has not yet been established or where motives are perceived as instrumental rather than relational. Building the conditions for genuine dialogue therefore requires sustained trust, recognising that confidence in the ethical intentions of others often develops gradually rather than through a single dialogical encounter. Dialogue that seeks to engage memory must therefore attend to the ethical conditions under which stories are shared, including the legitimacy of silence, refusal, and non-disclosure.

Power, institutions, and the risk of instrumentalisation

These tensions are further intensified within institutional contexts. Universities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and international bodies increasingly mobilise intergenerational dialogue within agendas of inclusion, sustainability, and social cohesion. However, such initiatives are often shaped by funding cycles, evaluation metrics, and policy imperatives that prioritise measurable outcomes over relational processes (Pain, Kindon and Kesby 2007; Escobar 1995; Smith 2021; Barnett 2017).

Within these frameworks, dialogue risks being instrumentalised as a means of producing data, narratives, or legitimacy. Storytelling may be translated into evidence; participation may be quantified; and complex relational processes may be compressed into project timelines. As Ahmed (2012) argues, institutional commitments to inclusion can become performative when they fail to disrupt underlying structures of power. Intergenerational dialogue, when embedded within such logics, may reproduce extractive dynamics rather than enabling meaningful engagement with historical harm or epistemic injustice.

Dialogue, futurity, and collective wellbeing

Despite these limitations, intergenerational dialogue remains a critical site for engaging questions of collective wellbeing and futurity. Futures are not singular or predetermined trajectories but plural, contested, and co-created through ongoing relational practices (Mignolo 2011). Dialogue contributes to this process, not by producing consensus but by sustaining spaces in which different temporalities, experiences, and aspirations can be held in tension.

In this sense, collective wellbeing cannot be reduced to individual resilience or psychological repair. It is relational, historical, and political, emerging through the restoration and reconfiguration of relationships between generations, between people and land, and between knowledge systems (Kirmayer, Gone and Moses 2014). Intergenerational dialogue participates in this process by enabling engagement with difficult histories without presuming closure, and by opening possibilities for futures that are not wholly determined by colonial logics.

This paper positions intergenerational dialogue as a decolonial praxis of healing rather than a neutral method or policy instrument. Its central contribution rests on three connected claims. First, intergenerational dialogue is historically asymmetrical; younger and older participants enter dialogue from differently situated relationships to colonial violence, inherited memory, cultural authority, institutional recognition, and future responsibility. Second, dialogue is not inherently reparative; its capacity to contribute to healing depends on the ethical and epistemological conditions under which it is convened, including relational accountability, ongoing consent, refusal, attentiveness to silence, epistemic humility, and temporal openness. Third, intergenerational dialogue is an unfinished praxis rather than a linear movement towards consensus, reconciliation, or closure. It involves the continuing negotiation of plural memories, conflicting interpretations, and competing future claims that may remain unresolved. Healing, within this account, concerns neither the restoration of an uncontested past nor the production of a unified collective narrative, but the gradual reconstitution of relationships and the creation of conditions in which historical harm can be engaged without demanding complete disclosure, equivalence, or agreement. The paper therefore positions intergenerational dialogue as asymmetrical, condition-dependent, and unfinished, identifying the historical, ethical, and relational conditions through which it may contribute to collective wellbeing without reproducing the harms it seeks to address

This article is intentionally conceptual rather than empirical. Rather than presenting original fieldwork, it aims to develop a decolonial framework for understanding intergenerational dialogue through critical engagement with dialogue studies, decolonial and Indigenous scholarship, and literature on memory, healing, and epistemic justice. It advances three interconnected propositions: that intergenerational dialogue is historically asymmetrical, shaped by unequal inheritances of colonial violence, memory, authority, and epistemic legitimacy; that its reparative potential depends upon ethical conditions including relational accountability, consent, refusal, silence, epistemic humility, and temporal openness; and that dialogue is best understood as an unfinished praxis in which healing emerges through the ongoing negotiation of plural histories and futures rather than through consensus or closure. These propositions provide the conceptual lens through which the paper examines the pos-

sibilities and limits of intergenerational dialogue as a decolonial praxis of healing. The discussions of Māori language revitalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand and Sámi youth political engagement in Northern Europe are therefore presented as literature-based contextual illustrations rather than empirical case studies. They are intended neither to represent the diversity of either community nor to serve as evidence for a predetermined argument, but to illuminate how the proposed framework is negotiated across different colonial histories and institutional contexts. In doing so, the article also acknowledges the ethical tension inherent in drawing upon Indigenous contexts for conceptual purposes and seeks to remain accountable by grounding its discussion in Indigenous-authored scholarship wherever possible, retaining the historical and political specificity of each context, and treating these illustrations as contexts through which the proposed framework may itself be questioned, refined, and critically tested.

Reframing Intergenerational Dialogue from Exchange to Praxis

Dialogue has long occupied a central place in philosophy, education, and peace-building as a means of cultivating relationships, negotiating difference, and shaping shared understandings. From Buber's (1958) conception of dialogue as an ethical encounter to Freire's (1970) understanding of dialogue as the foundation of emancipatory praxis, dialogical traditions have consistently rejected communication as the mere transmission of information, instead presenting dialogue as relational, transformative, and constitutive of human becoming. However, these traditions have also been criticised for assuming reciprocity, mutual recognition, and communicative openness, often overlooking the unequal historical conditions through which dialogue is made possible. Participants rarely enter dialogue as equals; their capacity to speak, to be heard, or to refuse participation is shaped by broader relations of colonialism, racism, gender, class, and institutional authority (Fricker 2007; Medina 2012).

Decolonial scholarship extends this critique by arguing that dialogue itself has historically been organised through colonial structures of knowledge that determine not only whose voices are heard, but which forms of knowledge are recognised as legitimate (Mignolo 2011; Walsh 2018). Dialogue therefore becomes not simply an exchange between participants, but a struggle over the conditions of recognition themselves. Viewed in this way, intergenerational dialogue represents a particular expression of a broader ontological and political problem: generations inherit unequal relationships to history, memory, and authority that shape the possibilities of dialogue long before any conversation begins. The challenge is therefore not simply to facilitate communication across generations, but to interrogate the historical and

epistemic conditions that make dialogue possible, constrain it, or render it ethically incomplete.

Generational relations and epistemic inequality

These asymmetries are further illuminated through the lens of epistemic injustice. Fricker (2007) distinguishes between testimonial injustice, where speakers are discredited due to prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, where individuals lack the interpretive resources to make sense of their experiences. Within intergenerational contexts, these forms of injustice operate across age as well as identity: elders may be dismissed as outdated or anecdotal, while younger people may be positioned as lacking authority or credibility.

Scholarship has begun to extend these insights to explicitly intergenerational contexts, conceptualising how dominant ‘world-pictures’ shape whose knowledge is recognised across generations and how epistemic authority is distributed (Pohlhaus 2011; Medina 2012). These dynamics are not confined to interpersonal interactions but are embedded within institutional and cultural structures that privilege certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others. At the same time, they are mediated through the diverse worldviews that individuals and communities inhabit, encompassing cultural, spiritual, and, in many contexts, religious understandings of identity, authority, kinship, and generational responsibility. These overlapping ways of knowing and being shape not only how knowledge is recognised, but also what dialogue itself is understood to be and what purposes it is expected to serve. In this sense, intergenerational dialogue is not merely communicative but epistemological, structured by unequal conditions of intelligibility and recognition.

Coloniality and the disruption of intergenerational transmission

From a decolonial perspective, these inequalities are intensified by the enduring effects of coloniality. Colonial systems not only suppress particular knowledges but fundamentally reconfigured the conditions under which knowledge is transmitted and validated. Colonial education, linguistic suppression, and assimilation policies disrupted intergenerational modes of learning rooted in oral traditions, land-based practices, and communal responsibility (Battiste 2013; Smith 2021).

This has been conceptualised as epistemicide, that is, the systematic erasure or devaluation of knowledge systems associated with colonised peoples (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). As a result, intergenerational dialogue often unfolds across fractured epistemic landscapes, where knowledge has been interrupted, transformed, or rendered incommensurable. Santos (2014) conceptualises this condition through

the notion of cognitive justice, arguing for the coexistence of multiple knowledge systems that cannot be reduced to a single epistemological framework. Within this context, dialogue cannot be understood as exchange between intact systems of knowledge, but as negotiation across disruption, loss, and partial continuity.

Dialogue as relational and situated praxis

Reframing intergenerational dialogue as praxis shifts the emphasis from communication to relational and ethical engagement. Freire (1970) conceptualises praxis as reflective action oriented toward transformation, where dialogue becomes a means of critically engaging with social conditions. However, decolonial scholarship extends this understanding by emphasising praxis as an ongoing enactment of alternative ways of being, knowing, and relating (Walsh 2018).

Contemporary work in decolonial and critical pedagogy reinforces this perspective, highlighting dialogue as a lived and embodied practice rather than a neutral method. For example, Wellington (2026) conceptualises critical dialogue as a decolonial feminist practice that foregrounds relationality, reflexivity, and resistance, demonstrating how dialogic encounters can challenge institutional power while remaining grounded in lived experience. Similarly, recent scholarship on decolonial methodologies emphasises the role of storytelling, affect, and creative practices as forms of epistemic resistance that extend beyond conventional models of dialogue (Alormele 2025; Thambinathan, Kinsella and Wylie 2023).

These perspectives collectively reposition dialogue as a site of relational reconfiguration. Rather than simply exchanging perspectives, intergenerational dialogue becomes a process through which relationships between generations, knowledge systems, and temporalities are renegotiated. Crucially, this does not eliminate asymmetry; instead, it requires engaging with asymmetry as an inherent ethical condition of dialogue.

Holding tension and dialogue without resolution

Understanding dialogue as praxis also requires moving beyond assumptions of resolution; however, both decolonial and critical scholarship challenge this orientation. Differences in experience, language, and epistemology cannot always be reconciled, nor should they be forced into coherence.

Recent work on intergenerational futures further complicates linear models of dialogue by emphasising the plurality of temporalities through which generations engage with the past and imagine the future. Moraitopoulou (2025) critiques dominant narratives of generational progress, arguing instead for more contested and plural

approaches to intergenerational futures that acknowledge discontinuity and difference. Similarly, decolonial approaches to futurity emphasise the coexistence of multiple pasts and possible futures, resisting singular narratives of development or progress (Terry, et al. 2024).

Within this framing, intergenerational dialogue is not oriented toward closure but toward ongoing negotiation. It becomes a space in which different temporalities, memories, and aspirations intersect without necessarily converging. Moments of misunderstanding, silence, or tension are not failures of dialogue but integral to its ethical and political complexity.

Towards a reframed understanding

Reframing intergenerational dialogue as decolonial praxis therefore involves several critical shifts. It requires moving from assumptions of neutrality to an explicit engagement with power; from models of exchange to relational and situated practices; and from expectations of resolution to an acceptance of tension, plurality, and incompleteness. These shifts are increasingly reflected within emerging dialogical approaches that seek to move beyond liberal models of consensus towards practices grounded in relational accountability, plurality, and solidarity. For example, the *Solidarity Dialogues* approach developed in Montréal brings together Indigenous, Global South, and Western perspectives to promote dialogue that recognises historical asymmetries, values multiple ways of knowing, and prioritises ethical relationship building over agreement or resolution (PLEDJ 2025). While differing in its practical orientation, such work illustrates that dialogue can be understood as an ongoing, relational, and contextually situated practice rather than a neutral communicative technique.

This reframing does not diminish the value of dialogue but situates it within the conditions necessary for it to function ethically. Dialogue becomes a space in which epistemic injustice can be recognised, fractured genealogies of knowledge can be engaged, and alternative forms of relationality can begin to emerge. At the same time, it remains contingent, shaped by the historical, cultural, religious, institutional, and relational contexts within which it unfolds.

These dynamics become most visible when attention shifts to the processes through which memory, silence, and storytelling move across generations and as sites where dialogue is not only spoken but embodied, withheld, and reconstituted.

Memory, Silence, and the Politics of Transmission

If intergenerational dialogue is understood as praxis rather than exchange, attention must shift then to the processes through which histories are transmitted, mediated, or disrupted across generations. Memory, in this context, cannot be treated as a stable archive of the past waiting to be retrieved. Rather, it operates as a relational and affective process through which communities negotiate what can be remembered, what must be withheld, and what is carried forward into the future (Assmann 2011; Hirsch 2008). Ricoeur (2004) reminds us that memory is never simply recovered but continually interpreted through narrative acts of remembering and forgetting. Intergenerational dialogue therefore becomes less the recovery of an authentic past than the ethical negotiation of inherited narratives whose meanings remain contested.

In contexts shaped by colonial violence, forced migration, and structural marginalisation, intergenerational memory is rarely linear or complete. Instead, it is often fragmented, embodied, and mediated through story, gesture, silence, and affect rather than transparent narration (Hirsch 2008; Thambinathan, Kinsella and Wylie 2023). This disrupts dominant assumptions that dialogue functions primarily through speech, repositioning it within broader ecologies of transmission in which meaning is carried across generations in multiple, often indirect forms.

The concept of *postmemory* is particularly instructive here. Hirsch (2008) describes how subsequent generations inherit the emotional and psychological weight of events they did not directly experience, often through mediated forms such as storytelling, images, and familial practices. However, within decolonial contexts, this transmission is further complicated by what Maldonado-Torres (2007) conceptualises as the colonality of being, where epistemic violence not only shapes what is remembered but also constrains how memory can be articulated and understood. This foregrounds the first dimension of the proposed framework by illustrating how historical asymmetries continue to shape what can be remembered, transmitted, and recognised across generations.

Epistemic trauma and the limits of articulation

These dynamics give rise to what has been described as epistemic trauma: a condition in which historical violence is not only experienced but also difficult to articulate within dominant epistemological frameworks (Thambinathan, Kinsella and Wylie 2023). In such contexts, the challenge is not simply remembering but finding forms through which memory can be expressed without distortion or erasure.

This has significant implications for intergenerational dialogue. If dominant models of dialogue privilege clarity, articulation, and coherence, they may fail to accommodate forms of knowledge that are fragmented, embodied, or affective. As Fricker (2007) argues, hermeneutical injustice occurs when individuals lack the interpretive resources to make sense of their experiences within dominant frameworks. Within intergenerational contexts shaped by colonial histories, such injustice is often compounded, as both older and younger generations may struggle to articulate experiences that fall outside dominant narratives of history and identity.

Consequently, dialogue must be understood as operating within limits. Not all knowledge can be fully expressed, translated, or shared, and attempts to force articulation may risk distorting or appropriating what is being communicated. This reinforces the need to move beyond speech-centric models of dialogue toward approaches that recognise the multiplicity of ways in which knowledge is transmitted and experienced.

Silence as presence, protection, refusal, and resistance

Within this expanded understanding, silence emerges not as absence but as a meaningful and situated practice. Critical and decolonial scholarship has increasingly challenged the assumption that silence signifies disengagement or repression, instead conceptualising it as a form of agency shaped by historical and relational conditions (Motsemme 2004; Kidron 2009).

In contexts where speech has historically been coerced, surveilled, or extracted, silence may function as protection, that is, shielding individuals and communities from further harm. It may also operate as refusal, asserting the right not to disclose knowledge within contexts where such disclosure would reproduce extractive dynamics (Tuck and Yang 2014; Simpson 2014). From this perspective, silence is not opposed to dialogue but constitutes a form of participation that resists dominant expectations of visibility and articulation.

Interpreting silence as absence risks reinscribing colonial logics that equate knowledge with disclosure and legitimacy with speech. Instead, a decolonial approach requires attentiveness to silence as a mode of communication that carries its own meanings, shaped by trauma, ethics, and relational responsibility. This demands a reconfiguration of dialogue itself, where listening is not oriented toward extraction but toward recognising the conditions under which speech is possible, withheld, or refused.

Storytelling, translation, and the risk of extraction

Storytelling occupies a central position within intergenerational transmission, particularly within Indigenous and diasporic contexts. As Archibald (2008) argues, storytelling is not merely a narrative practice but an epistemological and relational one, grounded in principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. Storywork engages multiple dimensions of experience – intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual – challenging Eurocentric separations between knowledge and affect.

However, the increasing institutionalisation of storytelling within research, policy, and community initiatives raises critical tensions. When stories are solicited, recorded, and circulated within institutional frameworks, they may be detached from their relational contexts and transformed into data, evidence, or cultural artefacts (Smith 2021; Tuck and Yang 2014). This process risks reducing storytelling to a form of epistemic extraction, where narratives are valued for their utility rather than their relational significance.

These dynamics are further complicated by processes of translation. Intergenerational storytelling often involves translation across languages, cultures, and temporalities. As Hall (1990) and Brah (1996) argue, translation is not a neutral process but one shaped by power, where meanings are negotiated, transformed, and sometimes lost. Within decolonial contexts, translation may render knowledge legible within dominant frameworks while simultaneously stripping it of its relational and ontological grounding (Mignolo 2011).

As Glissant (1997) suggests through the concept of opacity, not all knowledge is intended to be fully understood or translated. Respecting opacity involves recognising the limits of comprehension and resisting the impulse to render all knowledge transparent. Within intergenerational dialogue, this has profound implications: it challenges the expectation that dialogue must produce shared understanding and instead affirms the legitimacy of partial, situated, and non-translatable forms of knowing.

Fractured genealogies and the conditions of transmission

These tensions highlight that intergenerational dialogue does not occur across intact genealogies of knowledge but within conditions of rupture. Colonial schooling, assimilation policies, migration, and state interventions have disrupted the transmission of language, culture, and relational practices across generations (Battiste 2013; Smith 2021). As a result, dialogue often involves reconstructing connections that have been fractured, without the possibility of full recovery.

Decolonial approaches to trauma resist the notion that healing involves returning to a precolonial past. Instead, they emphasise the reconstitution of relationships in the present, acknowledging loss while enabling continuity (Walsh 2018; Kirmayer, Gone and Moses 2014). Within this framing, intergenerational dialogue becomes a site where memory, silence, and storytelling intersect in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

Importantly, this perspective resists both romanticisation and deficit framings of dialogue. It neither assumes that dialogue naturally produces healing, nor that rupture renders it impossible. Rather, it positions dialogue as an ongoing negotiation shaped by historical, relational, and epistemic conditions. Healing, in this sense, is not the outcome of successful communication but the emergent effect of practices that attend to power, ethics, and relationality across generations.

Negotiating Memory, Authority, and Futurity in Māori and Sámi Contexts

Intergenerational dialogue, when situated within lived contexts, rarely resembles the reciprocal exchange imagined in policy discourse. Instead, it emerges as a process of negotiation shaped by asymmetries of authority, fractured epistemic lineages, and competing orientations toward the past and future. The dynamics of memory, silence, and epistemic inequality outlined earlier are not abstract conditions but are actively reworked within practices of language revitalisation, political participation, and cultural continuity.

Across contexts, intergenerational engagement is often framed through the language of transmission, particularly the movement of knowledge from elders to younger generations. However, this framing risks obscuring the extent to which transmission itself is contested, partial, and mediated. Rather than a unidirectional flow, intergenerational dialogue is better understood as a site where knowledge is translated, reinterpreted, and sometimes resisted. This becomes particularly visible in contexts where colonial histories have disrupted the conditions under which knowledge is sustained and recognised. These illustrations are used not to validate a universal model of dialogue but to explore how the proposed conceptual framework is reconfigured within different colonial histories and institutional contexts.

Language revitalisation and the reconfiguration of authority

Language revitalisation initiatives provide a critical lens through which to examine these dynamics. A literature-based illustration can be seen within *kōhanga reo*, where elders do not simply teach vocabulary or grammatical structures but introduce younger generations to language as a lived relationship with *whakapapa* (genealogy),

whenua (land) and collective responsibility (King 2001; Higgins, Rewi and Olsen-Reeder 2014). The significance of these encounters lies not solely in linguistic recovery but in the continual negotiation of what it means to speak Māori within contemporary Aotearoa. Younger speakers frequently inhabit multiple linguistic and cultural worlds, moving between Māori-medium settings, English-dominant education, urban environments, and digital spaces. Intergenerational dialogue therefore becomes a process of translation rather than replication, where inherited meanings are neither preserved unchanged nor abandoned, but continually reinterpreted in response to contemporary realities. The illustration demonstrates that dialogue is not simply the transmission of knowledge across generations, but the ongoing negotiation of authority, belonging and cultural continuity under conditions shaped by colonial disruption.

However, such framings risk flattening the complexities through which revitalisation unfolds. Language recovery does not simply restore a pre-existing system of knowledge; it requires the reconstitution of relationships between generations, institutions, and epistemologies that have been profoundly reshaped by colonialism (Albury 2014; 2015). Elders are positioned as custodians of linguistic and cultural knowledge, yet this authority is mediated by historical marginalisation and contemporary institutional recognition. At the same time, younger generations engage with language within hybrid contexts (for example, formal education systems, digital platforms, and urban environments) that differ significantly from the conditions of prior transmission.

This produces a reconfiguration of authority rather than its restoration. Institutional recognition of *te reo* Māori, including its incorporation into state education and policy, introduces new forms of legitimacy that may privilege standardised or certified knowledge over community-based practices (Albury 2014; 2015). As a result, intergenerational dialogue becomes entangled in tensions between relational and institutional forms of knowledge, where what counts as legitimate transmission is itself contested.

Youth political engagement and the politics of translation

A similar dynamic can be observed in Sámi youth political participation, where younger representatives frequently navigate between Indigenous understandings of land, kinship, and collective responsibility and the legal and bureaucratic languages of Nordic states and international institutions (Josefsen 2010; Kuokkanen 2007). In practice, this may involve translating relationships to ancestral territories into the vocabulary of consultation, environmental governance, or Indigenous rights. Such translation undoubtedly creates opportunities for political recognition, yet it may also narrow meanings that are grounded in relational ontologies rather than legal

categories. Dialogue, therefore, is not simply about ensuring that Indigenous voices are heard, but about negotiating what is lost, transformed, or strategically retained as knowledge moves across epistemic and institutional boundaries.

Unlike language revitalisation initiatives, which are often framed through continuity, Sámi youth engagement foregrounds the tension between inheritance and transformation. Younger generations are positioned simultaneously as custodians of cultural knowledge and as agents of political change, navigating issues such as climate governance, land rights, and Indigenous sovereignty (Kuokkanen 2007). This dual positioning destabilises generational hierarchies, as youth may challenge established practices while also being expected to uphold them.

Central to these dynamics is the process of translation. Sámi youth frequently operate across multiple linguistic, cultural, and political contexts, translating Indigenous knowledge into forms that are legible within national and international frameworks. However, as decolonial scholarship emphasises, translation is not neutral but shaped by power relations that determine which aspects of knowledge are rendered visible and which remain obscured (Mignolo 2011). The risk is that translation may enable participation within dominant systems while simultaneously disembedding knowledge from its relational and ontological grounding.

Continuity, fragmentation, and institutional mediation

A comparative reading of these contexts reveals both shared dynamics and important divergences. In both Māori language revitalisation and Sámi youth political engagement, intergenerational dialogue operates within conditions shaped by colonial disruption, requiring the negotiation of fragmented epistemic lineages. In both cases, dialogue is mediated through processes of translation, where knowledge is adapted to contemporary contexts while remaining anchored in ancestral traditions.

However, the specific configurations of these dynamics differ in significant ways. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the institutional recognition of *te reo* Māori as an official language creates conditions that enable revitalisation while also introducing forms of regulation and standardisation. This produces tensions between community-led practices and state-mediated forms of knowledge, where authority is redistributed rather than simply restored.

In contrast, Sámi communities operate across multiple nation-states with varying levels of recognition and support, resulting in a more fragmented and contested institutional landscape (Josefsen 2010). Here, intergenerational dialogue is less stabilised by formal recognition and more explicitly shaped by political struggle, where questions of authority and legitimacy remain open and contested. These differences

underscore the importance of contextual grounding, demonstrating that intergenerational dialogue cannot be understood through a singular model but must be analysed in relation to specific historical and institutional conditions.

Across both contexts, intergenerational dialogue is not only oriented toward the past but also toward the future. However, the future is not approached as a shared or unified horizon. Instead, it emerges as a site of negotiation where different generational perspectives on continuity, change, and possibility intersect. In language revitalisation, futurity is often framed through continuity as the preservation and transmission of language as a means of sustaining cultural identity. Yet even here, younger generations reinterpret language within contemporary contexts, reshaping its meanings and uses. In Sámi youth engagement, futurity is more explicitly contested, as younger generations navigate the tension between maintaining cultural continuity and responding to contemporary political and environmental challenges.

These dynamics reinforce the argument that intergenerational dialogue does not produce consensus but sustains engagement with difference across time. Futures are not co-created through agreement but through ongoing negotiation, where multiple temporalities and aspirations coexist without necessarily converging (Mignolo 2011; Walsh 2018).

Reframing practice beyond emancipation or constraint

Taken together, these illustrations demonstrate that the significance of intergenerational dialogue lies less in whether knowledge is successfully transmitted than in how relationships to that knowledge are continually negotiated. In Māori contexts, dialogue primarily illustrates the reanimation of language through community-led continuity, while Sámi contexts foreground the political translation of Indigenous knowledge across multiple institutional settings. Despite these differences, both reveal that dialogue operates through inherited asymmetries rather than equal exchanges. Authority is negotiated rather than assumed, tradition is interpreted rather than reproduced, and healing emerges through sustained engagement with difference rather than the recovery of an uncontested past. The illustrations therefore reinforce this article's conceptual argument that intergenerational dialogue is historically situated, ethically conditioned, and necessarily unfinished.

What emerges is a conception of intergenerational dialogue as a site of ongoing negotiation, where continuity and rupture, authority and resistance, and memory and futurity are continually reworked. These dynamics, however, cannot be fully understood without attending to the institutional conditions that shape how dialogue is convened, structured, and evaluated, the conditions that both enable and constrain its possibilities.

The Limits of Dialogue and the Conditions of Decolonial Praxis

If intergenerational dialogue holds transformative potential, it must also be understood as inherently vulnerable to co-option. Dialogue does not emerge in neutral space; it is convened, structured, and evaluated within institutional contexts that shape its purposes, pace, and outcomes. Universities, NGOs, and international bodies increasingly mobilise intergenerational dialogue within agendas of inclusion, sustainability, and social cohesion. While these initiatives may create important opportunities for encounter, they are embedded within logics that can constrain and instrumentalise dialogue, often reproducing the inequalities they seek to address.

Within higher education, intergenerational initiatives are frequently tied to research funding, impact agendas, and public engagement frameworks. Consider a university project that brings together refugee grandparents, community elders, and younger participants to co-produce digital life histories. While funded as an initiative promoting intergenerational dialogue, the project may simultaneously require measurable outputs, participant numbers, and publicly accessible resources within a limited timeframe. Participants therefore negotiate not only what stories to share but whether they should be archived, translated, or circulated beyond the community. Dialogue becomes shaped as much by institutional expectations as by the relationships themselves, illustrating how ethical tensions emerge not from dialogue alone but from the conditions under which it is organised. These structures privilege forms of dialogue that can be documented, measured, and disseminated, typically within short-term project cycles (Pain, Kindon and Kesby 2007). The demand for demonstrable 'impact' incentivises visible outputs (e.g., reports, exhibitions, digital archives) over slower, relational processes that resist quantification. Dialogue is thus reframed as an event or intervention rather than an ongoing ethical relationship. This temporal compression sits in tension with the realities of intergenerational healing, which unfolds through trust, repetition, and the gradual negotiation of memory, silence, and meaning (Kirmayer, Gone and Moses 2014).

Comparable dynamics are evident within NGO and international development contexts, where dialogue is shaped by donor priorities, policy frameworks, and funding cycles that emphasise scalability, visibility, and replicability (Escobar 1995). Within these conditions, storytelling and testimony may be solicited as forms of evidence to legitimise interventions or demonstrate programme success. As Smith (2021) argues, such practices risk reproducing extractive logics, transforming lived experience into a resource for institutional consumption. Dialogue, in this sense, becomes less about relational engagement and more about producing knowledge that aligns with external agendas.

Dialogue as extraction of storytelling, data, and epistemic appropriation

The tension between relationality and extraction is particularly pronounced in relation to storytelling. Storytelling is a culturally situated and relational practice, embedded within systems of responsibility and reciprocity (Archibald 2008). However, within institutional contexts, stories are often translated into data to be recorded, analysed, and circulated as evidence of impact or insight. This transformation detaches narratives from their relational grounding and repositions them within dominant epistemological frameworks (Tuck and Yang 2014).

The conversion of story into data raises significant ethical concerns. It reshapes questions of ownership and consent, particularly when narratives are mobilised beyond their original contexts or for purposes not determined by those who shared them. It also risks reducing complex, lived experiences to discrete and consumable units, undermining the ongoing and relational nature of intergenerational transmission. These dynamics are intensified within global knowledge economies, where Indigenous and local knowledges are increasingly recognised as valuable resources in areas such as sustainability and climate adaptation (Briggs 2013). While this recognition may generate visibility, it also risks epistemic appropriation, where knowledge is extracted, translated, and incorporated into dominant systems without adequate reciprocity or contextual integrity (Mignolo 2011).

Such processes reflect broader patterns of coloniality, in which knowledge is decontextualised and rearticulated in ways that align with dominant epistemologies while erasing its relational, cultural, and ontological grounding. Within intergenerational dialogue, this may manifest in the selective uptake of narratives that align with institutional priorities, while forms of knowledge that resist translation or commodification remain marginalised or excluded.

Temporal tensions and the ethics of engagement

Temporal tensions are central to understanding the limits of institutionalised dialogue. Institutional frameworks operate within accelerated timelines shaped by funding cycles, reporting requirements, and policy deadlines. In contrast, intergenerational dialogue particularly when oriented toward healing, unfolds over extended and uneven temporalities that resist standardisation and compression (Walsh 2018). This mismatch creates a fundamental tension between the demand for rapid, demonstrable outcomes and the need for slow, relational engagement. When dialogue is forced into project-based timelines, it risks becoming superficial or performative, prioritising visibility over depth. More critically, it may become harmful, par-

ticularly when participants are encouraged to engage with histories of trauma without adequate time, support, or relational grounding.

The ethical implications of this temporal disjuncture are significant. One key risk is retraumatisation. Inviting individuals to recount experiences of violence, displacement, or marginalisation entails emotional labour that may reopen wounds rather than facilitate healing. When such processes are embedded within institutional contexts that prioritise outputs over care, participants may be left without the support necessary to process these experiences. Consent, in this context, cannot be reduced to procedural agreement; it must encompass the conditions under which stories are shared, the purposes they serve, and the responsibilities that follow.

A further ethical concern lies in performative inclusion. Institutional commitments to diversity and participation often involve incorporating marginalised voices into existing frameworks. However, as Ahmed (2012) argues, such inclusion can become performative when it fails to transform underlying structures of power. In intergenerational dialogue, this may result in the symbolic inclusion of elders or youth without meaningful redistribution of decision-making authority or epistemic legitimacy. Dialogue, in such cases, functions less as a site of transformation and more as a mechanism of institutional validation.

From instrumentalisation to relational ethics

These limitations do not render dialogue inherently flawed; rather, they reveal the conditions under which it becomes problematic. Dialogue becomes ethically compromised when it is instrumentalised as it becomes oriented toward outputs, visibility, and control rather than relationships, care, and accountability. Addressing this requires a fundamental reorientation from output-driven to relationship-centred approaches. At the core of this reorientation is a shift toward relational ethics. Decolonial and Indigenous scholarship emphasises that knowledge cannot be separated from the relationships through which it is produced and sustained (Smith 2021; Wilson 2008). Intergenerational dialogue, therefore, must prioritise care, reciprocity, and responsibility over extraction. Its value lies not in what it produces, but in how it is experienced and sustained over time. Dialogue becomes an ongoing relational process rather than a discrete intervention.

This reorientation also foregrounds the importance of consent and refusal. Dominant models of dialogue often assume that participation, particularly in the form of speaking, is inherently positive. However, in contexts where speech has historically been coerced or appropriated, such assumptions risk reproducing harm. Decolonial approaches insist on the legitimacy of refusal, including the right not to speak, not to share, and not to translate certain forms of knowledge (Tuck and Yang 2014).

Consent must therefore be understood as ongoing, relational, and contingent, rather than procedural or fixed.

Epistemic humility, silence, and temporal openness

A decolonial approach to intergenerational dialogue further requires epistemic humility. The assumption that dialogue leads to understanding risks flattening difference and appropriating knowledge. Differences in experience, language, and epistemology cannot always be reconciled or made commensurable. Epistemic humility involves recognising these limits and resisting the impulse to resolve difference into coherence (Mignolo 2011). Within this framework, silence must also be reconceptualised. As discussed previously, silence is not the absence of dialogue, but a meaningful form of participation shaped by protection, resistance, and ethical withholding. Attending to silence requires shifting from extractive listening toward an ethics of attentiveness, where what is not said is recognised as equally significant as what is spoken.

Temporal openness is equally critical. Intergenerational dialogue, particularly when oriented toward healing, does not conform to linear trajectories of progress or resolution. It unfolds unevenly, requiring sustained engagement that extends beyond institutional timelines. Decolonial praxis demands an openness to this temporality, recognising healing as an ongoing and relational process rather than a finite outcome (Walsh 2018).

Context, plural futures, and dialogue as unfinished practice

These orientations collectively resist the standardisation of intergenerational dialogue. There can be no universal model applicable across contexts without risking abstraction or erasure. Dialogue is always situated, shaped by specific historical, cultural, and political conditions, and must remain responsive to these contexts. This has important implications for how futures are understood. From a decolonial perspective, futures are not singular trajectories but plural, contested, and co-created through ongoing relational practices (Mignolo 2011). Intergenerational dialogue contributes to this process, not by producing consensus, but by sustaining engagement with difference across time. It enables multiple temporalities, memories, and aspirations to coexist without necessarily converging.

Similarly, healing must be understood as incomplete and relational. It is not an end-point achieved through dialogue, nor a return to a precolonial past, but an ongoing process shaped by the reconfiguration of relationships and the negotiation of historical harm (Kirmayer, Gone and Moses 2014). Dialogue, in this sense, participates in healing not by resolving tension but by creating conditions in which it can be en-

gaged ethically. Rather than understanding dialogue as a mechanism for resolving conflict, this account resonates with Lederach's (2005) conception of the moral imagination, in which relationships remain open despite enduring disagreement. From a decolonial perspective, however, sustaining relationship also requires confronting the colonial asymmetries that shape whose futures are imagined and whose histories continue to structure the present.

Intergenerational dialogue as decolonial praxis, therefore, remains an unfinished practice. It resists closure, standardisation, and simplification. Its significance lies not in delivering outcomes but in sustaining forms of engagement that remain open, reflexive, and grounded in lived realities. By embracing its incompleteness, dialogue can move beyond instrumentalisation toward more ethically grounded and politically attentive forms of relationality.

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Unearthing an Uprising: How to Excavate and Recraft South Asian Folklore for Feminist Purpose

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Abstract: One of the most common charges against Pakistan's feminist movement has consistently been the refrain that efforts made for women's emancipation are 'foreign funded' and Islam already awards women 'all the rights they will ever need'. Pakistani feminists repeatedly reject the idea that female rebellion is an inherently western import and that feminine silence is the hallmark of South Asian culture. My work on feminist folklore has helped me confront this notion by redeploying indigenous heroines such as Heer, Sassi, and Sohni as agents of uprising against traditional sociocultural frameworks. This paper unpacks the transformative potential of intergenerational dialogue through this prism of South Asian oral traditions featuring iconic female protagonists drawn from Punjabi and Sindhi Sufi poetry. These figures have primarily been reduced to romantic archetypes, but carry immense potential as feminist resistance warriors and affective agents of spiritual sovereignty. Invoking the stories of Heer or Sassi as dialogic tools allows for a feminist intervention across class and generational lines in Pakistan, given indigenous narratives are ubiquitous and embedded with a template for female rebellion against the sociocultural status quo.

Framing these tales within contemporary urgencies of gender-inclusive governance, curriculum development, and entertainment can help recraft traditional frames of power, mobility, and agency. The paper draws on feminist decolonial theory and peacebuilding praxis by mapping the potential of storytelling spaces to foster a new site for feminist dialogue such as communal gatherings, mehfil, qawwali performances and digital dialogues. My work engages with Uma Chakravarti's concept of historical memory, Shail Mayaram's work on oral histories and resistance traditions, Sara Ahmed's work on the politics of emotion, and Maria Lugones' concept of the coloniality of gender.

Keywords: Folklore; feminism; decolonial theory; indigenous methodology; affect

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Introduction

Qazi: Follow Sharia if you want to live.

Remember you can only enter heaven if you die in faith.

Hir: What good is life if I am not faithful to myself?

My love is known to the earth and the skies.

– Waris Shah, Hir (trans. Sekhon)

Every year in March, women across cities in Pakistan take to the streets carrying playfully and often painstakingly crafted placards that read like fragments of everyday unfinished conversations. Some are sharp, others irreverent: ‘khana khud garam kar lo’², ‘mera jism meri marzi’³, while others speak to something much older, deeply ingrained, and far less easily translated: ‘Lo beth gayi sahi se’⁴, ‘Rishta aunties ko unsubscribe karo’⁵ and ‘Tu kare to stud, mein karun to slut’⁶. Among the chants, slogans, and corresponding annual backlash against the Aurat March, there are moments where the past seems to surface unexpectedly. Sometimes, it asserts itself as verse from a Sufi *kafi* or the name of a woman long ago folded and faded in folklore. Other times it bursts forth with women whirling in *dhammal*⁷ on hostile public streets. Regardless, as the women’s marches navigate their survival in an increasingly authoritarian climate in Pakistan, they continue to carry a rhythm that feels inherited rather than invented.

² Translated from Urdu, ‘Heat up your own food’.

³ Translated from Urdu, ‘My Body, My Choice’.

⁴ Translated from Urdu, ‘I’m sitting properly now, Happy?’ depicted on several placards with women sitting with their legs spread wide mocking ‘manspreading’ by men on public buses or men sitting crouched on the floor.

⁵ Translated from Urdu, ‘Unsubscribe the Rishta aunties’. Referring to a culture of women who approach families to arrange marriages for their daughters and in the process, often ask unduly personal and invasive questions, often accompanied by public commentary about their appearance.

⁶ Translated from Urdu, ‘When you do it, you’re a stud, when I do it, I’m a slut’.

⁷ *Dhammal* is a rhythmic, often trance-inducing, form of devotional dance performed at Sufi shrines across Sindh and Punjab, where bodies move collectively to the beat of the *dhhol* (drum) in acts of spiritual surrender, communal presence, and affective expression.

Such moments are frequently dismissed by conservative commentators, religious pressure groups, and opponents of the Aurat March as mere aesthetic embellishment rather than political interventions. They are frequently framed as a kind of cultural garnish to an otherwise ‘modern’ feminist movement. Yet, they persist. What has repeatedly unsettled anti-Aurat March campaigners is not merely the visibility of women on the streets, but the vocabulary through which that visibility is articulated, framed, and projected beyond the moment of the assembly itself. As Afia Shehribano Zia argues, feminism in Pakistan is frequently framed as foreign, elitist, or incompatible with local religious and cultural traditions (Zia 2018, 5). This accusation is one that Pakistani feminists are all too familiar with, the idea that feminist rebellion arrives from elsewhere, speaking in a language that does not belong to our ‘culture’. Such a unilateral framing of what is and is not ‘Pakistani culture’ resolutely rests on rigorously policed acts of forgetting.

Long before feminism was named as such, South Asian cultural traditions were already populated by women who refused, resisted, and reimagined the terms of their existence. Heer, who defied familial and caste authority; Sassi, who crossed the desert in pursuit of chosen love; Sohni, who risked her body against the river’s current rather than submit to social order. According to Farina Mir, ‘These figures are not marginal to cultural memory; if anything, they are central to it. These women’s stories are sung, staged, narrated, and circulated across generations, class divides, and national borders’ (Mir 2010, 183). However, they are rarely read as anything other than tragic lovers. What is lost and often deliberately buried in this reading is a possibility that goes beyond nuance. In reducing these women to archetypes of romance, their acts of disobedience are stripped of political meaning; their mobility is reframed as devotion; and their desire is recoded as sacrifice. What emerges as a result is a sanitised narrative that preserves the story by defusing the agency of its central protagonists, all of whom happen to be female.

This paper unpacks the premise that South Asian folklore is not simply an archive of the past, but an existing infrastructure of intergenerational dialogue through which meanings are transmitted, contested, and reworked across time. As Shari-Stone Mediatore argues, ‘To read these stories as “experience” is to recognise that they do not simply mirror a pre-given world but are part of a continuous process of making and remaking the world’ (Stone-Mediatore 2003, 161). If folkloric stories have endured, it is not because they are static but because they are continually reinterpreted. This raises the question of how these same stories centred around female legends can speak to feminist futures in South Asia and beyond. This paper argues that this conversation already exists within the texts and tellings; what needs to change is how we listen and what we excavate. By re-reading the folk heroines Heer, Sassi, and Sohni as agents of resistance rather than just vessels of romance, this paper seeks to recraft

indigenous narratives for explicitly feminist purposes. This intervention speaks directly to the concerns of intergenerational dialogue and wellbeing futures by asking how inherited narratives shape the possibilities available to contemporary communities. If cultural memory determines who is remembered, who is heard, and what forms of life become imaginable, then the reclamation of folk heroines becomes not merely an interpretive exercise but a contribution to collective flourishing and feminist futurity. The proposed reclamation then offers up a shift in emphasis: from romance to resistance, from sacrifice to agency, and from memory to dialogue. Such a shift does not import feminism into the local: rather, it excavates it from within.

Intergenerational Dialogue as Epistemological Framework

Underpinning most broad critiques of Pakistani feminism, there is a peculiar insistence on locating the origins of feminism outside of South Asian land and traditions. The charge is familiar enough to be predictable at this stage – the notion that feminist articulation emerges from foreign funding, western frameworks, and vocabularies that do not belong to ‘our culture’. What this insistence obscures, however, is not merely the presence of indigenous feminist thought, but the mechanisms through which such thought has always already circulated. Further, this insistence on locating culture in terms of what it is not rather than what it is, is a common argument used to exclude a myriad of emancipatory indigenous frameworks. According to Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘If “culture” shadowed by coherence, timelessness, and discreteness, is the prime anthropological tool for making “other”,... then perhaps anthropologists should consider strategies for writing against culture’ (Abu-Lughod 1991, 143). The question, then, is not whether feminist ideas exist within South Asian cultural traditions, but how they have been transmitted, muted, reframed, and remembered across generations. What is at stake in this framing is not simply a question of legitimacy, but of memory, more specifically, the terms under which cultural memory is curated, disciplined, and made to appear coherent.

Approaching this question requires a shift in how we understand both folklore and dialogue. Intergenerational dialogue is often framed as exchange between age cohorts, that is, a conversation that is navigated between elders and youth and a negotiation between past and present. Yet this definition remains insufficient in contexts where knowledge is not transmitted primarily through formal discourse, but through story, song, ritual, and repetition. In such contexts, dialogue is not only spoken, rather it is inherited, performed, and reinterpreted. Folklore and indigenous excavation involve reaching for a repository of cultural memory and framing it as an active epistemic field through which communities negotiate meaning across time.

Scherto Gill suggests that intergenerational dialogue is not simply the transfer of knowledge but ‘the co-creation of shared meaning across temporal difference’ (Gill 2025). Here dialogue is envisioned as a relational practice through which identities are negotiated and future imaginaries crafted. Set within these framings, South Asian folklore can be understood as something more than a repository of cultural memory but as an active site where co-construction is already operational. Meaning making is occurring alongside a reconfiguring of prescribed roles and affective potentialities. None of this is really occurring as formal dialogue but rather an exercise in repetition, variation, performance, and reinterpretation found in the legendary folk tales that reassert themselves in pop and rap music as well as television dramas and fashion.

This understanding of dialogue also shifts how knowledge itself is produced. Rather than treating dialogue as merely communicative, Min Young Choi argues that it functions as an epistemological framework through which meaning is co-constructed across differences in experience and positionality (Choi 2025, 19–44). Read through this lens, folklore becomes more than a repository of inherited narratives and emerges as a space in which communities continually negotiate and remake meaning, producing new understandings of gender, authority, and belonging through repeated acts of interpretation.

South Asian folklore, particularly in the Punjab region, functions not as a static archive but as a ‘site of ongoing negotiation’ where competing moral frameworks and social hierarchies are perpetually reworked. This inherent ‘polyphony’ of voices (Bakhtin 1981, 270) suggests that the persistence of these narratives is evidence of continuous reinterpretation rather than historical stability. Through this lens, South Asian folklore becomes a site of intergenerational dialogue, not because it preserves the past, but because it allows the past to be contested in the present. Stories do not simply carry forward meaning, they actively reshape it and offer a framework through which communities can revisit inherited structures of authority, gender, and belonging, and in doing so, renegotiate them.

The significance of this continued reinterpretation lies in its capacity to generate knowledge. As Shari Stone-Mediatore argues, storytelling functions as an epistemic intervention that reclaims marginalised experiences as sources of knowledge and challenges dominant frameworks for understanding the world (Stone-Mediatore 2003, 161–165). Stories do not simply preserve experience; they reshape what can be known and extrapolated from it. This insight is particularly important in the Pakistani context, where feminist claims are frequently dismissed as foreign or imported. Reading folklore as a site of knowledge production allows these narratives to

function not only as cultural inheritance but as indigenous frameworks for critique and resistance.

This raises a further question of what happens to narratives as they move across generations. Such transmission and excavation are never neutral. They involve selection, emphasis, and often, erasure. Certain elements are amplified while others are muted, depending on what is deemed culturally acceptable or ideologically useful. This unevenness is central to understanding how folklore operates as a dialogic field. Fauzia Saeed touches upon this contradiction by framing the idea of ‘cultural pruning’, where ‘aspects of our heritage that are deemed “messy” or “inconvenient” are systematically removed to create a sanitised version of culture’ (Saeed 2011, 42). The resultant unevenness is central to understanding folklore as a dialogic field, especially when certain subversive elements are muted while others are amplified for ideological utility. Uma Chakravarti’s work on feminist historiography provides a crucial intervention here, arguing that because ‘memory is constituted through processes of selection that privilege certain voices over others,’ feminist scholarship must actively ‘recover the silences and absences within dominant narratives’ (Chakravarti 2006, 27). It is in identifying these ‘suppressed genealogies of resistance,’ that scholars can challenge the ‘cultural pruning’ that has previously sought to narrow the scope of South Asian identity and use the same framework to subvert these policing impulses by expanding it.

Within South Asian folklore, this process of selective memory is particularly visible in the reduction of complex female protagonists to romantic archetypes, where their defining feature is their sacrifice and dying for love rather than their fight to live on their own terms. Heer, Sassi, and Sohni are widely remembered, but they are generally remembered in ways that render their acts of resistance legible within acceptable moral frameworks. Their defiance is reframed as devotion; their mobility is articulated as longing, and their refusal is memorialised as tragedy. What persists is a narrative that preserves their form while neutralising their collective and individual force. Yet, somehow, these stories continue to resist complete containment. Shail Mayaram’s work on oral traditions suggests that such narratives often carry ‘counter-histories that exist alongside, and in tension with, dominant narratives’ and since ‘oral traditions carry subaltern memories that resist official historiography,’ they allow for the survival of voices that continue to subvert the attempts of power structures to prune away elements of resistance and female rebellion (Mayaram 2004, 23–25). Ultimately, these ‘narrative traditions can function as sites of resistance where alternative histories are sustained,’ thereby ensuring that even when a story is neutralised on the surface, its subversive core remains intact for future reinterpretation.

These counter-histories do not always present themselves explicitly and often emerge in fragments, as glimpses or transitory moments where the narrative exceeds its own containment. They are visible in the heroine's refusal to comply, her movement across restricted space, her insistence on desire against the weight of social expectation. Such moments do not disrupt the narrative but rather they are the core of the indigenous narrative. To read folklore dialogically is to attend to these tensions and centre them, not as deviations from a set script but as central sites of meaning.

In this sense, intergenerational dialogue is not something that must be introduced into folklore, it is something that must be recognised within it and revived for coming generations. The stories of Heer, Sassi, and Sohni endure not because they offer moral closure but because they remain open to reinterpretation. They invite each generation to return to them, to argue with them, to extract new meanings from familiar forms. What changes, then, is not the story itself, but the terms under which it is read.

If folklore functions as a site of intergenerational dialogue, then the question becomes how such dialogue might be read, interpreted, and mobilised in and for the present. The following section outlines the methodological and political commitments that shape this reading.

Methodology, Praxis and Positionalities

To read folkloric stories as intergenerational dialogue is to recognise that they do not simply belong to the past. They are continually reactivated, reinterpreted, and re-deployed in response to present conditions. What changes is not the story but the terms of its reception, and it is in this shift, from transmission to recognition, that the possibility of feminist reclamation emerges.

This paper adopts a feminist hermeneutic approach that reads South Asian folklore not as a fixed archive but as a living site of meaning, one that is continuously shaped through performance, circulation, and reinterpretation. It combines textual analysis of Punjabi *qissas* with attention to their contemporary articulations across musical, performative, and political spaces. In doing so, it situates folklore within broader frameworks of intergenerational dialogue, affective transmission, and feminist memory. The aim is not simply to reinterpret these narratives but to understand how they continue to function as sites through which meaning is negotiated in the present.

Simultaneously, this work is shaped by a particular positionality that emerges from sustained engagement with both academic and activist feminist spaces in Pakistan. The impulse to reread these stories, like their own framing, is not neutral; it is driven

by a pressing need to locate feminist articulation within cultural frameworks that are often mobilised against it. To read Heer, Sassi, and Sohni as agents of resistance is therefore both an interpretive act as well as a political one. It is an attempt to intervene in the ways culture is invoked as a boundary that excludes rather than includes women and marginalised identities and how it disciplines rather than enables them.

This approach draws on Uma Chakravarti's notion of historical memory as a site of feminist retrieval where a myriad of suppressed genealogies of resistance can be excavated and rearticulated. Chakravarti states that 'memory is a contested terrain where power determines what is remembered and what is erased; to retrieve the past is therefore a political act of reclaiming agency' (Chakravarti 2006, 27). Similarly, Shail Mayaram's work on oral traditions connects here, where narrative becomes a means of negotiating authority outside formal institutions. Mayaram argues that 'oral traditions carry subaltern memories that resist official historiography, providing a space where marginalised groups can articulate their own versions of the past' (Mayaram 2004, 25). Together, these frameworks allow for a reading of folklore not as passive inheritance but as active dialogue that continues to shape feminist possibility in the present.

Folklore As Living Archive

What is transmitted and what is suppressed

If folklore endures as an intergenerational archive, then the question we are confronted with is not simply what is remembered but also how it is remembered and at what cost. Guided by the feminist hermeneutic approach outlined above, this section turns to the folk archive itself to examine how resistance is transmitted, contained, and reactivated through the stories of Heer, Sassi, and Sohni. The persistence of these three protagonists within South Asian cultural memory is often taken as evidence of continuity, of a shared inheritance that binds communities across time. Yet such endurance should not be mistaken for any kind of fidelity. What is transmitted across generations is rarely the full force of the narrative; rather, it is a version shaped by the pressures of acceptability, morality, and power. Here the archive, is not neutral but rather curated... and for very specific ends. Folklore's persistence across centuries is not because it remains unchanged but because it remains affectively legible. These stories endure because they are felt and because they generate emotional attachments, shared imaginaries, and moral vocabularies that exceed textual boundaries.

This affective endurance allows the stories to travel, but it also enables their containment. The reduction of these heroines to tragic lovers is not incidental but a disciplining mechanism. This allows contemporary and ancient South Asian honour

coding to preserve the story and repurpose it for female sacrifice while diffusing its insurgent, indeed feminist, potential. As Frank Korom reminds us, ‘folklore as an empirical bit of reality does not exist apart from our academic creation of it’ (Korom 2013, 9).

Voice, form, and conditional speech

At the level of form, this process of containment is embedded within the very structure of the *qissa*⁸ as a medium. The question-answer base format of the *qissa* allows these protagonists a voice, and these texts lend themselves to oral performance, suggesting the simultaneity of print and performance. Yet this apparent granting of voice is deeply conditional. The *qissa* form allows them a voice in a narrative that is traditionally and constitutively framed in a ‘female voice’ embodied by the male protagonist. This effectively leaves the heroine voiceless until they are condemned and given a chance to answer the questions society asks of them. What emerges here is a structure in which speech is not a right but a response. The heroine does not speak freely: she speaks only when summoned, when accused, when required to justify her transgression. Her voice is reactive rather than generative.

This conditional visibility bears a striking resemblance to contemporary dynamics of gendered speech in Pakistan. Women are permitted to speak but often only in moments of crisis, accusation, or spectacle. Their voices are solicited as a defence but seldom regarded as authorship. The continuity here is not incidental; it suggests that what is being transmitted across generations is not only narrative content but a performative grammar of when and how women are allowed to speak. This is where the *qissa*’s *sawal-jawab* structure becomes analytically crucial. Far from being a neutral literary device, it constitutes a dialogic form in the Bakhtinian sense, one that stages competing voices within a shared narrative space: ‘The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads... it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue’ (Bakhtin 1981, 276). Yet crucially, it is also the form of the ‘living utterance’ that regulates access to that space. Heer, Sassi, and Sohni speak, but they speak within constraint. And it is precisely within this constraint that their resistance becomes legible.

⁸ *Qissa* (from Arabic *qiṣṣa*, ‘story’) denotes a South Asian narrative form combining oral performance and written text, often centred on tragic romances such as *Hir Ranjha* and *Sassi Punnu*. Typically performed in poetic and musical settings, *qissas* incorporate dialogic structures like *sawal-jawab* (Question-Answer) enabling layered negotiations of love, authority, and social norms (Mir 2010; Orsini 2015).

Defiance as feminist praxis

However, all the constraints placed upon these women in their respective tales still do not prevent them from enacting their defiance against social custom as a central facet of how each of them loves. Nowhere is this more visible than in Heer's confrontation with the Qazi, a moment that condenses the tensions between love, law, and authority into a single exchange.

Hir: What good is life if I am not faithful to myself?
My love is known to the earth and the skies.

This declaration is often read as an expression of romantic devotion. Yet to read it solely in these terms is to miss its juridical force and scope. Heer is not merely defending her love; she is also contesting the authority of the Qazi to adjudicate it. Her statement reframes the regulatory parameters of faith itself, shifting it from adherence to external law toward fidelity to the self. Heer's confrontation with the Qazi constitutes one of the *qissa* tradition's most concentrated moments of feminist jurisprudence.

What Heer enacts in this space is not simply an act of romantic rebellion but a fundamental epistemological shift that potentially relocates authority from institutional religion to embodied experience. By asserting the validity of her own internal witness against the dictates of the *qazi* (judge) and the family, Heer 'furnishes the Punjabi literary formation with an ur-text of feminist critique' according to Sara Kazmi (Kazmi 2019, 4). This move toward interiority as a site of truth resonates with the Sufi tradition of autonomy; as Nosheen Ali observes in her reading of Hallaj, such an articulation of truth offers 'an empowering sense of autonomy and freedom... at once individual and collective, spiritual and political' (Ali 2016, 12). Bridging this Sufi autonomy with Heer's defiance reveals her political subjectivity as a form of 'intergenerational dialogue and inquiry,' which Scherto Gill defined as 'the co-creation of shared meaning across temporal difference' as discussed earlier (Gill 2025, 12). Ultimately, this dialogue serves as an epistemological framework where, as Min Young Choi argues, participants 'co-construct meaning through their shared positionality and experience' (Choi 2025, 24). Through this process, the *qissa* ceases to be a mere story from the past and becomes a living infrastructure for negotiating contemporary agency. These stories endure not because they are transmitted intact but because each generation receives, interprets, contests, and retells them differently. The dialogue at stake is therefore not only between storyteller and audience but between successive generations negotiating the meaning of agency, obedience, honour, and desire.

The same logic extends to Sassi and Sohni, whose acts of movement across hostile terrain are often framed as excessive devotion rather than deliberate transgression. Such stories are personified in the legendary Sufi poems centred around Hir, Sassi and Sohni, and these native myths repeatedly portray women who break from tradition in dramatic and often fatal ways: they are the agents in the story but seem to always be positioned socially by how they met their fate.

In the case of Sassi, her journey across the desert is often framed as the ultimate act of devotion, an excess of love that consumes the self. Yet to remain within this reading is to overlook the deliberateness of her movements. Sassi does not wander; she traverses. Her passage through the desert is not merely a pursuit of the beloved but a sustained refusal of the social order that renders such pursuit impossible. The terrain she crosses is both physical and symbolic, marked by the absence of protection, kinship, and legitimacy. Sassi is one of the rare female protagonists in folklore who ventures into the 'unknown' and finds spiritual meaning. This is often a trajectory exclusively reserved for male figures and is also the path to them being regarded as Sufis and mystics. Sassi transforms the desert from a space of desolation into a site of assertion, where her initial quest for her beloved Punnun becomes an act of knowing and a claim to selfhood.

Similarly, Sohni's nightly crossings of the river are frequently recast as tragic inevitability, a lover's compulsion that leads to her death. But Sohni's movement across water is repeated, intentional, and perilous and signals persistence rather than surrender. She chooses to cross the torrents again and again, despite the structures that seek to contain her within marriage, domesticity, and social expectation. Her body, in motion, refuses all acceptable norms of stability. It exists in defiance of the boundaries imposed upon it, even as it remains subject to them. What is often remembered as tragedy is, in fact, a repetition of insubordination, a series of acts that insist on desire, mobility, and presence in the face of prohibition.

Any re-reading and excavation of folklore must insist on female agency as a critical cornerstone of these tales. These women are not simply acted upon, they act. They move across deserts, rivers, and social boundaries in ways that violate prescribed norms of gendered immobility. Yet, as Shameem Abbas notes, these narratives have historically been absorbed into Sufi frameworks that repurpose them for spiritual allegory: 'Musicians sing the native myths of lovers like Sassi, Hir, Sohni...because the myths have become metaphors for the polarities of gender, religious, sociopolitical, and economic hegemony' (Abbas 2002, 19). Abbas demonstrates how women's voices and actions in these stories become framed exclusively as metaphor rather than memory and choices. In this transformation, the heroine's body becomes a symbolic site rather than a political agent. Her journey is no longer read as an act of

resistance, but as an allegory of spiritual longing. What is suppressed, then, is not the story itself, but its material implications.

However, what binds these figures is not the inevitability of their fate, but the persistence of their refusal, one that is enacted through movement rather than proclamation.

Love, kinship, and the structure of constraint

At the heart of these narratives lies a recurring tension between love and kinship, as these figures are found oscillating between individual desire and communal obligation. The key point to note, however, is that in each case, they choose the former. This opposition is often framed as tragic inevitability, yet it is a structuring mechanism through which authority is enforced. Kinship operates as a regulatory system, one that disciplines desire in the name of honour, lineage, and social order. According to Annemarie Schimmel's reading, 'The tragic heroines...represent the human soul in search of the beloved...united only through suffering and death' (Schimmel 1975, 434).

What such readings obscure, however, is the extent to which these women actively choose disobedience. Their deaths are not simply tragic; they are the consequence of refusal, and so, much of the repositioning of their stories involves exposing the toxicity of the social norms and honour frameworks that condemn them rather than merely highlighting their sacrifice. To constantly privilege the tragic over the resistant is to reproduce the very framework that seeks to contain them. If these stories are repeatedly reshaped, then their transmission cannot be understood as passive inheritance. Rather, it becomes an ongoing process of re-authoring. This is most powerfully illustrated in Amrita Pritam's *Ajj Aakhaan Waris Shah Nu*, where the poet does not simply retell Heer's story but summons Waris Shah himself to bear witness to how women have loved and lost in *his* Punjab:

Ajj aakhaan Waris Shah nu, kiton qabran vichon bol...

Pritam's invocation is not nostalgic it is accusatory. She calls upon Waris Shah to witness the violence of Partition, effectively repositioning Heer within a new historical context. By summoning the eighteenth-century poet to 'turn another page in the book of love', Pritam ensures that the *qissa* is no longer a static relic but a site of dialogic justice where the past is held accountable to the present. Through this invocation, Pritam positions the female voice 'not merely as a victim, but as an agent or narrator of cultural history' (Tripathi and Roy 2025, 285), transforming a legendary figure of resistance into a moral witness for a modern tragedy. In her analysis of radical retellings, Kazmi argues that Pritam uses the existing 'interpretive interventions'

of the Heer legend to confront the patriarchies of her own time. (Kazmi 2019, 18) In doing, so, Pritam proffers a tentative template for other feminist repurposing of similar heroines.

What is ultimately transmitted across these narratives far extends the terrain of stories and archetypes but also a new lexicon and grammar for reconstituting and unearthing rebellion and resistance. Buried under layers of sacrifice and tragedy, there rests a grammar of refusal, of movement, and of speaking under constraint and against it. Heer, Sassi, and Sohni are not merely remembered, they are widely recognised figures across generations. Their acts of defiance resonate not because they are exceptional, but because they articulate conditions that persist, and this provides immense potential for contemporary re-readings and re-tellings for feminist organising.

Mobility, mutability, and feminist praxis

To understand how this retelling dialogue manifests requires attending not only to narrative content but to form, movement, and embodiment. Across South Asian folklore, one encounters a recurring feminine figure, one that is mobile, mutable, and resistant to containment. She appears across genres, across terrains, and across registers, often slipping between sacred and secular, myth and performance, devotion and defiance.

This subversive phantom presence that flits from Punjabi *qissa* to Sufi *qawwali* and wedding *tappay* with sublime ease allows for a remythologising of Pakistani women. Its mutability is essential to capture a new collective consciousness that is still embedded in indigenous voices but not only permits, rather actively encourages, both deviance and defiance of what are considered 'cultural norms'. It emerges as both narrator and critique of its own cultures. What is at stake here is not the figure itself but what it makes possible. This mobility is not simply aesthetic; it is methodological. It allows for a way of reading across texts, performances, and contexts without fixing meaning in a single location. In doing so, it offers a framework through which female rebellion can be understood not as isolated acts, but as recurring gestures that move across time and space. This mutable and mobile feminine entity echoes Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the *Mestiza* consciousness, navigating and often trespassing liminal borders as she 'slips between' categories and remythologises identity frameworks. Anzaldúa states, 'The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode... she reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths' (Anzaldúa 1987, 79). In both contexts, this mobility is a methodological necessity: it allows the subaltern subject to exist in

a state of perpetual becoming, where rebellion is not a singular event but a recurring and pluralistic gesture that can be reconfigured when and where the need arises to defy any national and/or cultural registers.

This is precisely why it is crucial that this figure is a woman. In South Asian Sufi tradition, where conventionally it is men who embody the ‘feminine’ voice and straddle the terrain of both genders to enact a range of mystical tasks, this framing demands that women seize the space to do the same and finally tell their own stories in the process. Owning desire and sexuality allows women claim over space, both geographical and physical, and permits folkloric heroines to discard traditions of veiling and concealing and swap them for revelation and revolt.

This movement across space – geographical, narrative, and symbolic – finds a structural echo in the *qissa* tradition itself. The *sawal-jawab* (question–answer) form resists closure, refusing a single authoritative voice or fixed meaning. In this sense, both the wandering figure and the dialogic form enact a shared logic: a refusal to remain contained within a singular identity, location, or answer.

From folklore to assembly

At the heart of these narratives lies a question of the body, its movement, its visibility and above all its refusal. The female body in South Asian folklore is never simply present; it is perennially regulated, contested, and disciplined. Yet it is also through the body that resistance becomes legible and manifest. Nearly all female rebellion...is framed through the *jism* (body) and consequently so are most mechanisms of gendered control. This condensation of anxiety onto the body is not incidental but structural. The question is not simply what the body says, but why it appears at all. Why is it visible, moving, speaking? Heer speaks before the Qazi. Sassi traverses the desert. Sohni crosses the river. These acts are not incidental, they are insurgent. Each woman appears where she is not supposed to appear, speaks when she is not expected to speak, and moves through spaces that have already been mapped out for her by others. Their resistance is not articulated through the language of rights, but through acts of embodied presence that make alternative ways of living visible.

Judith Butler’s formulation in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* helps name this dynamic. For Butler, bodies assembled in public do not merely protest; they exercise ‘a plural and performative right to appear’ (Butler 2015, 25). Read through this lens, the folk heroines are not simply symbols of resistance. Their bodies become the medium through which resistance is enacted. The significance of their actions lies not in whether they succeed, but in the fact that they render visible forms of life which dominant social structures attempt to foreclose. It is an archive of embodied political speech that has been circulating across generations long before

the vocabulary of rights or assembly was available to name it. This becomes even more evident when placed alongside Gloria Anzaldúa's formulation of the body as geography: 'our bodies are geographies of selves made up of diverse, bordering and overlapping "countries"' (Anzaldúa 2015, 69). In this context, the movements of Heer, Sassi, and Sohni are not simply narrative devices but reconfigurations of space. They redraw the boundaries of what is permissible, traversing terrains that are both physical and symbolic. Fayyaz Baqir's reading of Punjabi folklore frames defiance as an epistemological act 'realising the limitations, deceptive appearance and finiteness of the form...[and] discovering the authenticity of what appears to be ideal, spiritual and unreal' (Baqir 2017, 452). What these frameworks collectively reveal is that the acts performed by these heroines and their contemporary counterparts are not merely emotional or symbolic. They are political in the most fundamental sense.

If these narratives persist, it is because they continue to resonate. Their reactivation in contemporary feminist spaces, whether through performance, protest, or pedagogy signals a reengagement with tradition not a break with it. Among the chants, slogans, and corresponding annual backlash against the Aurat March mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there are moments where the past seems to surface unexpectedly. The most highly contested of all the slogans brought forward by the Aurat March in Pakistan has been 'Mera Jism, Meri Marzi', a colloquial reframing of 'My Body, My Choice'. The reactions to this slogan have ranged from vitriol and ridicule to death threats, physical violence, and organised campaigns of moral panic. Since its emergence, feminist organisers have been subjected to 'intense backlash and even death and rape threats' (Alamgir 2022), while the slogan itself has been publicly denounced as immoral, un-Islamic, and a threat to the social order. This hostility has not remained confined to discourse. Aurat March participants have faced police violence, public attacks, and sustained harassment both online and offline. In some cases, the slogan has been drawn directly into narratives of violence, including instances where its invocation has preceded acts of domestic murder as well as charges of blasphemy against Aurat March organisers in 2021. What emerges from these reactions is not simply disagreement, but a deeper anxiety, one in which women's claims to bodily autonomy are perceived as destabilising the moral and cultural fabric itself. Sara Ahmed's concept of the 'wilful subject' becomes particularly useful here as she describes wilfulness as " (Ahmed 2014, 2). What links Heer, Sassi, Sohni, and contemporary feminist activists is not sameness but a refusal to comply with the conditions imposed upon them – wilfulness. The affective dimension of this continuity is equally important. As Blom and Lama-Rewal argue, political movements are shaped by both 'mobilised emotions' and 'mobilising emotions' (Blom & Lama-Rewal 2020, 4). The anger, humour, and defiance present in Aurat March slogans do not emerge in a vacuum. They are prefigured in the emotional landscapes of the folk archive. They function as contemporary responses to much older cultural conversa-

tions about mobility, honour, bodily autonomy, and refusal. The women who carry placards demanding the right to move freely through public space are not articulating an entirely new political language. Rather, they are participating in an existing conversation that stretches backwards through the folk archive, one already populated by women who crossed deserts, challenged *qazis*, and refused the terms of their prescribed lives. In this sense, the Aurat March becomes an intergenerational dialogue conducted through protest rather than inheritance alone.

This continuity is perhaps most strikingly embodied in moments of performance such as Sheema Kirmani's *dhammal* at Sehwan following the 2017 bombing. Following the attack, Kirmani performed *dhammal* at the shrine and her presence marked not only defiance but an act of reclamation, as Kirmani was not simply protesting violence, she was inhabiting a space from which women had historically been excluded. Her body, in that moment, became a site of intergenerational dialogue, bridging past and present through embodied action. The classical dancer and activist has since organised dance workshops at the Karachi Aurat March protests and is a leader in the marches. As Butler reminds us, bodies gathered in public 'produce and reproduce alliances' (Butler 2015, 66).

The Aurat March, in this light, is not merely a protest but an assembly in the fullest sense. It is a collective articulation of presence, demand, and refusal drawing on a legacy that is *local*.

Feminist futures moving forward

What emerges from this analysis is not only a reinterpretation of folklore, but a re-framing of wellbeing itself. If wellbeing is understood not solely in material or developmental terms but as a relational, cultural, and affective space, then the reclamation of folklore becomes a critical site of intervention. These narratives offer more than symbolic value; they provide a culturally embedded vocabulary through which dignity, autonomy, and collective agency can be articulated. In contexts where feminist discourse is frequently dismissed as foreign, the ability to speak through the familiar forms of Heer, Sassi, and Sohni, repositions feminist thought within an indigenous epistemic frame. Wellbeing, in this sense, is not merely about access or inclusion but about recognition and the ability to locate oneself within a lineage of resistance that has always existed and with which people from across the sociopolitical and class spectrum can identify.

Intergenerational dialogue here goes beyond transmission opening space for transformation. It enables inherited narratives to be reworked in response to contemporary urgencies, whether in governance, education, or cultural production. When folklore is engaged as a living archive, it offers one possible framework through which

conversations about education, cultural participation, public memory, and governance may be reimagined. The value of these narratives lies not in their ability to provide ready-made solutions but in their capacity to expand what communities understand to be possible, legitimate, and culturally intelligible. This makes it possible to mobilise it pedagogically, to reframe curricula, to reimagine cultural policy, and to intervene in public discourse in ways that are both legible, disruptive, and undeniable since no one can resort to the ‘this is against our culture’ excuse to dismiss claims rooted in indigenous knowledge. What is being proposed here is not a return to tradition but a reactivation of it as a refusal to allow cultural memory to remain static or selective in favour of upholding the *status quo*. Such a reactivation cannot, on its own, transform social structures. It can, however, create new openings for dialogue by recovering forms of cultural memory that have been rendered inaccessible, marginal, or politically inconvenient.

Yet, this reclamation is not without risk. The gradual co-optation of rebellious figures into controllable traditions parallels broader patterns of institutional absorption. Folklore, once mobilised, can be sanitised, commodified, or stripped of its radical potential. The very figures that once embodied defiance can be reabsorbed into narratives of morality, spirituality, or national heritage that neutralise their political force. The case of state-sponsored cultural institutions, such as Lok Virsa and other heritage bodies, illustrates this tension clearly. These institutions often provide visibility and preservation for Sufi and folk traditions while simultaneously sanitising their subversive elements, offering what might be understood as ‘cultural cover’ for narratives that once challenged authority and authoritarian structures.

This is not unique to South Asia. As Watenpaugh observes in her work on ‘deviant dervishes,’ figures of radical spiritual dissent are frequently absorbed into more regulated and acceptable forms over time (Watenpaugh 2005, 538). The same dynamic is at play here. The challenge is not whether to engage folklore but how to do so without reproducing the very structures of containment that the project seeks to dismantle. Any feminist reclamation of the folk archive must remain attentive and constantly vigilant to this tension between preservation and transformation, between visibility and co-optation.

This tension is further underscored by the material realities that persist alongside these narratives. In present-day Punjabi feudal sensibility, where women are ‘married to the Quran,’ exchanged as payment to settle land disputes, and frequently murdered in the name of honour, this act of a woman taking both spiritual and physical ownership over land along with herself is the ultimate radical act. The same tradition that produced Heer’s defiance also exists alongside systems that continue to discipline women’s bodies and choices. To romanticise the archive without acknow-

ledging these contradictions would be to reproduce its silences. Yet, it is precisely within this tension that the possibility of feminist intervention lies.

To read South Asian folklore as intergenerational dialogue is to recognise that these stories are not relics of the past, but active participants in the present. By recrafting their heroines as agents of resistance, it becomes possible to locate feminist futures not outside tradition but within it. The question, then, is not whether folklore can speak to feminist futures. It already does. The question is what shifts when we choose to listen and frame differently. When we read Heer not as a tragic lover but as a jurist confronting patriarchal law. When we read Sassi not as a figure of sacrifice but as a woman who refused to stop moving. When we read the Aurat March not as a rupture, but as a continuation – the most recent articulation of a much older grammar of refusal.

As Amrita Pritam writes:

Jithe wajdi si phook pyar di,
Wey oh wanjhli gayi guwaach
Raanjhey dey sab veer ajj,
Bhul gaye ohdi jaach.

Lost is the flute that once carried the sound of love;
Ranjha's kin have forgotten how to hear it.

And yet, the sound remains faint, insistent, waiting to be heard again.

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Unpaid Reproductive Labour, Gendered Invisibility, and the Need for Intergenerational Dialogue in Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver'

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Abstract: This paper explores the theme of unpaid reproductive labour and gendered invisibility through Mahasweta Devi's famous short story 'Breast-Giver'. The special focus is on how intergenerational dialogue can illuminate and transform understanding of women's unpaid care work, their oppression in socio-cultural space, and economic exclusion from the capitalist market. The narrative of Jashoda, a Brahmin woman who becomes a wet nurse due to economic vulnerability, serves as a lens to explore the intersections of caste, class, and gender in a patriarchal capitalist society. By using Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, the paper investigates how Jashoda's multiple identities collectively intersect and shape her exploitation and thus render her labour both essential and invisible. The paper uses theoretical perspectives of various feminist theorists such as Silvia Federici, Indira Hirway, and Hannah Telling to contextualise Devi's story within broader socio-economic frameworks. The analysis critiques the romanticisation of motherhood and caregiving and further interrogates the sexual division of labour that ignores women's work both within household and beyond. The paper identifies that intergenerational dialogue is crucial for challenging internalised ideals of women's sacrifice and servility. The lack of mutual comprehension and empathy between two generations, as depicted in the story between the central character Jashoda and the next generation daughters-in-law, helps to identify women's exclusion from public spaces despite their fundamental role in social reproduction. It makes an earnest attempt to bridge that gap between two generations and promote mutual understanding.

Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue, unpaid reproductive labour, gendered invisibility, gender justice, wet nursing, intersectionality, objectification, commodification, surrogacy

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Introduction

Breastfeeding is often romanticised as a divine gift and an innate maternal offering. Though the biological significance and nutritional value of maternal colostrum is a well-established fact, the social implications of breastfeeding reveal deeper layers of exploitation. The term *mother* extends beyond nurturing to encompass the invisible burdens and sacrifices associated with reproduction and caregiving. This paper aims to explore the theme of unpaid reproductive labour and the problems faced by women employed in it. It also critiques, as depicted by Mahasweta Devi in her story 'Breast-Giver', the gendered invisibility of the central character Jashoda's unpaid reproductive labour and attempts to expose the structural erasure of women's work in patriarchal and capitalist societies.

A popular and prolific Bengali woman writer, Mahasweta Devi (1926–2016) wrote during the postcolonial period, a period marked by socio-political turbulence. During this time, women were largely dependent financially on their fathers prior to marriage and on their husbands after marriage. Despite the legal abolition of practices like Sati and child marriage during the colonial times in India, structural gender inequality continued. Although women started entering professional spaces, their opportunities were largely determined by education and class. While educated women often faced barriers like the glass ceiling, uneducated and economically unprivileged women were confined to unpaid care work such as cooking, cleaning, reproductive labour, and childcare, which was normalised within Indian patriarchal households. Their labour, though essential, remained invisible in mainstream feminist discourse. In the story, Jashoda's gender identity, Brahminical identity, economic status, and the diseased body all intersect under patriarchal capitalism. This paper uses the story first to examine how unpaid reproductive labour impacts women's health and socio-economic status and then explores an appropriate alternative of building solidarity between two age groups to provide women recognition and support.

The paper applies qualitative literary textual analysis as a method to study the representation of unpaid reproductive labour, gendered invisibility, and the gap of intergenerational dialogue in Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver'. The close reading of the text through characterisation, narrative structure, and socio-cultural context facilitates investigating how women's reproductive labour is normalised within patriarchal systems. The analysis foregrounds the intersection of unpaid reproductive labour, caste, gender, and class in 'Breast-Giver' using Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of 'intersectionality' as a critical framework (Crenshaw 1991, 3–10). The analysis of these intersections exemplifies that sharing lived experiences across generations is important for recognition of unpaid care work and gender justice. The documentation of

such experiences will enable young generations to question the normalisation of unpaid reproductive labour and further advocate for structural change to incorporate women's labour into the nation's economic growth.

Jashoda is trapped within the capitalist exploitative structure of the Haldar household once her husband, the primary earner of her household, becomes physically disabled in an accident. The lack of any other means of survival and stagnant economic conditions force Jashoda to choose the profession of wet nursing. Despite belonging to the upper-caste Brahmin section of Indian society, she remains economically powerless. Eventually, she develops breast cancer due to excessive lactation services she provides constantly for years. Consequently, she is abandoned, not only by her husband but also by her biological children and surrogate children, as well as her employers. This paper situates Jashoda's plight within the broader global frameworks of feminised care work that thrive on women's invisible contributions but do not provide reciprocal legal, social, economic, or emotional recognition to them. Throughout the story, Jashoda's body is used as a site of service and sacrifice for sustaining others. However, towards the end, the same body becomes a site of disease and deprivation.

To evaluate these power structures, this paper benefits from the critical insights of some of the important theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, and Maria Lugones. Crenshaw observes how vulnerabilities like domestic violence or economic oppression are governed by race, caste, class, and gender. She states that identity politics 'ignores intragroup differences' and 'this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class' (Crenshaw 1991, 3). In the story, the Haldar family functions as the 'batterer' of Jashoda leading to these intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw 1991, 3). Jashoda's character emerges through the interaction of caste privilege and caste vulnerability, poor economic status, motherhood, the diseased body, and patriarchal control. All these intersecting structures make her vulnerable to exploitation alongside being revered and disposable. Chandra Talpade Mohanty extends this critique further into postcolonial locations. In her work, *Feminism Without Borders*, she explains the 'politics of solidarity' and says, 'feminist solidarity as defined...constitutes the most principled way to cross borders – to decolonise knowledge and practise anticapitalist critique' (Mohanty 2003, 12). She argues that 'third-world women' should not be treated as a homogeneous, monolithic, oppressed category. Instead, their experiences are shaped by specific geographical, historical, and cultural structures. Mohanty's views foreground the specificities of the Indian patriarchal system as seen in the formation of Jashoda's intersectional identity. Similarly, Maria Lugones' concept of the 'coloniality of gender' challenges

the universalisation of Western definitions of gender. She emphasises that the Western idea of gender is governed by colonialism and cannot be applicable to all cultures because the specificities of socio-cultural background impact the construction of gendered bodies (Lugones 2023, 36–42). Thus, their views highlight how power dynamics have naturalised the hierarchies that govern caste-, class-, and gender-stratified bodies.

The paper applies the insights of contemporary Indian feminists such as Nivedita Menon, Uma Chakravarti, and Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak to define gendered objectification and reproductive labour in the Indian context. Nivedita Menon in her book, *Seeing Like a Feminist*, observes that Indian societies prepare women to perform domestic duties from childhood and the normalisation of this is the foundation on which the economic structure of the country exists. Menon opines that ‘the woman is expected to do all the household duties and childcare on her own, or to supervise a domestic help who is usually a woman’ (Menon 2012, 10). Menon’s arguments subtly fit the Indian context and help in the analysis of Jashoda’s intersectional identity. Similarly, Uma Chakravarti in her work, *Gendering Caste*, raises pertinent points related to caste and gender. She states that caste cannot be studied separately from gender as it survives through the regulation of women’s bodies, sexuality, marriage, and reproduction. She also demonstrates that women’s contribution to social and economic reproduction is very significant, yet their labour often remains invisible due to multiple ideologies, such as familial duty, purity, motherhood, and family honour (Chakravarti 2018, 25–30). Chakravarti’s idea of ‘Brahminical patriarchy’ supports the view that Jashoda’s labour is valued and exploited simultaneously. Jashoda’s Brahmin identity does not shield her from patriarchal exploitation. Instead, it exposes the hypocrisy of the patriarchal social structure which problematises her poverty, while exploiting her caste-derived supremacy for the survival of its progeny. In contrast, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak’s concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ offers a temporary framework suggesting that if different groups of women operate in cross-generational solidarity, they can collectively resist patriarchal oppression and exploitation (Singh 2022, 5). Thus, the two groups of women in the story, the older and younger generation, could stand in solidarity to oppose Jashoda’s oppression.

Historical and Socio-Economic Study of Care Work

To contextualise Jashoda’s labour, it is important to define and differentiate between paid and unpaid work. Paid work is defined as work ‘for the mental or physical labour performed within the work force for which remuneration is received; and unpaid work means work or labour for which no remuneration is received’ (IGNOU n.d., 4). Unpaid work can be further explained as ‘any work that is done in homes, communities, and workplaces that contributes to those environments and the people

within them, but which does not result in financial security and status in society' (IGNOU n.d., 4). Historically, women's unpaid reproductive labour has been naturalised along the lines of caste and class in Indian households. Practices like wet nursing, rooted in Mughal courts and later institutionalised in colonial domestic spaces, reveal how women were reduced to instruments of care for privileged and royal families. Women working as wet nurses (*dai ma*) had no agency of their own and mostly depended on the royal family to take care of them. Indrani Sen's research on the role of wet nurses, house maids, or caregivers to European children, reveals that English women 'replicated the Empire on a domestic scale' (Sen 2009, 3–4). Sen has also recorded in her research the difference between the *ayahs* and wet nurses. *Ayahs* were the caregivers whereas wet nurses breastfed the children of European *mem-sahib*. This dynamic exemplifies Lugones' assertion that 'colonial power reinforced gender hierarchies' during colonial times, which enabled English women to exercise their political power over lower-class native women and keep them doubly marginalised (Lugones 2023, 40).

Despite constituting a significant contribution to the national and global economies, women's reproductive care work remains structurally obscured, as stated by contemporary feminist scholars such as Bhattacharjee, Hannah Telling, and Indira Hirway. According to Bhattacharjee, 'Reproductive work has largely been precarious, invisible, and generally without any kind of remuneration beyond the fulfilment of an ideological normative idea of women as beings to serve others' (Bhattacharjee 2024, 45). Moreover, there is continuous precarity and invisibility of women's reproductive labour including nourishing and caregiving in India which links historical wet nursing directly to commercial surrogacy. Animesh Nagvanshi notes in his article that altruistic surrogacy in India has a long history and records that the arrival of 'alternative reproductive technique' (ART) in the late twentieth century initiated a large, unregulated commercial surrogacy industry. The unlegislated use of surrogacy led to a constant growth in 'low-cost fertility clinics and huge numbers of underprivileged women' who often compromised their health (Nagvanshi 2023, n.p.). It prompted the Indian government to outlaw surrogacy for foreigners in 2015. The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act (2016) established regulations for it, and The Surrogacy (Regulation) Act (2021) prohibited commercial surrogacy in favour of altruistic surrogacy.

The brief history above reveals that reproductive labour is not only domestic labour but also a historically generated system of exploitation. UN data also reveals that globally women perform two-and-a-half times more household and caregiving work than men, contributing an estimated 10% to 39% of the GDP in various countries. The analysis suggests that in the US, although women constitute half of the paid workforce, they still shoulder almost 80% of the unpaid domestic work, worth approximately \$3.6 trillion annually. Despite its immense economic value, this work

remains excluded from official GDP calculations (The Guardian 2025, n.p.). Indira Hirway's research focuses on factors responsible for the invisibility of women's care work. She argues in the chapter, 'Understanding Poverty: Insights Emerging from Time Use of the Poor' in her book, *Unpaid Work and the Economy: Gender, Time Use and Poverty in Developed Countries*, that most of the women in developing countries continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work due to inadequate access to resources such as a 'low level of technology' and 'public services' (Antonopoulos and Hirway 2010, 22–51). Furthermore, Gulfam Tasnim also emphasises that compensating for this labour would significantly improve the national as well as the global economy.

Surrogacy and maternal sacrifices have also been idealised in South Asian literary traditions. Important writers like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (in *Charitraheen*), and Munshi Premchand (in *Kamala*) have portrayed women as embodiments of self-annihilation, maternal devotion, and paragons of virtue, establishing their roles as invisible domestic workers. Through the literature review it is noted that women in India often prioritised family welfare above personal choices. In their work, mothers and caregiving women act as pillars of the family structure whose domestic labour remains indispensable yet largely invisible. Progressive women writers like Ismat Chughtai have exposed the gendered oppression of women within domestic spaces, for example, in her works 'The Crooked Line' and 'Chauthi Ka Joda'. Such literary representations explicitly highlight the glorification of Indian women's nurturing roles. However, Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver' radically subverts this tradition and exposes how the professionalisation of motherhood under capitalism exploits the gendered body.

Intersectional Exploitation and Commodification of Jashoda's Body

Historical and theoretical research makes it clear that women have been doing unpaid domestic labour for a long time and have been idealised for the same in multiple ways. In this framework, the paper analyses the role in the story of the central character Jashoda, who represents the older generation of women who adhere strictly to patriarchal traditions even at the cost of their lives. Her subjugation is very well contrasted with the young women of the Haldar family, who have easy access to education and wealth. The paper attempts to show the various aspects of Jashoda's economic vulnerability which force her to take the role of professional motherhood for the Haldars but with no additional financial security. The paper also evaluates various factors responsible for the tragic consequences of her profession, such as the lack of understanding and empathy by the upper-class women of the Haldar house even in the most tragic days of her life. Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns against consid-

ering women as a homogeneous or monolithic group. Her critique is used in analysing the intergenerational as well as class divide between the two groups of women within the household. It also showcases how historical as well as class- and caste-based structures intersect to shape their distinct experiences.

Jashoda is described as 'a mother by profession' in the story, the profession which does not guarantee any financial assistance and ultimately leads to reproductive exploitation. She is devoid of sexual autonomy, and her body is merely seen as an object by her husband, Kangalicharan. His routine objectification of Jashoda's 'capacious bosom' every afternoon exhibits that Jashoda is much more a commodity than a human being (Devi 1997, 31). In fact, her breasts are treated either as erotic objects, 'large and round' or as transactional sources of survival and nourishment. In the Introduction to Devi's *Breast Stories*, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak observes the commodification of breasts as well as the physical body of a woman: '...it is a survival object transformed into a commodity, making visible the indeterminacy between filial piety and gender violence, between house and temple, between domination and exploitation' (Spivak 1997, vii). The objectification of Jashoda's body is more explicitly visible in Kangali's use of Jashoda's body for his sexual gratification devoid of any emotional connection. Jashoda's identity as a responsible mother, a dutiful wife, and a pleasing sexual partner for her husband does not offer any financial security. This dynamic reflects Federici's critique of capitalist social relations:

In the same way as God created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally and sexually – to raise *his* children, mend his socks, patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social relations...It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of that servant, which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time invisible. (Federici 1975, 3)

Federici's critique highlights the invisibility of women's work in the capitalist model of society, which favours all men and ignores women's contribution to it. This capitalist model shifts Jashoda into complete economic dependence, first on her husband and later on the Haldar family.

Religious and caste ideologies further reinforce Jashoda's commodification. These ideologies create a ripple by interacting with her gender identity. By exemplifying women like Sati, Savitri and Sita, the patriarchal society pedestalises Jashoda as a goddess. This highlights how the internalisation of silence and perseverance is used to manipulate women. Jashoda is also portrayed as a symbolic mother goddess in the

story, an emblem of self-sacrifice, filial piety, and infinite tolerance who is capable of feeding endless children.

Rigid, mythical, and superstitious structures trap Jashoda into an exploitative cycle. As Uma Chakravarti points out, the rigidly rooted system of Brahminical patriarchy combines with gendered expectations and naturalises exploitation as a religious duty (Chakravarti 2018, 28). The patriarchal group of people like Kangali, Halder Babu and others in the story have staunch faith in the Goddess idol placed in the temple who is often referred to as 'Lionseated'. Halder Babu, the head of the Halder family, interprets the appearance of the goddess in Jashoda's dream as a mandate for her and says, 'she creates as a mother and preserves as a midwife' (Devi 1997, 44). The study exposes the ideological structure of West Bengal's caste- and class-ridden society, where Brahmins are treated with utmost reverence, yet Jashoda is offered no material protection. Furthermore, this false veneration is reflected in Kangali's complacency and his financial dependence on the Haldars. His approach leaves the family destitute when Halder Babu dies and consequently leads to Jashoda's victimisation.

Further, Jashoda is an embodiment of everlasting nourishment, and survival. She becomes the ultimate realisation of Meenakshi Tapan's 'good woman', a woman who sacrifices her personal comfort and physical health to secure family survival as defined in the introduction to her book *Living the Body*:

The 'good' woman, whether she is selfless worker, wife, daughter, mother, is a significant trope in the stories, so that women work for the survival of the family,...stay on for the benefit of the family or are obedient daughters or seek to establish their place as 'good' women in their aspirations to be recognised as such by the family and community. (Thapan 2009, xix)

According to Thapan, such 'good women' embody a complex mix of 'economic deprivation, caste, familial and gender relations' which operates within the deeply compromised 'physical and social conditions of everyday life' (Thapan 2009, 2). Similarly, women like Jashoda 'are embodied socially' through their 'location in a socio-cultural and political space' (Thapan 2009, 2). She is trapped first within the space of her family structure and later within the Halder household. By surrendering her body to the Halder Mistress, Jashoda renounces her pleasures and comforts. This transaction is not fully compensated by the Halder family, instead it becomes a benevolent favour bestowed upon Jashoda. Her condition aligns with the arguments of Silvia Federici when she says, 'They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work' (Federici 1975, 1). Jashoda's acceptance of the mistress's proposal of 'unwaged work' does not empower her. In fact, her work remains invisible and, moreover, it distorts Jashoda's goddess-like image.

By romanticising motherhood, the Halдар household relegates Jashoda's labour to mere commercialisation and institutionalisation. Federici also critiques the way motherhood and care-giving activities are romanticised, which ignores women's exploitation in the domestic space. Jashoda is completely oblivious to the fact that her reproductive power can become a means of earning her livelihood. In fact, she finds it difficult to seek help from medical practitioners for the deteriorating condition of cancer. However, for Jashoda, 'Motherhood was always her way of living and keeping alive her world of countless beings' (Devi 1997, 40). Though her profession becomes the sole way to seek identification from the children she once reared, it differentiates her from the '*amateur* mama' of the Halдар family. Based on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's arguments on 'identity politics' which ignores 'intragroup differences', the contrast between biological mothers' and professional mothers' approach towards raising children is visible (Mohanty 2003, 3). The biological women of the Halдар house raise children to carry forward their family name, while professional mothers like Jashoda, even in their professional roles, create a strong bond with the young ones as in Melanie Klein's object relations theory, in which the baby 'internalises the objects (*mother's breast*) ... by swallowing the nourishing breast milk' and which treats the mother's breast as a prototype for all future human connections. It is the 'symbol of life and love' which helps Jashoda establish a strong bond through suckling and internalising through human contact (Etherington 2024, n.p.). Ironically, this profound connection developed through surrogacy yields no reciprocity and Jashoda's surrogate children also completely abandon her when her body is no longer useful to them.

Caste privilege does not safeguard Jashoda from exploitation. In fact, it only yields symbolic reverence but no material protection. The oppressed women of a class- and caste-ridden society just like the 'women of color occupy positions both physically and culturally marginalised within dominant society' (Crenshaw 1991, 11). According to Crenshaw, the needs of white and non-white women are different so must be addressed separately, and resource allocation must also be done according to their different needs. Jashoda's suppression and suffering within the upper-class patriarchal household showcases the entrenched social hierarchies in which she is treated like a mere milk vending machine and later abandoned in old age when she is diagnosed with cancer. Uma Chakravarti's framework of 'Brahmanical patriarchy' explains how Jashoda's Brahmin identity enables her to get only superficial medical help from her 'batterers', who are completely governed by the superstitious fear that the death of a Brahmin woman under their roof will incur spiritual sin (Chakravarti 2018, 25). Lugones' idea of the colonality of gender also reveals how women's bodies are transformed into mere service-providing instruments while keeping them socially invisible (Lugones 2023, 36–42). The patriarchal domination and women's commodification become more evident when Jashoda's cancer deteriorates and leads to her death.

Here, Crenshaw's 'intersectionality' illustrates how caste privilege and gendered economic dependency operate simultaneously in the story. It reveals clearly that Jashoda's exploitation does not emerge solely from her gender identity but also from the conflicting nature of her class and caste identity, loss of reproductive capacity in old age, and the abandonment of her diseased body. All these intersect with each other to produce an invisible form of labour despite its continued relevance to the survival of household structure.

Intergenerational Dialogue from Moral Appeal to Critical Tool

The climax of the story highlights a significant disconnect between Jashoda, representing the older generation women, and the daughters-in-law, the women of the younger generation in the Haldar family. Having education and class mobility as their tools, the younger women easily evade traditional patriarchal control over their bodies. The choice of safe deliveries in hospitals and modern-day family planning reflects their awareness of their right to female autonomy. This is one of the important reasons they refuse the old patriarch's dream of 'filling half of Calcutta with Haldars'; instead, they choose to follow their husbands and work with them outside the territory of the house (Devi 1997, 74). As Federici notes, women are excluded from financial autonomy by not being offered wages for their labour: it makes them economically dependent and politically disempowered. Thus, refusing uncompensated domestic confinement is a crucial step towards female autonomy.

It is important to note at this juncture that this generational divide is fundamentally governed by class privilege, which women like Jashoda are not afforded due to their poor economic status. Therefore, the Mistress of the Haldar household employs Jashoda to protect the physical appearance of her daughters-in-law. She deliberately uses Jashoda's reproductive capacity as a source of survival for her grandchildren because her daughters-in-law are reluctant to breastfeed so that they can keep their breasts intact. She says:

Since they will be mothers as long as it's possible, progressive suckling will ruin their shape. Then if the sons look outside, or harass the maid servants, she won't have a voice to object...If Jashoda becomes the infants' suckling mother, her daily meals, clothes on feast days, and some monthly pay will be enough. (Devi 1997, 51)

It reveals a double layer of objectification. These standards may have been set by the patriarchy and women's bodies may be the object of the male gaze; however, these standards are enforced by the females of the household. As in the story, the mistress herself supports the argument that if Jashoda is hired as a wet nurse, her daughters-

in-law will remain healthy to produce children for as long as possible. Instead of following Mohanty's idea of 'feminist solidarity', the Mistress exploits a poor woman's body to preserve the social value of her well-to-do daughters-in-law. The young women quietly benefit from this arrangement while Jashoda's voice is unheard, and her labour remains invisible due to the insensitivity of the older generation's Mrs. Halдар, as well as that of the younger generation of daughters-in-law. Nivedita Menon has criticised the beauty standards set by the patriarchal society as some of the major factors that contribute to this kind of gender injustice and the relegation of women to the periphery.

This conflict between the two groups of women is structurally 'intersectional' rather than merely generational. The culmination of the story broadly highlights the lack of intergenerational dialogue between Jashoda and the other section of women including the Mistress and the young generation of the daughters-in-law of the Halдар household. Educational background, paid employment, right to family planning, and class mobility reshape the younger generation women's relationship with the older generation women and with reproduction and care work. Hence, once the Mistress of the Halдар household dies, Jashoda is also expected to leave. In fact, bearing children was considered the will of God by older generation women such as Jashoda and Basini, while, in contrast, the young generation women choose freedom by dismantling the traditional belief system of the Halдар household. Devi writes, 'The daughters-in-law have moved the throne! When the tree says I won't bear, alas it's a sin!' (Devi 1997, 75). Through the narrative of the two generations, the author shows that while these younger women successfully challenge their own role in the patriarchal set up, they completely ignore the aging, uneducated wet nurse, Jashoda, and her problems, the very woman who enabled their independence.

Thus, an effective feminist reading requires intergenerational dialogue not only as a simple moral request for harmony, but also as a critical tool to identify how capitalist advancement divides women. The younger women could initiate a communicative dialogue with the older generation of women and thus work together towards gender justice. For Spivak's 'strategic essentialism' to function smoothly as a tool for genuine solidarity, younger, educated women must actively participate and surrender their class privileges to stand with the exploited women. Without this conscious attempt at cross-generational alliance, the freedom of wealthy women will continue to depend on the exploitation of economically vulnerable women.

Ageing, Abandonment, and Global Repercussions

When Jashoda's deteriorating health condition due to age and disease leads to the loss of her reproductive capacity, she is disowned by everyone. In fact, Kangali gives

himself credit for her employment in the Haldar household when he says, 'Where did you bring in the food? Could you have gotten the Haldar house? Their door opened for *you* because *my* legs were cut off' (Devi 1997, 77). He abandons Jashoda when her diseased body loses its utility and aesthetic appeal. She is forced to seek divine help in the temple for protection, only to find that her caste identity merely provides symbolic reverence but no material aid. Thus, the aspects of her identity governed by factors like poverty, aging, and disease intersect to render her insignificant in the capitalist patriarchal social structure of India.

The effects of excessive lactation for years disable Jashoda in old age and push her to such a mental state that she cannot sleep 'without a child at the breast' (Devi 1997, 78). Her social value was associated with her reproductive capacity only. However, once illness and age cause the loss of her professional skill, Jashoda can no longer survive in the capitalist market as other younger generation women would do in the story. Despite all this, Jashoda remains a silent sufferer instead of resisting superimposed patriarchal power structures. As Crenshaw says, 'race and culture contribute to the suppression of domestic violence' (Crenshaw 1991, 18), so Jashoda internalises her pain and refuses to show her diseased breast to a male doctor saying, 'I can't go to hospital. Ask me to croak instead. I didn't go to hospital to breed, and I'll go now?' (Devi 1997, 83). The neglect is exacerbated by the patriarchal family doctor, who dismisses her illness by saying, 'Yah! Cancer indeed! That easy! You misheard, all she needs is an ointment' (Devi 1997, 83). By the time Jashoda is taken to the hospital, the disease has turned terminal. To escape from incurring sin by Jashoda's death in their home, the Haldar sons have her admitted to the hospital as they say, 'If Brahmin-sister had died in our house, we would have had to perform the penance-ritual' (Devi 1997, 71). Even the male physician vents his anger at the systematic carelessness that drags women to their doom and states, 'Cancer constantly defeats patient and doctor' (Devi 1997, 72). Jashoda's death maintains the structural gender violence and provides no answer to ensure women's wellbeing.

The study exposes the hollowness of Jashoda's mythic divine elevation when Devi raises a subtle question: she had suckled the world; could she then die alone?' (Devi 1997, 74). It is answered ironically by Devi, pointing out that becoming a mythic mother means dying friendless when she writes that one must become Jashoda (the mythic mother of Krishna and, in that sense, the suckler of the world) if one suckles the world. 'One has to die friendless, with no one left to put a bit of water in the mouth' (Devi 1997, 74–75). In a final indictment of patriarchal capitalism, Jashoda, the Brahmin woman, is cremated all alone at the hands of an untouchable, with none of her wealthy 'milk-sons' present. This exploitative structure uses caste for continued labour but refuses to offer basic human dignity.

The narrative of Jashoda resonates with contemporary global crises. Despite constitutional reforms, unpaid reproductive labour continues to be a global apparatus of inequality. Jashoda's trajectory is mirrored by disadvantaged women from the Global South, who often face economic precarity while providing reproductive and domestic services for affluent families. There are migrant domestic workers, nannies/maids and caregivers in foreign places such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, UK, and USA who, like Jashoda, remain tethered to employer patronage with no legal protection and are discarded once they are no longer useful. Their working conditions demonstrate the structural undervaluation of women's labour and make it a global crisis rather than an isolated issue.

In India, legal frameworks like the Maternity Benefit Act (1961) also exist, but its uneven implementation constantly defies social change and sustains intersectional gender inequality. Some of the alternatives like human milk banks and online lactation consultations for women in Indian rural areas show progress, yet comprehensive structural reform is still required. Hirway argues that domestic care work is still performed in the informal economy without minimum wages and social security, so some progressive measures must be taken in this regard. She points out the lack of regular income preventing vulnerable women from achieving economic independence (IGNOU n.d., 19). To escape this domestic trap, today educated women often choose professional career paths outside their homes, yet domestic workers continue to face exploitation at the hands of both patriarchal men and affluent educated women. A great deal more awareness is required among community workers and rural people so that the benefits of the law can be enjoyed by those who deserve them, and so the exploitation of women can also be largely checked (Lakhkar et al. 2022, n.p.). By promoting meaningful conversations between the two generations, a transformative model of gender justice may be implemented which can help in not only the protection of such women but also their empowerment in society.

Conclusion

This paper finds that Mahasweta Devi's story 'Breast-Giver' is a powerful critique of how patriarchal and caste-based capitalist systems exploit women's reproductive capacities. Jashoda's tragic story symbolises the lives of countless women whose unrecognised labour sustains their families, yet their contribution remains unacknowledged. In line with Mohanty's framework, Jashoda's experiences must be evaluated within their specific historical and postcolonial context rather than as a universalised representation of generic female oppression. Government policies should aim at strengthening women by recognising and remunerating reproductive labour, which is critical for not only gender justice but also for sustainable socio-economic development. Moreover, feminists and researchers must use intergenerational dialogue as

a critical tool to dismantle class and caste barriers that separate women and prevent them from showing solidarity. As mentioned earlier, Spivak's 'strategic essentialism' may be a temporary option, but it does not offer a permanent solution because Jashoda's choices are governed by poverty, limited access to education, caste-ridden domestic service, and her complete dependence on household patronage, whereas the daughters-in-law have greater access to education, mobility, and paid work. It may help to dismantle the class and caste hierarchies and bridge the divide between the two groups of women. Therefore, the paper considers intergenerational dialogue not as a moral appeal but as a critical tool for the readers and contemporary feminists. It must function as a mechanism to enable movement across unequal social locations and emphasise how unpaid reproductive labour may continue from one generation to the next if this dialogue is not facilitated. Thus, by encouraging intergenerational dialogue, internalised patriarchal ideals of sacrifice can be challenged. Therefore, an effective intergenerational framework must be developed to critically interrogate the younger generation's capitalist advancement and consequent transfer of reproductive precarity to economically vulnerable women. The sacrifices of previous generations can be contextualised, not glorified, and used to push for reforms such as inclusion of unpaid work in GDP calculations, healthcare rights, and robust social security systems for domestic workers across the globe.

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Belonging, Knowledge and Authority

Speaking Across Silences: Dialogic Negotiation and the Politics of Belonging in the Pakistani Diaspora

Fatima Raza, Emma Hussey¹

Abstract: This article argues that Pakistani diasporic identity is not simply inherited, retained, or lost through migration, but continuously negotiated through strategic forms of dialogue across familial, communal, institutional, and digital spaces. While existing scholarship often frames intergenerational tensions through binaries of tradition and modernity, assimilation and cultural retention, this article contends that the central issue is not identity conflict per se, but dialogic strain: the uneven and ongoing negotiation of belonging, legitimacy, and cultural authenticity between generations within diasporic contexts. To theorise this process, the article draws on feminist peacebuilding and Goffmanian dramaturgy to conceptualise diasporic identity as relational, performative, and contextually mediated. Feminist peacebuilding foregrounds the significance of care, relationality, and gendered modes of negotiation in sustaining intergenerational cohesion

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beyond conventional conflict paradigms. Simultaneously, Goffman's dramaturgical framework illuminates how diasporic subjects strategically perform and recalibrate identities across multiple social 'stages', including the home, community networks, educational institutions, and digital environments.

The article further argues that digital technologies intensify these negotiations by collapsing generational and spatial boundaries, producing new forms of visibility, surveillance, contestation, and self-fashioning. Online spaces become critical sites through which competing understandings of authenticity, religiosity, gender, and national belonging are articulated and contested. Rather than positioning younger generations as resisting inherited traditions, the article demonstrates how both older and younger diasporic actors engage in continuous processes of negotiation aimed at preserving continuity while adapting to shifting social realities. By advancing the concept of dialogic strain, this article contributes to broader debates on diaspora, identity formation, and post-colonial belonging. It reconceptualises diaspora not as a fixed cultural condition, but as an ongoing process of mediated negotiation in which identity is continually produced through interaction, performance, and intergenerational dialogue.

By examining dialogic strain within Pakistani diasporic family and digital contexts, this article contributes to the *Journal of Dialogue Studies* special issue by demonstrating how dialogue operates through everyday negotiations of legitimacy, visibility, and relational belonging rather than solely through formal or institutional communication.

Keywords: Pakistani diaspora; dialogue; Goffman; belonging; dramaturgy; feminist peacebuilding

Introduction

Pakistani diasporic identity is commonly understood through the language of continuity, adaptation, and loss (Lyon and Bolognani 2011). Such accounts often assume that migrant subjects either preserve cultural authenticity, assimilate into dominant social norms, or negotiate some hybrid position between the two. While these perspectives capture important dimensions of diasporic experience, they remain limited in explaining how belonging is actually accomplished in everyday life. They frequently treat identity as something individuals possess before interaction rather than something continually produced through it. This article instead begins from the premise that belonging is fundamentally dialogic. Pakistani diasporic identity is constituted through ongoing communicative negotiations across family relationships, community institutions, transnational networks, and digitally mediated publics, where individuals continually decide what may be spoken, what should remain unsaid, and how different forms of selfhood can be made socially intelligible (Kanwal and Aslam 2019; Fagerlid and Tisdell 2020).

Understanding identity as dialogic shifts attention from questions of cultural retention to the communicative conditions through which recognition becomes possible. Dialogue is not simply the medium through which identity is expressed; it is the process through which belonging is negotiated, contested, and sustained. These negotiations are rarely symmetrical. They unfold across relationships structured by intergenerational authority, gendered expectations, communal obligations, racialisation, migration histories, and increasingly, digitally mediated forms of visibility. Rather than facilitating unrestricted communication, contemporary digital environments transform the conditions under which dialogue occurs by collapsing previously distinct audiences and exposing communicative acts to simultaneous familial, communal, and transnational scrutiny (Blackbeard 2017; Frank 2012; Liubiniene and Keturakis 2015; Rahman and Mohammad Suhail 2025). Under such conditions, dialogue becomes inseparable from questions of visibility, legitimacy, and reputational risk.

Against this background, the article asks: How do processes of dialogue and dialogic strain shape belonging and identity formation among Pakistani diasporic subjects? It argues that existing diaspora scholarship has paid considerable attention to identity, hybridity, and transnationalism, yet has devoted comparatively little attention to the communicative processes through which belonging is negotiated in everyday life. To address this gap, the article advances dialogic strain as its central analytical concept. Dialogic strain refers to the communicative pressures that arise when individuals seek to sustain relationships across competing moral frameworks, unequal relations of authority, and overlapping social audiences. It captures the tensions generated not simply by disagreement, but by the continual effort to remain recognisable and relationally connected while navigating divergent expectations surrounding religion, gender, culture, family, and citizenship.

The article develops this argument through three interconnected concepts: dialogic legibility, managed opacity, and conditional belonging. Dialogic legibility describes the communicative labour involved in rendering oneself socially intelligible across multiple moral worlds, drawing on scholarship concerning recognition and interaction (Taylor 1994; Yuval-Davis 2006; Goffman 1959; Goffman 1971). Managed opacity refers to the strategic regulation of visibility through selective disclosure, silence, code-switching, and audience management under conditions of unequal power (Scott 1990; Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963; Solove 2007; Ferrari 2020). Conditional belonging highlights the contingent and negotiated character of recognition, demonstrating that inclusion depends upon the continual performance of culturally and morally legitimate identities (Anthias 2008; Yuval-Davis 2006; Youkhana 2015). Read together, these concepts explain how dialogic strain emerges through the intersection of recognition, visibility, and relational obligation.

To account for these processes, the article brings feminist peacebuilding into conversation with Goffman's dramaturgical sociology of face-work. Feminist peacebuilding conceptualises dialogue as a relational practice shaped by power, care, repair, and unequal vulnerability rather than as a neutral exchange between equal interlocutors (Snyder 2005). Goffman's account of face-work complements this perspective by explaining how individuals sustain interaction through impression management, tact, strategic silence, and the preservation of social legitimacy (Goffman 1956; Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963; Goffman 1971; Domenici and Littlejohn 2006; Lahlou 2008). Together, these approaches demonstrate that belonging within Pakistani diaspora communities is constituted not through the expression of an essential identity but through the continual negotiation of dialogue, including its asymmetries, silences, interruptions, and limits. In doing so, the article contributes to dialogue studies by extending dialogue beyond formal deliberative settings and conceptualising it as the everyday relational infrastructure through which diasporic belonging is continually produced, negotiated, and sustained.

Towards a Theory of Negotiated Belonging in a Diasporic Context

Pakistani diasporic identity cannot be understood as a static inheritance transmitted unchanged across generations, nor as a linear process of assimilation into Western liberal modernity. Rather, identity within diaspora is produced through ongoing negotiations across familial, religious, national, and transnational spheres that shape the terms through which belonging becomes intelligible. This article conceptualises Pakistani diasporic identity as dialogic and relational, constituted through continuous interaction between competing moral frameworks, cultural expectations, and structures of social recognition. In doing so, it moves beyond binary framings of 'tradition' versus 'modernity' that often dominate discussions of Muslim diasporic communities and instead examines how belonging is negotiated under conditions of intergenerational expectation, gendered respectability, communal scrutiny, and digital visibility.

Belonging is not a fixed condition but a dynamic and relational process through which individuals negotiate their position within social, cultural, and political communities (Yuval-Davis 2006). As Schmidt argues, belonging should be understood not simply as a feeling of attachment but as a relationship shaped by social structures and power relations that determine who is recognised as belonging and under what conditions (Schmidt 2005). Belonging therefore involves both emotional attachment and political recognition, making it simultaneously personal and collective, affective and institutional. The question is not merely whether one belongs,

but how one belongs, who possesses the authority to confer recognition, and what social, cultural, or moral conditions are attached to inclusion.

This distinction is particularly significant within diasporic contexts where belonging is rarely negotiated within a single social field. Rather, diasporic subjects frequently navigate multiple and overlapping systems of expectation emerging from family, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and the broader society in which they reside (Anthias 2008). These expectations are not always complementary. Individuals may experience competing demands regarding cultural continuity, religious observance, linguistic practice, gender performance, and social behaviour, requiring ongoing acts of negotiation and self-positioning (Mistry 2010). Belonging therefore becomes less a question of cultural membership than of social legitimacy; individuals must continually demonstrate that they are sufficiently authentic, respectable, and recognisable to multiple audiences simultaneously.

Diaspora scholarship provides an important framework for understanding these processes. While early approaches emphasised homeland orientation and collective memories of displacement (Safran 1991), later scholarship has highlighted the fluid and negotiated character of diasporic identities. Cohen (2008) demonstrates that contemporary diasporas emerge through diverse historical trajectories, while Clifford (1994) shifts attention from fixed origins to processes of movement, encounter, and hybridity. From this perspective, diasporic identities are not preserved unchanged but continuously negotiated across cultural, national, and generational boundaries. Identity is therefore best understood as a social practice rather than a cultural possession; it is produced through interaction, interpretation, and contestation rather than inherited in a stable form.

These negotiations increasingly occur through transnational communicative networks. As Wahlbeck (2002) argues, diasporic communities are sustained through social relationships that facilitate collective identification across dispersed populations. Contemporary digital platforms have intensified these processes by enabling diasporic subjects to engage simultaneously with homeland politics, religious discourse, cultural practices, and family networks while navigating the realities of their countries of residence. Digital spaces therefore function as sites where competing understandings of authenticity, tradition, citizenship, and cultural responsibility are actively negotiated and contested.

Within Pakistani diasporic communities, these negotiations often take place across generational lines. Younger generations may seek forms of belonging that incorporate multiple cultural influences, while older generations may prioritise continuity with inherited traditions and communal norms (Renzaho et al. 2017). However, these tensions should not be reduced to a simple opposition between tradition and

modernity. Both generations engage in ongoing processes of interpretation, adaptation, and meaning making, albeit from different social positions and historical experiences. The central issue, therefore, is not identity conflict itself but what this article terms dialogic strain: the fragmentation, asymmetry, or breakdown of communication through which competing understandings of belonging are negotiated. Dialogic strain emerges when participants continue to engage one another yet operate from divergent assumptions regarding authority, legitimacy, obligation, and the boundaries of acceptable identity expression.

Digital technologies further intensify these dynamics by collapsing distinctions between private and public life. Social media platforms transform familial and community negotiations into visible performances that may be observed, evaluated, and contested by multiple audiences simultaneously. While digital spaces provide opportunities for self-expression, solidarity, and political participation, they also amplify surveillance, moral policing, and communal scrutiny (Asenabuaam 2021). Within Pakistani diasporic communities, debates surrounding modesty, feminism, masculinity, religious authority, and cultural authenticity increasingly unfold within these digitally mediated environments (Zahra et al. 2026). Visibility therefore becomes both a resource and a constraint. It creates opportunities for recognition and community formation while simultaneously exposing individuals to intensified forms of judgement, regulation, and reputational risk.

Drawing on critical diaspora studies, recognition theory, and postcolonial sociology, this article argues that visibility functions as a key mechanism through which belonging is negotiated. To be visible is simultaneously to be recognised and regulated (Schmidt 2000, 66-81). Pakistani diasporic subjects must therefore navigate layered forms of scrutiny arising from racialised state discourses, communal expectations, gendered moral frameworks, and digitally mediated publics. They negotiate not only who they are, but also how they appear, to whom, and under what conditions visibility becomes socially consequential. The politics of belonging within diaspora are therefore inseparable from questions of legibility: whose identities are recognised as authentic, whose performances are deemed acceptable, and whose claims to belonging remain contested. Viewed through this lens, Pakistani diasporic identity is best understood not as a stable cultural inheritance but as an ongoing process of dialogic negotiation. Belonging emerges through continual efforts to reconcile intergenerational expectations, gendered norms, communal scrutiny, and the demands of digital visibility. It is within these negotiations, and the strains they generate, that contemporary diasporic identities are produced, contested, and transformed.

Dialogue in Context

Dialogue is not simply a communicative exchange but a social process through which individuals negotiate their place within communities and broader structures of belonging. Contemporary dialogue scholarship increasingly emphasises that dialogue is constitutive rather than merely expressive; it does not simply reflect social identities but actively participates in their construction and transformation (Bakhtin 1981; Wegerif 2019). Through dialogic engagement, individuals encounter competing narratives, values, and expectations that shape their understanding of who they are and where they belong. Consequently, dialogue becomes particularly significant in contexts characterised by social change, migration, and cultural plurality, where inherited identities are continually subjected to reinterpretation and renegotiation.

This relational understanding of dialogue aligns closely with broader debates concerning belonging and identity. Belonging is not a fixed condition achieved through membership alone but an ongoing process through which individuals seek recognition, legitimacy, and acceptance within particular social worlds (Yuval-Davis 2006). Dialogue serves as one of the primary mechanisms through which these processes occur. Through interactions with family members, community leaders, peers, and institutions, individuals negotiate the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that define collective identities. These negotiations are rarely neutral. Rather, they are shaped by unequal power relations that privilege certain voices, values, and interpretations while marginalising others. As Buber (1958) suggests, dialogue involves the recognition of others as legitimate participants in a shared social world; however, the extent to which such recognition is granted remains deeply contingent upon broader cultural and political dynamics.

Within diasporic settings, the significance of dialogue becomes even more pronounced. Migration disrupts established frameworks of belonging by exposing individuals to multiple and often competing systems of meaning. Diasporic subjects must therefore navigate ongoing conversations regarding culture, authenticity, tradition, and adaptation. Dialogue becomes the medium through which these competing claims are mediated, enabling individuals to reconcile, resist, or reformulate inherited understandings of identity. Rather than viewing intergenerational tensions as evidence of cultural decline or assimilation, a dialogic perspective reveals them as manifestations of deeper struggles over belonging and recognition (Hayes et al. 2023). These tensions emerge not because identities are simply changing, but because different actors hold competing visions of what constitutes legitimate membership within the community.

It is this relationship between dialogue and belonging that is particularly relevant for understanding the Pakistani diaspora. Questions of identity are not solely concerned with cultural retention or loss; they are fundamentally connected to how individuals are recognised by others and whether they are permitted to claim membership within particular social and moral communities. As Yuval-Davis (2006) argues, belonging is always political because it involves the drawing and policing of boundaries that distinguish those who are considered insiders from those positioned as outsiders. Dialogue therefore becomes a critical site through which these boundaries are negotiated, challenged, and reproduced. Understanding belonging as a dialogic process allows for a more nuanced examination of how diasporic individuals navigate competing expectations surrounding culture, religion, gender, and generational authority.

Pakistani Diaspora and the Problem of Dialogic Belonging

To speak of Pakistani diasporic identity is not merely to name a population dispersed across nation-states. Diaspora is a social and moral formation organised through transnational kinship, memory, obligation, and symbolic attachment (Jain 2017). Within this framework, identity is neither fixed nor singular but continuously negotiated through everyday interactions and competing cultural expectations. In the Pakistani diasporic context, identity emerges through processes of dialogic negotiation shaped by family, religion, gender, nationalism, and digital communication. Existing scholarship often frames intergenerational tensions as a conflict between 'tradition' and 'modernity' (Angel 2017). Furthermore, Yuval-Davis asserts that 'even when you are included, it is always complicated by how you are included' (Yuval-Davis 2006). Thus, in the context of the Pakistani diaspora, the conflict emerges where the traditional aspect of inclusion is often eclipsed by the need for Belonging. These dynamics can be more fully understood through dialogue studies, which provide an important framework for conceptualising identity as relationally produced through interaction rather than passively inherited through culture or tradition.

Dialogue, within this context, is not reducible to harmonious communication or mutual agreement. Rather, dialogic approaches emphasise that identity emerges through ongoing exchanges shaped by power, recognition, emotional obligation, and unequal social positioning. Pakistani diasporic belonging is therefore constituted not simply through shared ethnicity, religion, or national origin, but through continuous communicative negotiation across familial, communal, institutional, and digital settings. Such negotiations are rarely stable or symmetrical because individuals remain situated within overlapping moral worlds that impose competing expecta-

tions regarding legitimacy, respectability, and social conduct. Thus, the central issue is not identity conflict itself but dialogic strain: the breakdown, fragmentation, or asymmetry of communication across generations and social institutions. Pakistani diasporic subjects navigate multiple and often competing normative orders simultaneously, including family expectations, religious obligations, national belonging, and digitally mediated publics. Belonging is therefore relational and performative, produced through everyday acts of negotiation rather than fixed declarations of identity (Youkhana 2015, 12). The strain lies not merely in disagreement itself, but in the difficulty of maintaining reciprocity, recognition, and relational continuity under conditions shaped by migration, racialisation, and transnational social change. Younger diasporic subjects frequently attempt to articulate hybrid identities, alternative political positions, feminist critiques, or non-traditional understandings of religion and gender while remaining embedded within familial and communal structures organised around continuity, obligation, and collective respectability (Shah and Muhammad 2011). Communication therefore becomes emotionally and morally labour-intensive because speech is never interpreted as purely individual expression; rather, it carries broader implications for family honour, communal legitimacy, and intergenerational cohesion.

Dialogic strain is further intensified by the unequal communicative conditions through which belonging is negotiated. First-generation migrants often articulate identity through narratives of sacrifice, displacement, and cultural preservation that emerge from experiences of migration, exclusion, and social precarity. Younger generations, by contrast, are frequently socialised within multicultural and digitally mediated environments that privilege self-expression, individual autonomy, and fluid identity formation (Volpe 2021). These differing orientations toward communication produce tensions surrounding authority, emotional expression, disagreement, and moral legitimacy. Dialogue across generations therefore frequently involves not only linguistic translation but the negotiation of distinct historical memories, political imaginaries, and moral vocabularies (Pavelenko 2001). The communicative strain emerges precisely because individuals remain relationally bound to one another despite inhabiting increasingly divergent social realities. Therefore, younger generations are not simply rejecting inherited traditions, nor are older generations merely resisting change. Rather, both groups engage in ongoing processes of recognition, legitimacy, and moral positioning under conditions shaped by migration, racialisation, and transnational nationalism. Digital platforms intensify these negotiations by expanding the visibility of identity performance and exposing private tensions to broader communal audiences. Consequently, diasporic belonging is best understood not as stable cultural retention or loss, but as an ongoing and uneven process of mediated dialogue through which individuals negotiate authenticity, authority, and social legitimacy.

Therefore, Pakistani diasporic belonging is negotiated through fragile and ongoing communicative practices shaped by visibility, relational obligation, and reputational risk. Identity within diaspora is thus not sustained through cultural consensus or stable forms of tradition, but through continuous efforts to manage disagreement, preserve legitimacy, and maintain social cohesion across fractured moral and political worlds. Dialogic strain emerges precisely because diasporic subjects remain relationally bound to family and community structures while simultaneously navigating divergent experiences of migration, racialisation, digital visibility, and generational transformation. Communication, under these conditions, becomes deeply affective and morally regulated, requiring individuals to engage in strategic forms of self-monitoring, emotional restraint, selective disclosure, and negotiated accommodation in order to sustain relational continuity. Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond conventional analyses of identity conflict toward frameworks capable of accounting for the emotional, interactional, and relational labour through which coexistence is maintained within diaspora communities. It is here that feminist peacebuilding and Goffman's theory of face-work become particularly useful analytical frameworks, as both foreground the everyday practices through which individuals negotiate tension, preserve social legitimacy, and maintain fragile forms of relational order under conditions of inequality and communicative strain.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Peacebuilding and Goffmanian Face-Work

Reading feminist peacebuilding and Goffman's theory of face-work together allows dialogue to be understood as both a structural and interactional process. While feminist peacebuilding directs attention to the unequal conditions under which dialogue occurs, Goffman illuminates the micro-social practices through which individuals navigate those inequalities in everyday life. Each framework therefore addresses a limitation in the other. Feminist peacebuilding provides a critical account of power, exclusion, recognition, care, and repair, yet offers less insight into how these dynamics are managed within situated encounters. Conversely, Goffman's interactional sociology reveals the mechanisms through which people sustain dignity, avoid embarrassment, manage impressions, and preserve relationships, but pays comparatively little attention to the broader structures of power that shape whose face is most vulnerable, whose voice carries authority, and whose self-presentation is subject to greater scrutiny (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1971; Porter 2016).

Bringing these perspectives together reveals that dialogue within diasporic communities is not simply the exchange of ideas between individuals holding different views. Rather, it is a morally unequal and interactionally staged process through which belonging is continually negotiated. Feminist peacebuilding highlights that

communicative encounters occur within relationships structured by age, gender, authority, obligation, and cultural expectations (Aolain 2016; Porter 2016). Goffman, meanwhile, demonstrates how individuals respond to these conditions through face-work, audience management, strategic disclosure, tact, silence, and impression control (Goffman 1959; Bargiela-Chiappini & Haugh 2009). What becomes visible through this synthesis is that recognition is never secured solely through what is said but through how individuals manage the social risks attached to speaking.

This insight is particularly important in Pakistani diasporic contexts, where communicative exchanges often carry significant relational consequences. Intergenerational discussions concerning gender, religious practice, marriage, sexuality, cultural authenticity, or political identity are rarely experienced as neutral conversations. They are embedded within networks of family obligation, communal reputation, and moral accountability (Naqvi & Riaz 2015). Participants therefore engage not only in the communication of viewpoints but in the management of relationships. The preservation of dignity, respectability, and familial cohesion frequently becomes as important as the substantive issue under discussion. Under such conditions, face-work is not merely an interactional strategy; it becomes a form of relational labour through which social ties are maintained despite disagreement.

This is where feminist peacebuilding substantially deepens Goffman's account. Face-work does not occur within a socially neutral environment. The responsibility for maintaining harmony, absorbing tension, translating competing perspectives, or preventing relational rupture is often distributed unevenly. Women, younger family members, and those occupying marginal social positions frequently undertake disproportionate forms of emotional, communicative, and moral labour in order to sustain dialogue and preserve relationships (Porter 2016). Feminist peacebuilding therefore reveals that what appears interactionally as tact, silence, compromise, or restraint may also represent a response to asymmetrical expectations and unequal distributions of social power. The management of face is not simply a matter of individual performance; it is shaped by broader structures that determine who is expected to accommodate, who is permitted to challenge, and who bears responsibility for repair.

At the same time, Goffman's work extends feminist peacebuilding by providing a vocabulary for understanding how these inequalities are navigated in practice. Individuals rarely confront power directly. Instead, they often engage in indirect forms of negotiation through selective disclosure, coded language, humour, ambiguity, strategic silence, or carefully calibrated performances of respectability (Freshwater 2008; Lim & Bowers 1991). Such practices allow participants to maintain relationships while testing the boundaries of what can be said and by whom. In this sense, dia-

logue is sustained not despite performance but through performance. Impression management becomes a mechanism through which individuals seek recognition while minimising the social costs of visibility. The synthesis of feminist peacebuilding and face-work therefore shifts attention from dialogue as consensus building toward dialogue as relational navigation. It highlights how belonging is produced through ongoing attempts to balance authenticity with obligation, self-expression with social intelligibility, and disagreement with relational continuity. What is at stake is not simply whether dialogue succeeds or fails, but how participants continually manage the tensions that emerge when competing visions of identity, morality, and community coexist within the same social space.

This framework informs the article's central concept of dialogic strain. Dialogic strain refers not merely to disagreement between generations but to the pressures that emerge when individuals must negotiate belonging across unequal relationships, competing audiences, and conflicting expectations. It captures the moments in which recognition is desired but uncertain, visibility is necessary yet risky, and dialogue becomes both a source of connection and a site of vulnerability. Through the combined lens of feminist peacebuilding and Goffmanian face-work, dialogic strain can be understood as the social and interactional condition through which contemporary Pakistani diasporic identities are negotiated, contested, and sustained.

Family, Community, and the Moral Labour of Speaking

Within Pakistani diasporic contexts, family and community function not merely as sites of cultural transmission but as moral institutions through which belonging, legitimacy, and social recognition are continually negotiated (Skrbis 2008). Existing scholarship frequently explains intergenerational tensions through binaries of 'tradition' and 'modernity' (Dwyer 2000), yet such framings overlook the communicative work required to sustain relationships across divergent experiences of migration, race, religion, and generation. Rather than locating the central problem in identity conflict, this article argues that it lies in *dialogic strain*: the unequal pressures involved in maintaining dialogue across competing moral worlds. Belonging is therefore produced not through cultural consensus but through everyday communicative practices that continually negotiate recognition, obligation, and legitimacy.

Dialogic strain is embedded within asymmetrical relationships structured by age, gender, authority, and expectations of filial respect. Younger generations often seek to articulate hybrid identities and greater personal autonomy while remaining embedded within family structures that prioritise continuity, collective responsibility, and communal reputation (Ullah 2025). These negotiations are rarely conducted between equal interlocutors. Instead, dialogue unfolds within unequal relations in

which some family members bear greater responsibility for preserving relational stability than others. Feminist peacebuilding provides an important lens through which to understand these dynamics because it conceptualises dialogue as a relational practice shaped by unequal distributions of care, vulnerability, and responsibility rather than as a neutral exchange between autonomous individuals (Aoláin 2016; Porter 2016). From this perspective, sustaining dialogue requires continuous emotional labour directed towards maintaining relationships despite disagreement.

While feminist peacebuilding explains *why* this labour becomes necessary, Goffman's account of face-work explains *how* it is accomplished in everyday interaction. Face-work captures the interactional practices through which individuals preserve dignity, avoid embarrassment, and maintain social order under conditions of interpersonal tension (Goffman 1959; 1971). Within Pakistani diasporic families, however, face extends beyond the individual and becomes collective, tied to family honour, communal respectability, and moral legitimacy. Consequently, speaking, remaining silent, disagreeing, or revealing personal experiences are never simply individual acts of expression; they carry implications for wider familial relationships and collective reputation. Face-work therefore becomes a mechanism through which dialogic strain is continually managed rather than resolved.

Read together, feminist peacebuilding and Goffman's interactional sociology reveal that family dialogue depends upon forms of communicative labour that often remain invisible. Disagreement is frequently softened through tact, strategic ambiguity, selective disclosure, deference, and emotional restraint rather than direct confrontation (Stewart and Zediker 2000). Such practices should not be dismissed as politeness or avoidance. Rather, they constitute forms of relational work through which belonging is preserved despite persistent ideological difference. The moral labour of speaking therefore involves continual judgements regarding what can be articulated, what should remain unsaid, and how disagreement may be expressed without jeopardising relationships. Dialogic strain is consequently sustained not because dialogue fails, but because dialogue itself becomes the primary means through which fragile relationships remain viable.

This labour is profoundly gendered. Feminist scholarship has consistently demonstrated that women shoulder disproportionate responsibility for maintaining emotional cohesion and relational continuity within families (Allen 2023). Within Pakistani diasporic contexts, women frequently occupy positions as custodians of religious morality, cultural continuity, and family honour, rendering their speech and visibility subject to heightened regulation (Mirza 2020). Daughters, in particular, often undertake forms of communicative mediation that require emotional restraint, self-monitoring, and strategic silence in order to preserve intergenerational

relationships. Viewed through feminist peacebuilding, these practices represent unequal distributions of relational responsibility; viewed through face-work, they illustrate the interactional techniques through which dignity, legitimacy, and communal respectability are maintained under unequal conditions of recognition. Together, these perspectives reveal that dialogic strain is neither episodic nor exceptional, but constitutive of everyday family life within diaspora.

Community extends these dynamics beyond the household. Religious organisations, community associations, and informal social networks become spaces where belonging is publicly recognised, evaluated, and reinforced. Participation within these settings requires continual performances of cultural competence, communal loyalty, and moral respectability while avoiding behaviours that threaten collective face (Mirza 2020). Recognition therefore depends not only upon shared identity but upon the successful performance of socially intelligible forms of belonging before communal audiences. Dialogic strain consequently shifts from intimate interaction to public reputation, preparing the ground for understanding how these negotiations are transformed within digitally mediated environments.

Digital Publics, Audience Collapse, and Reputational Risk

Digital technologies fundamentally reconfigure the conditions under which dialogic strain is negotiated. Social media platforms no longer function simply as spaces for communication; they actively organise visibility, recognition, and social legitimacy by collapsing distinctions between family, community, religious institutions, professional networks, and transnational publics (Poell, Nieborg & Duffy 2023). As a result, communicative practices previously confined to intimate settings become exposed to dispersed audiences operating across different moral and cultural frameworks. Digital publics therefore transform the interactional conditions of dialogue by rendering belonging increasingly dependent upon visibility and reputation rather than physical proximity alone.

This transformation is best understood through the concept of *audience collapse* (Lahlou 2008; Solove 2007). Social media compresses previously distinct social worlds into a single communicative space, requiring individuals to present themselves simultaneously before family members, peers, religious authorities, professional contacts, and transnational communities. For Pakistani diasporic subjects, these audiences frequently hold contradictory expectations concerning religion, gender, nationalism, sexuality, and cultural authenticity. The challenge is therefore not merely one of self-expression but of sustaining communicative intelligibility across competing moral audiences. Audience collapse intensifies dialogic strain because

every act of communication becomes potentially consequential for multiple relationships simultaneously.

Here, Goffman's theory of face-work assumes renewed significance. Digital interaction requires continual impression management across overlapping publics in which identity performances remain permanently visible and readily circulated (Goffman 1955; Lim and Bowers 1991). Face is no longer negotiated within bounded interpersonal encounters but across networked environments where familial honour, communal reputation, and individual legitimacy intersect (Smith et al. 2021). Expressions of feminist politics, religious reinterpretation, political dissent, or personal autonomy may therefore strengthen recognition within one audience while undermining legitimacy within another (Ziarek 2001). Face-work thus becomes increasingly complex as individuals negotiate not a single interactional order but multiple and often incompatible regimes of recognition.

These conditions fundamentally reshape the communicative strategies through which belonging is sustained. Rather than promoting unrestricted openness, digital publics frequently encourage strategic silence, selective disclosure, and carefully calibrated visibility (Taylor 1999; Ferrari 2020). Decisions concerning what remains unsaid become as significant as those concerning what is publicly articulated. Issues relating to gender, sexuality, sectarian identity, mental health, or political disagreement often remain communicatively constrained because they carry disproportionate reputational risks within transnational communal networks. Silence should therefore be understood not as communicative failure but as an interactional strategy through which dialogic strain is managed under conditions of persistent visibility.

Feminist peacebuilding further reveals that these communicative pressures are unevenly distributed. Digital participation undoubtedly creates opportunities for solidarity, political mobilisation, and alternative forms of belonging; however, it simultaneously exposes individuals to new forms of surveillance, harassment, and moral judgement (Kalra 2007). Women, in particular, experience heightened vulnerability because digital visibility frequently reproduces existing expectations surrounding modesty, family honour, and communal respectability (Jose et al. 2025). The relational labour previously performed within families therefore extends into digital publics, where maintaining dialogue increasingly requires strategic negotiation between authenticity, safety, and communal legitimacy. Digital communication does not simply amplify existing tensions; it transforms the very conditions under which dialogue remains possible.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that audience collapse does not replace family and community as sites of belonging but reconfigures them. Digital publics

extend dialogic strain across transnational spaces, intensifying the moral and interactional labour required to sustain recognition under conditions of persistent visibility. Read together, feminist peacebuilding and Goffman's account of face-work illuminate both the unequal distribution of this labour and the interactional practices through which it is managed. Pakistani diasporic belonging is therefore best understood not as a stable cultural inheritance but as an ongoing dialogic accomplishment produced through the continual negotiation of recognition, reputation, and relational responsibility across both intimate and digital worlds.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Pakistani diasporic identity is best understood not as an inherited essence, stable possession, or straightforward expression of cultural authenticity, but as an ongoing process of dialogic negotiation. Across family, community, institutional, and digital settings, diasporic subjects navigate competing expectations regarding loyalty, authenticity, gender, religion, and respectability. Belonging, therefore, is not simply possessed or claimed; it is continually negotiated through communicative encounters structured by unequal relations of recognition, obligation, and visibility. Under such conditions, dialogue becomes both necessary and precarious. It is through dialogue that individuals seek recognition and sustain relationships, yet it is also through dialogue that they encounter the possibility of misrecognition, sanction, exclusion, and relational rupture.

To account for these dynamics, the article has brought feminist peacebuilding into conversation with Goffman's dramaturgical sociology and his account of face-work. Feminist peacebuilding reveals dialogue as a form of relational infrastructure shaped by asymmetry, care, vulnerability, repair, and unequal distributions of communicative labour. Goffman, by contrast, illuminates the interactional practices through which individuals manage face, maintain social intelligibility, navigate reputational risk, and preserve the viability of relationships under pressure. Read together, these perspectives demonstrate that diasporic dialogue is neither a neutral exchange nor a transparent encounter between equal speakers. Rather, it is a morally unequal and interactionally staged process through which belonging is continually negotiated, challenged, and sustained.

The article has advanced this argument through three interconnected concepts: dialogic legibility, managed opacity, and conditional belonging. Dialogic legibility captures the labour involved in rendering oneself recognisable and intelligible across multiple and often competing social worlds. Managed opacity highlights the strategic regulation of visibility through silence, selective disclosure, ambiguity, code-switching, and audience management. Conditional belonging foregrounds the con-

tingent nature of recognition, demonstrating that inclusion within diasporic communities is frequently dependent upon continued adherence to particular expectations surrounding culture, morality, gender, religion, and communal respectability. Together, these concepts provide a framework for understanding how diasporic subjects navigate contradictory demands for authenticity, visibility, and recognition while remaining embedded within relationships that matter to them.

The analysis has further demonstrated that digital environments intensify these dynamics. The collapse of audiences, expansion of visibility, and amplification of reputational risk transform dialogue into an increasingly consequential practice. Under such conditions, silence, restraint, selective disclosure, and strategic ambiguity should not be understood as failures of dialogue or signs of weak identity. Rather, they emerge as practical responses to dialogic strain and as mechanisms through which individuals seek to preserve both belonging and personal integrity across competing moral worlds.

The broader implication of this article is that dialogue in diasporic life should not be idealised as transparent communication oriented toward consensus. More often, dialogue is a fragile accomplishment sustained through ongoing efforts to balance authenticity with obligation, self-expression with social intelligibility, and disagreement with relational continuity. Understanding Pakistani diasporic identity therefore requires attention not only to what is said, but also to what remains unsaid, deferred, translated, or strategically obscured. It is within these negotiations that belonging is produced, contested, and transformed.

By foregrounding dialogic legibility, managed opacity, and conditional belonging, this article contributes to dialogue studies, diaspora studies, and scholarship on identity formation by demonstrating that belonging is not merely a question of cultural inheritance or individual choice. Rather, it is a communicative accomplishment emerging through the continual negotiation of recognition, visibility, and relational obligation. To understand diasporic life, then, is to understand the labour of remaining legible without becoming overexposed, of sustaining relationships without surrendering difference, and of belonging while knowing that belonging itself remains contingent. It is within this tension that the possibilities, limits, and future trajectories of dialogue become most visible.

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Intergenerational Interculturality: Complexities of Intergenerational Dialogue in UK-Chinese Migrant Families

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Abstract: Research on intercultural dialogue has traditionally focused on communication between visibly differentiated cultural groups, often overlooking the everyday intercultural negotiations occurring within migrant families. This paper addresses this gap by exploring intergenerational dialogue within UK-Chinese migrant families through the concept of intergenerational interculturality. This paper conceptualises intergenerational interculturality as the dynamic process through which migrant parents and their children negotiate identities, values, family practices, and understandings of self and other in relation to their own cultural sense making.

Drawing on a qualitative doctoral study involving five UK-Chinese migrant families, this paper analyses multilingual, individual, and group interviews conducted with one migrant parent and one UK-raised adolescent child from each family. Adopting a non-essentialist small cultures approach, the study moves beyond fixed understandings of ‘Chinese’ and ‘British’ culture to examine how participants themselves draw upon, negotiate, and make sense of broader cultural narratives within everyday family interactions.

Findings demonstrate that parents and children frequently framed intergenerational differences through binary understandings of ‘Chinese’ and ‘British’ culture when discussing issues such as identity, education, marriage, and values. However, closer analysis reveals more fluid and complex negotiations shaped by migration histories, generational positioning, and lived experiences rather than fixed cultural categories alone. The paper argues that intergenerational interculturality provides a valuable lens for understanding the nuanced dialogic processes occurring within migrant family relationships. In doing so, the paper contributes to dialogue studies by extending understandings of intercultural dialogue into the intimate and often overlooked space of migrant family life.

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Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue; interculturality; intercultural communication; migrant families, Chinese

Introduction

This paper explores the practice of intergenerational dialogue which occurs between parents and their children in migrant families. It is commonly expressed that parents and children in general may experience barriers in their communication and this is often expressed as a generation gap (Aggarwal et al. 2017). However, this experience of an intergenerational communication barrier may be intensified in migrant families, when the two generations have been socialised in different countries, different languages, and different education systems.

In migrant families, parents who have grown up in one country, are raising their children in a different country to the one they are from. Within these families, I conceptualise the parent-child relationships as being ‘intercultural intergenerational’ relationships. This conceptualisation recognises that under their similar appearances as being from the same cultural background, that is, a Chinese family, the intergenerational differences in upbringing and enculturation make their communication an intercultural phenomenon. By bringing the intercultural to the forefront, this concept allows for a deeper exploration and understanding of the communication taking place. While this paper focuses on communication within migrant families, it also approaches these interactions as forms of intergenerational dialogue (Gill 2026). Through dialogue, family members continuously position themselves in relation to one another, drawing on personal experiences, social expectations, and wider cultural narratives.

In this paper, I draw on my findings from a qualitative study with five UK-Chinese migrant families, to explore how parents and children negotiate identities, values, and family relationships through everyday dialogue. I first provide some context on UK-Chinese families and the existing research on this topic, before explaining the non-essentialist, conceptual framing of small cultures (Holliday 1999) and intergenerational interculturality (Chan 2025) used within the study. I explain the methodology used, before presenting examples from the data on how parents and children negotiate everyday issues of identity and values. Through these examples, I demonstrate how parents and children understand these negotiations and make sense of their relationships. In doing so, I make a contribution to dialogue studies by extending understandings of intercultural dialogue into the intimate and often overlooked space of migrant family life.

UK-Chinese Families

Within this study, families are called ‘UK-Chinese’ to note that they identify as being ethnically Chinese and are living in the UK. The Chinese ethnic group is both large and fast-growing and one of the oldest diasporic communities in the UK (Benton and Gomez 2008; Zhu 2008). The presence of this group can be traced back to World War II (Ng 1968; Benton and Gomez 2008), followed by the large wave of migration to the UK in the 1980s as China started to open up its borders and relax its emigration policies (Liu 2009). Early settlement was primarily from Hong Kong and Guangdong province, meaning earlier Chinese settlers in the UK were predominantly from a Cantonese background. This was reflected in the Cantonese restaurants of the early Chinatowns across the UK (Beck 2007; Benton and Gomez 2008) and the earlier Chinese complementary schools which taught Cantonese (Francis, Archer and Mau 2009). This is also reflected in the literature (e.g. Li 1994; Parker 1995; Song 1997; Sham and Woodrow 1998; Chan 2000), with earlier studies mainly focusing on economic migrants from Cantonese-speaking regions, typically working in the Chinese catering trade. They were depicted as a relatively homogenous group, reflecting the demographic composition of that period.

Through these studies, aspects of UK-Chinese family life were highlighted. In particular, there was a focus on the ‘take-away lifestyle’ of families, where migrant Chinese parents worked long hours in family-run shops, with children often working alongside them (Parker 1995; Song 1997; Sham and Woodrow 1998). It was suggested that the identity formation of British-born Chinese children was strongly linked to their everyday experiences in the take-away (Parker 1995), and that these identities were relational to their siblings (Song 1997) with the better child being described as helping out more in the take-away and being more ‘Chinese’, as opposed to helping less and being more ‘English’. These studies (Parker 1995; Song 1997; Sham and Woodrow 1998) were instrumental in shedding light on the context of UK-Chinese families during the 1990s, at a time when UK-Chinese family life was largely unknown to others. However, their explanation of family behaviours reflected dominant cultural frameworks of the time, which drew on more fixed understandings of culture, and contemporary non-essentialist approaches can now allow for further exploration of these family practices.

Over recent decades, migration from China to the UK has diversified beyond the earlier Cantonese-speaking communities. The UK has attracted many international students from mainland China with most of these being Mandarin speakers (Yu and Moskal 2019). Some of these students have later settled in the UK. There has also been more varied migration from different areas of China, and this is no longer limited to economic migration but also lifestyle migration (Zhu 2010). Growing wealth

in China has also enabled both economic and lifestyle migration through various visa routes. These changes in migration patterns have increased the use of Mandarin among the UK-Chinese population (Zhu 2010), contributing to a language shift reflected in the rise of Mandarin complementary schools and the decline of Cantonese provision (Ganassin 2020; Huang 2021). Studies have highlighted the growing diversity of the UK-Chinese community and the need for this to be reflected in research. This has been addressed in more recent studies, where participants have come from more diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Lau-Clayton 2014; Huang and Lamb 2015; Zhu and Li 2016; Ganassin 2020).

Until recently, the UK-Chinese community has been understudied (Archer and Francis 2006; Lau-Clayton 2014; Huang and Lamb 2015). Although there is a body of research on Chinese migration, much of this does not focus on the UK context, and even less on families, making the contribution of this paper significant and much needed. This paper further complements Zheng's (2026) recent work on intergenerational dialogue within UK-Chinese families, where she highlights increasing intergenerational conflicts between parents and children and argues this is due to misrecognition of affective practices. This paper also addresses a gap Zheng (2026) highlights as the need to include young people's voices and to explore the actual everyday interactions between parents and children. In addition, Zhu and Li (2016) noted that even with growing academic interest in transnational and migrant families, rarely does the research focus on family dynamics and what is happening within the families, which is a gap that this paper aims to address.

Intercultural Dialogue and Migrant Families

Dialogue studies is concerned with communications between different people and how communication practice is socially situated (Carbaugh 2013). Here, dialogue is understood as a relational and meaning-making process through which people negotiate understandings of themselves and others. It involves ongoing processes of positioning, interpretation, and negotiation shaped by social and cultural contexts. Within intercultural dialogue research specifically, dialogue has often been associated with engagement across cultural difference, particularly in contexts such as education, civic participation, and international exchange (Elias and Mansouri 2020).

Existing research on intercultural dialogue has largely focused on visibly differentiated cultural groups or encounters between people perceived as culturally distinct (Elias and Mansouri 2020). However, intercultural negotiation may also occur within more intimate and less visibly differentiated contexts, including family relationships. In migrant families, parents and children may share ethnic identification while simultaneously experiencing different linguistic, educational, and cultural socialisa-

tion processes shaped by migration and life across multiple contexts. These differences may shape everyday communication, values, and identity negotiations between generations.

This paper therefore approaches migrant parent-child relationships as sites of intergenerational intercultural dialogue. Rather than viewing culture as fixed or nationally bounded, this perspective recognises interculturality as an ongoing process through which individuals negotiate meanings and identities in relation to others (Zhu 2015; Holliday 2017). The focus is therefore not on identifying static 'Chinese' or 'British' cultural characteristics, but on examining how participants themselves draw upon, negotiate, and make sense of cultural narratives within everyday family dialogue.

A Non-Essentialist 'Small Cultures' Approach

Traditionally, research on culture has taken an essentialist approach, where cultures of specific people are characterised and defined as fixed practices, relating to specific nations and race. For example, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions is often used to explain differences in culture and communication. Within Hofstede's work, British culture can be characterised as individualist and Chinese culture as collectivist. However, an overreliance on these fixed ideas of culture can be problematic and lead to stereotyping. They are often oversimplified and cannot account for the complexity of individual experiences.

Holliday's (1999) work criticises fixed ideas of culture as an essentialist approach and labels it a 'large cultures' approach. Instead, he encourages a 'small cultures' approach which highlights the fluid and emergent nature of culture. The small cultures approach looks at the culture of social groupings, of any size, big or small. It recognises that social groupings develop their own cohesive behaviours due to the group's members. These behaviours form a small culture that emerges over time and can continue to be shaped.

Holliday's thinking was central to informing the doctoral project for which this data was generated. By working within a small cultures paradigm, I understood each family's culture as being fluid and shaped by the members of the family. This non-essentialist thinking led to my conceptualisation of intercultural intergenerational relationships. During the research, I refrained from imposing fixed ideas of 'Chineseness' onto participants' experiences, instead focusing on how participants themselves negotiated and articulated cultural meanings through everyday family interactions. This allowed for a deeper exploration of participants' experiences and their reasoning behind their behaviours. Although many behaviours and values of my participants did conform to popular and fixed ideas of 'Chinese culture', it is important that,

firstly, I did not start the research looking for these patterns, and, secondly, I did not analyse these behaviours simply as ‘being Chinese’.

Lau-Clayton (2014) argues that existing research on Chinese migrant families has often used culture to explain patterns of behaviour, and she criticises the overgeneralisation of a shared Chinese culture to understand Chinese family relationships. I argue that this is due to the essentialist and binary framings of culture, which do not seek to understand more than how individuals justify and make sense of their experiences. By working within the non-essentialist paradigm of small cultures, we can build a more nuanced understanding of how cultures and practices are being formed and understood within migrant families.

Non-essentialist approaches to culture are, of course, already well established within intercultural communication and related social-science scholarship. Earlier critiques of essentialised understandings of culture have highlighted the fluid, negotiated, and contextual nature of cultural identities and practices. The contribution of this paper is therefore not to claim novelty in non-essentialism itself but rather to demonstrate the value of applying a non-essentialist and dialogic lens to the everyday intergenerational negotiations occurring within migrant family relationships. In particular, this approach allows greater attention to how parents and children draw upon, negotiate, and make sense of broader cultural narratives within their everyday family dialogue.

Methodology

The data informing this article was generated to explore the everyday intercultural intergenerational experiences of UK-Chinese families from the perspectives of the Chinese migrant parents and their UK-raised children (Chan 2025). The project focused specifically on UK-Chinese families with intercultural intergenerational relationships, and five such families were recruited from the Northwest and West Midlands regions of England. The families in this research all self-identified as being a Chinese family in the UK, where the child generation had been predominantly raised in the UK. From each family, one adolescent child and one parent actively participated.

Of the five families that participated, there were two mother-son pairs, one father-daughter pair, one mother-daughter pair, and one father-son pair. Three families spoke Cantonese and two families spoke Mandarin. The parents had all lived in the UK for over 15 years, and some for over 30 years. They had all predominantly raised their children in the UK. The child-generation participants were between 16 and 22 years old and were still in full-time education.

Data was generated through multilingual, semi-structured interviews with the families. A series of group and individual interviews were carried out with the families over a period of six months, between 2018 and 2019. Each family first took part in a group interview, which resulted in a three-way multilingual conversation between me (as the researcher), the parent, and the child. Next, the parent and child each had an individual interview. Finally, the parent and child were invited to a group interview to conclude. In some instances, additional individual interviews took place, resulting in a data corpus of twenty-two interviews across the five families.

Being fluent in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin, I was able to manage the many aspects of researching multilingually (Holmes, Fay, Andrews, and Attia 2013) within this project. These linguistic capabilities, as well as providing a shared background, aided the quick development of participant-researcher relationships and the building of rapport and trust. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed by the researcher using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021). The reflexive approach to analysis allowed me to fully embrace my 'insider' positionality and relationship with the research. Being from a UK-Chinese family myself and raised in the UK by Chinese migrant parents, adopting a reflexive approach allowed me to consider my own experiences whilst addressing my subjectivity within the research.

Ethical approval was sought through the University of Manchester, and low-risk ethical approval was granted for this project (Ref: 2018-5073-7036). All participants were informed of the study prior to them giving written consent to take part. All participants have been anonymised and the names used below are pseudonyms.

Intergenerational Interculturality

Through the analysis of the doctoral project, I found that intergenerational negotiation was prevalent across the findings and that many of these negotiations were intercultural in nature. These everyday negotiations shaped family practices and relationships, and had explanatory meaning for both parents and children. Through these negotiations, they position themselves in relation to each other, and through this process, they make sense of their own culture as well as the other person's. I define this process as intergenerational interculturality (Chan 2025).

The concept of interculturality emerged partly in response to more static and essentialist understandings of culture which positioned cultures as fixed, bounded, and primarily tied to national or ethnic groups. In contrast, interculturality emphasises the dynamic, relational, and negotiated nature of communication and identity (Zhu 2010; Holliday 2017). Rather than viewing culture as something individuals simply possess, interculturality focuses on how people draw upon different cultural experiences, social positions, and contextual understandings within interaction and mean-

ing-making processes (Holliday 2017). Building on existing understandings of interculturality, the concept of intergenerational interculturality focuses specifically on the phenomenon of migrant families with intercultural intergenerational relationships. By adding the term intergenerational to this concept, it highlights the often-overlooked intercultural differences which can occur in families and provides a useful lens for more nuanced understanding of their communication.

To demonstrate the intergenerational interculturality within the data, I present below examples from two areas of the larger study. The negotiation of identities, and the negotiation of values are presented below to illustrate the negotiation between parents and children. Note that sometimes this negotiation is also an internal process of the individual but is still a process of self-positioning in relation to the other generation. The examples below are taken from the data of three families only. The table below shows some of their basic information at the time of participation.

Family	1	2	5
Names	Mother/Son	Father/Daughter	Mother/Son
	Julie & Daniel	Steve & Qiqi	Xiuli & Andy
Parent Age	45+	45+	55+
Child Age	18+	16+	18+
Parent Time in UK	20+ years	15+ years	30+ years
Home Language	Cantonese	Mandarin	Cantonese

Table 1. Participant Information

Negotiation of Identities

Within the child generation, it was clear to me throughout the interviews that their cultural identities constantly shifted, depending on what was discussed, to whom they were speaking, and what they were speaking about. The child generation can feel affiliation to both their Chinese and British identities, and participants said that they wanted to embrace both their upbringing in the UK and their Chinese heritage. However, this was not always the case, and their acceptance of both cultures has developed over time, through continuous negotiation with themselves, their parents, and others in their environment. This can be seen in Daniel’s account where he explains that he started to recognise the importance of his heritage as he was growing up.

'If I had to put a label on it, I would call myself BBC [British-born Chinese]. And I feel that way. I was born here, I grew up in an English society and culture, but as I was growing up, I recognised the importance of my ethnic group. It was a good thing for me to consider both cultures, Chinese and English [...] I like to, wherever possible, take the good thing from both sides, that's usually how I think about things.'
(Daniel – Family 1)

Daniel also explains that the way he acts and feels changes depending on who he is with:

'When I'm outside, when I'm not with my family, I'm typically very, the way I act with other people is very western, very UK-like. But when I'm with my family, talking, having a meal, or doing anything, it's like Chinese culture, I kind of just adapt to it essentially.'
(Daniel – Family 1)

The child generation participants belong to a number of social groups within their environments, and their identities are continuously negotiated through dialogic engagement across these different relational spaces. The small culture of their family will be different to the small culture of their school, or church, or friendship circle. They can effortlessly move across their ecologies and adapt to different cultures. When reflecting on this movement, what becomes apparent to Daniel is his movement across western and Chinese spaces. I believe this is because large notions of 'Western' and 'Chinese' culture provide people with explanatory power. However, closer interrogation allows us to see that Daniel is explaining a more fluid movement between his different identities and social groups. During the interviews, Daniel also describes other social groups he belongs to, such as his international Chinese student friends at university, his British-born Chinese friends from Chinese school, and his white British friends from secondary school. Depending on who he is with, he will behave and adapt to that social environment in the way he instinctively feels most suitable. This is Daniel doing interculturality through the everyday dialogic negotiation of identities, relationships, and social expectations. Interculturality here does not require conscious effort but is a result of the years of experience of negotiating his own identities.

In contrast to Daniel above, who is embracing the different parts of his identity, his younger brother is currently rejecting the Chinese identity and is insisting that he is only English, through negotiation with his mum Julie.

‘佢話 I am English, mum, I was born in Manchester, not China. 我話, 你唔係呀, 你係 BBC, British-born Chinese, 跟住佢話 no, I am English.’ Julie – Family 1)

[‘He said, I am English, mum, I was born in Manchester, not China. I said, you’re not, you are BBC, British-born Chinese, and then he said, no, I am English.’]

Many of the child-generation participants have negotiated their identities as a process of making sense of who they are as they have grown up. As all adolescents, they go through a developmental phase of understanding who they are and forming their own identities (Erikson 1968). For these children of Chinese migrant parents, they have the additional aspect of trying to navigate and negotiate who they are within their family and their transnational family connections in China but also in relation to their local peers and the society they live in.

As they make sense of the cultures around them and position themselves in relation to others around them, they may not notice the fluidity of their own identities. I noted that participants sometimes presented ideas that contradicted what they had previously said. For example, Andy positions himself as Western compared to his parents and explains that they cannot change their Chinese way of thinking: ‘I keep trying to tell them (parents), but they won’t understand. They can’t understand. It’s just the way they’ve been brought up. They can’t change their way of thinking’ (Andy – Family 5). But later he explains that, as a Chinese person, he finds living with white housemates rather difficult: ‘Say, here, I’m living with white people, and I kind of have to adapt to their living. I don’t know how to explain it. [...] Making food. I just feel that Chinese people are more clean’ (Andy – Family 5).

At times, Andy commented on his preference for being individual and western and on his preference for being collectivist and valuing family more as a Chinese person too. Note that this construction of individual and collectivist cultures is not my construction but how Andy describes culture:

‘We, like, respect our elders and family a lot more. Then, they have more individualised living, where they focus on themselves a lot more. So, I think, for Asians, it’s more like a community. It’s kind of different in Western culture. I’ve taken, like, a western viewpoint, though, where I focus on myself.’ (Andy – Family 5)

As Andy is trying to describe his culture and identity, he is making sense of it by using large-culture understandings of Western and Chinese categorisations. This is

because of the grand narratives (Holliday 2021) that are present in his environment. He and the other participants are accustomed to hearing their cultures being described as British or Chinese, a binary divide with clear differences. Although they see themselves as being somewhere in the middle, or being both at the same time, when trying to articulate this, it is difficult not to use the dominant, binary, large-culture narrative.

It seems that although Andy presents conflicting accounts of his identity, this is part of his complex cultural reality, and these different values can comfortably coexist. This comfortable coexistence of conflicting values and identities is also a performance of interculturality.

Negotiation of Values

When participants talked about their family cultures and intergenerational relationships, they reported some different values between generations, and these sometimes played a shaping influence on the relationships. These differences in values were often conceptualised by the participants as being due to the different cultures of Chinese and British people.

Xiuli and Andy often described their intergenerational differences as pertaining to Chinese and Western cultures. In particular, Xiuli and Andy had conflicting opinions about money and spending. Xiuli often referred to this as an example of their intergenerational differences, and she talked about her disapproval of Andy's and the younger generation's spending habits.

‘思想方面呢，始終佢跟住英國呢個生活，同埋啲人群呀，同我哋唔一樣。譬如佢諗嘅嘢同我哋都唔同啦，係咪先？我哋呢輩人，慳得就慳。佢哋啲思想就係，我鍾意啲衫又好，食又好，點貴我都會買，咁樣囉。但係我哋啲思想就係，雖然係鍾意，但係咁貴我都要考慮，值唔值得買呢？點解呢，因為我哋嚟到呢度，係一無所有，係咪？’ (Xiuli – Family 5)

[‘Thinking-wise, he has always lived in England, and the groups of people he's around, it's different to us. For example, the way he thinks is different to us, right? Our generation, we save as much as we can. The way they think is, if I like something, clothes or food, no matter how expensive, I will buy it, like that. But the way we think is, even if I like it, I need to consider if it's expensive, is it worth it? Why, because when we arrived here, we had nothing, right?']

Andy also commented on his parents' spending habits.

'Because I want them to actually do what they want. As in... that's one thing about money, though. I'm like, why are you saving so much money when you can spend it and just do whatever you want now. Even if you say you are saving it up for me, I'd rather you just spend it all now, on yourselves. [...] When I grow up, I'll make the money for myself. [...] I keep trying to tell them, but they won't understand. (Andy – Family 5)

Here, Andy confirms that he differs from his parents on values on money. He explains that although he is aware that his parents are likely saving money to help prepare for his future, he does not feel that this is necessary. He suggests that this is a different value that is due to the way his parents were raised. He explains that his grandma did everything for her family, connecting to his earlier point on how Asians focus more on community and family, and that is how his parents think too.

Another topic that was discussed with participants was values and ideals about marriage.

'我覺得啲Chinese呢，係要同返啲Chinese，比較啱。' (Julie – Family 1)

['I think Chinese people should be with Chinese people, more suitable'].

Julie thinks that it is better for Chinese people to choose Chinese partners. This opinion was common amongst the families, as also demonstrated here by Xiuli:

'佢識咩人呀，又唔可以阻止佢嘅，咁當然，我哋中國人始終都係，將來佢哋啲婚姻都係希望娶返個中國人啦唔好娶個鬼妹返嚟啊。[...] 咁西人同我地啲生活方式唔同啊嘛，溝通始終都係差啲㗎。' (Xiuli – Family 5)

['Whoever he meets, I can't stop him, but of course, we Chinese people still would want, in the future when they get married, we still hope that they will marry a Chinese person, don't marry a white person. [...] Well western people and us have different lifestyle habits, communication is not going to be as good.']

Andy is aware of this expectation and said, 'Say, if I get a girlfriend, it's fine, as long as they are Chinese, I think. My dad said he wouldn't mind if I date a white person, but he would prefer a Chinese person because they can communicate' (Andy – Family 5). Andy said that his parents are not that strict compared to other UK-Chinese parents he knows: 'I know that some, they have to, like, date Chinese women, stuff like that, even go to the extremes of, like, I'll disown you if you, like, get with a white person' (Andy – Family 5).

Here, Steve also shares his opinion that it would be easier for his daughter if she married someone from the same cultural background.

'It's not about race. It's about comfort. Marriage is not just you like each other. It's about how you spend the rest of your life together. So, the more your comfort zones can overlap, the less conflict you will have. In other words, if you are not in the same channel, even if you like each other in the first place, the conflict will emerge gradually. Because, I don't like pizza, I like noodles, this is looks very small, but a fundamental issue. About attitudes, relationship, culture, will become a very big thing in your marriage. Because a relationship is not just spend a few days, going to the cinema. It's about everything in daily life. Because you grow up in a Chinese family, Chinese tradition penetrates your mindset. There will be a lot of conflict if you go with another background or culture. My daughter is not old enough. She hasn't realised this. I didn't realise this, only after marriage, I can taste, I can reflect. It's very hard for different cultures to be together without conflict.' (Steve – Family 2)

Here, Steve is able to articulate the reason many UK-Chinese parents want their children to marry someone ethnically Chinese. He explains it is not about race but how his daughter has been raised in a Chinese family with Chinese values and that it is easier to make a life with someone with these shared values and practices. However, not all parents are able to communicate this well with their children. As demonstrated by Julie and Xiuli's examples, sometimes this is more simply expressed in terms of race. In my own experience and within my observations, the way parents expressed this sentiment was often interpreted as prejudice by the children and could lead to intergenerational tension.

Lastly, a value which was often discussed was the value of education. All parents in the study expressed that education was highly important and that their child's education took priority. The children all stated that valuing education was part of Chinese culture and that this differed to the family values of their local peers who were not Chinese.

‘So, for instance, the traditional Chinese values of doing well at school, for instance, education is always first. And I had certain friends who didn’t think that of course, especially at high school as we were nearing our GCSEs. And for a while, I did think the same, you know, why should I be studying so much when people are already earning money and things like that? But, em... I think my parents have helped in that in a way. So, we discussed the importance of education first and how it will really benefit me in the long run in my personal development and things like that.’ (Qiqi – Family 2)

Here Qiqi explained how she was originally critical of having to work too hard but now accepts the importance of education, after continued discussions with her parents. However, the parent’s valuing of education was sometimes a cause of intergenerational tension if the child did not share this value. Here, Daniel explains that his younger brother is often made to do extra schoolwork which his brother rejects.

‘He always shouts at my mum, he’s very angry all the time. It’s because my parents are strict with him [...] that’s why it’s always quite noisy in our house. My mum and dad always want him to do work, extra work as well, on top of his work at school. That’s why he gets very upset about it.’ (Daniel – Family 1)

Julie explains that her younger son feels it is unfair since his classmates do not need to do additional work. However, Julie tries to explain to her younger son that Chinese people study harder. This is still rejected by her younger son, who states he is not Chinese since he was born in England.

Making Sense of Intercultural Intergenerational Dialogue

During intercultural intergenerational dialogue, parents and children would draw from large-culture narratives as a tool of negotiation, and they would also use large-culture understandings to justify their differences. However, this often oversimplified their intentions and underlying reasoning.

Many of the participants had their own understandings of what constituted Chinese culture and British culture, and these understandings were continuously negotiated through everyday intergenerational dialogue. These terms would often be used by them to express difference. However, on many occasions I found the explanations of cultural difference to be quite superficial, such as the food they eat and habits they practise. My analysis suggests that parents and children draw upon large culture narratives as dialogic resources through which they explain, negotiate, and justify intergenerational differences, which allows them to accept their intergenerational dif-

ferences more easily and also allows them to justify the difference to others more easily.

Xiuli's example above about the difference in spending habits between her and her son highlights this. She uses this as an example to explain how growing up in England means her son's thinking is different to hers. She explains how her generation is more frugal, with frugality often being associated as a traditional Chinese value rooted in Confucian culture (Yu and Reiss 2026). However, at the end of this example, she suggests that the reason for her to be more frugal is because when she migrated to the UK, she arrived with very little and had to work very hard to build a life for her family here. This hardship has not been experienced by her son and his generation, and they therefore do not value money in the same way. This difference in personal trajectories and experience is what is shaping the difference in value, but it is much more easily expressed as a cultural difference in Confucian and Western values of frugality as is often stereotyped.

In the examples above about marriage values, the parents demonstrate their preferences for their children to find a Chinese spouse. Underneath this preference is the parents' assumption that someone who is Chinese will be more compatible in terms of lifestyle habits, values, and even language. However, further discussion with the child generation about whether they think their parents' preference is about race or about language further problematises this construct, as participants and myself have met many ethnic Chinese people who do not speak Chinese. If the parents pictured their children with someone as 'Chinese' as themselves, that is, from China, then intercultural differences will still be present in the relationship. Parents hope that their children find a suitable partner, and this is most easily expressed by visible similarities in ethnicity as a proxy for shared culture.

Lastly, the example about education shows how the high valuing of education is constructed as a Chinese value, and this is also documented in existing research (Francis and Archer 2005). The parents have taught the children from a young age that, as a Chinese family, it is important to study hard and that this will lead to a good future. Linking studying hard to the Chinese identity is an example of how large-culture constructions can be used as a negotiation tool, as this is hard for the child generation to argue against. On closer examination, parents provided different reasons for why they wanted their children to study hard. For example, some parents wanted their children to avoid a hard life in the catering trade such as they had experienced, whilst other parents stated that education had provided them with upward social mobility and therefore saw the power of education.

Across these examples, intergenerational interculturality can be understood not as a fixed cultural divide between parents and children but as an ongoing dialogic pro-

cess through which family members negotiate identities, values, relationships, and understandings of self and other.

Discussion

The data presented above illustrates how intergenerational interculturality is present within the everyday dialogic interactions of UK-Chinese families. Through ongoing dialogue, parents and children negotiate identities, values, expectations, and understandings of self and other in relation to their different socialisation experiences and cultural trajectories.

Research on interculturality has often explored students' development of intercultural skills and competences through their continued engagement with another culture, such as learning a foreign language or study abroad programmes (e.g., Howard 2019). Much of this research has focused on dialogue across visibly differentiated cultural groups or institutional settings. The findings of this study suggest that intercultural dialogue may also occur within intimate family relationships where cultural differences are less visibly marked but nevertheless shape everyday communication and relational meaning making.

Although interculturality as a theoretical concept has drawn more attention in recent decades (Zhu 2010), the phenomenon itself is not new. People have always been able to negotiate between their different identities and negotiate identities assigned to them by others (Zhu 2015). People engage differently with different groups of individuals and attempt to choose the right tone and vocabulary to use with those groups, given their previous experiences of communicating with different people. For example, the way people communicate with their parents may be quite different from the way they communicate with their friends. This may go unnoticed if the family and friends seem to be from the same cultural background because this is an unmarked difference. Although unmarked and unnoticed, this fluid movement of identity and changes in behaviour are also displays of interculturality. A dialogic lens makes these otherwise overlooked negotiations more visible by focusing attention on how meanings and identities are relationally constructed through everyday interaction.

For the children of these UK-Chinese families, the way they communicate with their parents and how they communicate with their local peers may be noticeably different, given the visible difference of race, in addition to linguistic difference. These differences in communication are then often explained in large-culture terms, as exemplified above.

The differences between the parents and children in these UK-Chinese families, on the other hand, are relatively unmarked, especially from an outsider perspective. The parents and children look similar in appearance, and all identify as being ethnically Chinese. They share cultural practices and languages to varying proficiency levels. These are shared similarities that mark both parents and children as being Chinese people in the UK. Their cultural differences and how they are played out in everyday family life, on the other hand, are less visible and require a deeper exploration.

Through close and supportive intergenerational relationships in the families of this study, the child generation have mostly accepted the values and habits of their parents, characterised by them as Chinese, and have also been given the space to negotiate such values and habits. However, this may not be the case for families where intergenerational relationships may be more problematic. It should be noted that the families in this study provide examples of how intergenerational interculturality can be played out within migrant Chinese families, but they cannot be generalised. It was clear from the recruitment process for this study that only families where parents and children had maintained good relationships showed interest in taking part in the research together. It may therefore be useful to explore how intergenerational interculturality may play out in families where the intergenerational relationships are less amicable.

Conclusion

In this study, I have highlighted how migrant parent-child relationships can be understood as sites of intergenerational intercultural dialogue, where identities, values, and relationships are continuously negotiated through everyday family interaction. By applying a non-essentialist lens, this paper has demonstrated how shared ethnic identification does not necessarily result in shared cultural experiences, perspectives, or values within migrant family life. In addition, intergenerational interculturality provides a lens for understanding intergenerational intercultural dialogue within these families.

The paper contributes to dialogue studies by extending understandings of intercultural dialogue beyond encounters between visibly differentiated cultural groups. Instead, the findings demonstrate how intercultural dialogue may also occur within intimate family relationships, where cultural differences are less immediately visible but are continuously negotiated through everyday relational interaction.

Although this study focuses on Chinese families in the UK, this phenomenon of intercultural intergenerational relationships is likely to be similar in migrant families of other origins. Although migration scholarship has extensively explored acculturation, identity, and transnational experiences, less attention has been given to the

everyday dialogic negotiations occurring within migrant family relationships themselves. Exploring migrant families through the lens of intergenerational interculturality therefore offers valuable insight into the complex dialogic processes through which family members negotiate belonging, relationships, and cultural meaning within everyday life.

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Self-Determination and Cultural Continuity Among Naga Tribal Students: Navigating Intergenerational Narratives of Conflict, Trauma and Future Aspirations

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Abstract: This paper examines intergenerational dialogue among Naga tribal students from Nagaland, Northeast India who migrate to metropolitan cities for higher education. The Naga peoples comprise Indigenous tribes, with seventeen major tribes officially recognised within the state of Nagaland, each with distinct languages, customary governance systems, and cultural institutions. Decades of armed conflict, political uncertainty, and life under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) have produced a distinctive culture of intergenerational narrative transmission, in which the historical experiences of one generation shape the perceptions and expectations of the next. The study investigates how that transmission travels with students to urban centres such as Bangalore and Delhi, and how the encounter between inherited understanding and lived experience generates ongoing processes of negotiation, reinterpretation, and forward-looking agency. The study uses Indigenous psychology methodologies with forty-four participants: individual semi-structured interviews with thirty-two Naga students and tribal student union leaders in Bangalore and Delhi, six stu-

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dent-only talking circles drawn from that group, and four mixed intergenerational talking circles in which students sat with twelve elders. Member checking was conducted in two phases and reflexive journalling throughout. Participants were drawn from multiple Naga tribes and span a range of academic levels and migration trajectories across both cities. The analysis draws on Self-Determination Theory, reoriented through Indigenous relational frameworks, to trace how the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are renegotiated across contexts. Four interrelated processes emerge from the findings: the negotiation of inherited conflict narratives against lived encounter; the emergence of tribal student unions as dialogical infrastructures performing a function strikingly analogous to that of the traditional Morung; the reconfiguration of self-determination from deferred political aspiration to present-oriented collective agency; and the cultivation of narrative sovereignty as psychological and cultural self-determination.

Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue; self-determination; Naga tribal students; indigenous psychology; narrative sovereignty; well-being futures

Introduction

In Nagaland and across Naga-inhabited regions of Northeast India, knowledge has long circulated through intergenerational relationships, transmitted not only through formal institutions but through story, shared practice, community deliberation, and everyday social interaction. Such modes of transmission are consistent with Indigenous epistemologies, where learning is embedded in relational and communal contexts rather than confined to formalised systems (Wilson 2008, 7; Kovach 2009, 55–60; Smith 2012, 125–127). These processes unfold across both rural and urban settings, where family, church, student networks, and community organisations all serve as sites of cultural transmission and identity formation (Longkumer 2010, 67–69; Ao 2009, 12–15).

The Naga peoples comprise numerous recognised tribes, with seventeen major tribes officially recognised within Nagaland, each with distinct languages, customary governance systems, and cultural institutions. Naga communities extend beyond Nagaland into neighbouring states in Northeast India and across the India-Myanmar border. Despite this internal diversity, a shared historical experience has taken shape over the past century, marked by colonial encounter, armed conflict, and ongoing political negotiations concerning autonomy, identity, and the terms of coexistence within the Indian state (Baruah 2005, 1–5; Kikon 2009, 271–272).

A further dimension of contemporary Naga life that warrants explicit acknowledgement is the central place of Christianity, predominantly Baptist, in the social, educational, and institutional fabric of Nagaland. Following the arrival of the American Baptist mission in the late nineteenth century, which encountered and partly transformed pre-existing Indigenous religious and ceremonial traditions, Christian

congregations and their associated institutions, including Sunday schools, youth and women's fellowships, denominational schools and colleges, and, in subsequent decades, church-led peacebuilding initiatives have become principal sites where intergenerational narrative life is carried out, contested, and renewed (Longkumer 2010, 23–28). Alongside these, family and clan structures, customary tribal institutions, and a range of civic and political associations all continue to function as locations of intergenerational dialogical life. Intergenerational dialogue in Naga communities is therefore plural in its institutional locations, and any single study addresses only part of that field. The analytical object of this paper is the tribal student union in urban migration, examined as a contemporary form of dialogical infrastructure. The *Morung* is invoked here as a conceptual reference point: an emblematic case of structurally embedded intergenerational engagement in Indigenous Naga life that illuminates what dialogical infrastructure looks like as a category, rather than a direct institutional antecedent from which student unions are genealogically derived. Church-mediated, family-mediated, and customary forms of intergenerational dialogue among Naga families and migrants, each consequential in its own right, would require studies of their own. The present framing is therefore a choice of analytical focus rather than a claim of exhaustive coverage, and the limitation is returned to in the Conclusion.

Nagaland occupies a complex position within independent India, marked by both institutional integration and unresolved political questions. Various Naga political groups have articulated, since before independence, claims to self-determination grounded in a distinct historical and political identity, including demands for greater autonomy, recognition of Naga-inhabited areas beyond existing state boundaries, and a negotiated political settlement (Baruah 2005, 1–5; Kikon 2009, 271–272). Counter-insurgency operations of the 1950s and 1960s, and the imposition of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in 1958, granting extensive powers of search, arrest, and use of force under conditions of declared disturbance, produced a socio-psychological environment in which narratives of resistance, mistrust, and unresolved grievance became embedded in everyday life (Kikon 2009, 274–276). The 1997 ceasefire brought relief from direct violence, but formal resolution remains incomplete, and the Framework Agreement of 2015 has yet to be fully realised in constitutional terms. For Naga families, the telling and retelling of these experiences became a form of cultural continuity. For younger Nagas, born into ceasefire but not resolution, these narratives arrived as inheritance, shaping their perception of identity, of the Indian state, and of what it means to chart a future.

It is against this backdrop that the migration of Naga students to urban India for higher education takes on particular significance. Moving to Bangalore, Delhi, or other metropolitan centres is rarely a straightforward educational decision. Students

cross not only geographical but cultural and psychological boundaries, entering environments where inherited understandings meet the unpredictability of daily encounter. What they find does not always match what they were told, and that gap becomes a space of continuous intergenerational negotiation.

The paper argues that intergenerational dialogue, in this context, does not operate primarily as a set of formal or facilitated exchanges. It unfolds within the everyday institutional life of tribal student unions through which past narratives, present experiences, and future aspirations are brought into sustained dialogue. These unions are identified here as dialogical infrastructures, performing under conditions of urban migration a function strikingly analogous to that of the traditional Morung, which sustained intergenerational engagement as a structural feature of collective life in Naga villages. As Gill (2025c, 8) notes, intergenerational dialogue is one of the primary ways communities deliberate, contest, and renew the meanings by which collective life is sustained, particularly under conditions of historical harm and structural injustice. The Naga case gives that claim specific empirical form.

Conceptual Framework

Dialogue as relational meaning-making

The intellectual roots of dialogue studies lie in several converging traditions, all of which push against the idea that communication is the transfer of information. Bohm (1996, 2–9) treats dialogue as a collective inquiry into shared meaning, in which participants hold their positions lightly enough to be genuinely altered by what emerges. Freire (1970, 69–74) grounds that possibility in the conditions of power that make exchange possible or impossible, arguing that authentic dialogue demands horizontal relationships; on this account dialogue is not a communicative technique but a transformative practice. Buber (1958, 11–15) states the requirement ethically: real dialogue means encountering the other as a full subject rather than as a category or an abstraction. Taken together, these positions treat dialogue as a relational achievement, always shaped by the histories and power relations through which it occurs.

Two concepts carry most of the analytical weight in what follows. Bakhtin's (1981, 342–346) internally persuasive word describes the individual-level process: inherited discourses arrive not as settled truths but as voices in a dialogical field, continuously tested against experience and re-accentuated as individuals make them their own or hold them at critical distance. Gadamer's (1989, 302–307) fusion of horizons describes the social counterpart: when people carrying different historical experiences encounter one another in good faith, what can emerge is an enlarged understanding that neither held before. Ramsbotham (2019, 73–75), also in this journal, enters a

caution that bears directly on this case: the conditions for genuine horizon-fusion may not exist where power imbalances are severe enough to close dialogue before it has begun. The AFSPA and the history of counter-insurgency are precisely the kinds of conditions that demand such caution.

Intergenerational dialogue and its institutional locations

Within this journal, these foundations have been taken up in directions directly relevant to the Naga context. Choi (2025, 19–21) argues that intergenerational dialogue is best understood as an epistemological framework, and demonstrates through qualitative research with Korean workers that dialogue between generations surfaces the taken-for-granted assumptions shaping divergent worldviews. Generalised generational categories are inadequate to this work: it is the specific historical context of each generation, not age alone, that determines what people bring to dialogue (Choi 2025, 37–38). This maps directly onto the Naga case, where generational worldviews have been formed by radically different experiences of armed conflict, ceasefire, and political uncertainty. Evans-Jones (2025, 45–46) develops the concept of dialogical justice, arguing that justice in post-conflict settings cannot be understood as a bounded event aimed at closure but must be conceived as ongoing and intergenerational. The shift he proposes, from resolution to relationship and sustained answerability to inherited harm (Evans-Jones 2025, 63–64), resonates powerfully with the unresolved situation facing Naga communities.

Two further contributions address where such dialogue is housed. Bakare (2025, 112–114) argues that Yoruba intergenerational dialogue systems are not peripheral cultural practices but foundational social architectures through which communities reproduce their values and sustain collective agency (Bakare 2025, 128–130). Kurian (2025, 90–93) brings the question into the Indian context through a study of hereditary folk artists, revealing cultural transmission as a co-creative endeavour in which elders and younger practitioners both shape what is inherited. The fragility she identifies in these intergenerational spaces (Kurian 2025, 106–109) is precisely what tribal student unions are working to address in migration.

Three modes of engagement with inherited narratives

Three modes are in view throughout this paper and should be named at the outset, since the findings distinguish between them consistently.

The first is direct intergenerational dialogue: the in-person, co-present encounter between members of different generations, exemplified here by the mixed talking circles and by elder visits to student spaces in Bangalore and Delhi.

The second is internally mediated engagement with inherited narratives: the intrapersonal work through which younger participants continue to engage with the cautions, worldviews, and framings transmitted to them, in the temporary or sustained absence of the elders who originated them. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981, 342–346) account of the internally persuasive word, this paper treats such engagement as dialogical in character, since inherited discourses retain their dialogical quality precisely because they remain in active tension with experience rather than functioning as closed transmissions. It is intergenerational in its object rather than in its participants.

The third is peer-mediated engagement with inherited narratives: the lateral, same-generation conversation through which students compare, contest, and re-accentuate what each has inherited, and in which framings taken to be shared across Naga communities are sometimes found to be specific to a family or a tribe. This mode is neither internal nor intergenerational in its participants. It is distinguished from the second because collapsing the two obscures a real difference: peer conversation introduces a second speaker who can answer back, where intrapersonal engagement does not, but that speaker belongs to the same generation as the participant and cannot answer for the generation whose narratives are under revision.

Only the first is intergenerational dialogue in the full sense of a co-present exchange in which both generations can be changed by what is said. The second and third are analytically distinct from it and from each other, and are treated here as parts of a broader dialogical field in which inherited voices remain active; the paper identifies which mode is in operation at each point in the findings. The Discussion returns to the analytical and ethical limits of extending the concept of dialogue in this way.

Self-determination: from individual capacity to relational practice

Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2000, 227–230) proposes that well-being depends on satisfying three basic needs: autonomy, acting from one's own values rather than external compulsion; competence, experiencing effectiveness in one's environment; and relatedness, meaningful connection with others. SDT provides a productive scaffold for this study, but its individualist framing requires reorientation. Wilson (2008, 7–11) argues that Indigenous epistemologies are fundamentally relational, grounding knowledge, identity, and well-being in relationships with community, ancestors, and the broader social world rather than in the bounded interior self that Western psychology assumes; SDT's three needs have accordingly been criticised for locating the self primarily within the individual organism rather than within relational obligations and identities (Kovach 2009, 55–60; Smith 2012, 74–78). In Naga tribal culture, the self is understood as constituted through community relationships, obligations to kin and tribe, and responsibilities toward ances-

tral heritage (Wilson 2008, 7–11; Longkumer 2010, 67). To act in accordance with these commitments is not a constraint on autonomy but an expression of it.

The study therefore retains SDT's three-need structure while reorienting each need through Indigenous relational frameworks (Wilson 2008; Kovach 2009; Smith 2012). Autonomy becomes relational accountability: acting from community-embedded values rather than external imposition. Competence becomes the capacity to contribute meaningfully to collective life and future. Relatedness is understood as specifically tribal and intergenerational connection, rooted in shared cultural identity and the dialogical transmission of collective memory. This reorientation contributes to the broader project of extending mainstream psychological frameworks to account for Indigenous understandings of selfhood (Smith 2012, 74–80; Kovach 2009, 55–62).

This reorientation, however, is not without its own difficulties, and three should be acknowledged at the outset. First, retaining SDT's three-need architecture while reframing each need through Indigenous relational categories risks preserving the structural primacy of a Western psychological theory even where the substantive content has been altered; critics from within Indigenous methodology have cautioned that such hybrid framings can read as accommodation rather than genuine epistemological decolonisation (Smith 2012, 78–80; Kovach 2009, 58–62). Second, the move to a relational reading of autonomy must be made carefully to avoid romanticising community as uniformly affirming; intra-community pressures, including the pressure to perform a sanctioned identity, can constrain autonomy as much as external imposition. Third, Indigenous epistemologies are themselves plural rather than monolithic, and a study located in one Naga setting should not be read as speaking for Indigenous selfhood as a category. The framework adopted here is therefore offered as an empirically grounded and provisional reorientation suited to this case, rather than as a generalisable replacement for SDT.

Migration as future-making

De Haas (2021, 3–8) repositions migration as a form of agency, shaped by the desire to achieve particular futures and by the structural capacity to pursue them. In the Naga context, migration for higher education is not primarily a response to conditions at home: students do not leave Nagaland primarily to escape, but to equip themselves to return, and the project is oriented toward community development. Sohdi (2025, 72–75) adds, through his analysis of translation as an intergenerational political act, that the movement between ancestral epistemologies and contemporary professional life involves the kind of cultural carrying and renegotiation in which what is transmitted changes in the act of transmission. Intergenerational dialogue is the medium through which inherited narratives, basic psychological needs, and fu-

ture-oriented aspirations are brought into relation with each other. It is within this dialogical process, unfolding in student unions, talking circles, and informal migrant life, that self-determination is both challenged and reconstituted, and that the conditions for well-being futures are made or unmade.

The gap addressed by this study

What remains limited in the literature is empirical attention to how intergenerational dialogue operates where Indigenous youth navigate not only cultural difference but the specific psychological weight of inherited narratives shaped by armed conflict and unresolved political struggle. The present study addresses this gap through work with forty-four participants in Bangalore and Delhi: semi-structured interviews with thirty-two Naga students and tribal student union leaders, six student-only talking circles, and four mixed intergenerational talking circles involving twelve elders.

Methodology

Epistemological positioning

The study is grounded in an Indigenous epistemological orientation. Wilson (2008, 7) describes Indigenous research as ceremony: a relational act of co-construction in which knowledge emerges through relationships rather than being extracted from participants. Reflexive positioning is presented here in the first person to honour the relational accountability that Indigenous methodology requires; the rest of the paper is written in the third person. I am a Naga community member with direct experience of migration for higher education and sustained involvement in tribal student networks in Bangalore. This insider positionality enabled access, linguistic fluency, and relational trust unavailable to an outsider, while also requiring reflexive care: my own inherited narratives about Nagaland, mainland India, and the meaning of education had to be held consciously at the margins of interpretation. Research journaling, regular supervision dialogue, and member-checking all supported this discipline. Kovach (2009, 41–42) argues that Indigenous research from within community frameworks carries a particular responsibility: producing knowledge that serves the community as well as the academy. That obligation shaped every methodological decision here.

Research design and data collection

Data were collected through a three-method design. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with Naga tribal students in Bangalore and Delhi, exploring experiences of migration, engagement with inherited narratives, in-

volvement in student community structures, and aspirations for the future. Interviews ranged from sixty to ninety minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured format allowed participants to connect themes in ways a rigid schedule would have suppressed.

Talking circles served as a complementary method, drawing on Indigenous practices of collective dialogue in which each participant speaks without interruption and all voices carry equal weight (Kovach 2009, 98–100). Student-only circles brought together groups of four to eight students from the same city, enabling peer-level reflection; six such circles were conducted across Bangalore and Delhi. Mixed intergenerational circles brought students, including tribal student union leaders, together with tribal elders in the same session; four were conducted in total, involving twelve elders who did not take part in the individual interviews.

These circles made it possible to observe intergenerational dialogue as a live social process rather than relying solely on retrospective accounts. Informal interactions with community members and union officials supplemented the formal data collection throughout. All participants provided informed consent, and descriptions in this article identify participants by tribe, gender, academic level, and city only.

Sampling and analytical approach

Participants were selected through purposive and network-based sampling to capture a range of tribal backgrounds, academic levels, and degrees of community involvement. Thirty-two students, including tribal student union leaders, took part in individual interviews: members of the Ao, Angami, and Lotha tribes studying at undergraduate and postgraduate level in Bangalore and Delhi. Participants in the six student-only circles were drawn from this same group. Twelve tribal elders took part in the four mixed intergenerational circles, giving forty-four participants in total. Analytical saturation guided the process: by the final rounds, no new thematic patterns were emerging (Braun and Clarke 2006, 96–97).

Data analysis combined thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 77–83), narrative analysis, and dialogical analysis, each adapted to the study's Indigenous epistemological orientation. Themes were understood as patterns of relational meaning rather than discrete content categories. Narrative analysis attended to how participants constructed accounts in relation to the temporal movement between inherited past, experienced present, and imagined future. Dialogical analysis of talking circle data illuminated how meanings were negotiated between participants in real time. Disconfirming cases were incorporated throughout rather than set aside. Member checking was conducted in two phases: individual participants reviewed interview summaries, and preliminary findings were presented to a validation group of stu-

dents and elders participants, in which interpretations were questioned and, in several cases, corrected (Smith 2012, 136–138).

Findings

Intergenerational dialogue among Naga students in migration is not a single, clearly bounded process. It happens in student union meetings and in late-night kitchen conversations; it happens when an elder visits Delhi and sits down with students who have questions they have not known how to ask at home. Four interrelated dimensions of this dialogical life emerged from the data.

Negotiating inherited narratives: between memory and encounter

Across all data sources, one of the most consistent patterns was the extent to which students arrived in other Indian cities carrying a set of expectations shaped by generations of familial and community storytelling. These were not primarily the product of explicit political instruction. They were embedded in the texture of everyday life at home, in the cautions offered before departure, in stories at family gatherings, in warnings from older siblings who had already made the journey. They functioned as anticipatory knowledge, a perceptual frame through which new experiences would initially be processed and evaluated. This pattern was consistent across tribal backgrounds and across both cities, suggesting it reflects a broader socio-political culture shaped by generations of conflict and its aftermath.

An Angami male postgraduate student in Delhi described how this inherited frame, encountered absorbed across years of family and community storytelling rather than through any single conversation with an elder, shaped his initial orientation:

‘Growing up, the way people talked about going to the mainland was not like going somewhere new. It was like going somewhere you already knew was not fully for you. We were told to be careful, to stay together, not to trust easily. It was not fear exactly. But it was always there in the background, this awareness that we are different, that we carry something they do not understand.’

This awareness drew on real histories of discrimination and racial othering that Northeast Indian students continue to encounter in urban India. But it was also a frame, and frames shape what one notices. For students whose families had lived through AFSPA-era militarisation, the figure of mainland India carried historical weight that could not simply be set aside on arrival.

Yet the encounter with urban life did not always confirm what students had been told, and the work of revising those inherited frames was, for many participants, internally mediated which is a sustained intrapersonal negotiation with voices that were not physically present but remained narratively active. An Ao male undergraduate in Bangalore described his disorientation in the early weeks:

‘I came expecting it to be difficult in a certain way. Racism, not being accepted. And yes, some of that is there. But it is more complicated than I expected. Some people are ignorant, some are curious, some become real friends. I had to rethink many things I was told. Not throw them away but rethink them.’

Bakhtin (1981, 342–346) describes this through the internally persuasive word: inherited discourses do not function as settled truths but as voices that must be engaged and either made one’s own or held at critical distance. Gadamer (1989, 302–307) frames the social dimension: when people from different historical horizons meet in good faith, what can emerge is an enlarged understanding that neither carried before. From an SDT perspective, this process of critical engagement with inherited framings, while remaining accountable to community values, is itself an exercise of autonomy within a relational Indigenous frame (Wilson 2008, 7–11).

A Lotha male postgraduate student in Delhi, four years into his migration, reflected on how his understanding shifted through conversation in a mixed intergenerational talking circle:

‘When I first came, I kept my distance from people who were not Naga. But over time I started asking myself: Is this caution coming from what happened to my grandparents, or from what is actually happening to me? That is a question I could not have asked alone. I asked it here, in the union, with my seniors, and sometimes with the elders who came to visit. They did not always give me the same answer. Some said be careful, some said be open. But the conversation itself changed how I think.’

What this participant describes is direct dialogue with elders in a co-present setting, but it is direct dialogue that takes its character from the internally mediated engagement that preceded it: the question he could not have asked alone had been forming through years of internal reckoning with inherited cautions. The dialogue here is generative precisely because it does not resolve into a single authoritative transmission. Elders themselves hold differentiated, sometimes contradictory, views. This resonates with Choi’s (2025, 38–39) argument that sustainable intergenerational relationships are built not through the elimination of generational differences

but by creating conditions in which those differences can be recognised and worked through.

Tribal student unions as dialogical infrastructures: a function analogous to the *Morung*

The *Morung* was a central institution in traditional Naga village life: a communal space in which young men lived, worked, and learned together under the guidance of elders, sustaining intergenerational engagement as a structural feature of collective life rather than an occasional activity (Longkumer 2010, 67–69). What made it effective was not any single programme within it but the quality of its everyday social texture: different generations sharing the same space and concerns over sustained periods of time.

Tribal student unions in Bangalore and Delhi perform a strikingly analogous function. They are not simply organisational bodies that coordinate cultural events or advocate for student welfare. They are the primary sites where intergenerational dialogue is embedded in the structures of everyday migrant life. An Angami female student union leader in Bangalore explained:

‘The union is not just an organisation. It is where we live as a community away from home. The seniors teach the juniors, how to navigate the city, how to study, how to handle discrimination, how to keep our culture alive here. And the elders who come to visit, or who are settled here, they come to the union also. It becomes the place where the generations meet.’

The clearest examples of direct intergenerational dialogue in the data come from these settings. In one instance described by multiple participants in the Delhi community, a visiting elder who had been involved in the Naga political movement sat with a group of students in a talking circle. The exchange that followed, in which students asked about his experiences of conflict and he asked them about their experiences of mainstream India, was described by several participants as among the most significant conversations of their time in the city. An Ao male undergraduate in Delhi captured what distinguished these spaces from more generic social belonging:

‘When the elders come and sit with us, it is not like a lecture. They share; we share. They are also learning from us, learning what it is like now, what we face here. And we are learning from them what was before, what they carried, what they gave up. It goes both ways. That is what makes it real dialogue.’

The relatedness need is profoundly implicated here (Deci and Ryan 2000, 235–237). Students who described feeling isolated or culturally invisible in mainstream university environments consistently identified the tribal student union as the place where this isolation was overcome. As Kurian (2025, 93) observes in her study of Indian folk-art communities, the relational space in which intergenerational transmission occurs is itself fragile and requires deliberate sustaining; its erosion is not merely cultural loss but psychological harm. The competence need is addressed through the practical mentoring that senior students provide to newcomers, extending well beyond academic guidance to include navigating racial discrimination, maintaining cultural practice in an unsupportive environment, and representing the Naga community professionally. Bakare (2025, 128–130) argues that Indigenous dialogue systems function as foundational social architectures through which communities reproduce their values. The tribal student union exemplifies exactly this quality.

Reconfiguring self-determination: from political aspiration to lived agency

Self-determination carries multiple registers of meaning in these communities. For elder participants, it remained primarily a political category: the ongoing claim for autonomy, recognition of Naga-inhabited areas, and a negotiated settlement. For younger students, the political dimension coexisted with a more immediate understanding of self-determination as something that also had to be enacted in the present, through the choices and commitments of daily life.

The shift was most often articulated in an internal, reflective register with students working through what self-determination now meant for them, in light of how their elders had spoken of it. An Angami female postgraduate student in Bangalore, completing a master's in public policy, articulated this internally mediated generational shift:

‘Self-determination is not just a political word for us. It is also about whether I can actually make choices about my own life, what I study, where I go, what I do with what I learn. In the city, there are so many things that make you feel you do not belong, that the system is not built for you. But I choose to be here, I choose to study this, and I choose to take it home. That choosing is also self-determination.’

Her educational project is entirely oriented toward return and community contribution; her autonomous agency is inseparable from communal commitment. This reflects the SDT autonomy need as reoriented through a relational Indigenous frame: not independence from community but the capacity to act from within it, from

one's own deeply held values (Wilson 2008, 7–11; Deci and Ryan 2000, 229–231). Where this autonomy was frustrated, through racial discrimination or institutional indifference, multiple participants described this not only as personal constraint but as a challenge to the community's collective capacity to shape its own future.

The productive dialogue between generational understandings was most visible in the mixed talking circles. Elders described self-determination as requiring patience and collective endurance; students consistently offered a more immediate counterpoint: self-determination must also be enacted now. The same theme was returned to in direct intergenerational encounter. A senior Naga community elder, speaking in a mixed talking circle in Delhi, reflected:

'We fought for something that was not yet there. These young people are building something that is already beginning. Both are necessary. When we sit together and talk about it, what we sacrificed, what they are doing, I think we understand each other better than we would if we did not have these conversations. The dialogue itself is part of the self-determination.'

Intergenerational dialogue is not simply a means toward self-determination but a practice of it: an exercise of collective agency in the face of historical and political uncertainty. Evans-Jones (2025, 63–64) argues that what matters in peacebuilding is not whether formal political settlement has been achieved but whether communities remain in sustained, accountable relationship with their own histories. The talking circle is a small but genuine instance of this.

Narrative sovereignty: reclaiming the right to define the self

Narrative sovereignty, the capacity of individuals and communities to define their own identities and histories rather than having those definitions imposed from outside (Episkenew 2009, 1–8), emerged as a consistent preoccupation in the data. For Naga students in urban India, this capacity is under pressure from two directions simultaneously: external stereotyping that positions Northeast Indian people as culturally foreign within their own country, and from within the inherited narrative field, where community discourses shaped by specific historical experiences may not account fully for contemporary urban lives.

An Ao male undergraduate in Bangalore described his response to the external pressure:

'People have assumptions about us, that we eat strange food, that we are not really Indian, that we are simple people from the hills. I do not

argue with this directly. I just show who I am, how I speak, what I know, what I care about. My presence is itself a statement.'

The internal dimension was equally visible. Several participants described discovering, through conversation with students from different tribes, that narratives they had understood as universal Naga truths were specific to their own tribe or family. This is peer-mediated engagement with inherited narratives in the sense set out in the conceptual framework. Its participants belong to a single generation and no elder is present to answer, so it is not itself intergenerational dialogue. What makes it consequential for intergenerational process is that inherited voices are the material under examination, and that students emerge from these lateral conversations better able to distinguish, in what they have been given, what is specific to a family or a tribe from what is shared. An Ao male postgraduate student in Bangalore described the process:

'I used to think the way my family sees things is the Naga way. But when I sit with students from other tribes, I realise we have different stories, different ways of understanding the same history. That has not made me less Naga. It has made me more aware of what is specifically mine, and more able to choose what I carry forward.'

What emerges is a reflexive narrative sovereignty: an ongoing, dialogically constituted process through which participants develop a more critical and intentional relationship to what they have inherited. Sohdi (2025, 84–86) argues that intergenerational translation is always a site of both continuity and struggle, where epistemic and cultural boundaries are navigated in ways that sustain collective well-being while exposing tensions around legitimacy and authority. The experiences here illustrate exactly this: productive struggle that generates not the loss of identity but a more agentic relationship to it.

Discussion

Dialogue as infrastructure: beyond the facilitated encounter

The tribal student union reveals a mode of dialogical life that existing literature tends to overlook: one where dialogue is not periodically organised but is a condition of ordinary collective life. The *Morung* operated on exactly this principle, sustaining intergenerational engagement through the simple fact of shared space and shared concerns over time (Longkumer 2010, 67–69). The student union works on the same logic in a new context. What the concept of dialogical infrastructure captures is the structured social arrangements through which dialogue is sustained as an ordinary feature of community life rather than enacted episodically.

Bakare (2025, 128) argues that Indigenous African dialogue subsystems function precisely as infrastructure in this sense. The tribal student union is a Naga instance of the same category, performing in urban migration a function strikingly analogous to the one the *Morung* performed in the village. Gill (2025c, 12–13) observes that meaningful dialogue requires the cultivation of trust and sustained commitment over time. The student union provides these conditions through cultural memory rather than deliberate design. Kurian (2025, 92–93) confirms a parallel dynamic in Indian folk-art families: the relational space in which transmission occurs must be maintained because its dissolution severs the bonds through which identity and resilience are reproduced. What the tribal student union does, often without its members naming it as such, is to maintain that space under conditions of geographical displacement.

Extending SDT: when autonomy is relational

The most theoretically significant finding concerns what autonomy actually means for Naga students. Students who made choices their communities would affirm consistently described these as autonomous; students who felt pressured to perform tribal identity in ways that felt inauthentic described this as constraint, regardless of whether the pressure came from inside or outside the community. The distinction that matters is not between individual and community but between acting from one's own deeply held values and acting under pressure that overrides those values.

Wilson (2008, 7–11) argues that within Indigenous epistemologies well-being emerges from the quality of relationships rather than from independence from them. Deci and Ryan's (2000, 229–230) own distinction between external regulation and identified regulation allows for exactly this reading: fully internalised values, even those originating in tradition and community, are compatible with genuine autonomy. The Naga case grounds this distinction empirically, and its implications suggest that autonomy as self-governance and autonomy as relational accountability may be fundamentally different orientations toward the self (Smith 2012, 74–80).

Intergenerational dialogue as negotiation, not transmission

The mixed intergenerational talking circles provided the clearest evidence against any account of intergenerational dialogue that treats it as unidirectional. In one session in Delhi, an elder whose understanding of mainland Indians had been shaped by counter-insurgency experience in Nagaland found himself in conversation with a student who had developed a close friendship with a colleague from Uttar Pradesh. The exchange did not produce neat resolution but generated the kind of shared meaning Bohm (1996, 6–9) describes as emerging when participants allow their assumptions to be genuinely suspended. Choi (2025, 38) frames this as the move-

ment from disagreement to co-creation, and Evans-Jones (2025, 47) calls it intergenerational listening as an ethical practice: being genuinely willing to be affected by what one hears. The framework adopted here treats direct intergenerational dialogue, internally mediated engagement with inherited narratives, and peer-mediated engagement with inherited narratives as analytically distinct processes within a broader dialogical field. Grouping them within a single field nonetheless carries weaknesses that must be acknowledged, and three are particularly salient. First, when an inherited narrative is re-accentuated in the elder's absence, the elder cannot respond, contest, or be changed by what the younger participant does with the inheritance; the accountability that Bohm (1996, 6–9) and Evans-Jones (2025, 47) place at the centre of genuine dialogue is asymmetrically distributed. This holds for the peer-mediated mode as much as for the internally mediated one: a second speaker is present who can answer back, but not one from the generation whose narratives are under revision. Second, neither mode carries the affective and embodied texture of co-presence that participants themselves consistently identified as making elder visits and mixed talking circles distinctive, and treating the three modes as belonging to one field should not be allowed to obscure that experiential difference. Third, there is a risk of conceptual overextension: if internal processing of any inherited content counts as intergenerational dialogue, the concept loses analytical purchase. Two restrictions follow. Only the direct mode is described here as intergenerational dialogue without qualification; the other two are described as engagement with inherited narratives, and the word dialogue is used of them only in the Bakhtinian sense of voices held in active tension. And that engagement is claimed only where inherited voices function as active interlocutors, tested, contested, and re-accentuated in relation to lived encounter, rather than as settled background assumptions. Direct dialogue retains a distinctive role in the model both because it is empirically central to participants' own accounts and because it restores the accountability that the other two modes cannot themselves sustain.

Migration as everyday peacebuilding and well-being futures

Mac Ginty (2014, 548–552) argues that sustainable peace is built through the accumulated practices of ordinary social interaction rather than primarily through formal political processes. Galtung (1969, 167–172) frames this structurally: positive peace is the presence of social conditions that enable communities to flourish, not merely the absence of direct violence. The dialogical practices observed here are everyday peacebuilding in exactly these senses. Naga students in Bangalore and Delhi are building the social fabric through which community life can be sustained in the absence of formal political resolution. Evans-Jones (2025, 63–65) proposes dialogical justice as an orientation that evaluates peacebuilding by its capacity for sustained, accountable listening across time. By this standard, what happens in tribal

student unions is genuinely peacebuilding: it sustains accountability for inherited harm and cultivates the relational trust that future political engagement will require.

For Naga students navigating migration, well-being is inseparable from its temporal dimensions. It depends on making sense of the past, feeling capable and connected in the present, and holding a vision of the future that is collectively significant. Intergenerational dialogue is the bridge through which these dimensions are brought into relation. The student who leaves Nagaland intending to learn, gain exposure, and return because her community needs what she is acquiring is performing a temporal integration: using inherited values to orient a future-making project. Gill (2025b) frames this as the core function of intergenerational dialogue in communities marked by historical harm: enabling communities to engage with their pasts without being imprisoned by them, and to imagine futures grounded in who they have been as well as who they intend to become.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how intergenerational dialogue shapes self-determination and well-being among Naga tribal students who migrate for higher education. The argument has been that dialogue, in this context, operates as a living institutional process rather than a discrete communicative event: embedded in the everyday structures of collective life through which inherited narratives, present experiences, and future aspirations are brought into sustained negotiation.

A first contribution is conceptual: the proposal of dialogical infrastructure as a framework for understanding how intergenerational dialogue can be a structural feature of community life. Tribal student unions do not host dialogue but embody it. This extends the work of Bakare (2025, 128–130) on Indigenous African dialogue subsystems and Kurian (2025, 90–93) on cultural transmission as co-creative endeavour, applying their insights to a post-conflict Indigenous migration context. A second contribution is theoretical: the reorientation of SDT through Indigenous relational frameworks. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness take on culturally specific forms in the Naga context that SDT's individualist framing does not fully anticipate. Autonomy is relational accountability. Competence is collective contribution. Relatedness is intergenerational and tribal connection. This responds to established critiques of the individualist assumptions embedded in mainstream psychological theory (Kovach 2009; Smith 2012; Wilson 2008) and offers a grounded alternative for contexts where the self is constitutively communal.

A third contribution is empirical: a detailed account of how intergenerational dialogue operates in a post-conflict Indigenous migration context that has received limited scholarly attention. The findings regarding the negotiation of inherited conflict

narratives, the tribal student union as a dialogical infrastructure analogous to the *Morung*, the reconfiguration of self-determination, and the cultivation of narrative sovereignty illuminate aspects of well-being futures that are missed when scholarship focuses only on formally facilitated dialogue or on the political dimensions of Indigenous self-determination claims. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample is drawn from two cities only and from participants engaged enough with community structures to be accessible through union networks; students less connected to tribal organisations may have different experiences.

The single-researcher positionality, reflexively managed throughout, inevitably shapes interpretation. A further analytical limit, signalled in the Introduction, is that this paper examines one institutional location of intergenerational dialogue among the several that operate in Naga life. The tribal student union was selected because it is where the students in this study spend most of their collective time in migration, and the *Morung* is invoked alongside it because it offers a well-documented Indigenous case against which the category of dialogical infrastructure can be specified. That is a choice of analytical focus, and it carries no claim that student unions are genealogically derived from the *Morung*, nor that other locations of intergenerational dialogue matter less. The role of Christian, predominantly Baptist, church institutions in mediating intergenerational narrative life among Naga families and migrants is at least as consequential, is not addressed here, and warrants dedicated study.

Future research might extend the comparative scope across additional migration cities, attend more closely to gender dynamics within student union dialogical processes, and follow students longitudinally to trace how intergenerational narratives evolve across full migration trajectories. The most consequential conversations in these students' lives happened in student union rooms, in late-night kitchen discussions, and in talking circles where elders and students sat together and asked each other questions they could not have asked alone. Those conversations, ordinary, relational, and woven into the fabric of everyday collective life, are where inherited narratives are reworked, where self-determination is enacted, and where well-being futures are imagined and pursued. To overlook them because they are not facilitated by professionals or conducted in purpose-built dialogue spaces is to miss the living tissue of how communities sustain themselves across time.

Declarations

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Conduct and Ethics Committee (RCEC), CHRIST University, Bengaluru, India, prior to data collection (Approval No. CU: RCEC/00124/08/24)

Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The authors used AI-assisted tools during the preparation of this manuscript for language refinement, clarity, and structural editing. All conceptualisation, analysis, interpretation, and substantive writing are the authors' original work. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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Flourishing in Feeds and Faith: Religious Influencers, Digital Authority and Intergenerational Mediation in Greece

Stavroula Koskina¹

Abstract: This piece examines how Orthodox Christian influencers in Greece use Instagram to influence religious discussions, establish authority, foster community, and encourage intergenerational conversations online. Although research on religious influencers has increased recently, it mainly focuses on non-European and predominantly Muslim-majority settings, leaving the Greek Orthodox context notably overlooked. To address this gap, the article explores how Instagram functions not just as a platform for sharing religious messages but as a hybrid space where Orthodoxy is reshaped through the visual, interactive, and algorithmic elements of platform culture. The study employs a qualitative digital ethnographic approach, analysing Instagram reels created by three Orthodox Christian influencers in Greece. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, it examines six key aspects: spiritual guidance, community building, intergenerational dialogue, ritualised engagement, emotional tone, and authority display. The selected cases represent different forms of digital religious communication: family-centred experiential spirituality, institutional pastoral support, and discourse rooted in motivational authenticity. The findings reveal that Instagram supports the coexistence of various types of religious authority, including institutional, experiential, and legitimacy based on authenticity. The influencers interpret Orthodox teachings in relatable, emotionally impactful ways, thereby fostering digital communities, promoting ritual participation, and passing values across generations. The article argues that digital Orthodoxy is both preservative and transformative: it maintains core religious principles while adapting them to match the communication styles of modern digital life. Focused on the Greek Orthodox context, this research contributes to broader discussions about digital religion, mediated power, and the evolution of faith, community, and religious practice in the social media age.

Keywords: Religious influencers; intergenerational dialogue; digital religiosity; social media; Orthodox Christianity; Greece

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Introduction

The swift growth of digital media has greatly changed how religion is communicated, practised, and experienced in modern societies (see the work of Campbell 2010). Social media platforms, specifically, have become significant spaces where religious discussions flow outside traditional institutional contexts, allowing new participants to engage in the creation and sharing of faith-related ideas. Cleland and MacLeod (2022) argue that digital platforms should not simply be seen as impartial communication tools, but as spaces where religious authority, rituals, and community are dynamically created and contested. In this setting, religion is progressively influenced by the visual and algorithmic dynamics of platform culture.

Amid this larger shift, the emergence of religious influencers has gained increasing academic interest (e.g., Sulfikar & Yasmine 2025; Febrian 2024; Sheldon 2024; Marei 2024; Beta 2024). These individuals use social media to convey spiritual direction, ethical counsel, interpretations of scripture, and daily insights into faith to broad and frequently varied audiences. Their presence showcases broader changes in digital religion, where authority is determined not solely by theological knowledge or institutional roles, but also by visibility, relatability, emotional ties, and performative sincerity. Although this body of literature has grown in recent years, it has primarily concentrated on non-European and particularly Muslim-majority environments, overlooking significant geographical and religious contexts. The Greek Orthodox context is notably missing from contemporary debates, even though Orthodoxy holds lasting cultural importance in Greece, and Orthodox religious figures are becoming more prominent on social media.

Simultaneously, digital religious communication should not be viewed solely in connection with authority. It is also closely linked to issues of community, identity, emotional assistance, and intergenerational dialogue. Historically, religion has served as a significant means by which values, ethical systems, and shared memories are passed down through generations. As communication progressively transitions into platform-based and visually driven settings, the methods through which this exchange takes place are being transformed. Social media generate fresh chances for intergenerational engagement by allowing younger and older groups to experience religious content in common online environments (Farhi et al. 2025). Nonetheless, the contribution of religious influencers in promoting intergenerational dialogue has gained minimal direct scholarly focus. This is a significant oversight, particularly since influencers frequently reinterpret established religious customs into relatable and emotionally impactful language for modern viewers.

This article fills these gaps by exploring how Orthodox Christian influencers in Greece use Instagram to influence religious discourse, cultivate digital community, and facilitate intergenerational communication and wellness. It specifically enquires into the performance of religious authority in this platform-driven setting, how Orthodox principles are adapted into daily digital discourse, and how these communication methods foster community development, emotional assistance, and intergenerational dialogue. In this manner, the article aims to link three areas that are frequently addressed independently: digital religion, intergenerational communication, and, in a later stage, psychosocial well-being.

To explore these inquiries, the article uses a qualitative digital ethnographic methodology (Varis 2015) and concentrates on Instagram Reels as a notably vibrant form of modern platform communication (Willcox et al. 2023). Reels hold particular significance as they merge visual, textual, and auditory components while promoting user engagement through comments, reactions, and sharing. The research explores three Orthodox Christian influencers in Greece who symbolise various types of digital religious engagement: one focused on family life and experiential spirituality, another rooted in pastoral and theological advice, and a third based on inspirational dialogue and personal narratives. Utilising Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk 2015; Fairclough 2023), the article examines how these influencers create religious significance via language, emotional tone, ritualistic interaction, and displays of authority.

The article argues that Instagram ought to be seen not just as a platform for conveying Orthodox teachings but as a hybrid religious environment where tradition is dynamically reshaped by the standards of digital culture. Orthodox influencers do not merely replicate traditional doctrine in digital spaces; they reinterpret it via personal stories, visual displays, emotional ties, and interactive participation. By doing this, they establish new types of religious authority and form digitally mediated communities that both maintain and alter Orthodox tradition. Concentrating on the Greek Orthodox environment, this article enhances the existing scholarship on digital religion and presents a new viewpoint on how social media enable intergenerational mediation, emotional aid, and the routine reorganisation of religious practices.

The following section examines the literature regarding intergenerational dialogue, mental wellbeing, social media, and religious influencers. It subsequently details the methodological approach and case selection, prior to addressing the analysis of the three Orthodox Instagram influencers. The concluding sections address the wider implications of the results for the examination of digital religion, religious authority,

and communication across generations, and finish by recommending paths for upcoming research.

Literature Review

Intergenerational dialogue, psychological wellbeing, and social media

Intergenerational dialogue has traditionally been seen as a crucial method for promoting social unity, sharing knowledge, and enhancing psychological health among different age groups (see Whitehouse & George 2018; Hayes et al. 2023, etc). Historically, this type of conversation took place within family units, community organisations, or educational settings where younger and older generations shared experiences, values, and practical skills. Nonetheless, the swift growth of digital communication technologies has greatly altered the circumstances in which these interactions take place. Social media platforms are increasingly becoming venues for generational interactions, allowing for innovative dialogue, mentorship, and community development while also bringing new sources of conflict and confusion (Muñoz et al. 2013).

Intergenerational dialogue fundamentally involves communication processes where people from varied age groups interact, share experiences, negotiate meanings, and transmit cultural and social knowledge. Contemporary scholarship increasingly views intergenerational dialogue not as a one-way transfer of wisdom from older to younger generations, but rather as a reciprocal process where both groups share perspectives influenced by their historical backgrounds and sociocultural contexts. Marte (2025) highlights that this dialogue is dynamic and circular: phases of effective communication can alternate with times of generational conflict when value differences, technological skills, or perspectives surface. Significantly, these tensions can also encourage fresh discussions, as different generations reconsider their expectations and communication styles.

The rise of social media has significantly altered the communication patterns that shape interactions between generations. Muñoz et al. (2013) contend that digital platforms establish novel communication trends defined by asynchronous messaging, algorithmically facilitated visibility, and swift content distribution. These characteristics transform the ways various generations engage by changing the timing of communication and the methods by which knowledge is exchanged. Younger individuals tend to adjust swiftly to the rapid, visually driven nature of social media, while older generations might depend on more gradual communication styles based on extended narratives or conventional interactions. Harmonising these communic-

ation patterns is vital for maintaining significant intergenerational conversation within digital spaces.

In spite of these challenges, digital media also offer unparalleled chances for promoting collaboration across generations and sharing knowledge. Amaro and Kallas (2025) emphasise that digital platforms serve as connections between generations by enabling the exchange of cultural knowledge, personal experiences, and skills among different age groups. In these environments, younger participants typically offer technological skills, whereas older participants share historical wisdom, ethical direction, or practical experience. This mutual exchange enhances social connections while fostering shared learning and respect, thus bolstering intergenerational unity.

Besides facilitating knowledge sharing, intergenerational dialogue has significant effects on mental health. Studies indicate that significant interaction between generations can enhance emotional backing, foster identity growth, and promote a feeling of community. Wexler's (2011) research on intergenerational dialogue programs within Alaska Native communities shows that organised discussions involving youth, adults, and elders can improve psychological resilience and overall community wellbeing. By means of storytelling and collective reflection, participants successfully re-established cultural wisdom in relation to modern issues, thus reinforcing both personal and communal identities.

However, the digital facilitation of intergenerational interaction also brings about new challenges. Variations in digital literacy, communication standards, and generational identities can lead to misinterpretations or strengthen stereotypes regarding younger or older groups. Marte (2025) observes that intergenerational conflict frequently emerges when generational groups view each other as culturally alien or morally at odds. In digital spaces, where communication tends to be concise and heavily mediated, such views may be amplified if discussions are substituted with unilateral messaging or extreme narratives.

Although these studies illustrate how digital spaces can promote intergenerational engagement and enhance emotional and social health, they seldom investigate the influence of religious narratives, rituals, and ethical systems on these interactions. Traditionally, religion has served as a crucial means for conveying values, identities, and moral perspectives through generations, but its influence in digitally mediated conversations between generations is still not well-studied.

The phenomenon of religious influencers

The increased presence of religious figures on social media has more recently garnered academic interest, especially in the wider areas of digital religion, media

studies, and the sociology of religion. Despite still being limited, new studies have begun to explore how religious authority is transforming in contexts influenced by platform dynamics and visual culture. These studies indicate that social media have allowed new participants, commonly called religious influencers, to convey religious teachings, moral guidance, and spiritual advice to extensive online audiences while also altering conventional authority structures.

A section of the literature examines the change in religious authority within platform-based settings. Sulfikar and Yasmine's (2025) research on platformised religious authority contends that social media platforms significantly transform the methods by which religious legitimacy is established and acknowledged. Instead of depending only on formal theological education or institutional qualifications, religious authority is more frequently determined by visibility indicators like followers, likes, and engagement rates. In this scenario, authority is negotiated within a hybrid environment where conventional clerical legitimacy engages with algorithmically influenced popularity and communicative expression. Related studies have investigated how digital media transform the visual and performative aspects of religious authority. Febrian (2024) examines the emergence of religious influencers on Instagram, highlighting the role of visual appeal, symbolic visuals, and thoughtfully crafted personal branding in shaping perceived authenticity and credibility. By employing visual storytelling, religious influencers can portray themselves as both spiritual mentors and relatable personalities, thus drawing in audiences who may not typically connect with traditional religious organisations.

Various studies position religious influencers in the larger discussions surrounding mediated religion and digital communication in a religious context. Sheldon (2024) and Marei (2024) emphasise how social media platforms enable religious figures to circumvent conventional institutional pathways and connect with audiences through tailored communication methods. In these situations, authority typically transforms into a relational and networked form instead of a hierarchical one, as followers engage actively through comments, queries, and interactive discussions that influence the dissemination of religious knowledge.

Researchers have examined the political and cultural effects of religious influencers, as well. Beta (2024) envisions them as participants engaged in socially mediated cultural politics, where religious communication overlaps with wider societal discussions, identity development, and ethical dialogue. From this viewpoint, religious influencers do not merely convey doctrinal beliefs but also engage in broader cultural discussions regarding values, norms, and shared identities within digitally facilitated public spaces.

Nevertheless, the literature on religious influencers should also be situated within broader debates on misinformation, conspiracy theories, and the political instrumentalisation of religion online (see Rogers & Powe 2022; Zeng et al. 2022; Rabinovitch et al. 2024; Lebrun et al. 2024). Digital religious authority may generate new forms of accessibility and participation, but it can also create risks when charismatic or emotionally resonant religious communication circulates without institutional accountability, especially in contexts marked by polarisation, health crises, or conflict.

Even with these significant contributions, the current literature is still restricted in various ways. Initially, scant research directly investigates the impact of intergenerational dialogue in the context of communication by religious influencers. Although researchers have examined authority, visual representation, and platform dynamics, minimal focus has been placed on how religious influencers act as intermediaries between different generational groups, interpreting religious traditions for younger audiences while also preserving ties with older forms of religious wisdom. Secondly, existing research is largely focused on non-European regions, especially Southeast Asia and Muslim-majority cultures, resulting in considerable geographical voids in our comprehension of religious influences in different cultural environments. The Greek context, despite the continuing cultural salience of Orthodoxy in Greek public life and its role in shaping moral, familial, and national narratives, as well as the

growing presence of Orthodox religious figures on social media, has garnered almost no academic focus².

Methodology

Research design

This research employs a qualitative digital ethnographic method (Varis 2015) to explore how Orthodox Christian influencers foster intergenerational communication and wellness via social media. Digital ethnography is especially effective for studying online religious activities, as it allows the researcher to examine how religious authority, ritual, and community are enacted and contested in digital spaces. Instead of viewing social media only as a means of communication, this perspective sees digital platforms as environments where religious significance, authority, and community connections are actively formed (Cleland & MacLeod 2022).

The empirical emphasis of the research is on Instagram Reels, inspired by the work of Willcox et al. (2023), which represent one of the most vibrant and extensively used formats in the Instagram platform's environment. Reels enable religious influencers to convey brief theological insights, pastoral counsel, scriptural interpretations, and spiritual direction using a mix of visual, textual, and auditory components. Significantly, the interactive features of Instagram, like comments, likes, and direct interac-

² A further dimension concerns how Orthodox institutions and theologians themselves approach digital media and social communication. Although Orthodox Christianity has historically emphasised embodied worship, liturgical participation, and face-to-face ecclesial community, Orthodox institutions have increasingly recognised digital media as tools for pastoral communication, catechesis, and public witness. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, for example, frames social media as a means of extending the Church's communicative mission, while also emphasising the need for responsible, respectful, and pastorally appropriate use (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, n.d.). This theological and institutional perspective is also reflected in broader Orthodox social thought. The Ecumenical Patriarchate's document 'For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church' emphasises the dignity of the human person, communal responsibility, and the Church's engagement with contemporary social realities (Ecumenical Patriarchate 2020). While not focused exclusively on social media, this document offers an important framework for interpreting digital Orthodoxy as part of the Church's wider encounter with modern social life. From this perspective, digital religious communication should be evaluated not only in terms of reach, visibility, or engagement, but also in relation to Orthodox concerns with communion, discernment, spiritual guidance, and the formation of persons within ecclesial life. This helps situate Orthodox influencers within a broader theological tension: digital platforms can extend pastoral communication and intergenerational dialogue, but they cannot fully replace the embodied, sacramental, and communal dimensions of Orthodox Christianity.

tions, create a conversational space where followers from various age groups can participate in religious discussions and interact amongst themselves. As a result, Reels offer an important platform for examining how digital religious dialogue enables both associational and emotional types of intergenerational interaction.

Case selection

The research examines three Orthodox Christian influencers on Instagram, consisting of priests, monastics, or lay theologians who frequently create religious content that tackles modern social and spiritual matters. These instances were chosen using purposive sampling (see Ahmad & Wilkins 2025), aimed at recognising individuals who have a prominent role in influencing digital Orthodox discourse in Greece. The choice was influenced by three primary factors. Initially, visibility pertains to the account's public exposure, as demonstrated by follower counts, repost rates, and the dissemination of their material throughout Orthodox digital platforms. Secondly, engagement is assessed by the amount of interaction produced by their posts, such as comments, likes, and user feedback, which reflects the existence of an active online community. Third, theological orientation, guaranteeing that the chosen influencers embody identifiable aspects of modern Orthodox discussion, including pastoral support, catechetical instruction, or spiritually focused contemplation. This method of case selection enables the research to encompass various forms of digital religious authority while ensuring analytical consistency across the narratives.

Case studies

Influencer A

The first case study focuses on a young (in her twenties) female Orthodox Christian content creator who integrates spiritual advice with stories about daily family life. She is a married mother of four, teaches, and is the wife of an Orthodox priest. Her online presence is thus integrated into both home and church settings, establishing her as a link between daily family life and Orthodox faith. Her Instagram content mainly features brief video reels that provide insights into motherhood, marriage, parenting, and Christian ethical living. These videos often combine religious teachings with practical guidance for modern families, typically viewed through the perspective of Orthodox principles like humility, patience, prayer, and devotion. The influencer often discusses issues like raising children with a spiritual focus, the difficulties of merging faith with contemporary living, and the significance of fostering a household centred on Christ. The account features a small yet very active audience of around twelve thousand followers. Engagement trends indicate that the material especially appeals to women (mostly mothers) looking for advice on incorporating Orthodox spirituality into their daily home life. Comment sections often serve as

places for encouraging engagement, where followers reveal personal challenges, show appreciation, or seek spiritual guidance.

Influencer B

The second case study examines an Orthodox Christian elder who sustains a prominent presence on Instagram by consistently posting brief video replies to inquiries about Orthodox beliefs and daily ethical challenges. This account, with over eighty thousand followers, is the most institutionally focused and popular case in the sample. The content mainly consists of brief reels in which the elder answers queries from followers. These inquiries usually focus on the practical elements of religious life, including prayer routines, moral challenges, interpersonal connections, atonement, and how Orthodox teachings are applied to modern social matters. The videos frequently take an instructional tone, offering brief spiritual insights based on traditional Orthodox theology. The influencer is dressed in clerical clothing and speaks in a pastoral tone that evokes conventional spiritual mentorship. Followers engage by posing questions, sharing their challenges, and interacting with the content through comments and reactions. The comment sections often feature expressions of thanks, prayer requests, and follow-up inquiries.

Influencer C

The third case study features a non-expert whose content integrates aspects of personal insight or guidance and declarations of Orthodox belief. In contrast to the earlier two instances, this influencer lacks an official religious position. Rather, his digital footprint is based on personal belief and daily encounters. The influencer seems connected to the military, a background that influences the tone and themes of his content. His material often focuses on themes like discipline, individual accountability, ethical integrity, and spiritual strength. These themes are frequently articulated through allusions to Orthodox Christian teachings, which are depicted as foundational guidelines for dealing with contemporary existence. The videos generally feature brief reflections providing guidance on issues like sustaining faith during tough times, building ethical resilience, and combating societal influences seen as morally destabilising. The communication style is straightforward and inspiring, merging aspects of spiritual encouragement with personal growth conversation. Comment sections frequently showcase encouraging replies, validations of common beliefs, and indications of consensus with the influencer's thoughts.

The table below summarises the main characteristics of the three influencers and highlights the differences in their profiles, content themes, and forms of religious authority.

Case	Gender	Religious Status	Main Content Themes	Communication Style	Followers (approx.)	Type of Religious Authority
Influencer A	Female	Deaconess	Motherhood, family life, Christian upbringing of children, everyday spirituality	Reflective, pastoral, experiential storytelling	~11.9K	Relational and experiential authority grounded in family and lived faith
Influencer B	Male	Orthodox church elder	Moral guidance, prayer practices, repentance, everyday dilemmas in Orthodox life	Didactic, pastoral, question-and-answer format	~80.7K	Institutional and pastoral authority translated into digital space
Influencer C	Male	Lay believer	Discipline, moral integrity, spiritual resilience, personal faith reflections	Motivational, testimonial, direct advice	~60.6K	Performative and authenticity-based authority rooted in personal testimony

Table 1: Overview of the three Orthodox Instagram influencers included in the study

Data collection

Data collection was conducted through a structured mapping and storing of Instagram content associated with Orthodox religious discussions. The process started with hashtag mapping, recognizing pertinent tags often used in Orthodox digital communities (e.g., mentions of prayer, saints, repentance, spiritual life, or pastoral assistance). This mapping facilitated recognising key accounts and situating the chosen cases within wider digital religious networks. After identifying pertinent accounts, a structured sampling approach was used to gather a collection of Instagram reels during a specified observation timeframe. Posts were chosen for their thematic connection to spiritual guidance, religious practices, or moral contemplation, ensuring that the dataset reflects ongoing communication patterns instead of isolated examples. Every chosen post was archived along with its relevant metadata, such as the publication date, view count, likes, comments, and the usage of hashtags or captions. These metrics offer an understanding of the content’s visibility and reception within the platform’s algorithmic setting. The reels’ audiovisual material was subsequently transcribed and translated as needed, encompassing both spoken language and important visual or text components displayed on the screen.

Data analysis

The analysis is conducted using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (see Van Dijk 2015, and Fairclough 2023). CDA is preferred due to its ability to examine how

language and symbols construct meaning in digital environments. More specifically, in this case, Instagram reels produced by Orthodox Christian influencers do not merely convey religious messages; they actively shape interpretations of faith or morality, and how everyday life should be, through specific linguistic, visual, and narrative strategies. CDA is particularly suitable for analysing these dynamics because it focuses on the relationship between discourse, power, and social practice. By employing this method, the study can uncover how these influencers frame religious guidance and establish relational bonds with their audiences. This approach, therefore, allows for a deeper understanding of how Orthodox religious discourse is negotiated and performed within this context.

The data analysis process was structured around six analytical categories: (i) *spiritual guidance* (communications that offer theological insight, ethical guidance, or practical direction for spiritual living); (ii) *community formation* (discourse that highlights communal affiliation, common identity, or reciprocal assistance among supporters); (iii) *intergenerational dialogue* (instances where influencers directly or indirectly connect with various age groups, closing generational gaps through relatable language or common interests); (iv) *ritualised engagement* (repetitive communicative habits like blessings, prayer requests, or standard responses that imitate aspects of liturgical exchange); (v) *emotional tone* (expressions of compassion, support, modesty, or solace that enhance the emotional aspect of digital religious discourse); (vi) *authority performance* (how influencers portray themselves as credible sources of spiritual advice by citing scripture, tradition, pastoral experience, or their own charm).

Limitations and ethics

Even though the information examined in this research can be accessed publicly on social media channels, ethical principles influenced the handling of all content. Influencers have been made anonymous, and identifying information has been eliminated. This method conforms to ethical standards for online research and maintains a balance between analytical thoroughness and safeguarding participants. At the same time, direct links to the original videos and posts are intentionally omitted. Providing such links would enable reverse identification of the influencers, thereby compromising their anonymity. In line with ethical standards in digital research, this study prioritises the minimisation of potential harm and the protection of individuals over full traceability of sources. Instead, transparency is ensured through the explicit and systematic presentation of data selection, coding procedures, and analytical categories. This reflects the methodological logic of CDA, where analytical validity derives from coherence and reflexivity, rather than from the possibility of exact replication.

Analysis

This section offers a thematic analysis of the Instagram posts created by the three Orthodox Christian influencers in Greece. The examination is based on the six analytical categories specified in the methodological framework. While all three actors play a role in the dissemination of Orthodox discourse on Instagram, they do so via different communicative approaches and thematic focuses.

Spiritual guidance

A key aspect present in all three accounts is the offering of spiritual direction that links Orthodox teachings to daily life experiences. Nonetheless, the form and focus of this advice differ markedly among the influencers.

Influencer A mainly positions spiritual guidance in relation to family dynamics and parenting. Her videos frequently express Orthodox values through daily home-life experiences, highlighting patience, humility, and prayer as vital elements for child rearing and upholding a Christian home. In this setting, spiritual insights are conveyed through individual narratives and contemplations on family experiences. For example, she explains why the family is making a deliberate decision to abstain from Carnival celebrations, which, within certain strands of Orthodox Christianity, may be viewed as incompatible with religious values (often associated with excess, disguise, or pre-Lenten festivities). Rather than treating this as a simple prohibition, however, the parents actively reframe the situation:

‘In our family, we have decided not to celebrate Carnival. That is, we do not take part in parades, parties, or similar school events. Our children are still young and do not realise that they are not participating in something their classmates are. Yes, but what about when they grow older? Together with the priest, we have agreed that on such days we will organise a lovely outing for our children, filled with activities they enjoy, so that they do not feel they are missing out on fun. With God’s help, we can find a solution for everything. There is no need to compromise our faith.’ [23/02/2025]

In contrast, Influencer B provides spiritual counsel in a more educational and pastoral manner. His material often directly addresses inquiries from followers about ethical challenges, prayer methods, atonement, and individual difficulties. This structure is similar to conventional pastoral counselling, using theological insights and scripture citations to offer practical guidance.

Influencer C takes an alternative route that merges spiritual contemplation with motivational dialogue. His videos often highlight personal discipline and resilience, portraying Orthodox spirituality as a foundation for overcoming social and individual difficulties. In contrast to the other two influencers, his content frequently highlights personal accountability and moral self-betterment, such as following a fast. He says, 'Fasting is not an end in itself. The true content of fasting is the fasting from our passions, the fasting from our egoism, because that is what essentially stands in opposition to the love of God and the love of other people. [26/05/2025].

Although all three influencers make Orthodox teachings more relatable, the thematic emphasis of their advice showcases their distinct social responsibilities. Influencer A highlights family and spiritual life at home, Influencer B offers theological guidance, and Influencer C emphasises ethical conduct and inner resilience.

Community formation

All three accounts provide proof of community building via exchanges between influencers and their followers. Nonetheless, the composition and interactions of these communities differ from one case to another.

The community around Influencer A seems to focus mainly on collective experiences related to family life and parenting. Numerous followers participate in conversations about parenting, romantic partnerships, and sustaining faith in the home setting. Consequently, the comment sections often appear as encouraging discussions among parents – mostly mothers – looking for spiritual direction. In a reel video, the influencer in an inspirational tone says, 'If you ask me what happiness is, I will tell you this... To walk barefoot in the dress you love, to cook delicious food for your family... and, when you lift your gaze, to behold HIM' [25/08/2025].

For Influencer B, the community functions more like a digital pastoral environment. Followers frequently ask about religious practices, seek prayers, or look for explanations on ethical and theological concerns. The interactions thus illustrate a dynamic where the influencer serves as a spiritual guide while followers engage as part of a faith community in search of direction. What was extremely surprising was that the majority of the followers interacting in the comments were young people (aged 15 to 35).

Influencer C's followers, on the other hand, often interact by showing agreement, offering encouragement, or affirming common moral beliefs. Conversations frequently focus on topics such as discipline and personal integrity. This community framework resembles a group of people linked by common ideological and ethical

viewpoints instead of through pastoral guidance or home assistance. For example, he focuses on humanity. He says,

‘Look around you. Today, someone may be feeling lonely; someone else may be feeling fear or anxiety; someone may be waiting for you to notice them, to look at them. You don’t need to understand everything. Just be there. A glance that says, “I see you,” a word that may bring relief, because truly, we also hurt, we also grow tired, and yet when we give, something changes. Small gestures that create a heaven on earth. Small acts of love that become eternal. Today, will you offer light?’ [15/02/2024]

It should be noted that most people interacting were older in age, in contrast with the audience group of Influencer B.

These distinctions show that digital religious communities can manifest in various ways based on the influencer’s communication style and thematic focus, as well as age group. Although all three influencers enable community engagement, the characteristics of these communities illustrate the unique functions each influencer fulfils in the online religious sphere.

Intergenerational dialogue

The three influencers vary in how they promote intergenerational dialogue through their content.

Influencer A often tackles generational concerns head-on by talking about parenting, raising children, and the passing down of religious values in families. Her videos frequently emphasise the role of parents in guiding children toward prayer and Orthodox customs. In this manner, her content clearly links younger and older generations within the framework of family life. In many videos, she tackles the issue of low birth rate in Greece in the new generations and connects it with moving away from God. For example, in a video she says,

‘Motherhood is a blessing, but also a struggle. Children are the greatest source of happiness, but at the same time the most demanding task. Yet, all that is beautiful and blessed in this life requires effort. Let us not forget this. For a woman, children and family are a path toward HOLINESS. Because... motherhood means... LOVE, SELF-SACRIFICE, HUMILITY, PATIENCE, GENTLENESS. It means a daily struggle to become a better example for our children. [...] We

thank You, our God, for this blessed path that You have given us to follow. You have made everything in wisdom.’ [02/05/2025]

Influencer B promotes intergenerational conversation in a more indirect manner. His replies to followers’ inquiries frequently incorporate traditional Orthodox teachings and express them in relatable language appropriate for modern audiences. This method successfully converts religious teachings traditionally shared by elders and clergy into a format accessible to younger audiences engaged on social media. For example, he uploaded a video confronting the issue of ‘church and social media’, in which he says,

‘The Church does not reject science. It uses it for the glory of God. That is what we are doing right now, with this very system. They tell me that millions of people around the world are listening. Therefore, we use it for the glory of God: so that God’s name may be glorified, and our fellow human beings may be helped – those who wish to be helped. It is a matter of use. As a tool, it is neither good nor bad; it depends on how we use it. Because, due to this very tool, many people will also be led astray.’ [25/02/2025]

Influencer C tackles intergenerational topics mainly by addressing moral decay and emphasising the need to uphold traditional values. His material could resonate with younger viewers by depicting Orthodoxy as a humanising moral force in a swiftly evolving world. In this regard, he presents religious tradition as a tool for addressing contemporary cultural difficulties and estranged relationships. In a video, he states,

‘We truly live in difficult times; the soul grows heavy, the mind becomes tired, and the heart sometimes feels afraid. And yet, Saint Paisios of Mount Athos whispered to us a powerful hope, he did not leave us in darkness. He showed us a path, simple yet strong: the prayer rope. Take your prayer rope, hold it like a child holding their father’s hand, and pray, not only for yourself, but for the whole suffering world.’ [27/01/2024]

In all three instances, influencers serve as intermediaries between religious customs and modern digital viewers. Nonetheless, the ways in which they promote intergenerational dialogue vary: through family stories (Influencer A), religious interpretation (Influencer B), or ethical encouragement (Influencer C).

Ritualised engagement

Ritualised patterns of digital engagement are evident in all three accounts, although their manifestation differs based on the influencer's communication style.

Influencer B clearly promotes organised involvement. His videos frequently encourage followers to post devotional phrases like 'Amen' or 'Glory to God' in the comments or to exchange prayers for others. These exchanges mirror online versions of conventional religious involvement. At the same time, he never abstains from encouraging believers to ask their questions in the comments in order for him to answer them in a following video.

Influencer A promotes participatory engagement as well, typically in a gentler and more conversational tone. Followers are encouraged to share their personal experiences or contemplate their family practices, fostering a conversational atmosphere instead of purely ritualistic answers. An indicative example is when she chose to create a reel answering a question from a follower: 'What should I do when my child does not listen to me? How can I protect them? How can I teach them what is right? Speak to God FOR them and let God speak TO them' [28/05/2025].

Influencer C's interaction trends are rather distinct. Followers often react with expressions of concurrence, validation, or backing for the influencer's insights on spirituality and ethical conduct. These exchanges frequently manifest as short confirmations instead of clearly devotional statements.

Even though these practices vary in style, they all aid in the formation of recurring communicative patterns that mimic digital forms of ritual engagement. Through these exchanges, followers openly showcase their religious identity and strengthen shared belief systems.

Emotional tone

Emotional communication is significant in the strategies of all three influencers, but the emotional tone differs in each instance.

Influencer A often takes on a caring and understanding tone. Her material frequently recognises the emotional difficulties related to parenting, family duties, and personal faith challenges. This emotional context fosters a nurturing atmosphere in which followers are at ease discussing personal issues. An important example is the videos she makes around abortion, where she uses a caring tone, saying,

“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” – Gospel of Matthew, 19:14.

No child deserves to be labelled as an accident, a mistake, or unwanted. All children are a blessing to their parents, even if, from a human point of view, we first see the difficulties.’ [13/02/2025]

Influencer B’s emotional tone embodies a pastoral approach that merges empathy with spiritual guidance. He often responds to followers with messages of comfort, urging them to have faith in God and to stay patient during challenging times. For example, he shared his wishes for Easter saying,

‘These days, not only for Orthodox Christians but for the whole world, are the most important, because all of humanity was waiting for someone to reveal the truth and to save it. For people were all going to Hades, that is, they were dying spiritually, separated from God, and this was humanity’s greatest problem. Until the good God sent His beloved Son, who was sacrificed, and what a sacrifice: what suffering, what torment, what humiliation He endured, and all this for humankind. In order to reunite humanity with God, so that now human beings may have hope again and be able to move toward their true destination, which is the Kingdom of Heaven.’ [22/05/2024]

Influencer C’s emotional display, focused on perseverance, resolve, and compassion, embodies a unique form of online religious dialogue that merges spirituality with a semi-motivational narrative. Instead of highlighting vulnerability, intimacy, or pastoral support (like other types of influencers), this approach prioritises inner strength and moral resilience as fundamental spiritual values.

These variations demonstrate how emotional expression in online religious communication can manifest in various ways, including compassionate support and motivational inspiration. Regardless of these differences, all three influencers offer emotional structures that assist followers in understanding personal challenges through religious stories.

Authority performance

Ultimately, the three influencers establish religious authority via distinct communicative tactics that mirror their social standings.

Influencer B embodies the most institutionally established type of authority. His clerical demeanour, pastoral voice, and allusions to Orthodox beliefs enhance his credibility as a spiritual guide within the conventional framework of the Church. However, the digital format changes this authority into a more engaging connection with followers.

Influencer A's credibility is based on relationships and experiences. Her reliability comes mainly from her role as a mother, educator, and member of a religious family. Instead of positioning herself as a theological authority, she establishes her credibility through personal experiences and common daily struggles. She often creates reels titled 'What I do in a day as a mother and a deaconess', trying to become relatable to her audience.

Influencer C, on the other hand, builds credibility via sincerity and personal belief. As a non-ordained believer, he depends on motivational speech and personal stories to gain the trust of his listeners.

These varied models of authority illustrate how digital religious environments enable the coexistence of various forms of legitimacy. Institutional authority, experiential authority, and authenticity-oriented authority all play a role in moulding religious influence in the Instagram context.

Discussion

The analysis, rooted in digital ethnography and CDA, of the three Orthodox Christian influencers shows that Instagram acts as a vibrant platform for the reimagining and sharing of religious dialogue in modern Greece. Within the six analytical categories – spiritual guidance, community building, intergenerational dialogue, ritual engagement, emotional tone, and authority performance – the results reveal both common communication patterns and unique forms of religious mediation influenced by each influencer's position. First, the three influencers effectively convert Orthodox teachings into daily practices, demonstrating that digital religious communication is not just theoretical but profoundly practical and experienced. Nonetheless, this translation adheres to three distinct paths: (i) Influencer A incorporates spirituality into family life and motherhood, presenting Orthodoxy as a framework for home and relationship practices; (ii) Influencer B takes on a pastoral and educational role, reflecting aspects of institutional religious authority by providing organised guidance and theological insight; (iii) Influencer C expresses a spirituality focused on motivation and humanity, highlighting individual accountability, perseverance, and ethical fortitude. Secondly, the analysis indicates that Instagram promotes the formation of diverse digital religious communities. These communities differ greatly in their structure and function: on the one hand, we observe a support-oriented, relational community (Influencer A) focused on common family experiences; then, there is a community focused on guidance, resembling a pastoral setting (Influencer B), in which followers look for counsel and spiritual leadership and; finally, we see a community rooted in ideology and values (Influencer C), based on common moral beliefs and affirmation. Significantly, these distinctions are mirrored in audi-

ence demographics, especially regarding age, as Influencer B draws considerably younger supporters than the others. Moreover, the results emphasise the function of influencers as facilitators of intergenerational transfer.

Collectively, the results show that Orthodox religious impact on Instagram is diverse, mixed, and most importantly, flexible. Instead of merely expanding conventional religious frameworks, digital platforms facilitate the simultaneous presence of various types of authority or interaction. Orthodox influencers serve as go-betweens for tradition and digital modernity, transforming the ways in which religious knowledge, identity, and belonging are formed and perceived today. Thus, the results of the analysis not only validate crucial insights from current literature but also expand the scholarship significantly, especially by tackling less-explored aspects of intergenerational communication, religious authority, and most importantly, the Greek Orthodox setting.

Initially, the findings closely correspond with current studies regarding the change of religious authority within digital contexts. As noted by Sulfikar and Yasmine (2025), social media authority is more frequently established through visibility, interaction, and communication style rather than just through formal qualifications. This trend is evident in the presence of three different authority models recognised in the analysis: institutional (Influencer B), experiential (Influencer A), and authenticity-oriented (Influencer C). The results, therefore, strengthen the claim that digital religion creates mixed authority frameworks, where conventional clerical legitimacy is merely one of several credibility sources. Simultaneously, this research contributes to the literature by showing how these various forms of authority function concurrently within the same religious environment, instead of displacing each other. Additionally, the research reinforces previous findings on the visual and performative aspects of religious impact (Febrian 2024), especially regarding how influencers create relatability and authenticity. Nevertheless, although current studies highlight visual branding and design, the new results redirect attention to discursive and relational activities, including emotional tone and community involvement. By doing this, the research emphasises that authority is manifested not just visually but is also collaboratively created through continuous engagement with followers, thereby enhancing our comprehension of platform-based religious communication.

Furthermore, the results align with research on networked and relational types of religious communication (Sheldon 2024; Marei 2024). The analysis shows that followers are not merely passive recipients; they are active participants who pose questions and engage in meaning-making processes. This is especially noticeable in Influencer B's semi-rural community and Influencer A's encouraging, experience-driven exchanges. These trends demonstrate that digital religion is marked by horizontal,

participatory communication; however, the research refines this assertion by indicating that levels of participation differ based on the influencer's communication style and authority framework. Significantly, the research enhances the existing literature by directly connecting these dynamics to intergenerational dialogue, an aspect mostly missing from earlier studies. Although previous research (e.g., Muñoz et al. 2013; Amaro & Kallas 2025) highlights social media's function in enabling communication across generations, it overlooks the impact of religious narratives in shaping this interaction. The results show that Orthodox influencers act as intergenerational intermediaries, transforming religious customs into forms that resonate with younger audiences while preserving ties to traditional beliefs. Every influencer represents a distinct mediation approach, whether familial transmission (A), doctrinal translation (B), or moral reframing (C), demonstrating in a way that intergenerational communication in online environments varies and is shaped by context and discourse.

Additionally, the research adds to the body of work on psychological wellness and emotional assistance in online settings (e.g., Wexler 2011) by demonstrating how religious influencers offer unique emotional structures, such as care or reassurance, that aid followers in understanding personal difficulties. This discovery indicates that online religious environments might operate as unofficial support networks, combining spiritual assistance with emotional resilience strategies. In this way, the research links two areas of literature that are seldom related: digital religion and mental health. Another important contribution relates to the idea of ritual in digital settings. Although earlier studies have recognised the shift of religious activities to online platforms, they have focused less on micro-level interactions. The recognition of 'micro-rituals', like saying 'Amen', sharing prayers, or showing support, illustrates how ritual behaviours are transformed into daily, platform-oriented activities. This discovery enhances the literature by demonstrating that ritual remains intact in digital settings but is instead dispersed and integrated into communicative practices.

The research tackles a significant empirical void noted in the literature: the absence of studies on religious influencers within the Greek and wider European Orthodox setting. This study offers context-specific insights into the functioning of digital religion by analysing Greek Orthodox influencers in a setting where religion is culturally rooted yet institutionally separate from other environments. It indicates that, even within a historically prevailing religious tradition, digital media facilitate the diversification of voices and forms of authority. Ultimately, the results add to wider discussions regarding religion and cultural politics (Beta 2024). Although the examined influencers do not directly participate in explicit political discussions, their focus on morality, family values, or even discipline, suggests that religious messaging on social media can subtly influence normative structures and identity formation.

This implies that religious influencers engage in cultural politics not primarily by conveying direct political messages, but by expressing values and ethical standards in daily life.

In addition to what has been mentioned, the results of this research indicate that Instagram can be viewed as a type of *liturgical public sphere*, where religious discourse not only moves online but is also transformed by practices unique to the platform. Opposing the belief that digital media diminishes religious significance, the analysis shows that Orthodoxy is being actively redefined through novel means of communication. Elements often linked to liturgical life, like repetition, participation, communal affirmation, are not diminished but rather reshaped into digitally mediated practices. Expressing 'Amen', posting prayer requests, or participating in repeated interactions serve as micro-liturgical acts, allowing users to express their faith in a distributed but symbolically linked setting. These activities do not mirror the sacramental richness of in-person liturgy, but they establish patterns of involvement and connection that resonate with liturgical frameworks. Simultaneously, Instagram broadens the limits of the religious public domain. In contrast to conventional church environments, which are limited by time and space, digital platforms facilitate ongoing, asynchronous interaction, enhancing the accessibility and adaptability of religious discussions to daily life. This change signifies a wider evolution where spiritual experiences are integrated into everyday digital practices. Consequently, Instagram ought to be viewed not as a space for secularisation or deterioration, but rather as a mixed religious environment where liturgical principles are redefined.

In addition, we observe a key transition from parish-focused religious authority to what can be referred to as mediated micro-authority. Although traditional Orthodoxy relies on hierarchical and institutional authority, the digital landscape allows for the rise of various, decentralised sources of power. The three influencers we have analysed demonstrate this shift clearly. Influencer B upholds a type of institutional consistency, converting clerical power into a digital pastoral function. Nonetheless, Influencers A and C show that religious authority can also emerge from daily experiences, relatability, and perceived genuineness, as opposed to formal ordination. This change does not suggest the elimination of institutional authority but instead its diversification and negotiation within platform contexts. Authority becomes relational, developed via engagement with followers, or expressive, demonstrated via communication approach and emotional attitude, or even quantified, influenced by visibility metrics like engagement and reach. Crucially, this change also indicates a shift in pastoral relationships. Rather than a parish with defined geographic limits, adherents engage in dynamic, interconnected communities, seeking direction via comments, direct messages, and the consumption of content. This leads to a type of *distributed pastoralism*, where support, guidance, and spiritual leadership are dis-

persed among various digital entities. Nonetheless, this advancement brings forth crucial inquiries. The division of authority can improve accessibility and involvement, yet it also threatens to undermine theological consistency and obscure the distinctions between expertise and personal opinion. Mediated micro-authority signifies both a broadening and a destabilisation of conventional religious frameworks.

One could pose the question: Does digital Orthodoxy strengthen tradition or transform it? The results indicate that it performs both actions at the same time. On one side, the influencers evidently aid in maintaining and passing on Orthodox values, such as prayer, fasting, family responsibilities, and ethical discipline. Using clear language and relatable material, they make certain that religious doctrines stay prominent and pertinent, especially for the younger, digitally connected populations and users. In this regard, digital media serve as a means of cultural preservation, prolonging the existence of tradition in new communication settings. Conversely, the act of mediation inherently alters tradition. Orthodox doctrines are purposefully restructured, streamlined, or modified to align with the dynamics of short-form video, audience interaction, and algorithmic exposure. These changes indicate that digital Orthodoxy is not merely a passive extension of history but a dynamic reconfiguration of religious significance. Tradition is preserved, yet it is also reframed within modern cultural and technological contexts. Consequently, instead of seeing reinforcement and transformation as conflicting processes, this research emphasises their mutual reliance. Digital Orthodoxy endures specifically due to its adaptability: by converting lasting values into expressions that connect with the realities of digital modernity.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore how Orthodox Christian influencers in Greece shape religious dialogue on Instagram and what this indicates about the changes in religious communication, intergenerational dialogue, authority, and community within digital spaces. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, the results reveal that Instagram functions not just as a medium for spreading established religious interpretations but as a dynamic platform where Orthodoxy is understood, contested, and redefined in the context of modern social, cultural, and technological factors.

To expand on these results, subsequent studies should examine the dynamics of digital Orthodoxy using both comparative and multi-method strategies. Broadening the empirical scope to encompass a greater number of influencers, along with cross-platform examination (e.g., TikTok, YouTube), would facilitate a more thorough comprehension of how platform affordances influence religious discourse and authority. Moreover, using audience-focused approaches, like interviews, digital ethnography,

or survey data, would offer a richer understanding of how followers perceive and navigate these types of mediated spirituality. Comparative research across various Orthodox settings (e.g., Greece, Serbia, Russia) or between Orthodox Christianity and other faiths might clarify if the observed patterns are unique to specific contexts or represent wider shifts in digital religion. Ultimately, upcoming studies might more directly address the political ramifications of digital religious discourse, exploring how ostensibly apolitical ethical and value-driven material intersects with identity formation, polarisation, and cultural politics in modern societies.

In summary, this study shows that digital platforms like Instagram are not secondary to modern religious life but are becoming increasingly essential in how religion is experienced, communicated, or even practised. Orthodox influencers play a crucial role in this dynamic, balancing the conflicts between tradition and modernity, authority and approachability, and structure and flexibility. In the end, digital Orthodoxy ought to be seen not as a weakened form of religious practice but as a dynamic and hybrid expression of religiosity, where continuity is maintained through change, and where faith is practised within the patterns and reasoning of digital culture.

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Embodied, Artistic and More- than-Human Relations

***Conversas* on the Territory: Participatory Video and Intergenerational Dialogue in Buenaventura and Caldono, Colombia**

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Abstract: Afro-descendant and indigenous communities in the Pacific region of south-west Colombia have rich ancestral oral traditions that have long been central to the design and development of their collective life projects. However, these have been disrupted by both conflict and insecurity in the region and internal community dynamics, including feelings amongst young people that they are often unheard by an older generation of leaders, affecting intergenerational collaboration that has been central to communities' efforts at self-protection. This article examines the potential of Participatory Video (PV) to be a catalyst for intergenerational dialogue in this complex context. Focusing on traditional forms of intra-community dialogue, '*conversas*', in Buenaventura (a majority Afro-Colombian city) and Caldono (a majority indigenous rural re-

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gion), we identify three mechanisms through which PV created spaces for more inclusive *conversas* on the territory: i) helping to reconnect young people with their communities and territories; ii) create structured moments of listening in which elders' narratives and youth perspectives were brought into conversation; and iii) functioning as a method for the co-production of actionable knowledge across generations. As well as contributing to ongoing discussions about how intergenerational dialogue can be promoted, the findings also shed important light on the value of PV as a tool of social change and intergenerational collaboration, foregrounding PV as a process that, when adopted by the community, operates as a catalyst for dialogical relationships, rather than merely as an output-oriented practice focused on representing the views of the community to outsiders.

Keywords: Participatory video; territory; *conversa*; intergenerational dialogue; participatory action research; ontological struggles; Colombia

Introduction

Afro-descendant and indigenous communities in the Pacific region of south-west Colombia are holders of rich ancestral oral traditions that have long been central to the design and development of their collective life projects. However, the potential of these practices to advance communities' aspirations to live in peace and dignity in their own territories has been disrupted by protracted conflict, leaving communities victimised by violence, forced displacement, and a variety of mechanisms of social control, with young people being the primary targets of (il)legal groups. Affected communities have not been passive in the face of these threats. They have actively resisted them and have sought to take measures to rebuild the damaged social fabric of their communities (Alzate et al., forthcoming).

In line with their traditions, processes of dialogue – understood through the concept of *conversa* – have been central to these efforts. In our research with two communities in the region, one predominantly Afro-descendent and one predominantly indigenous, the practice of holding '*conversas* on the territory' – open spaces of memorialisation, discussion, and deliberation on local issues, where people express in their own terms the ways they understand, feel and imagine their life in the territory – emerged as particularly important. Yet, in practice, those *conversas* did not always live up to the ideal of openness. Indeed, they were often perceived as hierarchical. In particular, we found that young people frequently felt excluded from full participation. This not only deepened generational divides but has also hindered the transmission of knowledge, memory, and leadership.

In this article we examine the processes and outcomes of an extensive participatory research process working in collaboration with young people in Buenaventura and Caldonó. Focusing on the use of Participatory Video (PV) as part of this process, we show that PV can serve as a useful tool for creating more inclusive intergenerational

conversas on the territory through: i) helping to reconnect young people with their communities and territories; ii) creating structured moments of listening in which elders' narratives and youth perspectives were brought into conversation; and iii) functioning as a method for the co-production of actionable knowledge across generations, contributing to identifying and creating spaces for intergenerational collaboration, reaffirming community agency, and enabling the emergence of new leaders among younger generations.

Through analysing these cases of PV-catalysed *conversas*, we contribute both to the literatures on intergenerational dialogue and PV. In relation to the former, we document culturally specific forms of dialogue in the Colombian Pacific region, highlighting the importance of *conversas* on the territory *both* for resisting violence and insecurity *and* for (re)building social relations and pursuing collective life projects, whilst recognising the ways in which community hierarchies can undermine their success as forms of collective deliberation. In relation to PV, and wider literatures around the use of artistic approaches in community-building and peacebuilding, we make two key contributions. First, we show that the *process* of PV can be as important as the *outputs* (i.e., the resulting videos). Whilst not wanting to dismiss the value of the visual products of PV, we show that examining the collaborative processes of planning and producing videos can be revealing of its potential to challenge existing social relations and enable the familiar to be perceived anew. Second, we show the value of PV within community dialogue processes. Visual communication supports open dialogue in ways that other methods might struggle to do, enabling consideration of deep and painful questions, as well as processes of collectively imagining more positive futures.

The article begins by unpacking the concept of *conversas* on the territory as a set of practices that have deep roots in tradition but have taken on a new importance in the context of violence and insecurity that characterises life in this region. We then introduce the two partner communities in this study, before examining how the processes of PV, in different ways, generated meaningful new spaces and forms of *conversa*. In the final section, we examine the contribution of PV to stimulating intergenerational dialogue in both Caldon and Buenaventura, and in doing so engage with some of the most common critiques of PV – in particular that it often fails to challenge power relations; that it can lead to the instrumentalisation of participants rather than empowerment; and that it can result in communities being romanticised and exoticised in the eyes of external audiences. By contrast, we argue, if we foreground PV as a *process* and understand the key value in that process being one that is internal to the community rather than about representing that community to outsiders, we can appreciate its potential as a tool of social change and intergenerational exchange.

Dialogue and ‘*Conversas* on the Territory’

Processes of dialogue are central to all transitions from armed conflict to peace, from high-level negotiations to agree an end to hostilities down to grassroots efforts to manage the ongoing impacts and legacies of violence (Jaramillo et al. 2022; MacGinty 2014; Neufeldt 2021). Dialogue is similarly crucial to decisions about where a society or a community emerging from conflict goes next (Lederach 1997; Van Tongeren 2013). This has been abundantly clear in Colombia where, during the peace negotiations between the government and the FARC, and following the final 2016 peace agreement, a variety of formal dialogue processes have been created and informal ones have emerged with varying degrees of success (Díaz et al. 2021; Jaramillo et al. 2023; Ríos & González 2021; Rodríguez 2019).

Challenging the Santos government’s plans for a swift and expedited national-level negotiation process with the FARC, the involvement of victims and civil society organisations in the peace process led to a series of local, regional, and national dialogues on key aspects of the agreement: agrarian reform, political participation, victims’ rights, drug policy, and disarmament and demobilisation (OACP 2018; CEP-DIPO 2020; UN & UNC 2012). The element that provided these dialogues with a cohesive framework was the ‘territorial vision’ (Cairo et al. 2018; Díaz-Arévalo et al. 2021; González et al. 2016; Peña 2019), which was intended to inform the design of peace and development programmes around the needs and expectations of local communities rather than imposing a single ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach.

Consequently, in the pre- and post-accord period, Colombia witnessed a variety of different forms of community participation and dialogue. On the one hand, there were high-profile government-sponsored processes of dialogue, a type that Cornwall (2004) terms ‘invited spaces’. On the other, there have been a plethora of ‘invented spaces’ (Miraftab 2004), in which grassroots and victims’ organisations have often acted as conveners, moderators, and sponsors (McGee & Flórez-López 2017; Parado-Pardo 2024). While these spaces coexist and sometimes overlap (Gaventa 2006), the long-standing tradition of community-based dialogue in Colombia, to which *conversas* belong, is better captured by the notion of ‘invented spaces’.

Depending on the context, *conversa* can have different meanings. The dictionary defines it as ‘chat; friendly talk’. Yet, for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, including those in Caldoño and Buenaventura, *conversa* signifies something more meaningful than this: an open, non-hierarchical communicative space in which all participants are recognised and valued. Particularly prominent in both Buenaventura and Caldoño is the practice of ‘*conversas* on the territory’, a concept which requires understanding not only what is meant by *conversa*, but also by ‘territ-

ory' (*territorio*). As the commonly heard motto expressing Buenaventura's resistance against the ontological occupation of their land (Escobar 2016) suggests, territory is understood as far more than land: 'The territory is life, and life is not possible without the territory' (Jaramillo et al. 2022; Parrado Pardo 2024). Territory, in this understanding, constitutes a complex web of intertwined relations embedded in local traditions, identities, forms of production, power relations, and systems of knowledge. In this sense, community life is understood from and through its territorial dimension, as are the ways in which people communicate and act (Alzate et al., forthcoming).

Therefore, by '*conversas on the territory*' we refer to open, 'invented' spaces for discussion and deliberation on local issues, where people express in their own terms the ways they understand, feel and imagine their lives and futures in the territory. This carries onto-political connotations (Albán-Achinte 2013). First, it recognises 'the other' in their own voice ('*reconoce al otro en su palabra*', the expression '*en su palabra*' conveying more than mere speech, encompassing voice, expression, agency, and legitimacy).² Second, *conversa* has served vulnerable and marginalised communities as a central tool for sustaining their struggles, not least those against large-scale development projects and (il)legal armed groups (Caicedo 2021). As Samper & Krause (2024) indicate, protecting the territory is inextricably related to protecting the environment. Third, *conversa* is also connected to the '*sentipensante*' (feeling-thinking) condition identified by Fals Borda (1987) among riverine communities in the Colombian Caribbean region (Robles-Lomeli & Rappaport 2018), which later became a watchword for non-Western ways of knowing. Recognising *sentipensante* as the crossroads of alternative epistemologies, Santos (2018) incorporated it as a central aspect of the theoretical framework of Epistemologies of the South. In this sense, *conversas on the territory* are not restricted to discussion of local issues. Rather they embody a 'thread' and a 'relational process', using Gill's (2026) terms – or relational ontologies, as Arturo Escobar (2016) suggests –, by which communities share, sustain and negotiate different ways of being, knowing, and existing in their territory.

In the Nasa indigenous community of Caldon, where there is a clear hierarchical structure, *conversas on the territory* occur frequently in different spaces. '*Mingas de la palabra*', for example, are ceremonial spaces to which the whole community is summoned to participate in a *conversa* on issues affecting their wellbeing. '*Mingas del pensamiento*', meanwhile, are deliberative spaces where the focus is on deep listening

2. It is not coincidental that Paulo Freire's most influential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), begins by reflecting on the essence of dialogue: the word, within which two constitutive elements can be identified: reflection and action.

and achieving shared understanding rather than on reaching a final decision.³ These spaces, which in some cases can last for days, are also referred to as '*tejer la palabra*' ('word weaving'), which relates partly to the fact that some community members practise traditional weaving during these gatherings, but also to the idea that the *conversa* is one of the practices through which the community's collective voice is expressed and the fabric of communal life is woven (interview with Indigenous Authority, a male member of Caldonio Local Council 2023; Archila 2015; CNMH-ONIC 2019).

In the majority Afro-Colombian city of Buenaventura, where the social movement operates through a multitude of autonomous grassroots organisations, '*la conversa*' takes place at various levels and in various spaces (Caicedo 2021; Parrado & Jaramillo 2020). For example, the process of inter-organisational dialogue that culminated in a citywide strike in 2017 was referred to as the '*grand conversa*' by some of its leaders (a series of 15 interviews with male and female social leaders in 2020, including young leaders and Mayores (elders)), as we will explore further below. *Conversa* in Buenaventura occurs through traditional oral practices such as '*palabreo*' (the art of speaking with rhythm and dramatic expression (Vanín 2016; Walker 2012)) and *comadreo* (spontaneous chatting and gathering), as well as through more organised poetry gatherings (Díaz-Arévalo et al. 2025). In this long-oppressed community, *conversa* has also acquired a more radical meaning. Collectives of women who are victims and survivors of Colombia's armed conflict, for example, have adopted *conversa* and *comadreo* as strategies of resistance against silence, isolation, and impunity (Sánchez-Contreras 2022), using them to defend their right to continue searching for relatives who have disappeared, and to support each other in their arduous process of seeking truth and reparation.

However, during the research we often heard complaints that *conversas* on the territory are not always intergenerational. Young people's disengagement played a role. Yet, even when they were present, their voices were not always heard and recognised. As Evans-Jones (2025, 46–7) has pointed out, listening is 'to make a moral choice regarding whose voice "matters", which silences we bear, and which histories we allow to shape us'. In the next sections, we will provide the context for the two case studies on which this article focuses, before examining how PV created new opportunities for building bridges that have enabled more meaningful intergenerational *conversas* on the territory.

³ Broadly defined, 'minga' can be understood as the act of 'being together', representing a sense of togetherness and solidarity in response to community needs (Alzate et al., forthcoming).

Buenaventura and Caldoño: Onto-political struggles in defence of the territory

Colombia's Pacific region, one of the most biodiverse regions of the world (Reardon 2018), is home to a wide variety of Afro-descendant and indigenous communities. Despite, or perhaps because of, its natural richness, it has also been one of the areas where Colombia's long and protracted conflict has been most intense over the last four decades (CNMH-ONIC 2019; CNMH 2015; Oslender 2008). Since the 2016 peace agreement, conflict in the region has not only continued but intensified, with reports indicating the coexistence of six simultaneous conflicts in the region (ICRC 2023; 2024) due to competition for territorial control between organised criminals, dissident guerrilla groups, and (il)legal armed actors. Furthermore, in the Pacific region, armed violence intersects with multiple forms of exclusion and social injustice, including ethnic discrimination, state neglect, and the predominance of extractive and illegal economies (Oslender 2018). In this context, *conversa* is not only a form of community-level communication and exchange but also a strategy for building and sustaining collective life plans, which involves both active engagement against systemic violence, marginalisation, and impunity – what Acosta Oidor et al. (2019) describes as 'active resistance' – and a constructive dimension focused on repairing the damaged social fabric. This includes fostering connections across fragmented communities and promoting reconciliation with the territory, a process that Nasa communities refer to as 'harmonisation' (Interview with male Indigenous authority, May 2023) and communities in Buenaventura discuss in terms of 'the right to live in peace and dignity in the territory' (dialogue with inter-organisational committee of the 2017 Civil Strike, August 2020).

The city-port of Buenaventura

Buenaventura, home to approximately 370,000 inhabitants, 90% of whom are of Afro-descendant identity, is a place where diverse and contradictory socio-economic and geopolitical realities collide. It is Colombia's principal port and one of the most sophisticated container ports in Latin America, giving it a huge geopolitical and economic importance for the country and the wider region. However, 80% of its population live in poverty, and over half identify as victims of the armed conflict (CEV 2019). Historical, socioeconomic, and racial inequalities have been exacerbated by systemic factors over recent decades. The privatisation and containerisation of the port in the 1990s led to the mass redundancy of thousands of workers (CNMH 2015; Jaramillo et al. 2020). After a period of guerrilla dominance in rural areas, a bloody paramilitary takeover followed at the beginning of this century, during which 19 massacres occurred with a combined toll of 118 victims, thousands of targeted murders were committed, and over 36,000 people were displaced (Ávila

2022, 171; CNMH 2015). The most recent transformations of the conflict have brought battles for control between organised criminal gangs who have divided the city with ‘invisible borders’ and exert close control over its inhabitants, a form of dominance that some call ‘criminal governance’ (Álvarez Durán 2021; González 2016). In a context, where drug trafficking, smuggling, and legal and illegal mining coexist with limited legal livelihood opportunities, many young people have either been forcibly recruited from the city’s neighbourhoods or have come to see criminality as an attractive economic alternative, or even as a desirable lifestyle.

Despite this history of violence and terror, Buenaventura has been a fertile ground for community-level dialogue and organising, including the creation of the movement of Afro Colombian communities (*Proceso de Comunidades Negras*, PCN), which succeeded in creating a landmark law (Law 70 of 1993) which recognised collective land rights for Afro-descendant communities. The city also has a long tradition of contesting socio-economic exclusion and racial discrimination, symbolised by three major civic strikes in 1964, 1998, and 2017, the last being known as the ‘strike of strikes’ (Jaramillo et al. 2023), which not only succeeded in securing agreement with the national administration to create a special investment plan for the city but also had a profound symbolic impact. It is often recalled by the locals as their own ‘local peace agreement’.

One of the most notable features of the 2017 strike was that its gathering points became, thanks to the enthusiasm of young people, spaces for popular celebration featuring local artists, singers, and groups performing both traditional and contemporary music. At the same time, improvised communal kitchens were set up to feed thousands of protesters. But the symbiosis between ‘natural’ leaders of the community (*mayores* and *mayoras*), leaders of social organisations, and young people, which proved so effective in achieving the aims of the 2017 civic strike, has proved difficult to sustain. Tensions, disagreements, and open criticism from some youth organisers towards the older generation of leaders of the civic strike have increased over the years. In this article, the Buenaventura case shows how PV can contribute to building bridges across generational divides through processes of co-creation of contextualised and actionable knowledge.

The indigenous community of San Lorenzo of Caldon

Over several decades, the municipality of Caldon, in Cauca department, has been caught in the crossfire. Located along a strategic corridor between the Andes and the Pacific, the indigenous community of Caldon has been subjected to multiple forms of insecurity and threat including armed conflict, territorial disputes between illegal groups and organised crime, the cultivation of illicit crops, the forced and non-forced recruitment of indigenous youth into armed groups, and the murder of social

leaders and indigenous authorities. Between 1988 and 2015, Caldon suffered 248 guerrilla attacks (Ríos Monroy 2021), almost one a month, making it the municipality with the second highest number of armed attacks in the country (CEV 2021). A young leader of Caldon recalled that after the signing of the 2016 peace agreement, she and her friends enjoyed for the first time the pleasure of sitting in the town's central park in the evening, meeting friends and listening to music or watching a film: 'Before that, my town looked like a ghost town', she recalled.

Yet that pleasure was short-lived. The demobilisation of the FARC left a gaping power vacuum that triggered new conflicts between (il)legal actors vying for territorial control (Erazo & Espitia 2018). Caldon once again became the scene of conflict. The response of the government under President Duque (2018–22) was a shift towards a militarisation of the government's response, alongside a failure to implement key elements of the peace accord (PARES 2021). While the disputes between the government and armed groups decreased in 2023, those between non-state armed actors intensified, which meant 'continued suffering for the communities that were stuck in the middle of the confrontations' (ICRC 2024, 5). Caldon was one such community.

The increase in violence following the 2016 peace agreement has prompted the indigenous authorities of Cauca to reinforce their efforts to strengthen communal ties and identity (PECT 2021) and to assert control over their territory through traditional practices of resistance and contestation, such as creating deliberative spaces (*mingas políticas*), collective analysis and reflection (*mingas de pensamiento*), and walks of the territory (Interview with a male member of Caldon Local Council, May 2023). *Conversa* is central to these methodologies, designed to facilitate communication and to reinforce the bonds of cultural identity that are fundamental to indigenous life. As one local authority put it, 'the word is the material with which we weave our communal relationships and projects'.

As in Buenaventura, however, the dialogues have often in practice been characterised by strong community hierarchies, which limit young people's opportunities for genuine participation and input. Furthermore, fear of their children being recruited by illegal armed actors has led many families in Caldon to send them away from the territory, often resulting in young people becoming disconnected from their roots. As will be explored below, the use of PV in the Caldon case has provided young people with more meaningful opportunities to participate, create spaces of interaction with elders, community groups and local authorities, and to take on leadership roles.

Research, Reflection, and Action: Dialogical Research and Participatory Video

Over the last few decades, the literature on participatory approaches to social inquiry has become such fertile ground for theorisation and the exchange of experiences that it has established itself as a field of theory and practice in its own right. Without wishing to over-simplify this rich literature, we here highlight three distinctive aspects of the epistemology of Participatory Action Research (PAR) that are closely connected to the focus of this article. First, in its most essential form, PAR is a dialogic communication process guided by a set of broad principles and motivated by a genuine desire to comprehend, learn, and act together in response to the needs and aspirations of disadvantaged groups (Díaz-Arévalo and Ruiz-Galván 2024; Swantz 2016). Second, the emancipatory tradition of PAR, which departed from the adaptive tradition of Action Research developed by Lewin in the 1950s, originated with activist scholars who drew on Freire's (1970) philosophy of praxis and joined forces with social movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia to challenge societal inequities (Wallerstein 2020). Third, the cornerstone of Freire's praxis is the rediscovery of the transformative power of dialogue. Although Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is mainly remembered for its ideas of 'conscientisation' and 'empowerment', its foundations lay in the principles of dialogical research that underpin the book's emancipatory agenda.

This article focuses on our Participatory Video (PV) work with the communities of Buenaventura and Caldon, although it is important to emphasise that those activities took place within the context of a much larger and wider programme of PAR (Díaz-Arévalo et al. 2024; 2025) which involved three interconnected stages. The first was the creation and training of *semilleros* (research 'seedbeds'), groups of 10–12 local young people in each location who received research training and gained hands-on research experience. The second stage involved the collaborative design and delivery of a research project on protection and care strategies. To support the *semilleros'* work beyond the life of the project, the third stage involved systematising experiences and creating toolkits to enable the *semilleros* to train new members and conduct their own research projects. While stages one and two involved greater participation of external researchers, stage three was characterised by the autonomy and agency of the local groups, with external researchers acting exclusively as advisors and supporters. This is also reflected in the co-produced nature of this article, in which the local researchers themselves led the selection of PV experiences that gave rise to the process of collective analysis and writing.

PV was one element of the PAR-based activity undertaken by the *semilleros* in both Buenaventura and Caldon. There is not a single definition of PV, but it can be

broadly understood as ‘a collaborative approach to working with a group or community in shaping and creating their own film, in order to open spaces for learning and communication and to enable positive change and transformation’ (Roberts and Lunch 2015, 1). Rather than concentrating on the visual output, however, in this article we focus on the *process* of PV in two complementary ways: firstly, the process of skill and capacity building which adapts to the needs and circumstances of the communities and enables them to engage in PV production (Richardson 2012; Tremblay and Peredo 2014); and secondly, the *process* of planning and making a video, which often has more significance for all those involved than the final video *product* (Shaw & Robertson 1997; Blazek & Hraňová 2012; Kindon 2003). The collaborative and negotiated use of PV, we argue, has considerable transformative potential, not only in terms of the action it may generate, but also in terms of the structure of relationships between the researcher and research participants. This is because, unlike other methods, the process of PV necessitates dialogue at every stage, from inception to dissemination, as the following examples illustrate.

Participatory Video and Intergenerational *Conversas* in, on, and through the Territory

As noted above, despite, or perhaps because of, the adverse conditions, traditional forms of dialogue have become important forms of non-violent contestation against violence and the imposition of silence and isolation (Aguilera & Polanco 2011; Grulli 2018). Yet, in both Buenaventura and Caldon, *conversas* on the territory have tended to be dominated by an older generation of social leaders. Whilst not deliberately seeking to exclude young people, these social dynamics have been an obstacle to intergenerational dialogue. Such challenges are certainly not unique to this region: research elsewhere has identified similar dynamics in which young people’s confidence and sense of agency can be undermined by the overpowering status and decision-making roles of adults (Chineka & Yasukawa 2020; Taft 2015).

This section examines how PV disrupted these dynamics by bringing young people, adults, and elders together in a process of mutual learning and co-production. While young participants readily engaged with the practical and technical elements of PV, such as filming, scene management, and editing, thus taking on some leadership in the process, more meaningful opportunities for intergenerational *conversa* emerged when the process moved towards the design and implementation of the PV projects.

Buenaventura: PV practice that leads to collective analysis and action

The Buenaventura case study provides a compelling example of how PV has been integrated as a central tool in an intergenerational training programme that seeks to strengthen the capacity of local organisations for community-led initiatives aiming to address the impacts and legacies of armed conflict on the territory.

Aware of the need both to provide training opportunities for younger generations and to sustain the thriving social movement in Buenaventura through building bridges between generations, our local partner, Cormepaz, has led one of the most ambitious and consistent efforts to promote intergenerational learning and collaboration over the past 12 years. Through certified annual training programmes (*diplomados*) for members of grassroots organisations, Cormepaz has addressed a wide range of topics, including human rights, mental health, and social dialogue, among others (Jaramillo et al. 2023b). In 2024, Cormepaz launched a *diplomado* on PAR, with a particular focus on PV. This was coordinated by co-author VYDH and some of the other co-authors collaborated with some modules. The *diplomado* consisted of fortnightly in-person sessions, combining PV with training in participatory and qualitative research techniques, followed by fortnightly hands-on structured practice of PV in four neighbourhoods of the city. The final part of the *diplomado* was for groups of participants to design and deliver their own research projects, using PV as a tool.⁴

⁴ Of the four projects developed, three focused on environmental issues. One of these examined the pollution of La Chanflanita stream, which decades earlier had been a source of fresh water and a recreational space for residents of the La Cima neighbourhood, but which over time became a dumping ground for rubbish and waste. In the neighbourhoods of La Unión and Antonio Nariño, the problem identified was the inadequate management of solid waste collection, as well as the lack of designated spaces for its disposal and recycling. In a tropical climate, the contamination and accumulation of waste have significant repercussions for the lives and well-being of these communities, including unpleasant odours, the proliferation of mosquito breeding grounds and other pests, and, consequently, an increase in cases of malaria and leptospirosis. The project conducted in neighbourhoods of Comuna 3, located near one of the main access routes to the port, focused on analysing the causes of the high rate of pedestrian accidents, as well as identifying measures to prevent this problem. It is worth noting that, in this case, the identification of the problem emerged during the process of dialogue with adult residents, as, to some extent, pedestrian accidents had been normalised as an inevitable occurrence or simply attributed to a lack of care on the part of local inhabitants (Díaz-Arévalo et al. 2025).

Turning everyday spaces into spaces of inquiry

The first PV project that *diplomado* participants were asked to undertake was titled 'The History of My Neighbourhood.' In addition to putting their PV skills into practice, they were encouraged to use basic qualitative techniques, such as semi-structured interviews, timelines, and social cartography, to co-produce a short narrative about each of the four selected neighbourhoods. During the process of identifying interviewees, some participants realised that their own grandparents, relatives, or neighbours were the keepers of the community's collective memory, as they had been co-founders of the neighbourhoods or among their earliest residents. However, as co-author VYDH recalls, the eagerness of some young researchers to obtain specific information made attentive listening challenging in some cases.

Nevertheless, as the process developed, through conversations with these elders, young participants learned about their struggles. For example, a seventeen-year old female participant recalls her surprise at finding out that her neighbourhood was built on land reclaimed from the sea, meaning that what is now a residential area had originally been mangroves that were gradually filled with rubbish deposited by collection trucks. What struck her most was her grandmother's vivid memory of the nauseating smells and clouds of mosquitos that the inhabitants had to endure over many years. Only decades later, after the waste had been repeatedly trodden on and compacted, did the ground solidify sufficiently to allow the construction of paved streets. Participants also uncovered more difficult aspects of their communities' histories. In one site, they learned about the massacre of eleven young people, and in another about the assassination of a popular environmental leader, both crimes committed by paramilitary forces.

As co-author VYDH noted, allowing elders to speak was often the only way the *diplomado* participants could access such knowledge. Storytelling thus became a primary method of research. As a result, almost any time or space could become an opportunity to collect stories. An eighteen-year-old male participant recalled how the process had sparked his interest in his mother's activism, and how after-dinner conversations at home had turned into moments of inquiry. Similarly, the porches of houses, where elders often spent their afternoons talking together in rocking chairs, became informal sites of social investigation. These everyday spaces, previously overlooked, were transformed into spaces for intergenerational co-production of knowledge.

Dialogue as a means of denormalising reality

The idea of PV as a means of 'giving voice' has been criticised on the grounds that it assumes that voicing local issues is, in itself, a pathway to social change (Walsh

2016), an assumption that overlooks structural conditions. However, another problematic, although overlooked, element of the idea of ‘giving voice’ is the implicit assumption that PV merely serves to highlight problems that are already well recognised by the community. This perspective tends to underplay the role of PV as a tool for research, rather than only as a medium for documentation.

In Buenaventura, it was certainly the case that the dialogue that emerged through PV involved revealing problems that had long been normalised, not merely discussing a problem that had already been clearly identified. As Clough et al. (2004, 56–7) suggest, in seeking to make sense of the culture of the other, Western-focused ethnography has traditionally aimed at ‘making the strange familiar’. Yet ethnographic research can also be understood as a methodology that ‘renders the familiar strange’. This was the case when, in a second PV project, *diplomado* participants were invited to identify local issues. The process of dialogue with the elders, as well as critical observation of their own context, enabled them to recognise that mountains of plastic and rubbish accumulating in public spaces, ponds of stagnant water with clouds of mosquitoes and foul odours infesting their homes, and frequent traffic accidents were not natural conditions of their environment. Looking through the lens allowed participants to see a reality they had stopped noticing after years of living with it. As a seventy-year-old female resident reflected, ‘We ended up assuming that mosquitoes, rats, and other pests were part of the natural environment. But watching the piles of rubbish on film created a sense that things should not be this way and that they could be changed; that someone needed to do something about it.’

From PV to collective action: dialogues for change

As Fals Borda (1987) states, retrieving memories from the past and identifying local problems are not neutral processes. Learning about the struggles of elders and the challenges they faced, both in founding the neighbourhoods and in defending their right to remain in the territory during both the rule of guerrilla groups and the violent takeover by paramilitary forces, was an invitation to action. At the same time, the dialogues revealed previously unspoken causes underlying the problems participants analysed; for instance, the rapid growth of these neighbourhoods as a result of the massive, forced displacement of rural communities seeking protection in the city, as well as the social fragmentation and fear produced by decades of living under a regime of terror (Jaramillo et al. 2019). These factors made it evident that problems such as rubbish and traffic accidents required not only technical solutions but also cultural and educational interventions aimed at repairing the damaged social fabric and rebuilding relationships.

When the *diplomado* participants were asked to carry out PV projects focusing on a specific local issue, an ethical and practical framework consisting of three basic as-

pects was co-developed by the groups. First, the issues chosen should not place participants' lives at risk. Second, they should allow participants a degree of agency in addressing the problem. Third, they should involve some form of educational action, including strategies to bring together community members.

Other elements emerged during the process. As many have pointed out (Cruz Garcia 2021; Richardson-Ngwenya et al. 2019), in addition to discussing and recognising opinions and concerns, PV allows participants to reorganise their ideas, re-record, and add information until 'they are satisfied that they have represented what they want to say and show' (Braden & Huoug 1998, 13). In recording the testimonies, one recurring element that emerged was that the elders had previously approached the local administration about these issues without receiving much support. As a male member of the local community committee stated, 'this not only contributed to the normalisation of the situation but also fostered a sense of powerlessness among the community'. PV, however, enabled them to shift from simply 'telling' what their problems were to 'showing' them. The process also helped them identify and engage with other key stakeholders, including environmental organisations, the waste collection company, and informal recyclers.

Seeking to support local initiatives and give more visibility to the work done by local groups, Cormepaz organised a multi-stakeholder event involving local leaders, members of the communal councils, and local authorities. In this way, the PVs functioned not merely as a means of 'giving voice' but as part of a broader strategy of advocacy, dialogue, and engagement between community members and key external actors. As we have documented elsewhere (Díaz-Arévalo et al. 2025), the PV addressing the high level of road injuries in Comuna 3 had almost immediate positive impacts. The measures jointly implemented by the local administration and community leaders, including the installation of traffic lights, zebra crossings, and educational campaigns, reduced accident rates by 50% in two neighbourhoods located near the crossings of a major highway.

Caldono: PV practice that strengthens relationships and identity

In contrast to Buenaventura, where PV was used by trainees working with a well-known organisation and within an established training programme, the Caldono case study is an example of an initiative led by a newly formed *semillero* of local young people whose initial research efforts were met with some resistance from the wider community. As co-author CVRU (who led the group) recalls, 'it took some time to gain people's respect and to engage them.' This was reflected in the first PVs produced, which were not the kinds of videos commonly produced through PV pro-

cesses. Instead, these were lengthy recordings in which the *mayores* and *mayoras* (male and female elders and traditional authorities) discussed potential research topics at length, without interruption or questioning. Although such videos may not have been effective for external audiences, these initial listening-based experiences allowed the *semillero* to identify themes on which to focus and to look for spaces and strategies of engagement that proved instrumental in creating the conditions for intergenerational dialogue.

Bringing research closer to the community

The idea of bringing research closer to the community became an early focus for the *semillero* members and was seen in two ways. First, this meant literally finding ways to reach the community, moving away from strategies that tried to bring people into ‘invited spaces’ of participation (workshops, for example), and instead taking the research to where people were already engaged in *conversas*. For example, a young female *semillero* member recalls her tearful yet meaningful experience chopping onions, a task she had never done before, while joining the *conversa* of a group of women preparing a communal meal, through which she learned about culinary traditions and practices. A group of male and female *semillero* members joined knitting groups, a privileged space for *conversa*, and the *semillero* became more actively involved in the community *mingas* – the affirmative solidarity initiatives through which the community expresses its sense of togetherness and self-reliance (Alzate et al., forthcoming).

Second, bringing research closer to the community meant adapting how the *semillero* members talked about the research process. As CVRU recalls, terms such as ‘focus groups’, ‘in-depth interviews’, and ‘transect walks’ were unfamiliar to members of the wider community: ‘We then started using words that reflected ideas and practices that were well-known locally.’ These included practices that were in the process of being documented by the *semilleros* such as *comadreos* (women’s dialogical circles; Díaz-Arevalo et al. 2025), *mingas de la palabra* (discussed above), or *recorridos territoriales* (community walks of the territory). Adapting research strategies and terminologies in ways that were consonant with these established practices created more suitable environments for participation, moving research away from being understood as an outside process of data collection towards more shared and community-based dialogical practices.

The PVs produced through these practices reflected a significant shift from the initial interview-focused approach to a more dialogical one, integrating women, children, and other young people into the *conversa*. Although some of these dialogues did not result in PVs or other types of research output, they fostered active engagement. This not only enabled the *semillero* to gain valuable insights into people’s stor-

ies and experiences but also helped to gain both wide recognition as a research group and expertise in the use of PV. As the young coordinator of the *semillero* PV production team explains, 'In this way, we challenged the stereotype that we, as young people, were disengaged, lazy, and apathetic toward community life.'

Critical recovery of history and the struggles of the present

A second aspect that *semillero* members gathered from the initial interviews with their elders was the importance that the community's spiritual practices have traditionally had in both defending their collective rights and land and 'harmonising the territory', as they refer to creating favourable conditions for human and non-human life to flourish. Realising how disconnected from, and unaware of, many of these spiritual practices they were, the *semillero* members started a new stage of the research process in which they sought to document spiritual sites and practices. It is worth recalling the enthusiasm of the *semillero* in creating a plasticine model for a stop-motion animation telling the story of a young person rediscovering his spiritual traditions. The *semillero* also organised *recorridos territoriales*, some of them taking several days. These walks served as a tool for intergenerational learning, strengthening cultural identity (including encouraging the use of the ancestral language, Nasa Yuwe) and, crucially, instilling a sense of ownership of the territory. As a local authority said, 'younger generations often know their own territory only through the maps used in the classroom... Only those who truly know their territory and feel it as their own will be ready to defend it' (Interview, Cali, May 2024).

One of the most significant experiences was a five-day walk to Juan Tama's stone, a place of symbolic importance for the Nasa people. High in the mountains, this site is believed to be where the indigenous Nasa leader, Juan Tama, who gives name to the territory of Caldon (*Sa'th Tama Kiwe* in the Nasa Yuwe language) and organised resistance against the Spanish conquistadores during the seventeenth century, left his mark, and it remains a powerful symbol of territorial resistance.

The series of videos produced as a result of the group's engagement in these walks through the territory included in-depth interviews, life stories, and place descriptions, all of which resonated with experiences of retrieving the past through the practice of mapping the territory in the 1980s (Findji 1994). These materials have served as pedagogical resources for local schools and were complemented by *conversas*, bringing together local authorities, members of the educational community, Indigenous Guards, and young people. At a time when the territory was subject to constant threats from illegal armed actors, these initiatives also encouraged the preservation of memories and traditions, bringing together older and younger generations in ways that had previously been rare.

Recognising and celebrating cultural identity: research as lived experience

The initial interactions with the elders not only provided the *semillero* members with insights into their community's life and history. It also enabled the authorities to recognise the potential of the *semillero*'s work for addressing what they considered to be one of the community's biggest challenges: the loss of cultural identity. For one member of the local council, who actively supported the *semillero*'s work, this was not only a cultural issue (although the local authorities saw that in itself as important) but was also associated with the high rate of young people leaving the territory for many reasons, including avoiding forced recruitment by illegal armed groups, escaping the situation of increasing insecurity, and searching for educational opportunities in cities.

In the case of Buenaventura, we discussed the process of denormalising reality. In Caldoño, by contrast, the research process facilitated what could be described as *centring identity*: recognising, learning to appreciate, and celebrating their own traditions and expressions of life. To do this, the *semillero* coordinated with the local authorities to create a series of videos focused on documenting the history and significance of festivities, rites, and harmonisation ceremonies. These were recorded exclusively for the community's own use (not intended for external audiences, as is more often the case with PV), and the material has also been used for educational purposes. These and many more contributions have not only created opportunities for mutual listening, transforming the PV experience into an intergenerational dialogue, but for some *semillero* members they have represented an opportunity to find their place in the community, with some of them becoming local authorities themselves.

CVRU encapsulated this process in the word '*vivencia*', often translated as 'lived experience'. However, for her, *vivencia* goes beyond this. As she puts it:

The training we have received and facilitated has allowed us to experience our territory as our own, meaning to discover, explore, and feel it as our own. We are that territory... This is why the dialogues we helped to create do not happen behind closed doors but through walking the territory, feeling it. This is how research becomes a *vivencia*.

Intergenerational Dialogue and PV: Responding to PV's Critics

Although widely used by researchers around the world for a variety of purposes, PV as a research technique/method has been subject to critique on a number of

grounds. Perhaps most significantly, it has been accused of a failure to challenge power relations, with outside researchers often maintaining control (either explicitly or implicitly) over agendas, resources, and stories (Milne 2016; Milne et al. 2012; Yang 2016), limiting the ‘real’ participation of communities and their ability to make decisions over key parts of the process, including final decisions over editing and where and how to exhibit their videos. As noted above, the implicit assumption that ‘giving voice’ through PV is a means of promoting social change in itself has also been criticised (Walsh 2016), as it often ignores systemic conditions. This is clearly problematic, especially in contexts of conflict, where communities and their processes of resistance can be romanticised and exoticised.

In this article, we have sought to show how PV provided the local researchers with strategies and methodologies to disrupt, negotiate, and sometimes overcome such power imbalances, creating new opportunities for dialogue, including intergenerational dialogue. Approaching the use of PV in an exploratory way that focused on the creation process itself rather than only on the outputs (Cruz García 2021) and providing support but not direction from the research team to the *semilleros*, helped mitigate the sometimes problematic effects of power dynamics. It is revealing that the core argument of this article – that PV can be a useful tool for stimulating processes of intergenerational dialogue – came entirely from the autonomous activities of the *semilleros*, not from the plans of outsider researchers. The PV projects did not start as attempts to generate intergenerational dialogue, even though they ended up that way.

This was possible because PV is much more than a research technique, which is how it has generally been viewed by its critics. At its best, it is a collaborative process through which communities narrate themselves, reflect on their own (hi)stories, and set their own agendas. Approached as a process-oriented and relational practice, it can be conducive not only to the production of audio-visual outputs but also to listening and reflexivity in ways that do not normally occur.

Looking retrospectively at the early PVs from Buenaventura, where elders were at times rushed to provide information, and from Caldoño, where lengthy monologues were filmed without interruption, it is clear that they were less-than-successful attempts at filmmaking. Yet both external and local researchers nevertheless recognised the value of these early efforts to generate *conversas*. These filming processes had the benefit of creating a space in which participants and facilitators began to recognise one another as valid interlocutors. Similarly, the process of discussing and documenting local issues that could form the basis of further PVs led to the creation of new relationships, grounded not only in kinship or neighbourhood ties but also in a shared interest in the life and wellbeing of the community. Elders came to recog-

nise the leadership skills of young people whilst those young people came to value the experience and commitment of the elders. As some *semillero* participants told us, the process connected them with their roots and histories, as well as helping them see themselves as having a stake in the protection of the territories.

Valuable as the series of PVs produced by local researchers were, they ultimately contributed to a broader, unintended outcome: the realisation that inclusive and intergenerational dialogues should not be understood merely as a way to facilitate participation in research. Rather, PV, like many other research strategies, should contribute to nourishing and sustaining the community *conversas* that will be so important to defining and defending the future of their territories.

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New Futures Arts Collaborative: A Case Study for Intergenerational Epistemologies through Arts and Creativity in Times of Polycrises

Isadora Canela¹

Abstract: This paper draws on a research project that investigates how artistic practices can be an infrastructure to intergenerational collaborations, fostering epistemological relationality in the face of contemporary polycrises. This study is grounded in the perspective that ongoing struggles, environmental, political, and social, are entangled with epistemological values that produce fragmentation, hierarchy, and processes of othering including between generations (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011; Lugones 2007). Focusing on generational divisions as dialectically formed by and reinforcing these structures, the research examines how dominant frameworks of knowledge disrupt relational continuity. It offers potential to expand intergenerational and epistemic theory-building and its practice by embracing arts-based flora and participatory methods, thus contributing to the exploration of means of cultivating collaboration across generations as a relational epistemology that includes more-than-human agencies and challenges linear conceptions of time (Phillips 2024; Krenak 2021; Haraway 2016; Kimmerer 2013).

Methodologically, the study also contributes to expanding transdisciplinary and participatory research approaches by integrating Participatory Action Research (PAR), arts-based methods, and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), positioning community oriented and creative processes as sites of knowledge production. These frameworks are enacted through a case study of the New Futures Arts Collaborative (2025), a four-month international arts residency that took place in Johannesburg, South Africa, bringing together participants across generations, geographies, and disciplines.

The reflections suggest that artistic and participatory processes enable forms of knowledge that move beyond fragmented and hierarchical structures, fostering relational, plural, and

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horizontal ways of knowing. While context-dependent, these practices offer grounded pathways for reimagining collaboration and collective futures within conditions of polycrisis.

Keywords: Intergenerational collaboration; arts-based research; polycrisis; decoloniality; relational epistemologies; Participatory Action Research (PAR); Causal Layered Analysis (CLA); Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

Introduction

How can intergenerational dialogues serve as epistemological alternatives to contemporary polycrises? In what ways can participatory and creative practices foster forms of knowledge that enact relational epistemologies? What intergenerational collaborations can emerge in art-based spaces? More than definitive goals, these questions offer us a pathway for experimenting and engaging in other ways of relating to one another and to the environment. This paper is situated within the context of what Adam Tooze (2021) defines as ‘polycrisis’, a condition in which multiple struggles (environmental, political, economic, and social) are deeply entangled and co-shaping one another (Moore 2015; Morin 2008). Rather than seeking a singular explanation or simplistic solutions for these crises, this research approaches them through an epistemological lens. It explores how particular ways of organising and legitimising knowledge shape social relations across generations and contribute to conditions of fragmentation, hierarchy, and exclusion.

Within this frame, the paper narrows its focus to generational divisions as one manifestation of these broader epistemic fragmentations. The concept of ‘generation’, while widely used to organise social life, often reinforces separation, linear temporality, and hierarchical distributions of knowledge (Mannheim 1952; Edmunds and Turner 2002). As critically discussed by Vanderbeck (2007) and Mead (1970), such divisions can disrupt continuity and limit collaborative knowledge transmission across time. In response, this research proposes intergenerational dialogue as a relational epistemology, one that embraces creativity, plurality, continuity, and the coexistence of multiple temporalities, including more-than-human agencies (Kimmerer 2013; Phillips 2024), thus contributing to expanding the field of intergenerationality in its enacted and transdisciplinary potentials.

To explore these possibilities, the study adopts a methodological framework that integrates Participatory Action Research (PAR), arts-based methods, and futures studies. PAR provides a relational and co-creative approach to knowledge production grounded in community engagement and shared responsibility (Freire 1970; Fals Borda 1987). Arts-based methodologies expand this process by enabling forms of expression and collaboration that move beyond linguistic and rational boundaries (Eisner 2002; Leavy 2015). Complementing these, Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

offers a framework to understand the multi-layered nature of reality and to engage with futures as plural and culturally situated (Inayatullah 1998).

These frameworks are explored through the case study of the New Futures Arts Collaborative (2025), a four-month, arts-based residency that brought together participants from diverse generations, geographies, and disciplines. Through participatory and creative processes, the project created a space for intergenerational and intercultural exchange, where knowledge was co-produced across human and more-than-human relations. The case study offers a situated context in which the theoretical and methodological premises of this research are enacted, allowing for an embodied exploration of intergenerational epistemologies in practice.

While the case study is grounded in environmental struggles, particularly mining landscapes and their socio-ecological struggles, this paper deliberately focuses on their entanglements with generational divisions and interconnections with systems of extraction, inequality, and epistemic canons. Within this frame, it proposes intergenerational dialogue as a potential counter-narrative that fosters relationality, continuity, and collaborative forms of knowledge-making.

The article contributes to intergenerational dialogues, both in theory and practice, first by expanding these debates beyond human-centred and linear causal time, considering more-than-human agencies as participants in knowledge-making, and acknowledging the present, past and future strata as a dynamic entangled process. Second, it connects intergenerational dialogue with relational and enacted epistemologies, reframing it as a practice of collaborative knowledge production rather than solely age-based exchange. Third, and possibly the biggest contribution is achieved by engaging in transdisciplinary, creative, and experimental approaches while demonstrating how participatory, creative and arts-based methodologies can function as epistemic terrains through which these forms of intergenerational collaboration can emerge as embodied and studied fields.

Literature Review: From Epistemic Fragmentation to Relational Intergenerational Dialogue

Epistemic fragmentation and the crisis of relation

This section briefly establishes the contemporary conditions of polycrisis through its epistemic canons. It argues that these crises are not only material or political but entangled with systems of knowing that shape and are shaped by social structures that reinforce divisions and hierarchies.

Contemporary global conditions – environmental collapse, war, systemic racism, and gender-based violence – are marked by overlapping crises that unfold across multiple generations, scales, layers and territories. While these are experienced in situated complexities and unequal ways by bodies, communities, and lands, they are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing, forming what has been described as a condition of ‘polycrisis’² (Tooze 2021; Mignolo 2017; Haraway 2016).

More than exclusively political, social, and environmental struggles, the contextual premises of this research examine epistemological values as generative forces that structure the very conditions through which contemporary polycrisis emerges. As Michel Foucault (1980) argues, knowledge both manifests and produces power, shaping what can be known, legitimised, and acted upon.

In this sense, contemporary dominant epistemologies have been shaped by multiple historical processes, among which colonial-modern formations constitute one particularly influential source of hierarchical divisions, as argued by Walter Mignolo (2013), Aníbal Quijano (2000) and Mbembe (2011). Aníbal Quijano (2000) defines the term ‘coloniality of power’ as a system that operates through hierarchical distinctions that dehumanise and create the ‘other’, not only through economic dimensions but also through a way of organising knowledge (Mbembe 2011; Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2013). These canons are grounded in what María Lugones refers to as ‘hierarchical binaries’ separating and ranking the world in dualistic conditions where one is valued more than the ‘other’: men/women; white/non-white; mind/body; human/‘nature’; new/old, sustaining processes of othering that justify domination, dehumanisation and exclusion. In the words of the Indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak, ‘Once you create this distance, you can justify domination, extraction, and the erasure of other forms of life’ (Krenak 2019, 17–18).

Generational division and the limits of age-based intergenerationality

Given the last argument on the divisionary epistemic conditions of current polycrises, this section unfolds generational divisions and their implications in knowledge creation, both in human and more-than-human exchange and addresses the current understanding of generations and its limitations in relation to non-human agents and multiple time perspectives.

² The Global Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report 2023 describes this as ‘Polycrisis: a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part.’

Although the concept of a generation has been expanded across disciplines (Mannheim 1952; Mead 1970; Edmunds & Turner 2002; Inayatullah 1998), it remains largely understood through age-based and historically situated categories. While scholars such as Mead (1970) and Vanderbeck (2007) broaden this understanding to include cultural and geographical dimensions, dominant conceptions continue to privilege human-centred perspectives and linear temporal frameworks. These assumptions limit intergenerationality to relations between human age groups and overlook epistemologies that understand knowledge as emerging across species, places, and intertwined temporalities (Haraway 2016; Kimmerer 2013; Krenak 2021; Phillips 2025). As critically noted by Rob Vanderbeck (2007), ‘the notion of generation is employed both colloquially and within the social sciences as a way of temporally positioning people in relation to one another.’

Rather than engaging in an extensive conceptual debate (see Karl Mannheim 1952; June Edmunds and Bryan Turner 2002), the aim here is to reflect on the epistemological values embedded within these conditions. As Rob Vanderbeck (2007), drawing on Kjørholt (2003) observes, there has been a tendency within social sciences to emphasise ‘generational discreteness and difference such that disruption and discontinuity between adults and children is stressed at the expense of continuity.’ As a result, generational divisions are expressed through asymmetrical configurations of authority and power, where knowledge is either concentrated in older generations or dismissed in favour of the new, producing discontinuities in transmission, recognition, and collaboration (Margaret Mead 1970; Leena Alanen 2003). This occurs as knowledge is legitimised or invalidated according to hierarchies of generational divisions, often reinforcing processes of othering and detachment that can allow oppressive dynamics to continue existing.

In this sense, generational divisions can be understood as interconnected with epistemological values that privilege separation over relation and hierarchy over collaboration. These patterns, as argued by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998), are deeply implicated in systemic harms, manifested in the persistence of intergenerational trauma and historical wounds.

Therefore, addressing the contemporary polycrisis with its generational implications through an epistemic shift requires the cultivation of alternative ways of producing meaning in relation to one another, moving from generational division toward intergenerational collaboration, which will be explored in the next section.

Intergenerational dialogue as relational epistemology

Following from the previous section’s discussion of the epistemic assumptions embedded in dominant understandings of generation, this section proposes intergenerational

ational dialogue as a relational epistemology. Rather than limiting intergenerationality to exchanges between older and younger people, it reconceptualises it as a collaborative process of meaning making across age, memory, place, materiality, more-than-human agency, and future imagination.

Intergenerational collaborations emerge as a practice of epistemic justice. They recognise that diverse ontologies and temporalities hold complementary forms of wisdom and that mutual transformation depends on understanding difference as a source of vitality rather than division Gill (2025). Rather than reproducing discontinuities between generations, they invite the reweaving of memory and imagination as co-creative forces through which futures remain connected to ancestral knowledge. As Ailton Krenak (2023) suggests, *the future is ancestral*. Similarly, Margaret Mead (1970) reminds us that societies endure not only through the transmission of information but through the continuous negotiation of meaning between generations.

More than an exchange between elders and youth, intergenerational dialogue is understood here as a relational field of meaning making across age, memory, place, materiality, more-than-human agency, and future imagination. In this sense, generations are not simply demographic categories but relational configurations through which different beings, temporalities, and forms of knowing encounter one another. This expanded understanding unfolds across three interconnected dimensions.

First, intergenerational dialogue extends beyond exclusively human relations. Drawing on Bruno Latour (1991), Anna Tsing (2015), and Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), this research understands more-than-human beings, materials, and ecosystems not as passive contexts but as participants in knowledge creation. Kimmerer (2013), for example, reminds us that knowledge has long emerged through relationships with the living world rather than solely through human interaction: ‘Ethnobiologists tell us that our great-grandparents spoke fluent natural history. They knew the names and personalities of dozens of birds...’ (Kimmerer 2013)

Second, intergenerational dialogue is relational across time. Rather than treating generations as fixed positions within a linear chronology, this research understands past, present, and future as continuously shaping one another. As Rasheedah Phillips (2024) argues, *time is not neutral*. Dominant temporal frameworks often privilege linear causality while marginalising other ways of experiencing continuity and memory. Reconsidering temporality therefore becomes an intergenerational gesture, opening possibilities for ancestral knowledge, present experience, and future imagination to coexist within the same process of meaning making. This resonates with Sohail Inayatullah’s (1998) understanding that both reality and futures are culturally constituted rather than universally given.

Third, intergenerational dialogue is relational across epistemologies. Rather than seeking consensus through a single authoritative knowledge system, it creates conditions where diverse ways of knowing can coexist, challenge one another, and generate new understandings collaboratively. In this sense, relational intergenerationality aligns with Quijano's (2000) call to recognise 'the heterogeneity of the world and the plurality of its histories', while also resonating with Maria Lugones' (2007) emphasis on relationality across difference.

Intergenerational dialogue is therefore understood in this research not simply as communication between different age groups but as a relational epistemology through which multiple temporalities, beings, and ways of knowing participate in collaborative meaning making. This conceptualisation provides the foundation for examining how artistic and participatory practices can cultivate these conditions in practice.

Arts-based and participatory practice as epistemic terrain

This section brings out artistic and participatory practices as epistemic terrains where such relations can be experienced. It argues that these approaches hold the potential to create conditions in which diverse forms of knowledge encounter, negotiate with, and transform one another through collective agency and co-creation.

Through the understanding of intergenerational dialogue as a relational process of meaning making across age, memory, place, materiality, more-than-human agency, and future imagination, the question then becomes how such relations may be cultivated in practice. Rather than emerging spontaneously, relational epistemologies require conditions that enable trust, reciprocity, creativity, and openness to difference. Within this perspective, arts-based and participatory practices are approached as epistemic terrains where dialogue can be embodied, experienced, and collectively enacted.

Artistic practice has the potential to enable meaning to be sensed and exchanged beyond language and where gestures, materials, images, sounds, movement, emotions, and experience are entangled and constantly negotiated in process-oriented knowledge making (Levy 2020). Art does not merely represent knowledge; it creates spaces where knowledge can emerge through experimentation, uncertainty, and collective imagination. As Elliot Eisner (2008) argues, the arts give shape to understanding that cannot always be accessed through propositional language alone. Similarly, Patricia Leavy (2020) understands arts-based research as opening possibilities for inquiry that engage affective, embodied, and imaginative dimensions of knowing.

Within this perspective, dialogue extends beyond conversation to become a relational process unfolding through multiple expressive forms. Encounters between people from diverse ages and cultures as well as materials, territories, and more-than-human beings become opportunities for collaborative meaning making in which knowledge is negotiated rather than transmitted (Eisner 2008). Artistic practice therefore creates conditions where difference does not require resolution but can remain productive, allowing multiple perspectives, memories and worldviews to co-exist while generating new processes of understanding.

Methodologies

Research design

Building on the conceptualisation of intergenerational dialogue as a relational epistemology, this study adopts a qualitative participatory case study design centred on the New Futures Arts Collaborative, a four-month, international arts residency that took place online and in Johannesburg, South Africa, between May and August 2025. The collaborative was selected as a case study because it intentionally brought together participants across generations, nationalities, artistic disciplines, and cultural backgrounds within a sustained process of collective artistic production, dialogue, and co-learning.

Through the case study, the research investigates how artistic and participatory practices acted as infrastructure to intergenerational collaborations and how these encounters contributed to relational forms of knowledge making. The study therefore approaches the residency as a living environment in which artistic creation, dialogue, reflection, and research evolved simultaneously.

The research is informed by Participatory Action Research (PAR)³ and Arts-based methods (ABM). PAR emerges as a methodological framework grounded in liberative education and decolonial epistemologies (Freire 1970) with the premises of knowledge as a relational, situated, embodied, and continuously evolving process. It suggests a research model in spiral stages of Inquiry/planning; Action/intervention;

³ PAR has been widely applied in community-based contexts where local knowledge is positioned as central to inquiry and transformation. For example, Fals Borda's work with rural communities in Colombia demonstrated how participatory research could support collective reflection, political agency, and locally grounded knowledge production (Fals Borda 1987). Similar approaches have been adopted in Indigenous research contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand, where participatory and community-led methodologies have been used to strengthen cultural continuity, self-determination, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Smith 2021).

Observation/documentation; Reflection/Analysis that leads to new Inquiries and continues. These premises align well with the purpose of this research in that PAR offers a framework through which intergenerational collaborations can be engaged as relational circular epistemologies.

As Alice McIntyre (2008) argues, PAR is ‘a collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake together’, positioning knowledge as something co-produced rather than extracted from subjects. In this sense, research becomes a relational process, shaped through ongoing interaction with communities, environments, and systems (Kendon, Pain and Kesby 2007).

Anchored in arts-based methodologies to the inquiry and data collection, the research potential expands beyond linguistic and rational values, incorporating the body, the territories, the more-than-humans and the emotional bonds to the processes of intergenerational collaboration and collective meaning making (Leavy 2015). Susan Sontag (1966) points to arts as a way to form engagement that exceeds rational interpretation.

As Adrienne Maree brown reminds us, ‘The systems we are in now were imagined and created by humans. They are not inevitable. If we can imagine them, we can imagine something else...we are in an imagination battle’ (brown, a. 2017).

Participants, selection, and residency format

Participants were selected through an international open call disseminated across the partner organisations’ networks. The selection criteria were based on the main purpose of creating a diverse group with multiple perspectives with the following criteria for the group balance: age ranges and career stage, nationality/region, race, gender, and artistic practice/mediums. Although intergenerationality was not the sole selection criterion, it formed an important dimension of the residency’s design, creating conditions in which intergenerational exchange could emerge and generate knowledge exchange and intergenerational collaboration.

The residency unfolded over four interconnected phases. The first consisted of on-line gatherings that introduced participants to one another while establishing shared themes and collaborative relationships. The second involved an intensive in-person residency in Johannesburg combining workshops, artistic experimentation, collective reflection, and community engagement. The third focused on the collaborative development and curation of the exhibition ‘Absent Matter(s): From Mine to Ours’. The final phase extended dialogue through public engagement, exhibition activities, and ongoing reflection.

Researcher positionality and role

This research adopts a participatory understanding of researcher positionality in which knowledge is generated through engagement and active participation. Throughout the New Futures Arts Collaborative, the author occupied multiple and overlapping roles as co-designer, curator, facilitator, and researcher. This commitment is integral to the epistemological commitments of Participatory Action Research, where inquiry unfolds through collaborative relationships, shared reflection, and collective action (McIntyre 2008).

Within the PAR framework the active participation of the researcher in the case study is therefore not a bias to be eliminated but a condition and potential for knowledge production engaging in personal reflections and lived experiences as valid data to be integrated in the reflections. As Orlando Fals Borda (1987) affirms, PAR seeks 'to produce knowledge that is useful to people in the process of transforming their reality', shifting the purpose of research from observation to transformation where knowledge is collectively produced and responsibility for its outcomes is shared (Paulo Freire 1970).

These engagements enabled continuous participation throughout the residency, from the design of the programme and facilitation of artistic processes to curatorial decisions, collective dialogues, and post-residency reflection. They provided access and agency to the evolving relationships, negotiations and meaning-making processes that constituted the empirical material analysed in this study.

Recognising that such proximity also shapes interpretation, the subjectivity and positionality is entangled with the research and part of its contribution, while reflexivity and engagement with the group's views were maintained throughout the research process. Reflective journals, facilitation notes, and ongoing conversations with participants formed part of an iterative practice of critical self-reflection, allowing assumptions, decisions, and interpretations to be continuously examined alongside the collaborative process itself. In this sense, reflexivity was not treated as a step following data collection but as an ongoing methodological practice accompanying the residency from its conception to its analysis.

Consequently, the findings presented in this article should be understood as situated interpretations emerging from the interaction between participants, artistic processes, curatorial practice, and researcher reflection. Rather than seeking detached neutrality, the research embraces situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), recognising that understanding is always produced through relationships and that the researcher's participation formed part of the relational epistemology explored throughout the study.

Data sources and ethical considerations

The analysis draws upon multiple forms of qualitative material generated throughout the residency, including participant observation, facilitation notes, reflective journals, documentation of workshops and collective dialogues, curatorial texts, artistic processes, exhibition design, photographic documentation, and the artworks themselves. These materials were interpreted iteratively throughout the residency and during subsequent reflection, allowing observations emerging during practice to inform later analysis.

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the research process. Participation in both the residency and the associated research activities was voluntary, and participants were informed that the project would contribute to ongoing academic research. Permission was obtained for the documentation and reproduction of artworks, photographs, and participants' contributions included in this article. Because artistic authorship formed part of the collaborative knowledge-production process, artists are identified where appropriate with their consent.

Analysis was conducted through an iterative process combining participatory reflection with Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). During the development of the exhibition, CLA informed the curatorial organisation of the artworks as participants and facilitators were invited to engage with different layers of contemporary realities. Following the residency, the same framework was employed analytically to interpret how artistic practices, dialogues, and curatorial decisions expressed different epistemological layers of intergenerational collaboration. In this way, CLA functioned both as a generative framework that shaped aspects of the collaborative process and as an interpretative framework through which the case study was analysed.

The analysis engages with Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) as a methodological framework for understanding and imagining futures. While PAR and arts-based methods provide the conditions for co-creation, embodiment, and circular knowledge making, CLA offers an analytical lens through which present realities can be understood as multi-layered, dynamic, plural, and continuously shaped across multiple dimensions. In this sense, CLA does not treat either the present or the future as fixed but rather as a living cartography in which meanings are continuously reconfigured through interactions between social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions (Inayatullah 1998).

Developed by Sohail Inayatullah (1998), CLA proposes a mountain-like methodology in which reality can be understood across four interconnected layers: the litany (symptoms), referring to immediately observable conditions; systems and structures, concerning the political, social, and economic mechanisms that sustain these condi-

tions; worldviews and discourses, examining the cultural assumptions through which reality is interpreted; and myths and metaphors, where deeper symbolic narratives and collective imaginaries shape meaning. As Inayatullah argues, meaningful transformation requires engaging across these interconnected layers rather than addressing only surface-level symptoms.

Each of them is entangled with different time scales that co-shape the realities. As Inayatullah (1998) suggests, meaningful transformation requires engaging across all these layers rather than addressing only surface-level symptoms.

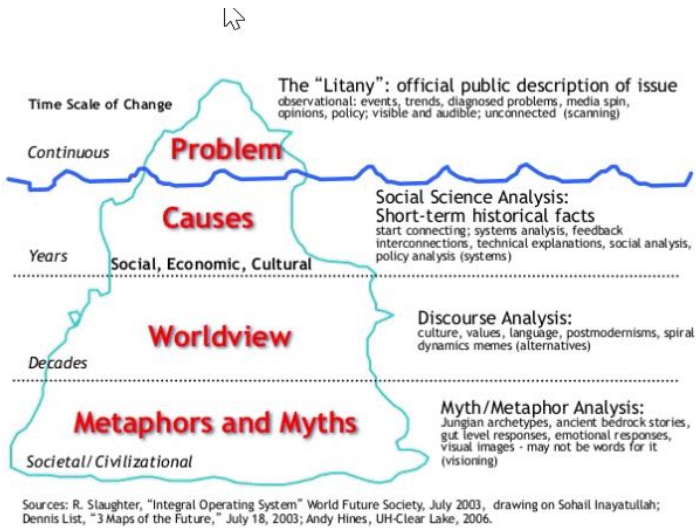


Fig. 1. CLA image

Within this research, CLA functioned in two complementary ways. First, it informed the curatorial development of the exhibition. The artworks themselves were not created through a predefined CLA framework; rather, they emerged through the artists' own creative processes during the residency. Following their development, the curatorial team employed CLA to organise the exhibition, arranging the works according to the four layers as a way of inviting visitors to experience the present as a multi-layered landscape of realities, narratives, and futures.

Second, following the residency, the same framework was employed analytically to interpret the empirical material. Participant reflections, artistic processes, curatorial texts, exhibition design, artworks and facilitation notes were revisited through the

four CLA layers to examine how intergenerational dialogue unfolded across observable practices, institutional structures, epistemological worldviews, and symbolic imaginaries. In this sense, CLA functioned both as a generative framework, shaping the curatorial organisation of the exhibition, and as an interpretative framework, guiding the subsequent analysis presented in this article.

The interpretations developed throughout the analysis emerge from multiple and overlapping perspectives. Meanings originated through the artists' creative processes, participant dialogues, and collective reflection during the residency. These were further shaped through curatorial discussions during the exhibition design and are interpreted in this article through the researcher's reflexive analysis.

Case Study⁴

New Futures Arts Collaborative: reflections grounded in PAR and arts-based methods

This section explores the case study structure and its findings within the methodological framework of PAR and arts-based methods. It also highlights the potential of interpretations and subjectivity that do not attempt to limit or capture the process. The case study is a situated and complex ecosystem of exchange from which this research unfolds and does not aim to be a claim for truth but rather an experimentation with the possibilities. This section intentionally shifts the third perspective to first-person language as it refers to lived experiences and reflections that include me as author.

Unfolding the case study constellation and structure, the New Futures Arts Collaborative was a four-month, arts-education residency that took place online and in Johannesburg, South Africa between May and August 2025. In total it was composed of 23 people, 16 artists participating, 4 team members, 1 host and media partner and 2 faculty leaders. The age range of the group was between 22 and 74 years old coming from 13 countries. The selection process of the participants was conducted through an open call broadly distributed through the networks of the institutional partners. The main goal of the selection was to create a group with diversity in perspectives especially with a balance of age/career stage, gender, race, nationality, and artistic mediums. In relation to age, there were 5 artists between 21 and 27 years of age; 5 between 28 and 33; and 6 between 34 and 40. The Faculty was formed of elders of 67 and 74 years of age, and there were two co-facilitators (in-

⁴ For more details on the project see www.newfuturesartscollaborative.online. The project was organised by a constellation of different institutions, collectives, and research partners: IoFC USA, Collective Webs, ART Africa Magazine and Exploring Visual Cultures project.

cluding this author) of 32 and 39 years. The team members were curators of 29 and 32 (this author), host and media partners of 55, and producers of 34, 39, and 46.

Although intergenerationality was not the only criterion guiding participant selection, it was intentionally incorporated alongside intercultural, interdisciplinary, racial, and gender diversity. While the residency was not originally designed exclusively as an intergenerational programme, the significant age diversity among participants, facilitators, and team members created conditions in which intergenerational exchange, on a daily, intimate, and continuous basis, became a defining feature of the collective experience and therefore a central focus of this research.

The project was divided into four phases: 1) online research (inquiries and community building); 2) In-person learning (action/intervention in relation to one another and with the environment); 3) co-creation and exhibition (documentation); and 4) continued activations (reflections/analysis leading to new inquiries).

In practice, this was enacted through a series of participatory workshops, collective dialogues, and co-creation sessions, where participants engaged with artistic processes such as material-based practices, storytelling, performance, or site-responsive work, collectively reflecting on their experiences and translating them into shared artistic outputs.

Although each phase reveals potential for research, in this paper we will focus on the in-person phases (phase 2 and 3), further deepening the analysis on the exhibition portion of phase 3. This is because it was the biggest portion of intergenerational exchange that happened in an embodied form, and when the art works were created, offered arts-based documentation for the reflections. The exhibition reveals a deep entanglement with the focus of this research into intergenerational exchanges, including the more-than-human bodies of Johannesburg landscapes and the knowledge production/knowledge transmission emerging from the curatorial process that followed a structure based on CLA proposed layers.

Participants lived and worked together for five weeks, sharing accommodation, meals, studio spaces, classes, and artistic production. These everyday encounters often became as significant as the formal workshops. Conversations during meals, collaborative studio work, site visits, and shared accommodation created continuous opportunities for exchanging memories, artistic references, personal histories, and different understandings of the mining landscape. These informal dialogues frequently informed later artistic and curatorial decisions.

The first week was oriented by Dr David Anderson Hooker (67) and focused the exchanges on narrative transformation, epistemic justice, and peace building, explor-

ing among other topics the colonial-modern paradigm and CLA. In the second week Dr Ernst Wagner (74) explored the role of arts in the face of a world in poly-crisis, diving into arts-based methodologies, historical references, and visual cultures across multi-generations and multi-cultures. In those weeks the programme was designed to integrate classes with site visits to historically exploited locations such as mining dumps and the communities living around toxic landscapes.



Group visit to Soweto Mining Dumps – Phase 2.

Moving towards phase 3 (co-creation), the same studio was then transformed into an art workshop space where the change in the environment revealed the changes in the dynamics. During this process, artistic decisions were continuously shaped through peer conversations, collective critique sessions, exchanges with facilitators, and encounters with local communities and landscapes. Ideas, materials, and narratives circulated among participants, making the artworks products not only of individual artistic practice but of ongoing dialogue.

For two weeks the artists developed their works individually and collectively focusing on artistic processes, material collection, pictures, and performances in dialogue with local landscapes and communities and peer exchanges. The shift toward a less structured co-creation phase raised collective reflections on responsibility and care for shared goods within horizontal frameworks.

For the last week the space became an exhibition space where the works were curated, interpreted, and organised to be further opened to the public. The exhibition lasted for one week and was open to the public, who joined the dialogue and explored the artists' processes. This portion will be highlighted and further unfolded in the next sections.

As for phase 4 – continuity of activations and further inquiries – it is relevant to point out that in response to the stress PAR lays on the need for accountability and mutual benefit for the community, the programme is still ongoing through online sessions and transnational activations. It has already developed two more exhibitions (in Brazil and Ghana) which members of the group lead and benefit from, either by going in person or by having the chance to showcase their work, as well as expanding the community and its inquiries to new groups and territories. It also continues to support the participants' needs in their own practices and local community projects.

Absent Matter(s) and CLA: intergenerational collaborations in present creation

Before discussing the exhibition through CLA, it is important to acknowledge that the organisation of the works emerged through dialogue rather than predetermined categorisation. While the artworks were initially developed independently by the artists, their placement within the four CLA layers resulted from collective conversations involving artists, facilitators, and the curatorial team. These discussions often generated multiple possible readings, revealing the exhibition itself as a dialogical process through which meanings were negotiated rather than fixed.

CLA was embedded in the four rooms of the exhibition. First, it presents the curatorial statement as the very first encounter with the exhibition to situate the public and invite them into the process. Then each room is first presented visually, followed by the text of the space, and then analysed and reflected upon the key insights and findings on the curatorial choices and the artworks presented there.

Curatorial Statement ran:

'silence grows solid ...Tell your story. Let it twist and remix your shattered heart. Tell your story. Until your past stops tearing your present apart.' Le-bogang Mashile

absent matter(s)

opens with a question that is also a fault line: can we transform what matters by embracing what is absent? A practice that narrative theory describes as 'unveiling the 'absent but implicit'.

In Johannesburg, the earth replies with voids. 278 abandoned mine shafts breathe sulphuric mist into Soweto. Mine dumps tower above the city like negative monuments. Toxic dust permeates lungs and laundry alike. The bodies of workers briefly surface before sinking back into the news cycle. Their dreams negotiated in court as numbers instead of names.

Absence here is not emptiness, it is thick, mineral, and profitable. 420 tonnes of 'invisible gold' lie dormant in the city's ground, wealth uncounted precisely because it is not yet in anyone's hands. Yet mine shafts extend beyond borders. In Brumadinho, Brazil, 272 bodies were folded into a single rush of tailings; the mud remains in the water table. Absences resonate across continents. An explosion killed dozens of workers in a private Iranian coal mine in South Khorasan. India, Ghana, Kenya, and beyond: voids are corporeal, intergenerational, and geopolitical; what is absent might be what connects us all. The untold stories, the silenced, embedded traces in mundane devices.

This exhibition evokes the value of the absents as shared matters that build our present. We attend to what industrial accounting omits: the slow violence of particulate time, the speculative lives of elements, and the songs of languages shaped in darkness. Absence becomes a common—a shared loss that might teach us other measures of value. The present is geological, and so is the future

Absent Matter(s) is a collective conversation among the works of 16 international artists from 11 countries developed through the New Futures Arts Collaborative residency program. Together, the artists were invited to unearth the narratives that sustain current systems and to uncover alternative imaginaries.

'Transformative change becomes possible only when we shift the deepest stories we tell about ourselves and the world.' Inayatullah 2004

Inspired by Sohail Inayatullah's research on narrative transformation in future studies, the space invites a journey through the multi-layered strata of the present. Walking through the depths of our narratives, it unfolds on four levels: from the perceptible surface, passing through systems worldviews—until the myths and metaphors—with seeds of long-term narrative change.

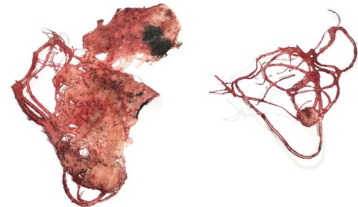
We invite you to move through the exhibition as one would navigate a defunct seam: alert to collapses, attuned to echoes, willing to feel the weight of things that are no longer present yet still insist on mattering. This is a journey into the entrails of our sensorial landscapes with the claim for a path towards a new narrative for living horizons, from mine to ours.⁵

⁵ Isadora Canela and Elsa Cuissard

The text weaves together multiple dimensions of the case study, addressing environmental struggles, epistemic and systemic injustices, and art and storytelling as resistance strategies. For this analysis we will prioritise the integration of the mountain-like frame of CLA that transformed the exhibition in itself into a visual and sensorial experience of the present strata, with focus on the intergenerational dialogues it materialises.

LEVEL I: SYMPTOMS | SURFACE

In the perceptible surface the symptoms are revealed, where socio-environmental disturbances appear as tangible matters. The senses respond to an ill socio-environmental landscape. What narratives are perceived in and by the body-land?

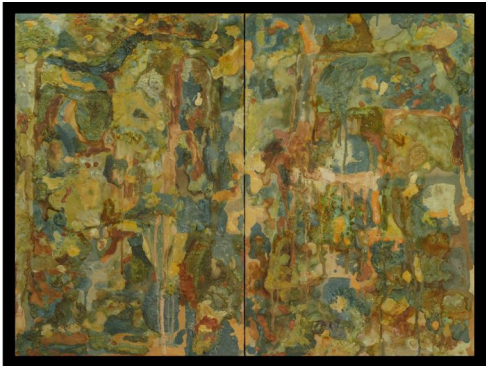


1.1



130
Wei

ΚΟΛΥΜΒΗΘΗΝ
Kiri Thunika
Johannesburg, 2025
Installation
Mixed media



1.3

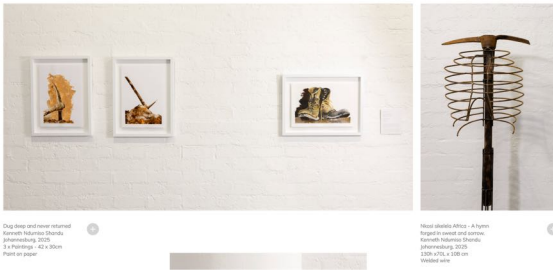


1.4

Byproducts Series I & II
Lukas Stenzenbach
Johannesburg, 2025
2 x Paintings - 60.9 x 91.4cm
Salt and hydrochloric acid on
copper

140
Wei

140
Wei



1.5

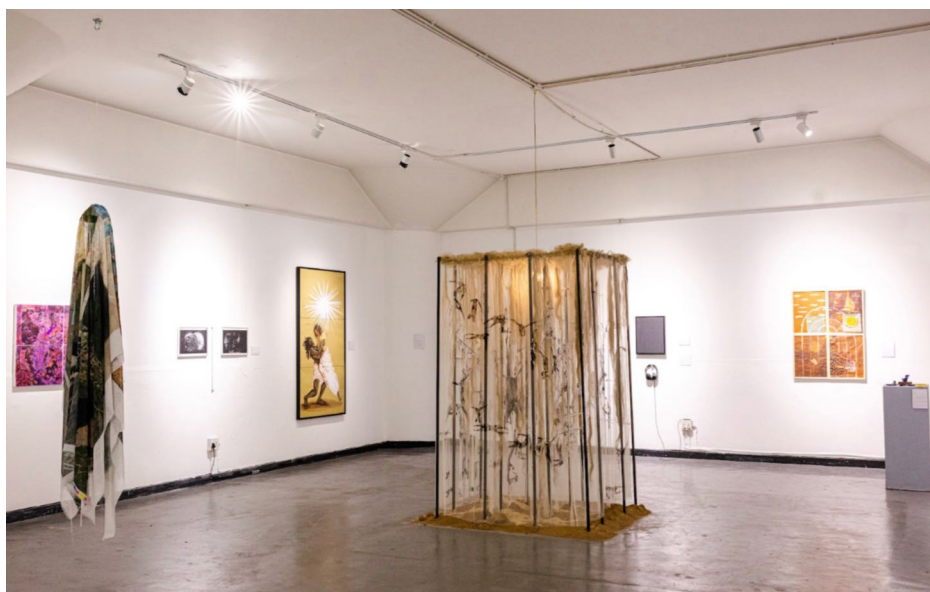
The first level of the symptoms (more commonly referred to as ‘Litany’), had five artworks, all of them reflecting on the current struggles of today’s polycrisis.

In an intergenerational approach beyond human-centred perspectives, artwork number 3 offers high potential for reflection. It was made by a young artist (23) from Germany in a relational process with the toxic soil from the mining dumps. Both in its aesthetic and in its materiality it engages with the consequences of an exploitative relationship between the human-made systems and the long before existing land of Johannesburg.

This interpretation emerged through conversations between the artist, facilitators, and curatorial team during the exhibition process, weaving together a critical approach to fragmentation and detachment as it also reveals a first layer of the realities presented by CLA, in a sensorial and arts-based approach. In the intergenerational collaboration it provokes viewers to engage with the more-than-human ancestral worlds as co-creators of the piece, responding to the movements of the artist, shifting colours and textures. Thus, it embraces a relational epistemology that can emerge from the reconnection with them as agents of knowledge rather than mere resources.

LEVEL 2: SYSTEMS

The systematic level uncovers the structures behind the edges of our existences – the trade, the laws, the rules, the institutional allegories, the borders of our societal bodies. What are the scaffolds of our socio-political landscapes? What values do they hold?



2.1

The second level concentrated the greatest number of artworks with ten pieces. Each one addresses a different perspective of systematic wounds from forced migration policies, systemic gender violence, all the way to computer binary systems, structural racism, and trade values.

More than one specific artwork, what is interesting to reflect on in this room is the time frame in which Inayatullah (1998) positions systemic change. He refers to this layer as being of years-long formation and transformation; this means that on a systemic level it is possible to experience change within one's own time, even within the same generation – change of institutional and political structures that are able to generate direct impact on symptoms or problems. While the first layer reveals more urgent and tangible struggles, the systemic layer seems to gain more attention from many artists concerned about laws and institutional values that sustain the symptoms, and this is still experienced in a time dimension. This is different from levels 3 and 4, which need multiple generations and therefore rely on intergenerational knowledge transmission to actually be transformed.

This led to reflection that the current divisions and lack of engagement between generations may be related to the concentration of efforts in this level. If intergenerational knowledge is disrupted, young artists might not perceive the resistance strategies of older generations and therefore indirectly it might resonate as less hope

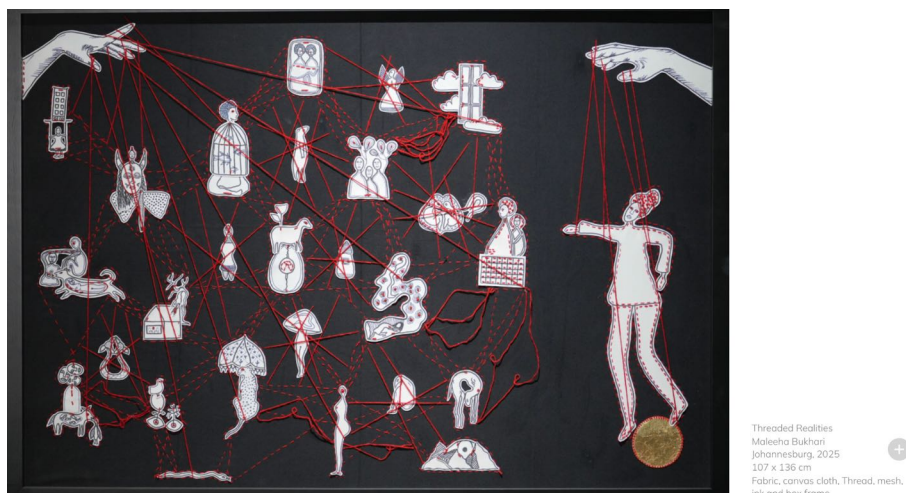
or commitment for long term societal transformation. Of course, that is speculative, and it seems to me that just the reflection in itself might hold enough potential to strengthen the time extension of our commitments to the transformations we work for.

LEVEL 3: WORLDVIEWS

In the depths of our metaphorical and metamorphic landscapes, worldviews carry the matter of our long-term perceptions, the ancestral marks, the hierarchies between worthiness and disposability, beauty and destruction, knowledge and mythology. How are the perceptions of the world shaping the matters of the world?



3.1



3.2

The third level speaks about the worldviews, the ideological forces, and the perspectives of value. There lie the deep narratives that make the systems appear natural, and it takes decades for this level to be transformed. Although any of the layers directly reflects specific domains, and the layers are always interwoven with one another, the worldviews hold a very close relationship with epistemic instances. Here is the level that sustains what kind of truth is validated as such, and it therefore reveals a very intricate connection with this research.

This level had 6 artworks, all of them somehow offering possible ways to reformulate our deep narratives. Based on curatorial dialogues, it brought together some pieces that critically reflected fragmented epistemologies and others that suggested agency to transform them from the bottom.

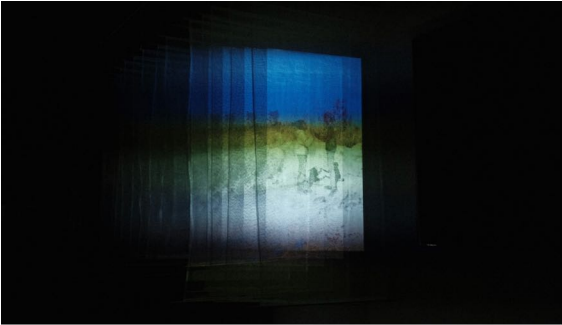
The work in image 3.2 was made by a Pakistani artist (26) with an interest in traditional symbols and cultures and their resonance between different cultures and times. She brought together Pakistani and African narratives, present in the daily life she experienced during the residency and through community bonds she has created. During curatorial discussions, the work came to be interpreted as entangled worlds, with a connection thread that invites us to reflect on the collective impacts of our beliefs. It shows on one side a collective of symbols interwoven and interacting with one another while on the other a woman tries to walk on the difficult balance of gold as a system of value. Each is controlled by an invisible hand that could be read as the hand of God or as the 'invisible hand of capital'. A third option would be to think that the movement toward change is in our hands.

LEVEL 4: MYTHS AND METAPHORS

The myths and metaphors at the bottom of our societal geology are proposed here as liminal spaces, where the potential for transition and long-term transformation live hidden beneath, in the deep tunnels of our imaginaries, those enrooted stories that carry the principles of our multi-layered meaning-making journey. It is the space for imagining, wondering, uncovering, unlearning, relearning, playing, and creating new narratives for new possible futures.



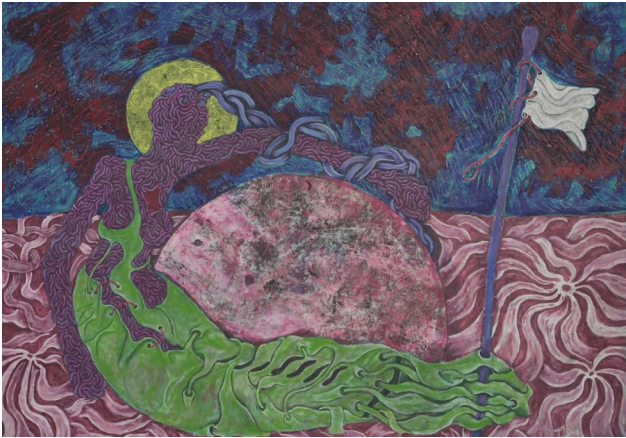
Hashiya of Sarah
Riaz Ali
Johannesburg, 2025
61 x 90 cm
Mixed media on canvas, incorporating Jadwal
grid, flower, and Acrylic on canvas



Hashiya of Sarah (Photograph by
Riaz Ali)
Johannesburg, 2025
300x50 cm
Installation, Fabric, Cotton, Steel,
Wood, Paper, etc.

4.2

4.1



4.3

The fourth level is at the very bottom of the CLA mountain-like layers. This level takes societal/civilisational time to be transformed, referring to the deep mythological forces that shape our worldviews. It is linked to ontological forces, and it is where the potential for long-standing transformation of all the other levels lies.

This was the room with the fewest artworks, four in total, which were curated based on their offerings for other mythologies to emerge. This room was an invitation to reclaim our agency in sowing new imaginaries of the future, deeply evoking intergenerational dialogues and collaboration. In image 4.2 the work by a young Pakistani artist, 27, reimagines Sara Baartman⁶ through sacred imagery, offering an alternative narrative that replaces dehumanisation with dignity, memory, and repair. In this sense, it exemplifies how artistic practice can contribute to intergenerational healing through the creation of new collective imaginaries.

Picture 4.3 is, again, an intergenerational claim. In a video installation the Brazilian artist, 30, invited the children from the community impacted by mining dumps to give a video performance of their plays. Having the toxic soil as their playground, the work invites joy, childhood, and playfulness to occupy the historical and ongoing wounds of the territory. In a world organised by pain and intersecting struggles, this work invites joy and relationality to be at the very bottom of our possible futures.

The last one, 4.4, is from a Kenyan artist, 40. It refers to looking at the planet from the mythology of Gaia instead of mythologies of othering. The work offers an intergenerational and epistemic lens where our home Earth is seen as a woman, fluidly navigating and caring for the waters and the lands. It is connected to a white flag, the symbol of peace that can only come to be through relating to the living world and to one another with affection and delicacy.

Discussion: Intergenerational Dialogue as Relational Epistemology

Returning to the central questions of this research, how can intergenerational dialogues serve as epistemological alternatives to the contemporary polycrisis? In what ways can participatory and creative practices foster forms of knowledge that enact relational epistemologies? And what intergenerational collaborations can emerge in art-based spaces?. The case study suggests that such practices hold significant potential to challenge fragmented forms of knowledge while cultivating more relational,

⁶ Sara Baartman was a South African woman exhibited as a freak-show attraction in Europe in the nineteenth century and it is a symbol of the exploitation of African bodies in the slavery of colonial times. See 'The Colonial Spectacle: Sara Baartman and the Commodification of Black Bodies' (Aiswarya and Anu 2024)

plural, and collaborative epistemologies. Beyond merely creating space for coexistence of different age groups, intergenerational dialogue unfolded through artistic, participatory, and curatorial processes that enabled participants to collectively negotiate meanings across generations, cultures, disciplines, and more-than-human relations.

The research identified that participatory and creative practices enable the emergence of shared meaning across differences, while the inclusion of more-than-human perspectives and layered temporalities expands the conditions through which knowledge is produced and validated. Furthermore, the case study revealed that when spaces of trust, horizontality, and collective agency are cultivated, participants can engage in processes that not only question dominant epistemologies but begin to embody alternative ways of knowing and relating.

The findings indicate that dialogue extended beyond verbal exchange to become an embodied and creative process. Throughout the residency, knowledge was alive and being generated through shared artistic production, collective reflection, material experimentation, curatorial conversations, and everyday interactions. Within this context, artistic practices did not simply communicate ideas but functioned as spaces where different experiences, memories, and perspectives could encounter one another without requiring consensus. The exhibition further extended these dialogues by transforming artistic processes into opportunities for collective interpretation, where meanings continued to evolve through interactions between artists, facilitators, curators, and audiences.

The case study also contributes to expanding understandings of intergenerationality beyond age-based exchange. As proposed in the literature review, intergenerational dialogue emerged not only through relationships between younger and older participants but also through encounters with places, materials, ancestral memories, and more-than-human agencies. The artworks and their curatorial organisation through CLA illustrate how dialogue can unfold across multiple temporalities and epistemological layers, as well as the potential for enactment of theoretical frames, bringing together lived experience, institutional structures, worldviews, and symbolic imaginaries within the same collaborative process in artistic ways. In this sense, the residency offers an empirical illustration of intergenerational dialogue as a relational epistemology.

At the same time, the findings suggest that these forms of dialogue did not emerge automatically from diversity alone. They depended upon particular relational conditions cultivated throughout the residency. Participants shared research, accommodation, meals, studio spaces, artistic production, and daily routines over five weeks, while receiving equal financial support and dedicating sustained time to collaborat-

ive inquiry. These conditions fostered trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, creating opportunities for dialogue to develop through continuous interaction rather than isolated activities. The case therefore suggests that relational intergenerational dialogue is enabled not only by diversity but by the social, temporal, and creative conditions through which collaboration becomes possible.

New Futures Arts Collaborative is not presented here as a universally replicable model; these findings contribute to dialogue studies by demonstrating how artistic and participatory practices can function as epistemic terrains where intergenerational dialogue is lived, negotiated, and collectively enacted. They further suggest that creative collaboration offers possibilities for connecting multiple forms of knowledge across age, memory, place, materiality, and future imagination, opening pathways for relational approaches to contemporary polycrisis.

Conclusion

In keeping with the principles of CLA, this conclusion closes the discussion by opening new questions and possible pathways for future inquiry. Rather than proposing a universal model, this research offers the New Futures Arts Collaborative as a situated experiment that explores how artistic and participatory practices can create conditions for intergenerational dialogue and collaborative knowledge making. It contributes to ongoing conversations on dialogue studies by expanding intergenerationality beyond age-based exchange and inviting further experimentation with relational and creative approaches to contemporary polycrisis.

At the same time, the case study developed under conditions that are not easily replicated. Dedicated time, shared spaces, and equal financial support enabled sustained collaboration, raising important questions about how similar approaches might be adapted to different institutional and community contexts. Future research could explore these methodologies within longer-term relationships, such as families, schools, or local communities, where histories, power dynamics, and conflict are already embedded.

Ultimately, this research does not seek to provide definitive answers but to open possibilities. How can intergenerational epistemologies be sustained beyond temporary projects? What conditions enable collaborative forms of knowledge making to flourish in everyday life? As adrienne maree brown reminds us, ‘what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system’ (Brown 2017). Perhaps the value of projects such as the New Futures Arts Collaborative lies precisely in their capacity to rehearse other ways of relating, creating, and imagining together.

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Making Sense in Common: Exploring Intergenerational Dialogue through Artistic Methodologies

Elsa Cuissard¹

Abstract: In a time marked by ecological collapse, socio-political fragmentation, and epistemological instability characteristic of late modernity in western societies, the concept of common sense calls for renewed critical attention. Often dismissed by Western rationality as conservative or static, common sense can instead be reimagined, following philosopher Isabelle Stengers, as a relational, dialogical, and collective form of knowledge. This paper argues that common sense is not merely inherited wisdom, but a political space of intergenerational encounter where memories of the past, the urgencies of the present, and the possibilities of alternative futures converge.

This paper explores the necessity of rethinking common sense as a collective process of sense making across times, generations, and geographies, made urgent by the contemporary ecological, social, and political crises. Drawing on the case study of the New Futures artistic residency, this research explores the conditions under which a renewed common sense can be collectively forged, across differences of age, race, class, gender, and culture, within a context of environmental justice shaped by mining extractivism. In the fractured landscape of Johannesburg, artist participants engaged with the roots of contemporary crises, tracing historical harms and geological layers,

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With a Bachelor's in philosophy from the Sorbonne University (Paris, France) and a Master's in social sciences (Humboldt University, Germany; Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India; University of Pretoria, South Africa) she is working as artistic facilitator and curator for the New Futures Collaborative Art Residency. Member of the Exploring Visual Cultures Project, Elsa has collaborated in exhibitions, conferences, and residencies across South Africa, Croatia, France, Germany, and Brazil. Her work includes community projects in Berlin, academic research and publications, and facilitating artistic programmes. For instance, she recently co-curated the Vazio Sobre Terra exhibition showcasing the works of 40 artists in Belém, Brasil at the Museum of Art of Belém at the occasion of the COP30, addressing the harms of extractivism in the context of the green energy transition. With Initiatives of Change USA and Art Africa, she co-designed the New Futures Art Collaborative artistic residency in Johannesburg (2024). She also co-organised two artistic residencies in Berlin (2023 and 2024), in partnership with Haus der Statistik and Berlin Refugee Week.

questioning present structures and narratives, while speculating on the possibility of a shared future. Far from implying consensus, this example seeks to highlight that the creation of common sense demands the negotiation of disagreement, the recognition of otherness, and the cultivation of shared imaginative spaces across generations and contexts. The residency functions as a microcosm for examining the tensions and practices involved in the co-construction of meaning, using artistic dialogue and collaborative creation as integral parts of an intergenerational methodology. Ultimately, this contribution seeks to advance broader conversations about the politics of knowledge and the essential role of intergenerational exchange in shaping collective futures amid systemic crises.

Keywords: Common sense; intergenerational knowledge; collective sense-making; environmental justice; artistic collaboration; epistemological renewal

Introduction

The essay explores how making sense in common can function as an epistemic and political response to contemporary crises. While Western philosophy has often dismissed common sense, opposing it to reason and science, or reducing it to mere good sense, the present moment challenges us to activate different ways of making sense collectively. Intensified neoliberalisation, through which public spaces, shared resources, and collective infrastructures are dismantled or absorbed into market logics, questions our relationship to the common, as privatisation and the individualisation of social relations weaken the material and institutional conditions needed for collective deliberation.

At the same time, multiple crises expose the collapse of the capitalist modern narrative of development and progress. The destructive side of modernity, namely its colonial, racist, imperialist and extractivist foundations, is becoming increasingly visible globally, while environmental devastation and ecosystems collapse and undermine the modern ideals of technological progress and mastery of nature.

In this context, growing scepticism toward epistemic authority fractures the legitimacy of Enlightenment regimes of knowledge, destabilising ideals of objectivity, universality, and linear progress. In this landscape, common sense becomes a politically contested resource. Farright movements increasingly mobilise ‘common sense’ as a rhetorical device, using it to legitimise exclusionary narratives, delegitimise plural perspectives, and produce ideological closures. Common sense is thus instrumentalised to reinforce polarisation and erode the sensory and experiential relations through which reality becomes collectively accessible. As Hannah Arendt emphasised, the degradation of common sense facilitates ideological thinking by breaking the capacity to perceive and inhabit reality with others.

The context of current polycrisis makes urgent the need for forms of knowledge capable of sustaining interdependence between generations, species, and environments. The question of common sense is therefore not only epistemological or political but also ecological and ontological: how to inhabit a shared world when the very foundations of common experience are destabilised.

It is in this context that the redefinition of common sense proposed by Isabelle Stengers in *Making Sense in Common* (2023) acquires a particular importance. For Stengers, common sense is not a repertoire of shared opinions, but a relational capacity, an embodied and situated mode of attention that allows us to remain in problematic situations, to be affected by human and nonhuman beings, and to inhabit a world composed of divergent and incompatible perspectives. This article puts Stengers's reflections into dialogue with the phenomenological and political approach to the *sensus communis* in Hannah Arendt, while situating these two perspectives within the broader philosophical debates that have shaped the notion of common sense in Western thought.

Historically, common sense has oscillated between an *a priori* faculty guaranteeing rational judgment (Aristotle, Descartes) and an *a posteriori* grounding of knowledge rooted in everyday experience (Reid, the Scottish empiricists). Modern scientific epistemology reinforced a division between objective knowledge and the 'ordinary' knowledge of common sense. Yet Arendt and Stengers both contest this dualism. For Arendt, common sense is cooriginary with the world, an aesthetic and phenomenological faculty that renders experience itself possible. Stengers similarly maintains that common sense is a practice of attention, a disposition to be affected and to coinhabit problematic situations without reducing them to solvable problems.

This article argues that such a reconceptualisation of common sense becomes particularly fruitful when examined through artistic methodologies situated in damaged or historically charged landscapes. Drawing on the New Futures Arts Collaborative residency in Johannesburg, I seek to show how artistic practices, choreographic experimentations, investigations beginning from the ground, and collective bodily encounters activate more-than-human forms of common sense. In these practices, mined soils, abandoned infrastructures, and human communities become active participants in processes of meaning production. The landscape itself inflects perception, modifies relational ecologies, and contributes to the emergence of new political subjectivities capable of responding to worlds in crisis.

By articulating philosophical analysis and situated artistic practice, this article proposes that common sense is not an innate faculty, but a collective, intergenerational, and more-than-human process. It is activated through relationality, imagination, and

sensory engagement with the habitats we inherit, habitats shaped by colonial extraction, capitalist exploitation, and ecological vulnerability. Rehabilitating common sense thus requires a speculative and aesthetic reorientation: a capacity for listening, for being affected, and for cocreating shared meaning with human and nonhuman beings. Artistic practice becomes a crucial site for cultivating these forms of attention and relationality, allowing us to inhabit a denser present and to compost the legacies of modernity into alternative futures.

Theoretical Framework

Throughout this article, I intend to draw on the reflections on common sense developed by Isabelle Stengers in her book *Making Sense in Common: A Reading of Whitehead in Times of Collapse* (Stengers 2023), placing them in dialogue with those of Hannah Arendt. First, I will contrast these perspectives with the various philosophical views on the question of common sense that have emerged in Western philosophy. Indeed, common sense is a widely discussed and controversial concept in the field of philosophy, particularly in relation to epistemology and political thought.

Epistemological positions

From an epistemological perspective, various philosophical positions offer differing views on the relationship between common sense and the production of knowledge and reason: Is common sense an innate or *a priori* faculty common to all human beings, or is it constructed through experience or empirical? What is the role of common sense in the process of knowledge creation? Is this role problematic or positive?

In Greek philosophy, Aristotle, for example, viewed common sense as a faculty that coordinates the senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell; while in Roman times, common sense referred to the idea of *sensus communis*, meaning ‘shared community values.’

In modern philosophy, Descartes distinguishes between common sense and good sense, by which he means the ‘power of forming a good judgement and distinguishing the true from the false’ (Descartes 1637, 3). Common sense is thus replaced by the assertion of a universal, *a priori* good sense that guarantees the accuracy of rational judgments. In his framework, reason becomes separated from what is spontaneously or commonly known, and objectivity is achieved through a process of doubting one’s own senses and judgments. As a separation emerges between the thinking subject and the world, modern epistemology seeks to understand the role of common sense in the process of cognition, either as an ally of reason or as an enemy of knowledge.

In contrast, the Scottish empiricists define common sense as the foundational basis of all knowledge, a basis that is derived *a posteriori* from experience of the world. Thus, according to this position, the most widely held beliefs are justified if they are not refuted. As argued by van Woudenberg, Peels and de Ridder (2020), ‘Thomas Reid, for instance, delineated common sense beliefs as beliefs that are not only widely held but also have properties such as that their denials are absurd, that they are not believed on the basis of investigation, and that they are foundational to practices that humans are ineluctably engaged in’ (van Woudenberg, Peels and de Ridder 2020, 1). Common sense is therefore defined as ‘the ordinary ability to prevent ourselves from being deceived by gross contradictions, palpable inconsistencies and unmasked impostures’ (Geertz 1975, 26 as cited in Leach 2023). With the advent of the natural sciences, an epistemological break is instituted between common sense and objective knowledge/science.

As Whitehead argues, ‘The development of natural science has gradually discarded every single feature of the original common-sense notion. Nothing whatever remains of it considered as expressing the primary features in terms of which the universe is to be interpreted. The obvious common-sense notion has been entirely destroyed as far as its function as the basis for all interpretation is concerned. One by one, every element has been dethroned, (Whitehead 1934, 14–15).

In the dominant modern scientific conception, true knowledge is therefore set in opposition to common sense, regarded as a repository of preconceived judgements and ideas, and is thus supposed to transcend it. It is in the transcending of common sense that legitimate knowledge is supposed to be found. Whereas common sense is situated, inherited, and therefore limited, ‘knowledge’, and, more specifically, scientific or ‘legitimate’ knowledge is conceived as objective and universal.

In this view, common sense is therefore regarded as the knowledge of ordinary people. In contrast to this epistemological perspective that promotes a disembodied, and therefore supposedly objective or neutral form of knowledge, Isabelle Stengers in her book *Making Sense in Common: A Reading of Whitehead in Times of Collapse* (Stengers 2023) argues that the rehabilitation of the notion of common sense calls for recognition of the embodied, situated and collective nature of knowledge, in both its epistemological and political dimensions.

Political positions

Politically, the same differences of perspective apply to the role that common sense should play in the sphere of political participation.

Kant, for example, rejected common sense in the political sphere, and dismissed ‘the magic wand of common sense’, as ‘one of the subtle discoveries of modern times, by means of which the most superficial ranter can safely enter the lists with the most thorough thinker and hold his own’ (Kant 1783, 7 as cited in Leach 2020). Gramsci is highly critical of common sense, which he regards as an unsystematic mixture of philosophical ideas lacking coherence or rigour. He argues that common sense is historically variable rather than fixed, functioning as a kind of philosophical ‘folklore’ that takes different forms across time and social contexts. For Gramsci, its defining traits are precisely its fragmentation and inconsistency, reflecting the everyday worldview of the masses rather than any unified or consequential conception of reality (Gramsci 1929–35, as cited in Leach 2023).

These philosophical perspectives show that the very nature of common sense is deeply contested. Philosophers position it either as an *a priori* faculty or as an *a posteriori* capacity grounded in experience, and these divergent accounts often depend on broader assumptions about scientific reason and the modern separation between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. It is this division between the subject and the object of knowledge that Arendt, who, in my view, resonates deeply with Stengers’s arguments on this point, calls into question by redefining common sense as something that is co-constitutive of our relationship with the world, through a phenomenological and aesthetic approach whose implications are at once epistemological, political and ontological.

Towards a phenomenological approach to common sense

According to Borren, Arendt understands common sense as the prereflective, intuitive grasp of the world that underlies and enables all explicit forms of understanding, including scientific and philosophical reflection:

We always have an immediate, intuitive, implicit, and non-reflective understanding of the things, events, and other people in the world. Explicit, reflective understanding, including philosophical and scientific understanding, is rooted in this prior implicit understanding, that is, in pre-suppositions, or, in hermeneutic terms, the ‘fore-structure’ of understanding. What explicit understanding does is to ‘articulate and confirm what preliminary understanding...sensed to begin with. (Borren 2013, 240)

According to Borren’s reading of Arendt, common sense is what makes experience possible in the first place: ‘Common sense enables experience; reversely, when common sense is destroyed, we lose the capacity for experience’ (Borren 2013, 240).

Neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori*, common sense, in Arendt's view, therefore, has an integrative effect and is constitutive of the world (Borren 2013, 239). In this sense, she challenges the distinction between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, 'like human existence in general, common sense is co-original with the world and hence challenges any dualism, both ontologically and epistemologically – between subject and object' (Borren 2013, 227).

Here she echoes Stengers, whose definition of common sense challenges the foundational dualisms of modern thought: science versus opinion, objectivity versus subjectivity.

Arendt, quoted in Borren's work, writes from this same perspective, 'The scientific ideal of objectivity implies that the scholar – or more generally the one who judges – is a disengaged observer who remains external to the subject matter she studies or tries to make sense of while applying a method that is equally detached from the subject matter' (Borren 2013, 243). As Borren argues, Arendt

holds that absolute, that is, non-situated objectivity would imply an untenable abstraction from differences and is thus incompatible with the fundamental fact of plurality. (Borren 2013, 243)

This position has important political implications. The issue of plurality, and the coexistence of different perspectives and realities, lies at the heart of the question of the common. This is particularly important against a backdrop of the systematic destruction of shared resources and public goods (water, rivers, land) in the context of capitalist privatisation, as well as the individualisation of societies, the reduction of civic spaces, and the fragmentation of social relations. Arendt argues that it is common sense that makes democracy possible and that it is the decline of common sense, which she associates with the growing social isolation of individuals, that paves the way for ideological thinking (Arendt 1951, as cited in Borren 2013, 244).

Stengers similarly argues that the crisis we are currently facing, which is as much epistemological as it is political, does not require supposedly 'objective' or 'neutral' experts to resolve or arbitrate political differences and disagreements. From both an epistemological and a political perspective, she argues that creating shared meaning involves establishing mechanisms rather than arbitrating disagreements from above, so as to enable people to reflect on their differences, to view them collectively, and, through this process, to develop the capacity to understand the perspective from which the other person is speaking.

In this context, common sense can be seen as a generative mechanism enabling us to engage in dialogue as citizens about shared resources and common problems in order

to produce knowledge in a more public and collaborative manner, and as a way of making society. How should we conceive of what is common? This is not merely an epistemological or political problem but an ontological one: how do we relate to one another and to our shared habitats, resources, and ways of life? How can we ground our politics and our science in the material world we share as opposed to the disembodied and fragmented relationships engendered by late modernity and neoliberalism?

Indeed, the question of common sense concerns our ability to ground ourselves in the material world in which we live. Arendt emphasises that common sense is an 'earth-bound faculty' (Arendt 1961, 273 as cited in Borren 2013, 245). She argues that '(totalitarian) ideology specialises in making up rational (logical) truth which it subsequently projects onto history and nature, in particular by means of propaganda. Thus, it starts to deactivate our sensory relation to the physical world and to coerce factual reality – which it disdains – to conform to its rules' (Borren 2013, 229).

This argument echoes what David Abram suggests, namely that the animated earth, that is, the earth itself, its forms and the relationships that run through it, is the environment in which our senses have been shaped, where our experiences of the world are woven and resonate, and where meaning emerges (Abram 1996, 91). In many ancestral traditions, cosmological narratives passed down from generation to generation in the form of stories are inextricably linked to the earth, to geography, and to the more-than-human world, constituting situated modes of knowledge, embedded in living landscapes, and imbued with temporalities that precede us.

In her work on common sense in dialogue with Alfred North Whitehead, Stengers similarly emphasises the need to reinterpret the natural world not as a passive object, but as a complex network of non-human agents actively participating in the making of the world (Stengers 2023). It is therefore a matter of reintroducing these non-human beings into the processes of knowledge production, not as passive entities, but as active participants in the production of meaning.

Common sense therefore involves an aesthetic process, one that involves the senses and the material world, or the habitats in which we live. In other words, creating shared meaning outside the fragmented framework of modernity requires a speculative practice that seeks to activate new forms of perception and relationship to the world and to one another.

The role of imagination and the senses

As Stengers argues, philosophy must reconcile our everyday experience (common sense) with speculation and creativity (imagination), in order to prevent science and thought from becoming detached from human experience, thereby restoring meaning to the world (Stengers 2023, 9). Following Whitehead, Stengers emphasises that the challenge here lies in forging a bond between imagination and common sense. Furthermore, she argues that the power of imagination lies in its capacity to conceive of alternatives. Whilst the modern, capitalist project presents itself as the only rational possibility, it is urgent for us to co-create alternative political imaginaries.

This resonates with Arendt's own account of the role of imagination in common sense, as presented by Borren. Arendt argues that imagination enables us to step back from our immediate emotions and sensory impressions, allowing what is no longer present to remain available to thought. This distancing is what makes critical self-thinking, or *Selbstdenken*, possible (Borren 2013, 241). She also maintains that imagination allows us to bring the absent into view and to 'enlarge one's mentality' by considering the plurality of perspectives that others might hold (Borren 2013, 241). On this basis, Arendt contends that the validity of common sense judgments is intersubjective: a form of situated impartiality grounded in representativeness (Borren 2013, 244).

Common sense is therefore inherently aesthetic in that it is a sensory faculty which shapes our relationship with the world. Because it operates at the level of perception, affect, and embodied understanding, it opens a space in which imagination can intervene and transform how things appear to us. Artistic practice works precisely within this sensory and imaginative field. By engaging and reconfiguring our modes of perception, art generates new ways of sensing and thus new ways of making sense of the world collectively.

Case Study

Methodology

In this article, I explore imagination in artistic practice and play as methods of epistemic inquiry and as key aspects in the activation of common sense. This article does not treat the arts as an illustration of a theoretical argument but as a field in which to examine how sensory, speculative, and playful practices contribute in concrete terms to the construction of common sense. Faced with the loss of our connections to the living world and our relationship with ancestry as a reservoir of collective knowledge, a reservoir that modernity has systematically destroyed, artistic practices emerge as epistemic resources. Indeed, being speculative in nature, I would ar-

gue that they open up a space enabling us to reactivate forms of listening, to reconstitute our relationships with the world, and to imagine new cosmologies in order to rebuild in the wake of the current disaster.

This article explores the following question: What might the creation of shared meaning through embodied, sensory practices look like in practice? Under what conditions can artistic methodologies support the co-creation of relational, intergenerational, and more-than-human forms of knowledge capable of responding to the challenges posed by damaged territories and worlds in crisis? We will explore how an artist-in-residence programme can function as a laboratory for co-inquiry, as a way of fostering a shared understanding. To this end, we will examine both the unfolding of the art residency and some of the works created by the artists taking part in it, using these as material for our analysis.

This research draws on the case study of New Futures Arts Collaborative (Johannesburg and online, March – June 2025), a four-month residency bringing together sixteen artists from diverse national, generational, and cultural backgrounds. Implemented by Initiatives of Change USA with Collective Webs, Exploring Visual Cultures Project, and Art Africa Magazine, the residency examined the conditions under which a shared sense can emerge amid ecological, social, and epistemic crises. Through embodied research, collective learning, and artistic creation, participants explored mining both as a material practice of extraction and as a metaphor for modes of existence based on possession and exploitation, while collectively speculating on plural, collaborative ways of living beyond this narrative.

The enduring presence of imperial and neo-colonial powers, coupled with ongoing forms of ecocide and genocide on a global scale, framed the thematic contours of the New Futures program. In this context, the program approached mining not solely as a material practice of extraction but also as a metaphor for a broader mode of existence rooted in accumulation, separation, and exploitation. In response to the urgent need to radically reimagine human relations with land, labour, and each other, the programme was conceived as a space for young and emerging artists to collectively engage with mining as both historical condition and contemporary reality. Through interdisciplinary methods, artists were invited to interrogate extraction as a material, symbolic, and systemic phenomenon, and to explore the potential of artistic practices as tools of resistance, mobilisation, and world-making. Johannesburg was selected as the central site for the programme due to its historical and ongoing entanglement with mining. Built upon the gold mining industry, the city provided a critical context for *in situ* learning. Its landscape, both physical and socio-political, offered a living archive through which participants could engage with the legacies of extraction and their contemporary reverberations.

Context

As a short historical context to Johannesburg, the city has been shaped by global flows of labour, capital, and extraction. It emerged as a product of globalisation, drawing people, resources, and investments from across the world. In this sense, Johannesburg can be understood as a profoundly cosmopolitan metropolis, one whose diversity is inseparable from histories of exploitation and displacement. The city's integration into the global economic system began with the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand in 1886. Following the Anglo-Boer War, British colonial forces took control of the region's gold deposits and rapidly expanded mining operations. Johannesburg and its gold mines soon became central to the world economy, particularly at a time when gold underpinned international monetary systems and served as the basis of global currency (Johnstone 1976). In the early phases of Western capitalism, South Africa's goldfields attracted massive flows of capital and people from Europe and beyond. Johannesburg became a nodal point of global migration, drawing miners, engineers, bankers, lawyers, journalists, adventurers, fortune-seekers, and displaced populations from across the world. Johannesburg became the nodal point of major immigration, attracting people from every part of the world: 'Australian miners, Scottish and American engineers, bankers, lawyers, adventurers, gamblers, schemers, criminals and fortune hunters, journalists, sex workers, refugees, thousands of impoverished eastern Europeans, Frenchmen, Italians and Greeks' (Mbebe 2004, 378).

Johannesburg's rapid growth is a story of forced globalisation, as capital and expertise flowed in from Europe and settler colonies, Black populations were systematically dispossessed of land and autonomy. Migration into the city was not chosen: for many Africans, movement was compelled by land loss, taxation, and the destruction of subsistence economies. The mining economy relied on the production of poverty and on a racialised labour regime that rendered Black life cheap, temporary, and replaceable. Racial separation was not incidental but structural: mining shaped Johannesburg as a city fundamentally divided along lines of race and class. As Martin Murray observes, the city continues to stage extreme oppositions between rich and poor, Black and white (Murray 2011). Despite the formal end of apartheid, the integration of South Africa into neoliberal global capitalism has not dismantled these dynamics. Racialised inequality remains deeply entrenched. Today, white South Africans, who constitute roughly 10% of the population, continue to own approximately 73% of the country's farmland, revealing the persistence of colonial power relations in post-apartheid South Africa (South African Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2017). Johannesburg thus stands as both a symbol of global connectivity and a landscape marked by the unresolved legacies of extraction, dispossession, and racial capitalism.

It is in this fractured landscape that the residency unfolded, with the aim to critically engage with the historical harms and the colonial legacies present in the social relations and in the landscape itself. The residency was constituted of a phase of online research, followed by two weeks of in-person learning, accompanied with site visits, followed by two weeks of creation. Participants were invited to engage with sites, institutions, and landscapes that embody the material and historical traces of colonial extractivism.

New Futures Art Residency

During the residency, artists are encouraged to share space, time, and resources and to work together across differences in age, cultural references, languages, and political positions. These differences produce friction, disagreements, and misunderstandings, which become an integral part of the process. As Stengers says, 'Living with one another requires imagination' (Stengers 2023). The residency begins with a process of asking the participants, artists, facilitators, organisers, and guests to come together and co-imagine shared agreements. These shared agreements are a space of negotiation of values, interests, and fears to welcome the moments of divergence that will emerge. The residency rests the premise of co-existence with 'others' on the creation of a shared ground in order for us test other ways of relating to one another as if in a laboratory, a micro-ecosystem, which could serve as a possible example of how transformation may look on a larger scale.

The questions explored during the first phase of the residency were as follows: How can we articulate shared problems? How can we recognise different identities and different power relations whilst moving beyond them, not towards a shared political vision, but towards a vision of a shared future?

The residency's first two weeks were conceptualised as learning phases guided by the facilitation of Dr David Anderson Hooker, which drew on narrative change methodologies, including Causal Layered Analysis. Within this framework, Sohail Inayatullah conceptualises the 'litany' (Inayatullah 1998) level as the surface at which tensions manifest as competing narratives of lived experience, often appearing fragmented, contradictory, or irreconcilable. However, as the process unfolded, deeper layers, systems, worldviews, and myths began to surface, revealing that these disagreements were not merely personal but structurally and historically produced. One of the key elements that enabled differences to coexist productively was the intentional creation of structured spaces for dialogue grounded in the shared agreements, to ensure that each participant could speak, be questioned, and be heard, under the assumption of good intentions. Rather than seeking the reaching of a consensus, the process privileged sustained engagement with difference.

The main point of this methodology is not to agree but to understand where the other is speaking from, as a step towards creating an understanding on how to share space, which is a key aspect of Stengers's understanding of common sense as well.

Example 1: Interaction with the landscape of the city

One could argue that forms of collective meaning making across cultures, ages, and race and gender identities is inherently an intergenerational question, as each individual is shaped by, and inherits privileges and discriminations, but also norms and values based on centuries of historical processes. The position one occupies in the present, but also our specific ways of moving in the world, depends on where we come from and is the product of specific and sedimented histories which precede us. How do these legacies interact, respond to one another, and shape our capacity or difficulties in relating to one another?

This question became particularly tangible in the context of the New Futures residency due to the specificity of the history of Johannesburg, layered in racial and colonial issues. Each of us, depending on our inherited position, had a very different and sometimes colliding experience of the city, and this brought frictions and disagreements. This invited the group to reflect on the ways in which each of us moves our body in the public space, how we interact with the urban landscape, and with the people that inhabit it. This experience furthermore asked us how to navigate the heritage of oppressions and of sedimented cultural narratives which we embody, which constitute us, which shape our ways of being and relating with the world in order to understand where the 'other' is speaking from.

Engaging with the city was an important part of the collective process of creating common sense. While gender dynamics significantly shape the experience of the city, both during the day and at night, often rendering it unsafe for women to walk alone, whiteness also profoundly conditions mobility within Johannesburg. This is due to the enduring socio-economic and racial legacies of Apartheid, which continue to distribute privilege and vulnerability along racial lines.

The participants' experiences of the city diverged markedly according to their gender, racial identities, cultural backgrounds, and socio-economic habitus. The shared art studio and working space was located at a twenty-minute distance from the hostel facilities, which were both situated in downtown Johannesburg. Some artists decided to walk from the hostel to the studio every day, while others felt unable to do so. These differences generated moments of friction and disagreement regarding how to inhabit and move through urban space, how unsafety is perceived, and how inequality is recognised. What emerged during the weeks of the residency

was not a shared reading of reality, but rather a confrontation between multiple, and at times conflicting, understandings of the structural conditions shaping the city.

An illustrative example of this process can be found in the artwork developed collaboratively by four artists: Morgana Mafra (Brazil), Ngugi Waweru (Kenya), Parimah Avani (Iran), and Isis Medeiros (Brazil). The research process and resulting video performance emerged from the participants' contrasting experiences of walking in Johannesburg and from the entanglements of race and gender in shaping these experiences.

Filmed on a gold mine dump in Southwest Township of Johannesburg, the work, titled *Spiraled Landscapes*, features two of the artists, a white woman and a Black man, physically connected at the waist by a piece of fabric. Each body simultaneously leans into the fabric as a point of support while attempting to move inde-



Spiraled Landscapes, Morgana Mafra, Isis Medeiros, Parimah Avani, Ngugi Waweru, Johannesburg, 2025, Video performance

pendently. As their movements unfold, the fabric twists progressively, drawing their bodies closer together.

Example 2: the Soweto mine dumps

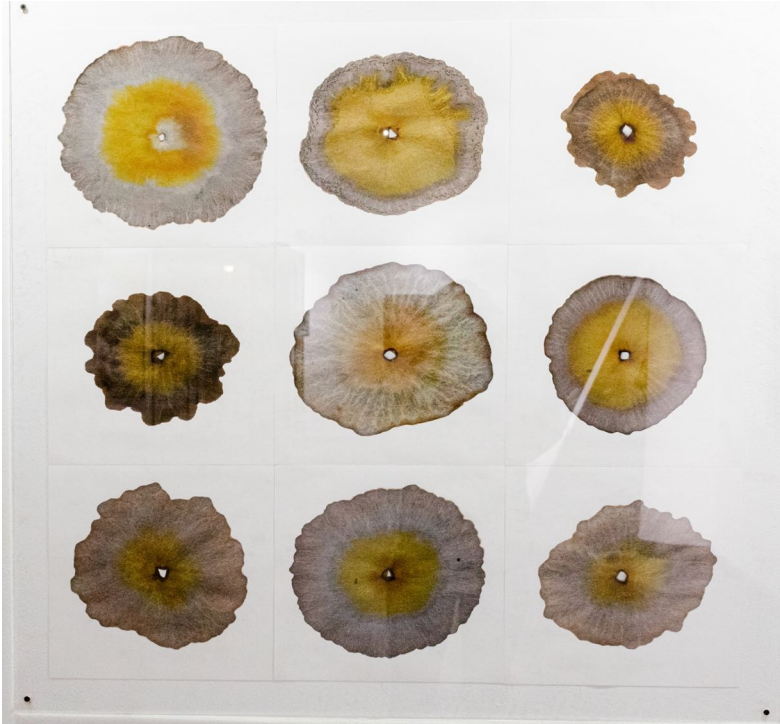
Soweto is a site of entangled histories that sharply reflects the dynamics of colonial extraction and the environmental destruction driven by the pursuit of gold. It is also a place of resistance: a key locus of struggle against apartheid, where Nelson Mandela once lived, and where the 1976 Soweto Uprising saw thousands of Black school students mobilise against the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction. The protests were met with brutal police repression, including the killing of young protesters such as Hector Pieterse, whose death became an enduring symbol of the violence of the apartheid regime. Today, Soweto remains largely inhabited by socio-economically marginalised communities and sits alongside vast mine dumps, remnants of decades of gold extraction that surround Johannesburg. These dumps, composed of toxic mining residues, release polluted dust that is carried by the wind into nearby neighbourhoods, contributing to respiratory and other chronic illnesses among residents.

The specific mine dump we visited as part of the New Futures programme spills into a water source and a river bordered by sites of worship, sacred within local ancestral spiritual traditions and still important places of worship today. At the same time, it is also a playground where children run, play, and swim. The landscape itself is visually striking: a canyon of toxic sands in shades of gold, ochre, and occasional blue, where vegetation struggles to grow.

We were accompanied a local guide from Soweto, Masike Lebele, who grew up playing on these mine dumps. Through stories of his childhood, he led us across this terrain, weaving together personal memory with broader social, political, and environmental histories, including the illnesses affecting local communities. In encountering these ecological ruins of gold extraction, the artists began engaging with the site in diverse ways, using artistic practices and play as methods for listening to the landscape and imagining possible responses.

Bringing the body to such a site is a sensory experience of the legacies of colonial extraction. Leaving the site after a few hours, our bodies retained its effects, a tightness in the chest and throat as lingering traces of exposure to toxicity.

Turkish artist Nilra Zoraloglu collected soil samples and employed an ancient agricultural technique that allows the soil to speak about itself. Through a chemical process, the components of the soil react to produce visual 'portraits' of the landscape, generating forms and colours that reflect its composition. Through this process, the soil reveals its history, its layers, its contamination, and the long-term effects of extractive practices. These soil portraits offer a sensory and visual way of understanding



Soil Portraits: Traces of Extraction, Nilra Zoraloglu, Johannesburg, 2025. Print Series: 18 x 15 cm x 15 cm. Fine art impression.

how colonialism and extractivism shape the material qualities of land, leaving us with altered terrains that we must now learn to inhabit and respond to.

Performance also became a key mode of engagement. Brazilian performance artist Morgana Mafra guided the group through a collective action in which we touched, rolled, ran, and moved across the mine, our bodies becoming the wind that carries and disperses the polluted sands. Here, play and performance became forms of embodied research, allowing us to engage the landscape beyond historical, scientific, or visual data alone.

This embodied experience invited us to consider how the landscape responds to our movements, and how our individual and collective actions, in turn, imprint it. The performance evolved into an act of tentative repair. Guided by visual artist Juji and Morgana, and in collaboration with our guide and a local initiative supporting artisanal miners' transition toward agroecology, the group created and dispersed seed



Pele Da Terra, Juji & Morgana Mafra, Johannesburg, 2025. Video Performance.

bombs made from plants such as hemp whose regenerative qualities hold the possibility of restoring the polluted soil. Our guide, Masike Lebele became involved in the project and became a performer as well.

Discussion

These works question the way in which these landscapes, mined soils, abandoned infrastructures, and inhabited ter-

ritories contribute to the process of artistic creation, but also to the activation of common sense, not as simple backdrops, but as morethanhuman agents carrying memories and long temporalities. More broadly, the New Futures Arts Collaborative study raises the following question: under what conditions can artistic methodologies support the cocreation of relational, intergenerational, and morethanhuman knowledge capable of responding to the challenges posed by damaged territories and worlds in crisis?

The choreographic work presented above is a sensitive example of this process. This artistic research of the artists, taking into account their different realities, is a way for them to understand the entanglement of what is created as binary: Men/Women; Black/White, and to navigate this field of tension, and to reveal their coconstitutive nature. At the same time, the work gestures toward the broader historical and economic conditions within which these bodies are situated. The twisting tension of the fabric evokes the ways in which bodies are entangled within capitalist extractivist systems, systems that continue to extract value unevenly along racialised and gendered lines.

Thus, the weaving of commonality cannot be conceived outside of these legacies. It is inseparable from the histories of colonial extraction that have shaped both the urban landscape of Johannesburg and the conditions of encounter within it. The city itself becomes an active participant in this relational field, both a site of fracture and a ground upon which new forms of coexistence may be tentatively rehearsed.

Throughout the unfolding of the residency, we observed how the creation of commonality occurred in the encounter of multiple trajectories and perspectives, including that of the landscape of Johannesburg, and modified the group as a whole, in the

affective, emotional and sociopolitical layers. Here, one could use a biological metaphor, looking at the relational fabric that connects us to each other and to the world. The confrontation of points of view gives rise to a new relational ecology, which in turn modifies individual perspectives. This reciprocal movement engenders another regime of imagination, an imagination that no longer seeks to be right by proving that the other is wrong, but which exercises itself in the ability to deal with plurality and invent forms of coexistence.

This echoes Stengers's definition of common sense of as 'an attitude of thought consisting in recognising the fact that we share the world with other beings whose positions and claims are often incompatible with ours'. Crucially, it 'does not refer to any particular content of knowledge'; what is common is instead an interest in 'the way in which others make their world matter...in the story of other ways of living, in the experience of all that belongs to the possible' (Stengers 2015, 200).

As an attitude, common sense expresses a sense of the common: a turn of mind capable of 'a transformation of divergences into as many dimensions intertwined by the situation itself', a situation to which one must consent without reducing it to a single problem or predetermined solution (Stengers 2017, 198). In other words, it is a capacity to involve oneself in a shared world, sustaining one's own claims while confronting the ongoing task of making them coexist with those of others.

This, therefore, confronts humans with all the other beings that populate the Earth: 'There is nothing incongruous in the fact that other beings, who do not speak but are part of the shared situation, participate in the problematisation. For they participate through the mode of inflection of statements that their presence provokes. To speak in the presence of, [...] is, constrained by this presence, to speak otherwise. For even if its presence is mute, what is made present listens, and its listening obliges one to slow down, to feel what should not have been felt, to let oneself be touched, that is to say modified, by an experience that activates the tentacular character of the situation' (Stengers 2017, 200).

The soil portraits of Soweto by the artist Nilra Zoraloglu exemplify how the arts can create ways of reconfiguring the sensible, where art practice places itself in relation or dialogue with the other forms of life that constitute our habitats and the fabric of our material existence, here the matter of the mined soil, which responds to our actions. This moment spent in the ruins of Soweto, and the different forms of artistic interactions that emerged there, allowed the artists to expose themselves to what is common, and to weave together political and relational ties, not only with the landscape, but also with its human and nonhuman inhabitants. These practices demonstrate how art can function as a form of epistemic inquiry as well as political en-

gement, opening ways of relating to landscapes shaped by colonial extraction that go beyond the fixed frameworks of modern epistemology.

This encounter thus became a process of collective sense-making, through the senses, the body, and speculation, with the soil as an active agent, and with the human communities that inhabit it. Knowledge, or sense-making, emerges here through encounter and relationality: in the openness to listen, to receive, and to translate experience through artistic imagination. It is ultimately materialised in forms that can be seen, felt, and shared with others.

It thus appears that a key dimension of common sense is a capacity for listening, that is to say, a position of openness to receive and be affected, which occurs below or before ideological positioning. As argued by Sjoerd van Tuinen (2019), common sense ‘contains an interstitial alterity, which enables it to evolve and reinvent itself. Although common sense generally does not appear as a very advanced stage of cognition such as that of natural science, critical philosophy, or avantgarde art, it is no less complex. This is because unlike good sense, which is self-sufficient and therefore tends to simplicity, common sense has a multiple relational constitution’ (Van Tuinen 2019, 145). While scientific reason and critical philosophy aim for coherence, universality, and methodological clarity, common sense operates differently; it is constituted through the ongoing negotiation of multiple perspectives, practices, and forms of life. From an epistemological point of view, Stengers’s notion of common sense is generative because it allows us to problematise/compost the binaries inherited from modernity: science/opinion, knowledge/emotion, objectivity/affects, science/politics.

In other words, common sense is activated in our capacity to be affected and to enter in relation with others, as well as with our habitats: ‘A reorientation of our critical habits implies an initiation into a new sensibility to the vulnerability of our habitats as much as into the possibility of collective transmutations in which we learn how to inhabit the earth together’ (Van Tuinen 2019, 149).

What I wish to demonstrate is that such a collective and relational process induces new forms of political subjectivity. Political subjectivation begins when individuals recognise themselves as part of a shared world, one populated by heterogeneous claims, incompatible perspectives, and other beings whose presence modifies how things can be said or done. In this sense, common sense is not merely a cognitive faculty but a political one as well, enabling subjects to orient themselves among others, to negotiate divergences, and to let their own positions be affected by what the situation makes present. This responsiveness is what allows individuals to shift from private judgment to intersubjective judgment, and from isolated opinion to participation in a shared situation.

Furthermore, the artistic works produced during the residency make visible the intergenerational dimension of common sense. They show that we do not encounter the world as a blank perceptual field, as we inherit landscapes, sedimented layers of history, and established ways of perceiving and understanding. These inheritances materialise in the habitats that surround us, our built environments, ecosystems, infrastructures, and also in us, through the positions we occupy within structures of power, through our embodied ways of moving in places such as Johannesburg, and through our habitual modes of seeing. As Stengers argues, the current polycrisis is not a story of progress gone wrong, but the legacy of a disaster, which was contained and understood in what modernity destroyed in its unfolding. As the project of modernity was built on colonial exploitation, slavery, and the objectification and exploitation of nature and the destruction of ecosystems, it contained from its beginnings the disaster that is unfolding before our eyes in the present. As she argues, and here she meets the philosopher Anna Tsing (Tsing 2015), thinking from the ruins of the current system therefore involves reformulating our problems, not from an abstract future, but from what has been passed down to us (Stengers 2023). It is a matter of composting the narratives, ideologies, structures, values, and norms we have inherited in order to think about a different future. In epistemological terms, this means that common sense is a transmissive and transformative process, as something shaped by past generations and continually reworked by present ones. Thus, making sense in common 'is to open up the gap between the past we inherit and the future to which we contribute our own difference in order to inhabit a thicker, ongoing present full of unexpected individuations' (Van Tuinen 2019, 145).

Conclusion

Returning to the initial questions, the relevance of engaging with common sense today, as thought by Isabelle Stengers, lies in its potential to become a shared ground from which meaning can be negotiated, and problems reformulated from an embodied and affective place. In times of polycrisis, the challenge that is posed to knowledge and science is to reconsider who is able to participate in framing the questions and how these questions are shaped by lived experience, perception, and relationality. This means that knowledge is produced in a political process of encounter and is situated rather than abstract and disconnected from the lived realities of the concerned participants, both human and non-human.

The New Futures residency suggests that common sense is not fixed, neither a *a priori* or a constructed faculty but something that has to be continuously woven, emerging through encounters between generations, disciplines, and more-than-human worlds. By engaging mined landscapes, abandoned infrastructures, and inhabited territories as active agents of memory and temporality, the process of research and

creation became a place to question time as it is connected to knowledge, acknowledging the precedence of the earth and the soil, and questioning the linear chronology of modern epistemology. From this perspective, intergenerational dialogue is not merely about transmission, but about the co-existence of multiple temporalities entangled in the problems of the present.

Artistic methodologies appear to be a fertile ground for the activation of common sense by enabling the creation of shared meaning beyond the constraints of rational or ideological frameworks. Art operates at the level of the senses, shaping perception before language stabilises interpretation. In doing so, it opens a space where disagreement does not need to be resolved in order for coexistence to occur. This suspension of fixed positions allows for the emergence of a common ground as a fragile agreement to remain in relation. To engage with common sense, then, is to reclaim the political dimension of shared life, as an ongoing practice of sensing, negotiating, and transforming our ways of being with others, human and more-than-human alike.

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Living Technologies and Ancestral Memory: A Transdisciplinary Study of Seeds in Intergenerational Future Co-Creation

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Abstract: This paper aims to weave reflections around relational practices of micro-regeneration and eco-democracy through the micropolitics of seeds and their strategies for inhabiting fractured worlds. It conceptualises seeds as living technologies and relational agents in intergenerational dialogue and future co-creation processes. Particularly interested in pioneer species that grow in toxic, desertified, or post-extractive landscapes, it approaches seeds as transitional matter and micro-archives of regeneration, carrying memory, adaptation, resilience, and futurity without contradiction. This inquiry is situated within a broader transitional crisis, in which the acceleration of extractive frontiers and the erosion of democratic institutions reveal a world already in the aftermath of irreversible change. Environmental collapse and democratic fragility are understood here as interconnected processes, produced by extractive systems that privilege control, certainty, and domination over relational practices. If the collapse is not ahead of us but already underway, the question becomes how to cultivate modes of living that sustain life in unstable, damaged, and uncertain conditions.

The paper presents and analyses an arts-based participatory protocol for engaging with seeds and examines how it can function as a somatic inquiry framework. Methodologically, the study is grounded in Art-Based Perceptual Ecology (ABPE) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). The protocols are structured through walking, deep listening, shared recording devices, seed investigation, and collective reflection, treating perception as embodied and relational. Through

¹ Juji is a neuroqueer artist and researcher from rural Minas Gerais whose practice spans sound, multi-media, and organic experimentation. Her work explores gradients and nuances beyond binary structures, informed by lived experience in environments shaped by heteronormativity and extractive economies. Her research on seeds as creative and political agents emerged through eco-political performances and residencies in Brazil, South Africa, and Patagonia Argentina, working with species capable of regenerating post-mined landscapes. Her work has been exhibited internationally, and she is currently engaged as both artist and facilitator in biennial and academic contexts. While her lived experiences are marked by environmental damage, social inequality, identity resistance, and political instability, her work does not begin from catastrophe. It is grounded in notions of affection, both as care and affect/being affected by, as resistance, and regeneration that allows life to be sustained under oppressive structures. From her ancestral roots, as non-binary artists of the Global South, she draws her work from decolonial, queer-feminist and eco-political thinkers, understanding the current global polycrises as what adrienne maree brown calls 'imagination battle', calling for small-scale practices of radical creativity where new horizons can be drawn towards living futures.

these practices, the protocols combine sensory engagement with territory and collaborative processes of inquiry. As a case study, the paper examines their application during the Third International Biennial of Río Negro, where the author facilitated a ten-day activation with intergenerational groups in the community of Valcheta, Argentine Patagonia.

Keywords: Micro-regeneration; seeds; arts-based participatory research; intergenerational dialogue; future co-creation

Introduction

The notion of micro-regeneration points to a politics of the fissure – a minimal transformation that resists total capture, standing in opposition to the extractivist logic of complete drainage. Paul B. Preciado frames contemporary extraction as a regime that turns living bodies and the planet into objects of capture – what he calls a ‘petrosexoracial regime of knowledge and power’ and the planetary ‘resistance... to be objectified as a capitalist commodity’ (2025, ‘I. Dysphoria mon amour’).

This paper aims to conceptualise seeds as living technologies and relational agents in intergenerational dialogue and future co-creation processes. These implications are intentionally outlined rather than fully developed. Their purpose is to mark a horizon for further inquiry: how seed-based participatory practices might cultivate intergenerational listening, how more-than-human relations might reframe democratic imagination, and how ecological, artistic, and situated forms of knowledge might contribute to practices of repair in damaged landscapes. Addressing these questions would require sustained comparative analysis across different territories, communities, and institutional settings, and therefore belongs to future research. Rather than proposing a comprehensive theory, this article approaches seeds as living technologies and relational agents in order to offer a provisional ethical and methodological framework for thinking about micro-regeneration and intergenerational future co-creation. Donna Haraway provides the seed-gesture that grounds this in a practice of renewal: ‘we need to reseed our souls and our home worlds in order to flourish’ (2016, p. 118), positioning sowing as a material and narrative act of re-composition against extractivist drainage.

To present an arts-based participatory protocol for engaging with seeds, this paper examines how such protocols may function as somatic frameworks for intergenerational and more-than-human inquiry. Methodologically, the study is first grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR), understood as a collaborative and cyclical process through which knowledge is generated with participants through action, observation, reflection, and renewed practice (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). PAR provides the participatory framework for the study because it refuses the separation between researcher, community, and process. The community is not approached as

an external object of analysis, but as part of the living field through which the inquiry takes form.

Within this participatory framework, Art-Based Perceptual Ecology (ABPE) operates as the artistic and perceptual mode through which PAR is activated. ABPE allows the study to foreground sensory attention, embodied experience, ecological observation, and artistic practice as modes of situated knowledge production (Woolery 2017). In this sense, the protocol becomes the mediating method between PAR and ABPE: it invites participants to engage with one another, with local seeds, and with more-than-human forms of life through arts-based perceptual practice. Through this activation, the study asks what becomes possible for intergenerational dialogue when participation is composed not only through speech, but through embodied relation with territory.

Empirically, this methodological framework is examined through a case study developed during the Third International Art Biennial of Río Negro in Valcheta, Argentine Patagonia. Over the course of a ten-day activation, the Municipal Green Nursery became the site for co-creating seed-based participatory protocols with local intergenerational groups. The broader research trajectory began through artistic engagement with mined landscapes in Soweto, South Africa, and continued in Valcheta, where walking, listening, shared recording devices, seed investigation, and collective reflection were activated as methods for somatic inquiry and micro-regenerative practice.

The sessions are organised through short, modular analytic units rather than a single continuous argumentative arc. This formal choice reflects the research process grounded in situated encounters, shared knowledge, and micro-regenerative practices. Each section advances a distinct layer of the argument while remaining relationally connected to the others, allowing the chapter to be read sequentially or approached selectively through its conceptual and empirical constellations. In this sense, the structure draws on experimental ways of writing that challenge assumptions of linearity and fixed form, preserving argumentative clarity through concise various sections. The aim is not fragmentation for its own sake, but a mode of composition adequate to the scale of the inquiry, where small units of analysis accumulate through resonance, juxtaposition, and return.

While this paper engages in the notion of dialogue across human and more-than-human worlds, it does not assume communicative equivalence between human language and non-human forms of existence. Rather, dialogue is approached here as a situated field of relation, response, and attention that emerges through embodied, mediated, and territorial practices. In this sense, the paper is less concerned with proving that seeds ‘speak’ than with examining how participatory protocols may

render partial, asymmetrical, and relational forms of co-presence perceptible. This framing resonates with Haraway's notion of response-ability, Kohn's call to think beyond the human without reducing meaning to human language, and Tsing's insistence that more-than-human sociality demands critical description rather than easy dialogue.

Stretching into Counter-Colonial Dialogues

Dialogue, in this article, is approached as a situated practice through which language, relation, and world-making are negotiated. This becomes especially important when the terms through which futures are named are already shaped by colonial and extractive vocabularies. Antônio Bispo dos Santos offers a precise entry point into this problem through what he calls a 'war of denominations'. In *A terra dá, a terra quer*, he recalls being asked by a researcher from Cape Verde how counter-colonisation could take place through the language of the enemy. His response is not to abandon language but to dispute its force: to weaken dominant colonial words that organise disconnection, and to strengthen words grounded in territorial, communal, and organic forms of life (Bispo dos Santos 2023, 3–4).

His critique of *desenvolvimento* [development] is particularly relevant here. For Bispo dos Santos, development is not a neutral term. It carries assumptions of progress, improvement, and sustainability while reproducing forms of separation from land, community, and living relations. Against this, he proposes *envolvimento* [involvement] as a more adequate term, condensed in his statement that 'a palavra boa é envolvimento' [the good word is involvement] (Bispo dos Santos 2023, 4, author's translation). This counter-colonial work of re-naming also appears in his replacement of sustainable development with *biointeração*, coincidence with *confluência*, synthetic knowledge with organic knowledge, transport with *transfluência*, money or exchange with sharing, and colonisation with counter-colonisation (Bispo dos Santos 2023, 3–4).

These substitutions do not operate as simple linguistic alternatives. They function as conceptual displacements that reorganise relations between language, territory, knowledge, and collective life. In this sense, dialogue is not only the exchange of ready-formed ideas, but also a struggle over the words that make certain worlds possible and others difficult to imagine. Meaning is negotiated across generations through the vocabularies that are inherited, contested, weakened, strengthened, and transmitted. Language is therefore itself an intergenerational matter: it carries orientations toward land, value, community, and futurity, shaping how people relate to one another and to the living world.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's reflection on naming extends this argument toward ecological memory. In 'Returning the Gift', she writes that 'Ethnobiologists tell us that our great-grandparents spoke fluent natural history. They knew the names and personalities of dozens of birds and hundreds emerging from a more-than-human community of life' (Kimmerer 2014, 20). Her argument suggests that the loss of ecological vocabulary is also the loss of relational memory. When the names of living beings disappear, what is weakened is not only information about species, but a whole mode of attention, kinship, responsibility, and transmission. Read alongside Bispo dos Santos, Kimmerer helps frame language as a counter-colonial and intergenerational practice: a way of carrying relations across time and of reactivating forms of belonging with land, seeds, and more-than-human life.

For the present study, this matters because seed-based protocols are also practices of re-naming and re-orienting relations. To approach seeds as living technologies is to challenge dominant vocabularies of development, innovation, repair, and sustainability, and to ask what other terms may emerge from situated encounters with territory, memory, and more-than-human life. The protocols do not treat dialogue as a neutral communicative exercise, but as a practice through which participants weave individual stories into living archives, connecting generations while challenging forms of silence produced by colonial, ecological, and epistemic rupture. By bringing children, elders, local workers, artists, and more-than-human presences into composition through listening protocols, dialogue becomes a mode of collective sense-making grounded in territory.

Viveiros de Castro's notion of controlled equivocation further clarifies this methodological position. It allows dialogue across human and more-than-human worlds to be approached without assuming transparency, equivalence, or full translation between different modes of existence. From this perspective, the limits of communication are not obstacles to relation but part of the relational field that must be carefully held, interpreted, and made accountable (Viveiros de Castro 2004). This is crucial for a counter-colonial understanding of dialogue because it resists the impulse to translate every difference into a single universal language.

Ingold's attention to materials also helps frame seeds beyond symbolic or inert matter. For Ingold, materials are not fixed substances with stable properties but processual beings whose qualities emerge through movement, weather, surface, substance, and flow (Ingold 2007). This supports the article's understanding of seeds as living technologies whose agency is not added from outside but emerges through relations of dormancy, dispersal, soil, climate, handling, and situated encounter. Seeds therefore enter dialogue not as metaphors alone but as material participants in the formation of memory, attention, and future possibility.

The following sections examine how this counter-colonial and more-than-human dialogic framework was activated in practice through participatory art protocols. In the case study developed during the ten-day process at the Municipal Green Nursery of Valcheta, Argentine Patagonia, walking, listening, seed engagement, shared recording devices, and collective reflection became methods for exploring what intergenerational dialogue can become when it is mediated by territory, living materials, and more-than-human presences.

Stretching into Seeds as Living Future and Ancestral Technologies

The equation of technology with the machine marks a decisive abstraction, one that detaches technicity from the metabolic, regenerative, and world-making processes of life. Escobar, Osterweil and Sharma argue for ‘returning technology to being part of Life by placing it at the service of multiple ways of worlding’ (in press, 9), displacing object-centred and dominant notions of technology in favour of forms oriented toward relation, care and plural world-making. Within this shift, technology is refigured as a practice of reconstitution, healing, and caring for the web of interrelations’ (in press, 15), while repair and regeneration are explicitly imagined as processes undertaken with ‘humans, non-humans, materials, landscapes, spirits, ancestors, water, seeds, and all kinds of tools and technologies’ (in press, 13–14).

This reorientation opens a ground for approaching seeds as living technologies. The concept of *autopoiesis*, as formulated by Maturana and Varela (1980), helps frame seeds within living dynamics of self-organisation, regenerative processes, and biological continuity. For Stefano Mancuso (2018), plants propose another model for thinking about the future, technology, ecology, and political systems. Their energetic autonomy, linked to cooperative and distributed architecture without centres of command, makes them capable of resisting repeated catastrophic events and adapting rapidly to major environmental changes. By foregrounding plants’ capacities to learn, memorise, and communicate, Mancuso opens another way of understanding intelligence, survival, and persistence. Read together, these perspectives allow seeds to be understood not as inert biological units but as living technologies whose self-organising capacities challenge dominant distinctions between matter, intelligence, and world-making.

Stretching into Fractured Worlds and Micro-Regeneration

This section situates micro-regeneration within fractured worlds shaped by extractive imaginaries of progress, development, and separation. The logic of contemporary

extractivist binarisms sustains a narrative of eternal progress, in which land, bodies, and more-than-human life are continuously converted into resources for economic and technological expansion.

Thought operates through the production of divisions: nature/culture, human/non-human, subject/object, body/territory, progress/ancestry, development/decay, innovation/memory. These binaries do not merely describe the world; they organise hierarchies of value. The same binary logic also reorganises time. Colonial futurity separates progress from memory, youth from elders, and innovation from ancestral transmission.

Against these separations, micro-regeneration emerges as a practice of recomposition. It does not seek to resolve fracture through a totalising unity, but to work within damaged worlds by reconnecting what colonial-extractive systems have violently divided. More is taken from the Earth to fuel innovations allegedly capable of saving us from the very crises that extraction has produced. The problem is therefore not only ecological, but also temporal: dominant Western narratives of development often imagine the future as a linear movement of growth, acceleration, and control.

Yet the Earth does not belong to this infinite chronology. It does not operate according to the abstract temporality of technological futurity but through finite, vulnerable, seasonal, and materially bounded cycles. From this perspective, fractured worlds are not only landscapes damaged by extraction, but worlds forced to live under temporal regimes that deny interdependence, decay, latency, and regeneration. Wark names this condition with precision: what remains is 'to build the new living world within the ruins of the old one' (2015, 134).

This need to transform the dominant imagination of the future resonates with Mapuche activist Moira Millán's response to the ongoing *terricidio*, or 'terricide': 'Necesitamos una revolución del pensamiento' [We need a revolution in our thought]. If dominant thought is implicated in terricide, then regeneration requires more than environmental repair. It requires a shift in perception, relation, and temporality: a movement away from seeing humans as external managers of the Earth and toward understanding human life as belonging to territories, ancestors, plants, waters, seeds, and the broader web of life.

Micro-regeneration emerges from this shift as a situated practice of endurance, re-seeding, and recomposition within damaged conditions. It does not name a total solution or a return to an untouched nature, but a way of working with fragments, cycles, and living materials in the aftermath of extraction. Haraway radicalises this horizon by insisting that 'recuperation is still possible, but only in multispecies alliance' (2016, 118). Together, these formulations frame micro-regeneration as a rela-

tional practice for inhabiting fractured worlds: not by escaping ruin but by cultivating the conditions through which life, memory, and future-making can continue within it.

Stretching into Participatory Art Protocols to Engage with Seeds: Sonic Walks

Protocols, in this study, are understood as situated methodological compositions that mediate relations between participants, territory, and more-than-human life. Operating through arts-based practice, they create conditions in which perception becomes shared, embodied, and responsive to place. Their role is not only to organise an activity but to hold open a field of inquiry where different generations can encounter one another through sensory attention, ecological imagination, and material engagement with seeds. In this sense, the protocol functions as a mediator for intergenerational dialogue. In this practice, the walking-and-listening protocol unfolded through a sequence of simple, yet layered actions guided by prompts: walking the territory, pausing to listen, passing a shared headphone and recorder between participants, handling local seeds, and exchanging verbal and non-verbal responses. These actions did not aim at extracting fixed meanings or producing consensus but at generating situated encounters through which participants could sense the nursery as a field of interdependence, tension, and uneven agency.

Grounded in Art-Based Perceptual Ecology and Participatory Action Research, the protocol treats inquiry as embodied, collaborative, and processual, combining sensory engagement with place and collective reflection on what becomes perceptible through walking and listening (Woolery 2017; Kemmis and McTaggart 2000). Listening is not approached here as a supplementary aesthetic layer, but as part of the methodological infrastructure of the inquiry itself. As Pauline Oliveros proposes in her practice of Deep Listening, the simultaneous activation of focal and global attention expands perception beyond the immediately visible and enables a more relational engagement with the environment (Oliveros 2010, 77). Within this framework, sonic attention becomes a way of approaching seeds not as inert objects but as material presences that inform biodiversity, adaptability, and future-making.

The protocol approaches it as a situated method of inquiry through which perception is activated in relation to territory, other participants, and more-than-human presences. Grounded in *Art-Based Perceptual Ecology* and *Participatory Action Research*, the protocol treats inquiry as embodied, collaborative, and processual. Developed together with the group, it unfolded through a series of guiding propositions structured around walking, deep listening, shared recording devices, seed investigation, and collective reflection. Through these propositions, participants were

invited to engage sensory attention, ecological observation, and verbal and non-verbal response as interconnected modes of inquiry.

Listening is approached here as part of the methodological infrastructure of the inquiry itself. In this sense, the protocol draws on Pauline Oliveros's practice of *Deep Listening*, particularly her proposition that 'Accessing both the focal and the global at once makes us Futurists too, both creators and recipients of the newness' (Oliveros, 2010, 23). This speculative aspect is central because it operates as a practice of myth-making: not as escapist fiction, but as a situated praxis that reconfigures the conditions of thought. By generating provisional narratives and 'as-if' worlds, speculative work opens space for alternative creative capacities and for questions that cannot emerge within dominant epistemic frames.

This orientation also resonates with Lisa Ann Schonberg's *Speculative Ecoacoustic Composition Systems (SECS)*, which offers a useful frame for thinking composition, listening, and ecological relation together (Schonberg 2025). In this context, sound is not treated as an ornamental addition to the work but as a relational medium through which environmental textures, more-than-human presences, and human participation co-compose the inquiry. The protocol unfolded through a sequence of simple but layered actions: walking the territory, pausing to listen, passing a shared recorder between participants, handling local seeds, and exchanging verbal and non-verbal responses. These actions did not aim at producing consensus or extracting fixed meanings but at generating situated encounters through which participants could sense the nursery as a field of interdependence, tension, and uneven agency.

Central to this process were the *participatory listening walks*, through which attention was oriented toward seeds, plants, wind, dust, silences, and the acoustic textures of the nursery. Here, sound did not function as a supplementary aesthetic layer but as the perceptual ground of the inquiry itself. As LaBelle argues, 'Sonic agency is therefore posed as a support structure for emancipatory practices, inserting into the sphere of dominant power an acoustics of social becoming and according to the rhythms and resonance that listening and being heard evoke' (LaBelle 2018, 21).

Case Study: Arts-Based Participatory Seed Protocols at the International Art Biennial of Río Negro, Patagonia, Argentina

This case study examines how engagement with local seeds operated as a framework for somatic inquiry during the ten-day activation of the Third International Art Biennial of Río Negro in Valcheta, Argentine Patagonia. The process unfolded in the Municipal Green Nursery through co-created actions with intergenerational local groups, gradually transforming the site into a space of artistic experimentation, situated learning, and public encounter. Grounded in Participatory Action Research

(PAR) and Art-Based Perceptual Ecology (ABPE), the inquiry did not begin with a fixed protocol to be implemented but with a set of open propositions shaped in relation to participants, workers, and the material conditions of the site.

During the ten-day activation, the author-facilitator was present at the Municipal Green Nursery in morning and afternoon shifts, making the listening walks available as an ongoing practice rather than a single scheduled workshop. The process took place in dialogue with nursery workers, who remained present in the greenhouses and contributed local knowledge about seeds, plants, and cultivation practices. The biennial's communication team announced the activation daily, which allowed spontaneous groups to join alongside scheduled school visits. As this was the third edition of the International Art Biennial of Río Negro, the local community was already familiar with the event and engaged with it as part of the cultural life of Valcheta. Participants therefore included school groups, local workers, artists, visitors, women artisans, queer participants, and community members of different ages. Across the ten days, the listening walks, sound recordings, seed handling, local seed bombs, poetic prompts, and the reactivation of the ruined school structure developed gradually as part of an open atelier. This format allowed the protocol to emerge through repeated encounters with the site and its engagement with the community.

The Valcheta case is examined here as a situated instance of dialogical practice. Its relevance does not lie only in the fact that different generations participated in the activation but in the way the protocol created conditions through which generational difference could become perceptible, negotiated, and materially mediated. The case allows the article to move from a conceptual discussion of seeds as living technologies toward an empirical reflection on how dialogue can be composed through shared attention, ecological memory, and embodied relation with place. Within this framework, dialogue is understood as a process through which meaning emerges across unequal positions, temporalities, and forms of knowledge, rather than as a neutral exchange between ready-formed subjects.

Read through Dialogue Studies, the protocol can be understood as a listening-based dialogical arrangement in which the shared recording device functioned as part of the methodological infrastructure of the inquiry. The recorder and headphones did not simply document the activation; they organised the conditions of attention through which participants encountered the nursery, one another, and the living materials of the site. As the device circulated among participants, listening became a situated and relational practice: each person temporarily occupied the position of listener, recorder, witness, and mediator of what the group might notice. This movement between focal attention and the wider acoustic field allowed seeds, plants,

wind, dust, silences, voices, and gestures to enter the process as part of the dialogical situation. In an intergenerational setting, the device also unsettled fixed positions of expertise, since attention could be guided by a child, a local worker, an artist, or an older participant at different moments. The sonic walks in this sense created a field in which perception could be slowed down, shared, and reoriented before becoming speech or interpretation. Through this practice, dialogue emerged as a situated process of listening-with, a way of composing attention across bodies, generations, materials, and possible futures. As LaBelle argues, ‘Sonic agency is therefore posed as a support structure for emancipatory practices, inserting into the sphere of dominant power an acoustics of social becoming and according to the rhythms and resonance that listening and being heard evoke’ (LaBelle 2018, 21). Through these listening practices, the nursery became legible not as backdrop, but as a relational field in which ecological processes, human gestures, and more-than-human presences could be encountered together.

Seeds became central to this inquiry as material presences through which memory, latency, adaptation, and future possibility could be collectively interpreted. Shiva’s formulation of the seed emphasises its capacity to carry biological and cultural memory while holding future potential: ‘Seed is autopoiesis’ (Shiva 2022). Haraway’s notion of *sympoiesis* allows this capacity to be understood within a wider field of relation, where living processes unfold through ‘making-with’, and where ‘nothing makes itself’ (Haraway 2016, 58). This framing is particularly relevant to the Valcheta activation because the protocol did not treat seeds as stable objects of knowledge. Their significance emerged through the relations they gathered and transformed: between generations, local ecological memory, the ruined school, the nursery, listening practices, and conversations about possible futures. The dialogical force of the protocol therefore lay in its capacity to create conditions for shared interpretation. Through seeds, dialogue became a situated practice of co-composition, in which participants engaged the territory and active condition of meaning, response, and future formation.

Read through this lens, local seeds mediated bodily attention, territorial memory, and situated relation. Particular importance was given to the *jarillas*, a group of resinous shrubs associated with arid Patagonia landscapes in Argentina, whose abundance in Valcheta made them a key point of orientation within the activation. Their presence helped situate the protocol within the ecological conditions of the Patagonian steppe, where plant life is shaped by dryness, wind, exposure, and cycles of scarcity. Rather than appearing as an isolated botanical element, the *jarillas* offered participants a concrete way of attending to the adaptive intelligence of the territory. Their smell, texture, scale, distribution, flowers, and seed structures invited closer observation, shifting attention away from abstract ideas of nature and toward the

specific forms through which living matter persists in place. Participants' responses were marked by curiosity, recognition, and imaginative engagement. For some, *jarillas* and local seeds reopened attention to species that had previously receded into the background of everyday life; for others, they activated memories, stories, and gestures tied to locality and embodied experience. Methodologically, these reactions were significant because they showed that the protocol did not merely communicate environmental information but activated perceptual conditions through which the territory became newly intelligible as a field of relation, memory, adaptation, and micro-regenerative possibility.

Figure 1 is included as methodological evidence of the embodied and mediated structure of the protocol. The images document forms of participation that are difficult to convey through verbal description alone: the circulation of the listening device, the proximity between hands and plants, the tactile engagement with seeds, and the attention given to local vegetal life. These gestures are central to the argument of the article because they show how dialogue was composed through bodily orientation, sensory mediation, and material relation. The accompanying online sound archive extends this documentation by gathering recordings and sonic collages produced across the days of activation with intergenerational groups, including layered voices, environmental textures, fragments of reflection, and the acoustic traces of shared movement through the nursery (Capanema Cruz, n.d.). Together, the visual and sonic materials document how intergenerational and more-than-human dialogue became practicable within the activation, as an embodied, mediated, and situated process of collective attention.



Figure 1. Participatory listening walks, tactile engagement with local seeds and jarillas, and the circulation of the shared recording device in the Municipal Green Nursery, Valcheta. [Source: author's photograph.]

The specificity of Valcheta was crucial to the formation of the protocol. The nursery was not a neutral site for participation but a layered environment marked by ecological adaptation, local knowledge, and histories of inhabitation. This became especially clear when community elders recognised that a ruined structure within the nursery had once housed the first school of Valcheta. The ruin reoriented the project's spatial and pedagogical logic. Together with nursery workers, visitors, and intergenerational groups participants, the space was gradually cleaned, reactivated, and transformed into an environment for experimentation, exchange, and exhibition. Listening walks, conversations with workers, the making of local seed bombs, and poetic engagements with local plants allowed the protocol to emerge through practice, in response to the textures, histories, questions for the future and relations of the site itself. By the end of the activation, the reconfigured nursery had also become the exhibition space for the final works, holding together process, co-creation, and public presentation within the same transformed environment.

The prompts for listening protocol took shape as a co-created set of guiding propositions developed over the course of the biennial through intergenerational encounters with school groups, women artisans, queer participants, nursery workers, agronomists, and artists ranging in age from 8 to 67. Emerging from author-led provocations and participants' engagement with the territory, the propositions were shaped as participants walked, listened, handled local seeds, observed textures, and exchanged poetic responses. A shared vocabulary of prompts gradually formed through collective attention, embodied experience, and the evolving conditions of the site. The prompts operated as a relational method grounded in movement, shared presence, and situated exchange. The instructions were originally developed in Spanish; the version that follows has been translated into English by the author.

- Hold a seed, jump across timelines.
- Find symbols in the leaves and remember them when you need them.
- Observatory body, biome body, vibrating body.
- Listen to everything all the time and remind yourself when you are not listening.
- Sync with microscopic listening.
- Seeds crack. When does memory begin?
- Listen with the palm of your hands.
- On the next inhale, prepare. Then make your first green sound on the exhale.

- Thank the sun.
- You stretch, you are very long, your arm gets longer, your arm...Lift your head up, the top of your head higher, even higher. The very top of your head loses its shape, lengthens, and comes out of your head. It is light.
- Unfold your feet, let your toes go.
- Trace decomposing. Trace composing.
- Look at the sky, the sun, and everyone.
- Zoom into chlorophyll, becoming centre from the inside.
- Notice the curve of an imagined seed, show it to someone.
- Find a plant your height, come back to visit it.
- Wind becomes choreographer, guiding gestures, rhythms, intensities, and pauses.
- Identify a myth that surrounds your landscape. Trace it to your body, in your memories, in your environment, in your ancestors. Create a new myth, trace it into the future, and materialise it.

The Valcheta activation shows how intergenerational dialogue can be supported through situated protocols that organise attention, participation, and reflection across different groups and forms of knowledge. In this process, seeds functioned as mediating materials through which participants engaged with memory, ecological knowledge, sensory perception, and future-oriented reflection. Conversations about the future emerged not as abstract projections but through situated encounters with the territory: what could be regenerated, what forms of relation should be sustained, and how local ecological knowledge might inform shared possibilities for living otherwise. The role of seeds was both material and methodological. They helped structure encounters between children, adults, local workers, artists, and more-than-human elements of the site, while opening a space in which memory and futurity could be considered together. For Dialogue Studies, the case offers an experimental contribution to thinking about how dialogical relations are shaped by the conditions in which they take place. It suggests that intergenerational dialogue is not only formed through what participants say to one another but also through the practices, materials, spaces, and forms of attention that allow

shared interpretation to emerge. In Valcheta, dialogue was shaped by the nursery, the seeds, the listening devices, the memories attached to the site, and the future-oriented questions that arose from the process.

Ethical and Documentation Considerations

The activities discussed in this article were developed as part of the public programme of the Third International Art Biennial of Río Negro, in Valcheta, Argentine Patagonia. Participants were informed that the artistic process could generate documentation, recordings, and later extensions of the work, including academic reflection and publication. The use of sound recordings, images, and process documentation was therefore communicated in advance within the context of the biennial activities.

Children participated through accompanied institutional settings, with teachers, facilitators, guardians, or responsible adults present. The article does not identify participants by name or attribute individual statements without permission. The photographs selected for publication avoid showing identifiable faces of participants and are used to document the spatial, methodological, and collective dimensions of the protocol. The analysis treats participants' gestures, responses, and interactions as part of a shared artistic-research process, with attention to consent, anonymity, and responsibility toward the local community, the site, and the living materials involved.

Stretching into More-than-Human as Intergenerational Dialogue and its Limits

The notion of more-than-human dialogue requires careful qualification. In this study, dialogue does not imply that seeds, landscapes, or environmental forces communicate in human terms, nor does it assume a transparent exchange between equivalent beings. The issue at stake is therefore not language as expression but the conditions through which meaning is produced, negotiated, and transmitted across generations; It is composed through the material histories of territories, the adaptive intelligence of ecosystems, and the living archives carried by seeds. These presences do not simply surround human dialogue. They participate in the formation of collective sense by holding traces of cultivation, displacement, extinction, resilience, and regeneration. In this frame, territory becomes an intergenerational agent: a living mediator through which past ecological relations, present forms of attention, and collective futures are continuously recomposed. This shift is important because, as Eduardo Kohn argues, taking nonhumans seriously makes it impossible to confine inquiry to a merely epistemological concern with how humans interpret the world;

it requires attention to forms of semiosis and life that exceed the human without collapsing them into human speech (Kohn 2013, 10).

At the same time, the term ‘dialogue’ must be handled critically. Anna Tsing warns that ‘thinking through dialogue between human Self and non-human Other may not be enough to learn multispecies worlds-in-the-making’ (Tsing 2013, 40). Her call for critical description is especially useful here because it asks not for immediate access to nonhuman experience, but for disciplined curiosity about how humans and other species come into ways of life through webs of social relations (Tsing 2013, 28–29). In this sense, the protocols developed in this paper do not reveal a harmonious conversation with nature. They instead stage conditions of attunement through which asymmetrical, mediated, and often fragmentary forms of relation can be sensed, negotiated, and interpreted.

Donna Haraway’s notion of response-ability offers further refinement. Rather than grounding relation in voice, transparency, or mutual recognition, response-ability emphasises the ethical and material demands of living and dying on a damaged earth. As Haraway puts it, ‘Response-ability is about both absence and presence, killing and nurturing, living and dying’ (Haraway 2016, 28). This is particularly relevant to a seed-based inquiry, where what matters is not whether seeds can be made legible as speaking subjects but how they participate in relational arrangements that reorganise attention, care, and future orientation. Read through this lens, the participatory protocols proposed here are less a means of translating nonhuman life into human discourse than a way of cultivating forms of situated responsiveness within fractured ecological and political conditions.

The limits of more-than-human dialogue, then, are not a weakness of the framework but part of its methodological value. They prevent the projection of human linguistic models onto vegetal and environmental processes, while also resisting the reduction of seeds to passive symbols. What emerges instead is a more modest but more rigorous claim: that seeds can act as relational agents within participatory arrangements, not because they speak like humans but because they help organise fields of attention, mediation, and co-presence through which different forms of life and matter become thinkable together. This position is also close to Despret’s insistence that inquiry depends on the kinds of questions and arrangements we bring into the world, since different modes of address can elicit different kinds of response (Despret 2013, 57).

Conclusion

To conclude, this article contributes to Dialogue Studies by examining how dialogue may be expanded through intergenerational, more-than-human, and territorially

situated practices. Returning to the central question of how seeds, approached as living technologies and relational agents, can inform intergenerational dialogue and future co-creation, this study has demonstrated that dialogical processes exceed verbal exchange or mutual understanding between human subjects. Dialogue emerges here as a situated infrastructure of attention, response, mediation, and co-presence, through which elders, youth, landscapes, memories, technologies, seeds, and ecological forces become implicated in shared processes of meaning-making.

Across its theoretical sections, the paper has conceptualised seeds as transitional matter and micro-archives of regeneration, carrying memory, adaptation, latency, resilience, and futurity without contradiction. This framing shifts the field from an exclusive concern with human communication toward the conditions that make relation, response, and transformation possible across differences. Seeds, in this sense, do not appear as metaphors for dialogue. They operate as relational agents that reorganise attention, temporality, responsibility, and future orientation within damaged worlds.

The concept of micro-regeneration has provided the political and ethical horizon of this inquiry. In contexts marked by extractive logics, ecological collapse, and democratic fragility, dialogue becomes significant as a practice for cultivating perceptual, affective, and collective capacities for coexistence. The politics of the fissure developed in this article names the small-scale gestures through which other forms of relation begin to take shape: walking, listening, recording, handling seeds, sensing wind, responding to ruins, composing prompts, and transforming shared space. These practices generate situated conditions through which participants rehearse other ways of perceiving, knowing, and relating within fractured worlds.

The case of Valcheta made this argument concrete. During the ten-day activation at the Municipal Green Nursery, participatory listening walks, shared recording devices, seed-based prompts, encounters with *jarillas*, and the collective reactivation of the former school produced a dialogical field shaped by intergenerational and more-than-human participation. The nursery became a pedagogical, ecological, and relational environment where local knowledge, plant life, memory, sound, dust, wind, and human gestures entered into composition. Through this process, the protocols activated somatic and perceptual conditions through which the territory became newly intelligible as a field of memory, adaptation, and micro-regenerative possibility.

For Dialogue Studies, the value of this case lies in its methodological expansion of what counts as dialogical practice. The study shows that dialogue can be investigated through embodied protocols, sensory mediation, artistic facilitation, and territorial engagement. This is especially relevant for intergenerational and more-than-human

contexts, where meaning is often partial, asymmetrical, mediated, and distributed across bodies, materials, histories, and environments. Seed-based protocols therefore offer a way of studying dialogue through the arrangements that shape gestures, orient attention, and open shared processes of response and interpretation.

At the same time, this research points to important limits and future pathways. The Valcheta activation unfolded within the specific conditions of a biennial, a municipal nursery, local ecological knowledge, and a temporary environment of artistic experimentation. These conditions enabled depth, trust, and collective engagement, while raising questions about transferability. How might seed-based dialogical protocols operate where institutional support is absent, where ecological damage is more acute, or where intergenerational conflict is already deeply embedded? How can more-than-human dialogue remain rigorous without projecting human language onto nonhuman life? What forms of documentation, accountability, and continuity are needed for such practices to move beyond temporary events?

These questions invite further experimentation with methodologies that bridge theory and practice, human and more-than-human relations, individual perception and collective knowledge-making. Future research could compare seed-based protocols across different biomes, communities, and post-extractive landscapes, while examining how listening, movement, and material engagement support dialogical processes in educational, artistic, and civic contexts. Such work would allow Dialogue Studies to engage more fully with ecological crisis, democratic fragility, and the need for relational practices capable of sustaining response within unstable conditions.

Ultimately, this paper affirms the transformative potential of dialogue when understood as a micro-regenerative practice. Through small-scale, situated, and embodied encounters, participants may cultivate shifts in perception, meaning, and responsibility that extend beyond the immediate event. Intergenerational and more-than-human dialogue can therefore be understood as a fractal intervention: a space where alternative futures are rehearsed through attention, gesture, sound, memory, and material relation. Within fractured worlds, seeds become methodological guides for learning how to listen, respond, and co-create with what is already present, already damaged, and still capable of future regeneration.

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Shared Worlds, Healing and Peace

Fostering ‘Joyful Connection in the Moment’ for Meaningful Intergenerational Dialogue, Wellbeing, and Inclusivity

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Abstract: The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015) and the World Health Organisation (2025) highlight the importance of intergenerational dialogue in advancing the 2030 Agenda. Goal 3 calls for ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being across all ages. At the same time, loneliness and social isolation are increasingly recognised as pressing global challenges affecting both students and older adults in the UK (Gov.uk 2022). Intergenerational dialogue offers a valuable approach to strengthening meaningful social connections and fostering inclusive forms of participation across age groups.

This article draws on researcher-practitioner experiences from designing and facilitating a series of intergenerational workshops held at a university and a community café in Southeast England. The workshops introduced themes related to wellbeing and the wider aims of the SDGs, supporting civic engagement, and encouraging shared exploration of equity and human rights in everyday contexts.

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Blended systemic and conceptual approaches informed the development of an intergenerational space oriented toward shared leadership and community transformation. Early participant priorities centred on sharing ideas across the generations. In one memorable case, an older member of the group described it as creating 'joyful connection in the moment'. Moments such as these suggest that adopting a relaxed communication style fosters a flexible, participant-led format in which facilitators introduce themes and participants shape the discussion's direction, enabling collaborative, meaningful intergenerational discussions.

Combining participatory observation with completed programme evaluations revealed that the group preferred to focus on generalised themes that all members could relate to. The article draws on those findings to show that sustained intergenerational dialogue strengthens collective wellbeing and supports more inclusive forms of social participation and connected communities.

Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue; wellbeing futures; social connectedness; joyful connection; participatory and co-creative practice; community-based interventions

Introduction: Intergenerational Dialogue, Wellbeing and Policy Context

Across the UK and most other post-industrial societies, we are experiencing a loss of meaningful social connection across the generations. Students and older adults often live side by side within communities yet rarely meet in ways that allow for the development of real listening or shared reflection. At a global level, the SDGs and the WHO Commission on Social Connection recognise the importance of intergenerational exchange. At the state level, responses to this concern are varied, and in practice, many initiatives remain short-term, transactional or overly outcome driven. Perhaps because of the complexity of addressing this issue, the subject of loneliness across the generations is rarely absent from the media or government-led directives (Jarvis and Mountain 2020).

This paper grew out of our work with the Intergenerational Exchange Programme (IGEP) and Community Café workshops at the University of Sussex and in a community venue in Brighton and Hove. This is not the first project of its kind; intergenerational programmes, such as ours, have long been recognised as a way to strengthen social cohesion and shared learning across age groups (Kaplan et al. 2002; Gilbert 2022). When establishing our project, we highlighted some key areas of interest. For example, to maximise the group's success, we became particularly interested in understanding how successful groups work in practice. This meant that from the outset we adopted a communally driven, participatory approach, with a strength-based mentality. We reflected on a comment during an early session by a member who said that they were looking for 'a joyful connection in the moment'. We acknowledged that, above all else, it was those small moments of laughter, curiosity,

and careful listening that could provide the foundation for developing cross-generational empathy, learning, and civic engagement. This article explores how those moments were created and how they could be replicated in other settings.

In the UK, both university students and older adults are identified as groups particularly vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation, with consequences for mental health, wellbeing, and community participation (Ratcliffe et al. 2021; Ferguson 2019). Levels of isolation are pervasive across society, and loneliness and social isolation are increasingly recognised as significant risks to health and wellbeing across the life course (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015).

Despite increasing policy attention, opportunities for meaningful intergenerational encounter remain limited, and many initiatives focus on outputs related to measuring loneliness rather than on concrete approaches that directly develop relationships between people of different ages. This gap points to a need for approaches that prioritise connection itself as a foundation for wellbeing and civic life.

Based on formal and informal feedback from participants and facilitators, we have clear evidence that our participants have valued the space to reflect and share knowledge across the generations. We describe the reflections and insights gained from this process to inform best practice in facilitating successful intergenerational workshops.

This article argues that meaningful intergenerational co-production is preceded by the development of relational connection, trust, and shared emotional safety. Drawing on researcher–practitioner reflections from the community café workshops, we propose ‘joyful connection in the moment’ as a relational condition that enables dialogue, reciprocity, and collective participation across generations. In doing so, the paper contributes to the intergenerational dialogue literature by shifting attention from outcomes-based participation toward the relational foundations that make meaningful co-production possible.

Programme Context

This section outlines the context of the intergenerational workshops that form the basis of this study. Workshops were delivered through the IGEP Community Café model, developed through collaboration between the University of Sussex, local community partners, and volunteer facilitators. Sessions brought together students, older residents, and community practitioners in an informal café setting designed to reduce hierarchy and encourage open dialogue.

The workshops are part of a wider project that has run for several years and aims to bring together students at the university and older people experiencing loneliness. Before this set of workshops, the Intergenerational Exchange Programme had formed links between older people and students to meet one-to-one for social support and to reduce feelings of isolation in both groups. Feedback from these pairings revealed that participants had deeply benefited from their meetings. Most striking was that both younger and older participants felt that sharing stories and ideas about simple, everyday living had brought them new insight, a sense of purpose, and a greater connection to the community. Participants had experienced increased wellbeing, enabling them to view their social worlds more positively and instilling in them the confidence to make further enhancements to their lives. Such participant reflections illustrated the programme's relational impact and inspired the workshop series.

Based on this positive feedback, it was envisioned that the workshop format would enable the programme to reach more participants and allow them to experience the same benefits as those of the one-to-one pairings. The workshops were therefore developed to create more opportunities for intergenerational discussions, to provide a vehicle for each participant to gain a greater sense of belonging and sustainable wellbeing, and to foster benefits to the two communities that were accessible not only during programme delivery but also extended beyond the workshop series. Researchers envisioned that the workshops would also generate new knowledge to further enhance intergenerational connections, thereby contributing to the literature.

The workshop programme was developed through planning meetings among the University of Sussex researchers, during which the overall aims were discussed, and themes for the workshops were developed. These were based on promoting human flourishing in alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015) and the World Health Organisation (2025). Central to the workshop design is Goal 3 of the 2030 Agenda, promoting healthy lives and wellbeing across all ages. Loneliness and social isolation are global challenges and are also recognised as affecting both students and older adults in the UK (Gov.uk 2022). It was agreed that the intergenerational workshops should: 1) combat social isolation, 2) reduce age-related stereotypes, 3) foster community resilience and promote a more inclusive, culturally enriched society. These themes informed the workshop topics and content.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Together, these perspectives informed a relational participatory framework for the workshops. The framework emphasises that meaningful intergenerational dialogue depends on emotional safety, reflexive listening, shared agency, and attention to the

wider social conditions shaping participation. Core group-focused approaches informed the design and facilitation of the intergenerational workshops with the programme drawing upon participatory practice and community-engaged research approaches. This approach emphasises that meaningful dialogue depends on relational conditions such as trust, mutual respect, and a sense of shared agency (Bion 1961). Our intergenerational workshops provided a small-scale setting in which members of quite separate communities could come together and develop mutual trust and understanding (Freire 1990). The group was ‘quietly’ held, and on occasions where differences of opinion were shared people were given space to express themselves without judgement. This approach echoes the ideas developed by Bion (1961) on the subject of the group in which he suggests that the mature work group is aware of its purposes and can define its task. Bion (1961) acknowledges that groups that work at this sophisticated level are rare. Yet by embracing the core value of unconditional positive regard as developed by Rogers (1961), it was possible to reach a state of what both he and Bion refer to as congruence. By creating space for the group of older and young people to take charge of their conversational direction of travel, it was also our intention to integrate values such as reflection-in-action (Schön 1991), and critical consciousness (Freire 1990, 197).

The benefits of diverse, multidisciplinary approaches within the core team were evident in the workshops’ development and delivery. Blended psychoanalytic and systemic theoretical and conceptual lenses were selected in alignment with the aims and priorities underpinning the programme and each team contributor’s professional expertise. For example, two of the authors, as qualified social workers, drew upon systems theory, to highlight value in understanding the community-based context of each participant, and particularly the way that each person’s past and present experience of community shapes their experiences and contributes to their capacity to be open about their identities and structural inequalities that might have shaped their levels of confidence in a group setting. For example, it was striking that one of our regular older female attendees usually started any point that she wished to raise with an apology that she did not feel clever or educated. Other members of the group were quick to reassure her and to encourage her to voice her opinion. Despite such concerns on her part, she remained keen to attend sessions and, over time, seemed both accepting of others and, most importantly, of herself and the contribution she was making. In this way, the use of systemic models in social work contexts contributed to the advancement of interaction (Bion 1961; Schön 1991). The facilitator identified these as translatable to the application of interaction skills in workshops, ensuring the safe enhancement of communication. Whilst some encounters could be viewed as conversational, there was a depth to the workshop exchanges that were purposively intentional. As stated by Zaidi (2023:11), ‘conversation is often a methodology for human flourishing, belonging, and understanding’ and ‘dialogue is a

collective communication and a relational discourse'. In short, by adopting a kind and empathetic environment, it was possible to see individuals experience positive shifts in levels of self-contentment and in their ability to value other people's perspectives (Sharly 2019; Rogers 1961).

Methodological Approach and Methods

The methodological approach was chosen to complement the programme's aims and to scaffold the workshop delivery. As indicated above, the study adopted a practice-based researcher–practitioner approach consistent with the action research traditions highlighted by Reason and Bradbury (2008), who note, in their Introduction to Groundings, that action research starts with the simple intent to improve a situation. Action research aligns with our aim to contribute to human flourishing through a systemic, interdependent, emancipatory, and participatory approach. To systematically achieve research aims and rigorously explore identified themes, the study adopted the action research approach seeking to establish a collaborative space in which researchers and participants co-construct actionable knowledge and to share meaningful connections through shared dialogue. The action research approach brings together stakeholder groups who share a common problem or aspect they wish to improve, so that they may plan, act, and reflect together to share knowledge and discover new insights and solutions. As a model, action research seeks to transcend standard hierarchical practices often present in research, in favour of a linear field of practice that builds trust and allows for the development of interpersonal dialogue and group processes.

A key element toward a successful action research approach is clarity around the researcher's positionality. Herr and Anderson (2005, 31) define researcher positionality through a continuum of six distinct stances researchers can take relative to research participants. They differentiate the stances as (1) an insider studying their own practice; (2) insiders in collaboration with other insiders; (3) insiders in collaboration with outsiders; (4) insider/outsider teams working in reciprocal collaboration; (5) outsiders in collaboration with insiders; and (6) an outsider working *on* insiders, not with them. Our understanding of our own positionality developed throughout the research process, and Herr and Anderson's concept allowed us to explore our experiences alongside those of other group participants. At the outset, we faced competing demands. Our starting point, entering the café environment as researchers from the university, automatically positioned us as outsiders leading the research (6), but we knew this was inconsistent with the needs of the programme overall and the participant groups, especially. Our ultimate ambition was to develop our workshops in line with the changing needs of the participant cohort, eventually transitioning participants into co-leaders of the practice. This intentional shift to-

ward egalitarian knowledge production and intergenerational exchange aligns with position 4 (reciprocal collaboration), establishing what Reason and Bradbury (2008) term a ‘community of inquiry’. Acknowledging that we were unsure how this transition would unfold, we established a dual aim. We used our initial outsider-collaborator stance to deeply listen and learn from the participants’ lived experiences. Simultaneously, we used the workshop outcomes to reflect on our own practice and systematically identify ways to involve the workshop participants more deeply in the process. By design, this approach allowed us to move dynamically along the continuum, intentionally shifting from outsiders collaborating with insiders (position 5) towards insider/outsider partnership (position 4). We used workshop outcomes to reflect on research-related questions, with a view to always involving participants more in the process. By consciously navigating this continuum, we created the relational trust necessary to increasingly shift our practice away from external management and toward true, reciprocal insider/outsider collaboration (Position 4).

Facilitated workshops held at the Community Café brought together students, older residents, and community volunteers. Sessions lasted around 90 minutes and took place in the informal café setting, where participants could gather around tables in comfortable armchairs, helping reduce hierarchy and create a more relaxed atmosphere. The four workshops were entitled 1) Introducing the Intergenerational Exchange Programme: Increasing our Social Connectedness; 2) Wellbeing Across the Generations; 3) Power to the People: Civic Action Across the Generations; and 4) Climate Conversations: Past, Present, Future. A brief table below outlines the format of each workshop, the topics, and the general methods used to promote discussion. Following the table, these are elaborated on further.

Workshop Title	Topics	Methods
Introducing the International Exchange Programme: Increasing our Social Connectedness	Bridge the gap introductions	Facilitator-led introductions
	Who are the generations?	Generational Quiz
	How does language change across the generations?	Table exchange followed by feedback to the group
	What is social connectedness?	Researcher-led discussion on the topic, followed by table exchange and feedback.

Wellbeing across the Generations	Warm up Why wellbeing? Wellbeing 'Influencers'	Pair and Share Facilitator-led discussion Table exchange and feedback
Power to the People: Civic Action Across the Generations	Warm up Civic Engagement, past and present Intergenerational Societies	Pair and share Facilitator-led discussion Table exchange and feedback
Climate Conversations: Past, Present, Future	Warm up Climate conversations	Pair and Share Table exchange and feedback

The format of each workshop had a distinct shape envisioned during planning, but this was adapted as the workshop series progressed, incorporating feedback from participants and café staff, as well as facilitator reflections. Over the course of the workshops, we found our positionality to be reflexive in relation to specific tensions. These were related to control over the interactive research process, the production of knowledge in action, and the participant voice in that process. One facilitator noted, 'Initially, workshop facilitation felt somewhat charged with the aim of steering and inspiring discussion around selected topics', but they quickly noticed that 'the focus on leadership became obsolete, and we began to seek out a more alchemical process'.

Our progression along Herr and Anderson's (2005) continuum is directly reflected in the evolving pedagogical structure of our four workshops. In **Workshop 1**, our stance was closely aligned with Position 5; we relied on researcher-led discussions and facilitator-directed tools (such as the Generational Quiz) to introduce the concept of intergenerational practice, which matched our starting point as university outsiders. Whilst facilitator-led introductions were identified as important for the first session, it was agreed that in subsequent sessions, this could be carried out as a 'pair-and-share' exercise, that is, participants were encouraged to chat with their neighbour and provide feedback if desired. The session was successful in setting the stage and introducing core concepts, such as social connectedness and establishing the boundaries of the space through which we may develop the community of inquiry. Following this initial workshop, the facilitator team tuned in to reflect and

noted that this format had been experienced as too 'busy', as one participant put it, and that the agenda had been too compacted.

Additionally, while the Generational Quiz was a good topic opener, it felt overly directive, and some participants struggled to read the questions on the PowerPoint slides. During the workshop, the rigid structure of the quiz was therefore largely abandoned, and the space was opened up for more general discussion, which yielded interesting insights from participants eager to share their views. It was clear that conversation between generations was what participants most valued. After the workshop, older people and the café staff all shared that they wished to experience more intergenerational exchange with the university students and have less focus on facilitator input. It was decided that, in future, all facilitated topic introductions should be highly engaging, serve as springboards for conversation among participants, be kept as brief as possible, and always encourage interactivity.

In this way, we intentionally scaffolded a shift toward Position 4. In **Workshops 2 and 3**, we decentralised our authority by introducing 'Pair and Share' dynamics, allowing participants' lived experiences of wellbeing and civic engagement to take centre stage. These workshops, therefore, incorporated materials for participants to work with on their tables. The pair-and-share activity provided lighthearted warm-ups and a way to deepen conversations. Participants were encouraged, for example, to share one 'rose' about their lives and one 'bud'. Roses came in the form of current things that you like about yourself and your life, evoking answers like 'I always make the effort to smile a lot at others', and 'I may not be much of a singer, but I love to share music', and buds were aspects of life that participants are looking forward to or developing: 'I am going to London with friends next week' and 'I am starting a new book club'. Following this, the workshop topic would be introduced, and pairs could share again, having already warmed to the practice. Whether the talks were pair-shares or table exchanges, the facilitator would then move between tables to encourage the discussions taking place on each table. Creative methods were used throughout the workshops to encourage written contributions and to spark conversations. Participants were given materials for themed activities to create posters and comment slips. These were used, but once again, it was noted that these methods often required increased facilitator intervention, so less interventional methods, in the form of conversation starters, were used in the third and fourth sessions.

By **Workshop 4 (Climate Conversations)**, we removed all researcher-led instructional components. The dialogue was driven entirely through participant-led table exchanges, using simple conversation starter cards. This methodological evolution demonstrates our transition from outsiders directing a programme to an insider/outsider community of inquiry engaged in mutual exchange and connectedness.

Data collection methods

Data collection methods were creative and fluid. We kept facilitator notes, gathered short written reflections from participants, and spoke with café staff afterwards about what they observed. Rather than formal interviews, we used storytelling, creative prompts, and open conversation, because that felt more respectful of the relational nature of dialogue and because topics were often introduced as open prompts, allowing participants to shape the direction of conversation. Most often, the evidence has been recorded as anecdotal and reflective, written by facilitators immediately after the workshops.

Findings from the workshops

The remainder of this paper presents and explores the findings from the workshops. The findings concern not only the lived experiences shared and documented but also the facilitators' progression along Herr and Anderson's (2005) researcher positionality continuum toward achieving the community of inquiry envisioned by Reason and Bradbury (2008). The findings emerge from the collected field notes, reflections, the noted anecdotes, and the words and phrases written by participants and facilitators. These are memories shared, ideas collected, insights gained, and new knowledges created. In subsection 1, the insights and new knowledge generated within the emerging community of inquiry are documented in a summary of each workshop. The second subsection explores the journey toward the community of inquiry and considers that the facilitator role is to foster meaningful connection as a key element in intergenerational co-production moving forward. The third subsection considers some of the implications for practice in establishing the environment necessary to facilitate such flourishing.

i. The discussions and new insights co-produced in the community of inquiry

In workshop 1, participants discussed generational divisions. Broader, societal conceptualisations of the 'Greatest Generation', the 'Baby Boomers', and 'Gen Z' did not resonate. Objections were voiced around 'who decided' on the names for the generations, and the idea of the young people of World War I as the Greatest Generation was rejected on the basis that 'there is nothing great about dying in war'. Overall, participants described feeling that separating the generations and ascribing certain characteristics to them was highly divisive. As one older person said, 'Wherever you go and whenever, people are people, the environment may change, but people remain the same; we are all flesh and blood'. The topic of slang became a humorous case in point. The slang for 'Being in a relationship' evoked many different word us-

ages towards the same meaning making. Depending on the time period couples were 'courting', 'talking', 'seeing', and 'stepping out'.

In workshop 2, another topic centred on wellbeing and what the term meant to individuals across generations. Participants discussed that multiple strands of influence through social media have led to conceptual saturation of wellbeing, diminishing its meaning. One Community Café attendee said that she did not need any help from others regarding her wellbeing at her age, and that she knew how to listen to her body, which tells her all she needs to know. However, taking time to reflect on and share 'our own influencers' revealed that participants had very personal role models, often older family members, who had emphasised and demonstrated the importance of 'Doing and Being', understood not only as taking action, but as embodying values, attitudes, and ways of relating to others that shaped participants' sense of responsibility, identity, and orientation towards their role in society.

The session evolved into participants sharing personal stories about individuals who had made sacrifices for others and were present for them as they grew up. These people often passed on the value of simple pleasures, such as connecting with the earth through walking, and emotions through music. One participant remembered watching time-travel science fiction with his father, who was himself a keen traveller, and shared how this impressed on him that the adventures of 'the world and of the mind' were the way to wellbeing. Another said, 'My greatest role model was my mother because she showed me the way to wellbeing is through being part of a wider community – we should all strive to "fill the house!"'

In workshop 3, the focus on civic participation fostered lively, thought-provoking discussion among the participants. Some felt that civic participation had diminished in modern life, whereas others felt that it was still very much present, but in a more dissipated form. The sheer number of opportunities to be involved in the community in disparate forms made up much of the discussion. It was an optimistic session in which ideas were exchanged about how individuals could maximise their opportunities to meet others in various environments. During table talks, participants expressed valuing the freedoms they felt they had in the modern era more than in the past. One student participant said she was enjoying the stage of life she is in now, as she has more freedom than she has ever had, and no adult is really telling her what to do anymore. An older person said that getting older meant that she had to answer to no one and did not mind what others thought of her anymore, in a way that she might not have when she was younger. Further exploration during whole-group feedback expanded on these themes of freedom. Some argued that growing consumerism and individualism have changed social behaviour, leading to greater isolation and less freedom. They felt that there is now a vast choice in what to do and

with whom, and that this could feel overwhelming. There was also a feeling that, often today, leisure and group activities cost money and that some people would not have enough to take part. Participants reflected that community resources, such as the Community Café, are vital, so this discussion looped back to how civic participation needs to be protected and the spaces for people to come together preserved. At the end of the session, during feedback, it was suggested that more time to discuss topics would be welcome. The group, familiar with the environment, the aims of the workshops, and one another, valued a greater emphasis on facilitator input around the tables, and it was decided that conversation starters could be prompted with cards placed on the tables.

Workshop 4 introduced the most facilitator-light approach. Resources had been prepared and scattered across the tables to prompt conversations. The facilitators welcomed the group but relied on the group tables to take discussions forward. Stories were shared of community support and the benefits of the 'art' of thrift and resourcefulness, living frugally, and making the most of limited resources. One older person said conserving energy and water 'was just what we did' and 'we didn't throw things away, we fixed them'. A more specific example was found in World War II victory gardens. One older person remembered this as a time when people grew food in their backyards to support the war effort and said the practice had continued into their childhoods. It was felt that home gardening was still a great way to promote food security and make gardens wildlife-friendly, but in cities, space was often limited. When one participant reminisced about growing food, and they would still like to do so, other participants discussed a plan to contact the council to 'voice their right to an allotment'.

ii. From Co-Creation to 'Joyful Connection in the Moment'

At the outset, we assumed that co-creation of outputs and shared problem solving would be the primary driver of participation. In practice, we learned something different. Connection came first. Participants needed time to feel safe speaking, to be listened to without correction or stereotyping, and to arrive at a relational level before engaging intellectually. Once safety and familiarity were established, co-learning and knowledge exchange followed much more naturally.

When facilitators relaxed control and allowed conversations to unfold, participants spoke more openly, and discussions deepened rather than diffused. Joy often emerged after moments of uncertainty or vulnerability, and learning flowed in multiple directions with no fixed expert role. Participant reflections also showed how dialogue supported understanding across family and generational contexts. One older participant reflected: 'Reconnecting with someone academically active in their twenties was highly stimulating and deepened my engagement with academic life.'

Hearing about their university journey also helped me better understand my grandchildren's experiences.'

Participant reflections also showed how dialogue supports understanding around sensitive and personal experiences. One student participant described a conversation about mental health that emerged during a workshop: 'We discussed mental health, and she was concerned about a young family member starting antidepressants. I shared that I had faced a similar situation years earlier and would not have imagined that I would now be managing my anxiety and taking part in this project.'

Moments like these illustrate how intergenerational dialogue can create space for honesty, reassurance, and mutual learning, allowing participants to recognise resilience in one another and to feel less alone in their own experiences. What we learnt was simple but important, and our findings suggest that before collaboration or behaviour change, people need moments of genuine human connection.

iii. Key Themes for Successful Intergenerational Workshops

Across the workshop programme a consistent set of themes emerged about what enables meaningful intergenerational dialogue. Participants emphasised the importance of being given time to arrive and feel safe, gentle facilitation that held the space without controlling it, and opportunities to share personal experience without judgement. These relational conditions allowed curiosity and humour to emerge naturally, which in turn supported deeper conversation and mutual learning. This reflects wider research showing that intergenerational learning can strengthen social capital and community participation (Newman and Hatton-Yeo 2008).

What became clear was that successful intergenerational dialogue depends less on perfect activities and more on the quality of the space created – one that values listening, vulnerability and shared reflection. Once these conditions were established, participants were more willing to explore differences, recognise common experiences, and build connections that continued beyond the workshops.

A set of key themes has emerged to inform understandings around how we may ensure the continued development of successful intergenerational workshops. These are described below.

Creating Space: Time was given to 'settling in'. Introductions, scene setting, and an early icebreaker activity were essential components in creating an atmosphere of warmth, humour, and openness. These early activities set the scene to ensure the safety of participants, respect the broad differences in personality and cognitive specificities, and honour the input of all participants. The creation of a supportive en-

vironment is crucial for experiential learning, a key component of the intergenerational workshops. The central importance of containment whilst creating space is particularly apparent. The workshops can offer containment and model curiosity when participants experience the facilitator's willingness to explore. This means being able to express their own imperfection and vulnerability. Intergenerational programmes should always aim to support participants in finding, making, sharing, and experiencing new meaning, and this begins with safety and transparency.

Being Reflexive: The workshops began with a position of purpose, offering the opportunity to reflect on a dilemma or issue that spans the generations. However, equally important was an attitude of reflexivity, curiosity, and the ability to allow the group's flow to develop organically. Key to the workshop's success is the adaptability of the material and activities in the moment, allowing for off-topic conversations and meanderings. The workshops are, above all, a place for learning in the moment, realising and interacting with the uniqueness the space affords. Group work can be compromised by a desire, either among participants or the facilitator, to present a final view or correct answer. Reflection in action (Schön 1991) enables the facilitator to prevent such pre-emption and to avoid the closing down of meaningful discussion. However, maintaining openness and curiosity in the reflective space can also lead to a lack of professional confidence. One way to avoid this is to clarify for the group what constitutes good participation. The facilitator's role and the responsibilities of all present in the group for maintaining respectful conversation and listening should be addressed at the outset. Facilitators navigate between encouraging transparency and vulnerability to allow experiences to be shared, whilst also promoting group participants' autonomy and competence.

The facilitator is pivotal to provide containing experiences for the participants. The concept of 'containment' (Bion 1961) understands the importance of remaining emotionally receptive to the feelings present in individual and group contributions. The facilitator processes the emotions and experiences that arise in the workshop through meaning making. This involves making the material more accessible for those sharing in the workshop. The facilitator's role is to maximise the learning and feelings of connection that participants can take from the group experience. As such, they must attune to their own position of power and model containment by valuing every contribution, each unique individual, and the group.

Strength in engagement: Although the reflexive space is essential, it is equally important that the workshops have an engaging, interactive structure to provide a purposeful and inspirational element to the rhythm of the interactions under investigation. The creation of thought-provoking content is an essential component of workshop planning and should act as a springboard for conversations.

Structural elements should also be fully integrated at the planning stage. Paying close attention to format and structure creates a consistent, containing context for sharing and learning. A clear agenda that describes the topic and tasks and leaves room for feedback is essential to successful workshops. It is a priority to set a specific time for the facilitator to share the topic/dilemma, followed by time for the whole group to consider the issues raised. The group is facilitated to reflect on and share their experiences, observations, feelings, thoughts, and ideas in an intergenerational context, enabling the creation of new knowledge. The use of creative methods to capture the thoughts and conversations generated provides evidence of a process completed for participants to view, and for facilitators to use in future planning and evidencing.

Acknowledging the Presence of Power and Privilege: An essential component in creating conditions for meaningful connection is acknowledging the power and privilege inherent in the topics discussed and the dynamics impacting the workshops. The programme team is committed to decolonising materials and adopting an inclusive approach to delivering the programme's resources. In this way, programme sessions discreetly invite participants to develop their critical consciousness (Freire 1973) and, at a preliminary level, introduce topics such as ageism, racism, and other equality issues by platforming multicultural, multilingual experiences.

There are unique challenges for each facilitator or participant within the group setting, dependent on their individual identity. The risk of micro-aggressions arising in group work (Sue et al. 2007), or of the disclosure of unconscious, intentional, or unintentional, racist or other forms of discrimination made as comments, poses a threat to minoritised groups. Facilitators must be ready to confidently hold a reflective space that challenges such aggressions as they arise. The facilitator may also be fearful of any unconscious bias arising in her, and topics such as these need time for exploration, reflection, and self-examination. Crehan and Rustin (2018) highlight the presence of 'loud silence' in group facilitation, in relation to addressing issues of equality, inclusion, and diversity. Crehan and Rustin put forward a psychoanalytic lens with which to understand how racial, religious, and cultural issues can emerge in the group setting, as anxiety impacts participant contributions to group discussions. Engagement in experiential reflective group workshops requires facilitators and participants to step into a potentially exposing space. In engaging with others with openness and courage, the facilitator should be ready to model imperfection, name and address sensitive issues as they arise, and, when appropriate, move on to maintain a safe space for all participants.

The successful holding of the space depends on the facilitator's capacity to be conscious of the dynamic balance needed to maintain appropriate boundaries and the pace and flow of the group's conversation, whilst reflexively adhering to the agreed

structure. The management of time, provision of a clear beginning and end to the session, and the overall governance of the session are conducted in parallel with providing encouraging and validating feedback, allowing linear thought and conversation, and, if need be, silences to emerge. The facilitator role can then move beyond the technical task to create a more productive, enlivened space for exchange.

Ending with optimism: In group work, not only positive but also more cynical or separatist feelings can arise in participants. For example, individuals may express feelings that the conversation is not for them and that they have nothing to contribute. By recognising this as a form of 'resistance' and actively thinking about this as part of the process, more deep-rooted and significant contributions can be uprooted, bringing more to the sessions than both participants and facilitators expected.

Facilitators play a role in modelling the capacity to tolerate vulnerability and in showing compassion towards others and themselves. Aspects of the workshop process require the facilitator to manage uncertainty. There is the possibility that conversations might falter or meander too far away from the topic. The topic may not be something the participants wish to engage with. Such happenings can lead the unprepared facilitator towards anxiety, which can then affect the group process. However, the firm provision of the reflective space and the slowing down of conversation can maximise participant capacity to approach the topic with curiosity.

Carefully chosen topics that may not be well received at the outset can, with the facilitator's encouragement, lead to new insights that might not be immediately obvious. Leaving space for conversations to develop new and alternative meanings beyond the more commonly held assumptions that can characterise stereotypes across generations opens the potential for more diverse views to be stated and heard. Through fostering creative curiosity, such forms of new thinking can generate much energy and inspiration. Where this is highlighted during the workshop and in its summing up, participants can leave invigorated and confident. These feelings stem from engagement with an intergenerational experience that was productive and left them feeling renewed. They leave content that they not only learned something new but also forged connections and were inspired to build on these experiences. The workshops above all foster feelings of empathy, inclusion, and a sense of purpose.

In conclusion, the thematic strands contain recurrent theoretical concepts related to group work and the diverse experiences of group participants and facilitators. The space created by this approach offers a meaningful connection experience for the group and continues to build connections as an integral feature of the programme as a whole.

Discussion

Although our workshops were small, they point to wider implications for universities, local authorities, and community organisations. Students often spoke about loneliness and uncertainty, while older participants described isolation after retirement or caring responsibilities. Research on ageing populations highlights the persistence of loneliness among older adults and its impact on well-being (Victor et al. 2005). Intergenerational dialogue offered a simple but powerful response: a place to listen, reflect, and recognise shared human experience across age differences.

The workshops also challenged common assumptions about ageing and youth. Intergenerational programmes are often framed as supporting older people or educating younger people. In practice, we observed shared vulnerability, mutual recognition, and a sense of dignity across generations. This was not a dialogue about ageing, but a dialogue with age as a lived and shared human experience. The findings suggest that ‘joyful connection in the moment’ should not be understood simply as a positive emotional experience, but as a relational process through which trust, recognition, and mutual vulnerability are established. These moments created the conditions necessary for participants to move beyond social politeness toward more meaningful forms of dialogue and collective reflection. In this sense, connection did not emerge from co-production; rather, connection preceded and enabled it.

Participants frequently told us how rare it was to have time to listen across generations without pressure to agree or produce an outcome. That alone suggests the importance of such spaces as part of community wellbeing infrastructure. This opportunity to listen and share across generations also links to positive psychological benefits experienced by older people when, as was the case here, they are given the opportunity to actively share their experiences and to reminisce and, in so doing, make meaningful sense of their lives (Xu et al. 2021, 1009). Universities, in particular, have an opportunity to act as long-term intergenerational civic spaces, working with local partners to support connection, learning and participation beyond the classroom.

While the workshops were small-scale and context-specific, they offer transferable insights into the relational conditions that support meaningful intergenerational dialogue in similar university–community partnerships.

These insights suggest that intergenerational dialogue should be understood not only as a social activity but as part of the foundations of inclusive wellbeing futures.

Conclusion: What we take forward

This paper began with a simple observation from participants: they were looking for moments of joyful connection. Through the IGEP Community Café workshops we saw how those moments – often small, quiet, and unexpected – created the conditions for empathy, confidence, and sustained relationships across generations.

What we take forward is the importance of recognising connection itself as a meaningful outcome. Intergenerational dialogue does not always produce immediate solutions or measurable outputs, yet it can create belonging, dignity, and mutual understanding in ways that are deeply significant for wellbeing. Supporting these spaces means valuing facilitation as skilled practice and recognising universities and community venues as places where intergenerational civic life can grow over time.

This paper, therefore, suggests that intergenerational practice should not begin from assumptions of co-production alone, but from the creation of relational conditions that allow trust, empathy, and shared participation to emerge. 'Joyful connection in the moment' offers a conceptual way of understanding how meaningful dialogue develops and how intergenerational spaces may contribute to more inclusive wellbeing futures.

Future work will explore how such programmes can be sustained, how facilitators can be supported, and how dialogue can be integrated into wider wellbeing and community strategies. At a time when social fragmentation often feels inevitable, creating opportunities for people of different generations to listen, laugh, and learn together may be one of the most practical ways to strengthen more inclusive and caring societies.

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Intergenerational Dialogue in Practice: Reflections on a Dynamically Unfolding Conversation

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Abstract: Intergenerational dialogue holds particular significance in the current global context, as contemporary society continues to encounter obstacles that inhibit meaningful engagement with some of its most pressing challenges, including transgenerational trauma, structural injustice, gender inequality, limited youth engagement, and wider planetary concerns such as ecological degradation. In this paper that examines intergenerational dialogue within a participatory/post-materialist framework, we reflect on a dynamically unfolding intergenerational dialogue series that has emerged through the New Paradigm Navigators (NPN), a subgroup of the Scientific and Medical Network, an educational charity with a history spanning fifty years. The aim of this paper is to explore practice from inside this orientation. In that context, the first dialogue took place in April 2024, and a series of fourteen dialogues have since been convened, covering themes including leadership, ecology, gender, death, and work.

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Joan, Louise and Liam collaborate on the New Paradigm Navigators (NPN) project that runs through the Scientific and Medical Network (SMN).

The project is grounded in a transformative learning context, with particular consideration to post-materialist approaches to knowledge and engagement that include the whole person – paying attention to how one is showing up in the relational space, both with and for others. This paper explores the project's rationale and ethos, drawing on co-operative enquiry (Heron 1996) and the Heart Sense methodological framework (Livingstone 2019, 2021, 2025), situating this practice within a broader participatory epistemological paradigm (Walton 2022). We include reflections from Liam Bureau, the young person lead in this process, draw on participant contributions from the dialogue notes, and analyse the dialogues through the lens of Heron's (1996) extended epistemology and Bohm dialogue theory (Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1999). The paper concludes with a reflection on the possibility of integrative learning for our times, suggesting that such dialogical practices may foster deeper connections between humans, the More-Than-Human world, and the Earth as a whole, and may offer a meaningful contribution to the challenges of multilateral governance and collective wellbeing.

Keywords: Relational space; heart-centred knowing; post-materialism; embodied cognition; wholeness

Introduction

The New Paradigm Navigators project emerged from a conversation between Dr Louise Livingstone and Dr Joan Walton in the Spring of 2022. What began as a shared concern about issues facing young people in turbulent times and the lack of meaningful intergenerational spaces within the Scientific and Medical Network (SMN) quickly evolved into something more expansive: a question about what it means to genuinely support the younger generations in finding their voices, their purpose, and their capacity to contribute to a world that is, by any measure, in considerable difficulty.

Both were acutely aware of the many challenges facing younger people – ecological anxiety, social fragmentation, economic precarity, mental health issues, and a pervasive sense that the inherited systems of knowledge and governance are inadequate to the moment. At the same time, they recognised that young people often lack spaces in which they can explore creative and constructive responses to these challenges in ways that feel genuinely open, supportive, and relational.

It is becoming increasingly evident that purely external or technical responses are insufficient for the complexity of our times (McGilchrist 2021, 2012). According to many post-materialist thinkers, including Dr Iain McGilchrist, what seems to be required, alongside such responses, are spaces in which people are able to think, feel, question, and imagine together – without being immediately constrained by predetermined frameworks or the pressure to arrive at solutions. The project began, therefore, with a simple but generative question: 'What can we do to improve the world for young people?'

From this question arose a clear intention: to facilitate a group of young people, through collaborative enquiry and the Heart Sense methodological framework, to pursue the questions that matter most to them, while supporting them in discovering their own innate wisdom and capacity to contribute meaningfully to the world.

Early work took the form of online gatherings in which young people were invited to share concerns and engage in dialogue grounded in deep listening. Rather than reinforcing despair, these gatherings sought to open space for constructive and participatory inquiry. What began as a small initiative has since grown into a developing international community, with a core group of participants, emerging projects, and a shared sense that something of value is unfolding.

In 2024, the project extended its work to include a dedicated intergenerational dialogue series, facilitated by Liam Bureau, in which younger and older participants were brought together around shared themes. This paper reflects on that series – its rationale, practice, and significance – and situates it within a broader theoretical and methodological context.

Intergenerational Dialogue in a Participatory Paradigm

Intergenerational relationships are often shaped, sometimes subtly, by assumptions of hierarchy – assumptions in which age is equated with knowledge, authority, or wisdom – indeed, from our lived experiences of running these dialogues, we have found that this is often the case. While experience undoubtedly brings depth, such assumptions can quietly constrain what becomes possible within dialogue, positioning younger participants primarily as recipients of knowledge rather than as active contributors to shared understanding. One of the generative questions arising from this work is whether something different might be possible: not in opposition to experience, but alongside it.

What might it mean to approach intergenerational dialogue not as a process of transmission but as a shared space of inquiry? This question has both ontological and epistemological dimensions, and it is worth pausing to consider each in turn.

A participatory ontology: The inseparability of knower and known

From a participatory perspective, knowledge is not simply held within individuals and passed between them. Rather, it can be understood as something that arises within relationship. The theoretical physicist John Wheeler (1994) proposed, on the basis of evidence from quantum physics, that we live in a ‘participatory universe’ in which there is a fundamental ‘inseparability of the knower and known’ – a view that

challenges the assumption of an objective, independently existing reality to which the detached observer has privileged access (Walton 2022).

This perspective resonates with a broader movement within post-materialist approaches to consciousness and inquiry which challenge the assumption that reality is fundamentally composed of discrete, separately existing entities. De Quincey (2002, 6) describes consciousness as ‘our deepest mystery and our most intimate reality’, noting that the classical scientific assumption – that consciousness is a by-product of the brain, and therefore ends with it – is increasingly difficult to sustain in light of findings from quantum physics, and from the lived experiences of those who encounter dimensions of reality that appear to extend beyond the material. There is a growing challenge to the materialist assumptions of classical science, with increasing recognition of the interconnected and relational nature of existence, and of the possibility that consciousness may be primary rather than derivative (Lorimer 2019; Walton 2022).

The Galileo Commission (2019), a project commissioned by the Scientific and Medical Network – the same organisation within which the NPN was formed – brought together more than ninety advisers from over thirty universities worldwide to contribute their views on the possibilities for a post-materialist worldview that integrates science, spirituality, and consciousness. This shared institutional context is not incidental: it reflects a community already oriented toward participatory and expanded understandings of inquiry.

Within such a participatory ontology, intergenerational dialogue can be understood less as exchange and more as a process of co-emergence, in which meaning arises through participation rather than being predetermined. No single participant holds the whole; rather, insight emerges in the space between – shaped by the presence, attention, and responsiveness of those involved.

Extended epistemology and ways of knowing

Donald Schön (1995) claimed that a new ontology requires a new epistemology. We agree. If knowledge is relational and participatory, then our understanding of how we know must expand accordingly. As Walton (2022) argues, there is an important congruence to be achieved: if we are to develop an epistemology and methodologies that are genuinely congruent with a participatory ontology, then researchers – and, we would add, dialogue facilitators – must be willing to include themselves in the inquiry. As soon as they see themselves as standing apart from the processes they are facilitating or studying, a lack of congruence arises that undermines the validity of the whole enterprise.

Heron's (1996) extended epistemology offers a helpful framework for understanding the richness of what participatory inquiry makes possible. Rather than privileging conceptual or propositional knowledge alone – the dominant mode in contemporary Western academic life – Heron identifies four interrelated modes of knowing, which he presents in a pyramidal form with experiential knowing as the foundation.

Experiential knowing is grounded in direct encounter – the felt, embodied experience of being in the world and in relationship with others. It forms the basis from which the other modes arise. Presentational knowing gives aesthetic form to experience through story, metaphor, image, and symbol: it is an expressive response to what has been encountered. Propositional knowing involves the articulation of concepts and ideas that seek to make sense of experience. Practical knowing, which sits at the apex of Heron's pyramid, is expressed through action – the capacity to act thoughtfully and responsively in the world, as the outcome of the other three modes of knowing in concert (Heron 1996, 1998).

These modes are not separate but deeply interdependent. In the context of the NPN intergenerational dialogues, all four are present and in dynamic interplay. Participants bring their lived experience into the space: reflections on ecological crisis, mortality, identity, and purpose. They express this through metaphor and narrative. They reflect together on what is emerging, and they begin to translate insights into action through collaborative projects, symposia, and new ways of being in the world.

This epistemological framing matters because it allows us to recognise that what is taking place in these dialogues is not merely conversation, but a form of knowledge co-creation that integrates multiple ways of knowing and that takes seriously the forms of understanding that conventional academic modes tend to marginalise.

Bohm Dialogue and Co-operative Inquiry as method

The methodological grounding of this work draws explicitly on Bohm Dialogue and Co-operative Inquiry (Bohm 1996; Heron 1996; Isaacs 1999). David Bohm, working from the ontological perspective he had developed through quantum physics, and reflecting on the Greek origins of the term – 'dia' meaning 'through', 'logos' meaning 'word' – devised dialogue as a form of 'collective participation' which allows for the 'harmony of the individual and the collective, in which the whole constantly moves toward coherence' (Bohm 1996, 32). Groups of people learn to think together; ideas and ways of perceiving reality are generated that no one person would have had independently.

Isaacs (1999) identifies five core dialogical practices that make this possible and which are worth naming precisely because they are present – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – within the NPN dialogues:

Listening, in this context, means more than waiting for one's turn to speak. It involves a commitment to quieten one's own thoughts, theories, and feelings, and to listen at a deep level to what others are actually saying, including what lies beneath the words. There is also the practice of collective listening: attending to that which lies beyond any individual contribution, which makes it possible to access new levels of shared insight.

Respecting involves valuing the right of another person to hold their point of view, and taking it seriously, even when it differs substantially from one's own. Differences in perspective are inevitable; what matters is that they are engaged without diminishing or critiquing the person who holds them.

Suspending is perhaps the most demanding of the four practices. It involves becoming aware of one's own deeply held assumptions, theories, and certainties, and holding them lightly – not suppressing them, but making them visible and available for examination. As Isaacs (1999) notes, this is essential if the 'wisdom in – and beyond – the room' is to become accessible. When assumptions are suspended rather than defended, a deeper order can become visible that allows the group to think in genuinely new ways.

Voicing is the capacity to speak in response to what is engaging one in the present moment – involving oneself as a whole person and not censoring one's own truth in order to conform to expected positions. Rather than repeating well rehearsed arguments, voicing invites participants to express what is actually arising within them, including uncertainty, and by doing so to contribute something genuinely new to the group.

A fifth element is the practice of silence. The ground rule articulated in the Spirituality and Consciousness Studies Special Interest Group, from which the NPN's own dialogical approach draws, states it simply: 'What takes place in the silence is as important as the content of the speaking' (Walton 2022). Silence is not absence – it is the space in which reflection deepens and in which new insight becomes possible. The NPN dialogues consistently create and honour this space.

The NPN intergenerational dialogues reflect all these principles in practice, shaped also by the Heart Sense framework developed by Livingstone (2019, 2025), which brings particular emphasis to relational presence, compassion, and engagement 'through the heart as an organ of perception'. Taken together, this creates what might

be described as a hybrid methodological space – integrating elements of Bohm Dialogue, Co-operative Inquiry, and relational practice – and one that participants themselves have shaped and developed over time through their engagement.

Seeking congruence: Research, participation, and reflexivity

Understanding intergenerational dialogue in this way has significant implications for research and inquiry. The conventional model of research assumes a separation between the researcher and the subject of research, a detachment that is held to be the condition of rigour and objectivity. But as Walton (2022) argues, there is a fundamental internal contradiction in using a methodology premised on the separability of researcher and researched to study phenomena that are, by their nature, participatory and relational. To do so is to apply the very assumptions that the participatory paradigm calls into question.

If we are to develop approaches to research that are genuinely congruent with a participatory ontology, then researchers, and, in this context, all three authors of this paper, must be willing to include themselves in the inquiry. This means engaging reflexively and relationally: attending to one's own experience, acknowledging the role of subjectivity in the co-creation of knowledge, and being willing to share something of one's own inner world in the process.

This is not, it should be said, without difficulty. As Walton (2022) notes, developing participatory approaches 'requires a level of vulnerability, and a willingness to trust, that many find difficult'. The fear generated by the prospect of genuine self-disclosure within a research or dialogical process may itself be an inhibiting factor. Naming this honestly is part of the reflexive commitment that participatory inquiry demands and it connects directly to the relational conditions that participants in the NPN dialogues themselves name as essential: trust, openness, and the willingness to be seen.

Rather than relying solely on replication or detachment as criteria of validity, participatory approaches may emphasise coherence, resonance, and transformative potential (Heron & Reason 1997). In the context of the NPN dialogues, this means attending carefully not only to what is said but to how people are present with one another and to what becomes possible as a result.

Taken together, these strands suggest that intergenerational dialogue, when grounded in a participatory ontology, extended epistemology, and a heart-sense approach, is not simply a facilitation technique. It is a form of transformative practice with genuine ethical, epistemological, and methodological significance.

The New Paradigm Navigators: Origins, Ethos, and Development

The New Paradigm Navigators project developed, from its earliest stages, through a growing recognition that meaningful engagement requires attention not only to what is discussed but to how people are present with one another. The project is grounded in co-operative inquiry (Heron 1996) and the *Heart Sense* methodological approach (Livingstone 2025), which foreground relational presence, deep listening, and engagement through qualities such as curiosity, compassion, and care.

In practice, this has involved a movement away from traditional facilitation, in which a leader directs content and outcomes, toward a model of space-holding, in which facilitators support the emergence of dialogue rather than shaping it. As Livingstone reflects, this involves ‘sinking into the space with one another... engaging openly with others, through the heart as an organ of perception, with curiosity, gratitude and care’.

The initial objectives were deliberately open-ended: to create a safe space guided by deep listening and trust; to enable young people to focus on issues present for them; to support the organic growth of ideas through curiosity and ‘not knowing’. These objectives reflect a commitment to process over outcome, a recognition that what matters most is not a predetermined destination, but the quality of attention brought to the shared journey.

Early webinars brought together a small group of young people to share concerns and explore possibilities for meaningful engagement. Rather than reinforcing overwhelm or despair in the face of global challenges, these gatherings sought to open space for constructive and participatory inquiry. From these beginnings emerged a core group of engaged participants, each bringing creative ideas and a genuine commitment to contributing positively to the world. This has since led to the development of symposia, collaborative projects, and educational initiatives, reflecting a movement from shared inquiry toward practical expression, what Heron (1996) might describe as the practical knowledge mode coming into fuller expression.

Participants frequently describe the space as one characterised by trust, openness, and belonging: ‘We’re building trust... we’re not rejecting anyone... we’re trying to work through things.’ This quality of belonging is not incidental to the project: it is the relational ground from which deeper inquiry becomes possible. It is also, we would suggest, an instance of what the participatory paradigm asks of research: a willingness to trust, to be vulnerable, and to engage with what genuinely arises, rather than what it might be safer or more comfortable to explore.

The Intergenerational Dialogue Series in Practice

The intergenerational dialogue series, facilitated by Liam Bureau from April 2024 onwards, has brought together a maximum of eight participants per session of different ages and backgrounds to explore themes of shared concern. Fourteen sessions have taken place to date, with a recurring community of participants drawn from across the NPN project and beyond, including members from multiple countries and a wide range of professional and personal backgrounds. The materials that inform this analysis comprise notes, reflections and quotations that arose through the co-operative inquiry and Heart Sense methodological framing of each of these dialogues.

Liam, as project lead of the intergenerational dialogue series, formally sets the agenda for each dialogue. Remaining open and aware to the arising themes in each dialogue, Liam continually checks in with all participants, facilitating an open space to ensure that all voices are heard and that the chosen theme for the next dialogue resonates with all present. As much as possible, Liam holds open a safe and equitable space for all participants to express themselves safely and in a way that feels comfortable for them. In this context, Liam's holding of this space practically embodies both the methodological frameworks of co-operative inquiry and Heart Sense (the underpinning frameworks of the NPN project as already detailed) and participants are actively encouraged to pay attention to *how* they are showing up in the relational space *with themselves, for others*.

Liam reflects on the impact of these gatherings: 'People met others they would not have normally met... and attendees often shared that they had thought of something in a new way due to their conversations within the gatherings.' The dialogues have also been a significant site of personal and professional learning for Liam himself, in facilitation, in organisation, and in participation as a younger person in an intergenerational space: 'By simply being a part of these conversations, I could play a role in the intergenerational process; I learned things myself and shared my perspective with others with whom I would not naturally be in conversation.'

This dual role as facilitator and participant reflects the participatory ethos of the project, in which distinctions between those who hold space and those who inhabit it are softened in favour of shared inquiry. It also enacts the congruence principle articulated above: the facilitator does not stand outside the process but is genuinely included within it. What follows are reflections drawn from five of the core dialogue themes, each of which illuminates a different dimension of the intergenerational inquiry.

Leadership as an inner and relational practice

An early dialogue focused on the theme of leadership. Rather than approaching it as a set of external competencies or positional roles, participants explored leadership as something deeply internal and relational. One participant articulated this shift clearly: 'Leadership is less of an action or behaviour as much as it is a way of being, an energy or vibration, and an internal practice.'

This opened a shared inquiry across generations. Participants described leadership as 'a dance of leading by following', as 'working with our own shadow, mind, ego, and heart', and as 'something we practise in ourselves, which ultimately transforms the world'. These articulations move fluidly across experiential, presentational, and propositional modes of knowing, demonstrating how dialogue can access forms of understanding not easily available through conventional conceptual language alone. They also reflect the Bohmian quality of voicing: participants speaking from what was genuinely arising within them, rather than from rehearsed positions.

There was also a critical edge to the conversation. Contemporary leadership structures were described as often reflecting collective shadow dynamics: 'In our current society, our leaders represent our shadows and resemble parasites.'

Rather than resolving this tension, the group held it generatively, allowing the discomfort to intensify rather than foreclose the inquiry. What emerged was not a definition of leadership but a deepened awareness of its ethical and relational dimensions and of the relationship between personal transformation and structural change. The dialogue moved between the inner and the outer, the personal and the political, in a way that intergenerational encounter makes distinctively possible: each generation brought a different vantage point on why leadership matters and what it costs.

Connection to the natural world and ecological crisis

In a dialogue on the natural world and ecological crisis, participants moved quickly beyond conventional environmental discourse into more profound questions about patterns of thought and consciousness. One participant reflected, 'The planet will actually go on, nature will go on – it is us that are at risk.'

This shift from concern for the environment as an external object to questioning the forms of thinking that have led to ecological imbalance opened a more fundamental inquiry. Another participant observed, 'The same thinking which created the problems we face now cannot itself overcome them.' This resonates with the participatory paradigm's insistence that a new ontology requires a new epistemology: the chal-

lenge is not simply to find better answers within existing frameworks but to question the frameworks themselves.

The dialogue moved between ecological, philosophical, and experiential registers, drawing on practices such as sitting with a ‘numinous tree’, reconnecting with natural rhythms, and engaging with perennial wisdom traditions including the Tao Te Ching’s principles of harmony and non-action. One participant reflected simply, ‘If Life is asking us to live in harmony with Life, maybe we just need more time to listen.’

This quality of attention – pausing, listening, reconnecting – is itself a form of practical wisdom, and one that the Bohm dialogical tradition specifically cultivates. It is also an instance of what Heron (1996) would describe as presentational knowing: a way of engaging with ecological reality that is not purely analytical but aesthetic and relational.

The intergenerational dimension was particularly evident here. Older participants brought lived memory of different relationships to the natural world – periods of greater simplicity, different economies of attention – while younger participants brought the particular urgency of those who know they will live longest with the consequences of current choices. Neither perspective alone was sufficient; together, they opened a richer and more complex inquiry.

Gender, identity, and the ethics of openness

The dialogue on gender and sexuality opened a particularly sensitive and complex space. Participants reflected on the social, political, and familial roles associated with gender, and on the marginalisation and intolerance that can accompany challenges to existing beliefs. The dialogue notes observe that discussing these subjects can sometimes make participants feel vulnerable and uncomfortable, which may deter engagement. Nevertheless, the group held that such conversations must be approached with curiosity, ‘in order to open our minds and hearts to other ways of being.’

A particularly illuminating insight concerned the relationship between identity and a deeper ground of consciousness. Participants noted that while social identities and roles are significant in this life, ‘the eternal source of consciousness is not constrained by these concepts’, suggesting that a participatory and relational understanding of being offers a ground beneath the differences that can otherwise divide. This allowed the dialogue to hold both the importance of advocacy and equal representation, and a wider perspective that transcends and includes these distinctions.

The notes record that across generations, ‘minds and hearts have been opened by curiosity, by the good vibes, love and acceptance of those who embrace complex identities even when they challenge expectations.’ This intergenerational quality, the capacity of different age groups to learn from one another’s experience of acceptance and struggle, is precisely what this form of dialogue makes possible. Respecting, in Isaacs’s (1999) sense – taking seriously another person’s experience without requiring it to conform to one’s own – was visibly at work in this session.

Death, meaning, and the continuity of experience

The theme of death opened perhaps the most philosophically rich space across the dialogue series, and the one in which the participatory understanding of consciousness – including the possibility that it may extend beyond the physical body – was most directly present. Participants spoke of mortality with both vulnerability and depth: ‘In dangerous moments, when I’ve contemplated my own possible demise, I’ve been more frightened for the experience of my loved ones finding out, than for my own experience.’

Others explored the relationship between contemplating death and living more fully: ‘Practising dying hypothetically helps us reduce regret and guilt by taking action. We can take action and make amends.’

The dialogues moved into territory that challenges conventional materialist assumptions about the nature of death itself. Several participants offered perspectives that understand death not as a terminal ending but as a transition: ‘Death is the end of a chapter, not a book’; ‘We have evidence that suggests reincarnation is not just a model or metaphor, but the reality of how our being is,’ offered another participant, drawing on forms of knowing that resist reduction to propositional argument alone and that sit within a post-materialist understanding of consciousness as potentially extending beyond the physical.

These perspectives connect directly to the theoretical framework of this paper. If consciousness is, returning to De Quincey’s phrasing, ‘our deepest mystery and our most intimate reality’, then a dialogue space that allows participants to explore their relationship to consciousness, including at the boundary of life and death, is doing something genuinely significant. It is not simply discussing an interesting topic. It is inviting a form of inquiry that the dominant materialist paradigm has tended to foreclose.

Rather than seeking consensus, the group held these perspectives in dialogue, allowing multiple ways of knowing to coexist with mutual respect. There was also an insight that speaks to the broader significance of this work across generations: ‘Death

is an invitation to reflect on life.’ Older participants brought experience of loss and the particular quality of attention that comes from knowing one is in the later stages of life; younger participants brought the energy of those still forming their relationship to mortality. Each had something the other needed.

Work, purpose, and the search for meaning

A later dialogue explored the theme of work and its relationship to purpose, meaning, and identity. Participants noted that the very definition of work is shifting: ‘Is it work if we don’t get paid for it? Is it work if we enjoy it?’ One participant offered a relational definition that emerged through the dialogue itself: ‘Work is what we do to contribute to something else, to other people.’ This is, in itself, a presentational knowing, a way of understanding that could not have been arrived at through individual reflection alone but that arose through the shared space.

Generational differences were illuminating here. Older participants reflected on the stricter gender roles and hierarchical structures that characterised earlier working life, while younger participants described the particular challenges of remote and online work, in which the boundaries between personal and professional life become porous:

‘Remote work has trade-offs. We’re more independent, but work follows us home now. It’s something like doing the dishes... when we’re done with the dishes we feel accomplished because the next day we start new. But with big projects and online work, the work continues through time and follows you into your personal time.’

The dialogue drew out both the losses and the freedoms of contemporary working life and allowed participants across generations to validate and learn from one another’s experience. The conversation also touched on the relationship between work and meaning, a recurring concern for younger participants. The dialogue notes observe that many young people today feel ‘caught up in a system that claims purposelessness.’ The intergenerational space offered a place to explore this, not abstractly, but in relation to the lived experience of those who have navigated similar questions across different decades. In doing so, it enacted what Heron (1996) describes as practical knowing: the movement from shared reflection toward a more grounded sense of how to act.

Tensions, Challenges, and Learning Edges

While the dialogues have generated many meaningful experiences, they have also brought into focus tensions and challenges that are instructive for the wider study of

intergenerational engagement. Naming these honestly is part of the participatory and reflexive ethos of the work and reflects the kind of vulnerability that the participatory paradigm requires of all involved.

One significant tension concerns assumptions about age and authority. While older participants may bring extensive experience, younger participants often offer perspectives that challenge established ways of thinking, revealing the limitations of hierarchical models. The meeting notes record a recurring concern: the importance of ‘really getting to know one another – no “sage on the stage”’. The dialogue aims to hold this tension, honouring experience without reifying hierarchy, but it is not always easily achieved. The Bohm Dialogue practice of suspending is particularly important here: participants on all sides must be willing to bracket off their assumptions about what different generations know or can offer.

A second challenge relates to language and meaning. Participants across generations may use similar terms, such as ‘community’, ‘purpose’, or ‘consciousness’, while attributing quite different meanings to them. The dialogue notes record this as a recurring feature of the conversations. Navigating it requires patience, genuine curiosity, and a willingness to remain in dialogue rather than arriving too quickly at false agreement. This is, in effect, the practice of suspending applied to language itself: noticing that the words we share do not always carry the same worlds within them.

A deeper question, raised within the dialogues themselves and articulated by Joan Walton, concerns whether the creation of space is sufficient: ‘Is creating the space for young people to think about these things enough? Or do you need something more?’

A related question, raised by participant Jeff, concerns structural constraints: ‘Is having space(s) the biggest impediment? Are there other important challenges to be addressed, e.g., needing to afford food/shelter?’ These questions are important, and the project does not claim to resolve them. The dialogues make no claim to address material inequality directly. But they do suggest that spaces for genuine reflection and connection are themselves a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the kinds of personal and collective transformation that more structural change requires. The relationship between inner work and outer change is not sequential but recursive: each feeds the other.

The dialogue notes also record a broader cultural critique that emerged across multiple sessions: ‘Contemporary society creates “bad questions”, that is, questions framed by unexamined assumptions about the nature of reality and who counts as a knower. This is, in effect, an intergenerational encounter with the limits of the dominant paradigm and it speaks directly to the participatory epistemological frame-

work of this paper. One of the contributions of this kind of dialogue may be precisely to slow down, question assumptions, and create conditions for new and better questions to emerge.

Practically, the series has also encountered the ordinary challenges of online community: sessions postponed due to low attendance, technical difficulties, and the fragility of digitally mediated presence. Two sessions in 2025 were postponed or cancelled. The meeting notes record this honestly. At the same time, they highlight the remarkable geographic and cultural diversity of participants who have engaged across digital boundaries, something that in-person gatherings alone could not achieve. Digital space both enables and constrains; the dialogue series is learning to work with both.

Integrative Reflections: Dialogue as Transformative Practice

What seems to be emerging through this work is not simply a series of conversations, but a living example of participatory, relational inquiry in action. The dialogues demonstrate that when certain conditions are present – trust, deep listening, willingness to engage across difference, attentiveness to silence, and genuine reflexivity on the part of all involved – something beyond the sum of individual contributions becomes possible. What arises is not owned by any one participant but belongs to the space between them. This is what Bohm (1996, 32) means by the ‘harmony of the individual and the collective’, and it is what the NPN dialogues, at their best, enact.

Viewed through the lens of the special issue’s themes, the NPN intergenerational dialogue series speaks to several of its core concerns. In terms of theories and practices, the work enacts an approach grounded in participatory ontology, extended epistemology, and dialogical method, offering a theoretically coherent account of why this is more than a well-run series of conversations. Wheeler’s (1994) ‘participatory universe’, Heron’s (1996) extended epistemology, and Bohm’s (1996) dialogical method together provide a framework within which the practice becomes legible as a contribution to the field.

In terms of knowledge co-creation, the dialogues demonstrate how intergenerational encounter can integrate experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowing, including the integration of ancestral and perennial wisdom traditions with the perspectives and concerns of younger generations. The ecology dialogue’s engagement with the Tao Te Ching, the death dialogue’s openness to post-material-

ist understandings of consciousness, and the leadership dialogue's exploration of inner transformation as a precondition for outer change are all instances of this.

In terms of digital spaces, the series illustrates both the opportunities and genuine limitations of online dialogue: its capacity to gather participants across continents alongside the qualities of presence that digital mediation cannot fully replicate. The practice of silence, in particular, works differently online than in person, and this is something the project continues to navigate.

With respect to gender equality, the dialogue on gender and identity illustrates how intergenerational encounter can both honour particular experiences of marginalisation and open toward a wider participatory ground that transcends category while taking it seriously. And in terms of positive peace, the dialogues offer a micro-level example of what it might mean to encounter profound difference, including difference in beliefs about the nature of death, consciousness, and reality, with openness and mutual respect.

Perhaps most significantly, the dialogues suggest that intergenerational encounter, when held in a participatory and dialogical spirit, may itself be a form of integrative learning, a practice that does not resolve complexity, but increases our collective capacity to hold it and to act from within it more wisely and humanely.

Conclusion: Stepping into the Unknown Together

Intergenerational dialogue, as explored in this paper, is not a fixed model or a transferable programme. It is an evolving practice, one that grows through the relationships it creates, the questions it refuses to close too quickly, and the care with which participants show up for one another across difference.

Taking a moment to reflect on these NPN intergenerational dialogues in relation to existing intergenerational dialogue literature, we suggest that our approach relates most closely to the Lifespan Perspectives approach, which focuses on human development across the entirety of life. Like Lifespan Perspectives, the NPN intergenerational dialogues are reciprocal, iterative, mutually informing, and founded on the deep importance of dialoguing across distinct age cohorts as different generations possess unique psychological, historical, and physiological needs that require mutual co-inquiry. Our general approach, however, is different from many of the existing theories, as we aim to make space for 'something more' within the dialogue space. For example, the intelligence of the heart (which includes emotional intelligence as well as somatic, intuitive, and spiritual ways of knowing and attending to the world) is welcomed, as is the potentiality and possibility of the relational space – not just in

relation to human-to-human, but holding a deeper sense of the importance of the space itself that is holding the dialogue.

What this work suggests is that something genuinely significant becomes possible when younger and older people come together not to instruct or persuade, but to inquire, to listen, and to co-create. The themes explored in the NPN dialogues – leadership, ecology, gender, death, work, and meaning – are among the most fundamental questions facing human societies today. That they can be explored across generational difference, with curiosity and genuine openness, and within a framework that takes seriously the participatory nature of knowledge itself, is no small thing.

We do not claim that dialogue alone is sufficient. The structural, material, and political dimensions of the challenges we face require responses that extend far beyond any conversation series. But we do suggest that the capacity to meet one another across difference, to listen with genuine openness – suspending assumptions, respecting difference, voicing authentically, and honouring silence – and to allow new understanding to emerge, is itself a foundational condition for more just, sustainable, and flourishing futures.

There is also, we would add, something important about the willingness to include oneself in the inquiry, to be genuinely present, genuinely affected, and genuinely changed by the encounter. This is what the participatory paradigm asks of researchers. It is also, we suggest, what intergenerational dialogue asks of all who enter it. The two are not so different. Both require the courage to step into the unknown, not alone, but together.

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Intergenerational Dialogues in Colombia: Some Reflections

Garrett Thomson, Rossana Silva¹

Abstract: This article examines intergenerational dialogue as a practice of collective healing among the Afro-descendant and indigenous communities in Colombia who participated in a 2025 UNESCO initiative. It introduces the concept of *spiritual harm* to capture forms of damage different from material and psychological accounts. The article argues that the distinct histories of the two groups have produced different configurations of spiritual harm and corresponding healing practices. The article concludes that standardised dialogue frameworks risk obscuring culturally specific meanings and proposes a revised methodology incorporating an initial open-ended phase in which communities define their own problem spaces.

Keywords: Intergenerational dialogue; spiritual harm; collective healing; Colombia; Afro-Colombian communities; indigenous communities; dehumanisation; participatory methodology

Introduction

This article describes some of the differences between the Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities in Colombia that participated in the Intergenerational Dialogue Programme which was held in 2023 as part of a broader UNESCO programme. These differences will be characterised primarily in terms of the kinds of spiritual harm that the two types of communities have suffered and the relevant types of healing practices they engage in.

The main objective of this comparison is to indicate how these differences might have impinged on the dialogues themselves and to thereby learn more about how to make the intergenerational dialogue processes more sensitive to relevant cultural and historical differences. The analysis in this article is based partly on the interviews

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with their elders and dialogues carried out by the young people in their respective communities.

The article is divided into six sections. The first provides some general background about Indigenous and Afro communities in Colombia. In the second we present the communities that participated in the programme. The third describes the Intergenerational Dialogue Programme and its methodology. The fourth introduces the concept of spiritual harm. In the fifth, we characterise the kinds of spiritual harm suffered by the two communities and the healing practices that form part of their cultures, and we also outline some informal results of the programme. The final section suggests how the methodology might be adapted to better take into account the differences outlined in the paper.

Colombian Context

Around 1525, when the Spanish were beginning their conquest of the territory that we now call 'Colombia', there were probably about 6 million indigenous people living in the area. It is estimated that by 1545 approximately 5.25 million of these people had died as a result of the invasion, including through diseases. The population remained at roughly the same absolute levels throughout the nineteenth century and declined in the first half of the twentieth century. Since 1965, it has been growing in both absolute and proportional terms. In the 2018 census, the population of indigenous peoples in Colombia was estimated to be over 4.4% of the total population or about 2 million people. More recent estimates place the percentage at 10% or 5.2 million. There are 115 communities, living mostly in the South (Nariño and Cauca), the North-East (La Guajira), and the North (Cordoba and Sucre) (Dane 2019). About 78% of the population lives in rural communities.

About 10% of the population of the country is Afro-Colombian (5 million), although higher estimates put that at 25%. Most live on the Atlantic and the Pacific Coast. The first people of Afro-descent arrived in Colombia around 1440 (Wade 2010). However, from around 1520, enslaved people from Africa were transported to Colombia to replace the indigenous slaves, who had already been decimated (World Directory of Minorities). The enslaved worked mostly in mines and sugar plantations but also in large farms or *haciendas*, sometimes alongside the remaining enslaved indigenous people.

One major historical difference between the two groups is starkly simple: the indigenous people had their land stolen from them, while the people of African descent were stolen from their land. This obvious difference has profound ramifications for subsequent socio-economic processes and for the cultural phenomenology of the two groupings. Partly because the land of this whole country was originally theirs,

the indigenous people have been granted territories which cover about 31% of the area of Colombia. These territories recognised by the 1991 Constitution grant a certain degree of autonomy and legal protection to the groups that inhabit them. In contrast, although some Afro-Colombian communities do have collective rights to the land they live on, in general these collective titles offer less legal protection than an indigenous protected territory (*resguardo*), and they amount to only 4% of the area of Colombia. The possible exceptions are the small number of the Afro-Colombian *Palenque* and *Raizal* communities (Toston 2012). In short, as the anthropologist Peter Wade notes, towards the middle of the twentieth century onwards, indigenous communities received levels of state backing that were not granted to Afro communities (Wade 2018).

As an implication of the original difference, indigenous peoples have a historically deep ancestral and spiritual relation to the land, which establishes cultural norms of long-term attachment. From this perspective, the most important political action is perhaps to regain, restore, and maintain these relations with the land and the cultural community practices and beliefs that define the meanings of those relations.

In contrast, historically, the communities of Afro-descendants tended to settle in remote areas to escape enslavement, especially in coastal regions along rivers in the Pacific. Afro communities were not granted strong territorial rights to the land they occupied. Furthermore, there has been a huge displacement of Afro-Colombians to large cities such as Cali, Bogotá and Medellín because of dispossession and the ongoing violence. It is estimated that over 70% of Afro-Colombians live in urban or on the fringe of urban areas (Dane 2008). From this perspective, perhaps the most important political action is to be integrated more fully into Colombian society, treated as a respected citizen of the Republic with equal rights and with equal opportunities to make a reasonable livelihood (Sanders 2023).

Afro-descendants and the Indigenous communities located in southwestern Colombia are among those to have suffered the most severe consequences of recent internal conflict. In total figures, indigenous peoples have contributed the highest number of young people recruited for war. In general, indigenous peoples experienced greater impact through recruitment and through the occupation of their territories. In contrast, Afro-descendant communities were more affected by massacres, paramilitary control, and much displacement from their land (Bratspies 2020).

However, please beware of these simplistic generalisations. In reality, the armed conflict has impacted various communities very differently depending on their location within the so-called ‘red zones’, which were areas where the conflict was especially intense, partly because of their role as drug trafficking corridors and also because of their location close to various natural resources.

Indeed, any general comparisons between Afro and Indigenous communities in Colombia is subject to important qualifications. The issue of how and by whom race and ethnicity are defined in Colombia is contentious (Chomsky and Forster 2010). The state's criteria are more stringent than how people would self-identify. This is one reason there are disparities between the official 2018 census figures and other studies based on self-identification. Moreover, the ethnicities are not absolute in various ways. Most people in Colombia have descents of diverse origins. Even those who self-identify as European or white on average have genetic ancestry that is over 45% indigenous and 11% Afro (Rojas 2010). In some cases, it is not so much that racial and ethnic lines are blurred but that they do not exist. However, such claims are politically contentious when they are used to deny groups the collective territorial rights that are supposed to be ensured by the 1991 constitution and the 1993 Law 70, known as the 'Law of Black Communities'. Additionally, in several parts of Colombia, including Chocó and northern Cauca, there have been long-term interactions between communities who live close to each other (Wade 2018). This was also true in some of the past mining communities in Colombia. Furthermore, these ethnic differences, taken as hard and fast racial distinctions, have served oppressive purposes during the colonial period and after, including actions to divide and rule (Wade 2017).

There are many historical, cultural, and political-economic differences between the many different Afro and Indigenous communities in the country. For example, the experiences of the indigenous groups who live in the forests of Amazonia and those who live in the desert of La Guajira and those who live in the Andes are bound to be very varied. Likewise, the Afro communities near the big cities such as Cali, Medellín and Bogotá are very different from those in small rural settlements, and those around the Atlantic coast are very different from those near the Pacific. For this reason, this article will largely restrict itself to noting some of the differences specific to the different groups that participated in the dialogues.

The Participating Communities

The intergenerational dialogues were practised by two indigenous groups. The first group was the Emberá Chamí of San Cayetano in Ríosucio, Caldas, which is made up of 32 adjacent communities. The second was the Emberá rural community in the mountains of Córdoba, Quindío.

It is important to note that these communities now live in conditions that are relatively peaceful compared to those of the indigenous groups in the south-west of Colombia, who have suffered severe ongoing violence, including the murder of group leaders. This is not to say however, that the groups in Quindío and Caldas

have not been persecuted and attacked and that their land is not threatened by invasion.

The Emberá Chamí are an Indigenous people belonging to the broader Emberá linguistic family, who live in the mountainous areas in Caldas, Quindío, Risaralda and Antioquia. Many of the communities live in rural *resguardos* (Tostón 2020). Only 50% speak their native Emberá language, which represents a significant loss of the cultural roots of the communities. Nevertheless, the community maintains strong social cohesion, deep attachment to the territory, and practices oriented toward solidarity. For instance, the Emberá Chamí are known for their gender balance. Both men and women fulfil the roles of *cabildo* (community leader) and *jaibaná* (shaman). Women are active in the economic activities of the group, such as craft and artisanal production, local trade, and various forms of agriculture. Women participate actively in community meetings and have their own healing sessions.

The groups maintain traditions that predate the Spanish conquest. Although they practice collective decision making, each community has at least one *cabildo* or local authority or community head. Each community also has one or more *jaibaná*, who are spiritual leaders who have contact with the ancestors and with the beings or *jai* who inhabit the spiritual realm. The *jaibaná* lead the traditional healing rituals. The spiritual traditions include a close connection to the land; the territory is treated as a sacred space, which means that the *jaibaná* will ensure that the community's economic activities do not violate the relation with the land and with the *jai*, and that the appropriate rituals are performed. The rituals concerning the use of the land, the relation to the *jai* and ancestors, and the healing of persons often involve traditional medicine and the use of local plants, each of which has its own specific healing properties. These are ways to maintain a cosmological equilibrium.

The Emberá rural community settled in the mountains of the municipality of Córdoba Quindío. The community is characterised by its rural nature and a subsistence economy based on plantain and cassava cultivation, and coffee harvesting. The group faces significant economic difficulties, exacerbated by limited institutional presence and restricted access to basic services. The community preserves many aspects of its traditional culture, such as the use of ancestral indigenous medicine, and it maintains a strong artisanal tradition, especially weaving by women.

The intergenerational programme was also put into practice by various Afro-descendant communities located in the Chocó region. These populations were brought to Colombia as enslaved people during the colonial period. Many worked in gold mines in the mountains to the east and were able to escape or were later freed to form communities in the isolated and seemingly safer regions of the Chocó. Because they were, and often still are, removed from the mainstream Colombian society,

these communities were able to preserve some African traditions. One of the main other cultural influences on them was that of the local indigenous peoples. Because many of these Afro communities grew up along the side of the many river systems in this often swamp-like area of the country, such as the Atrato and Baudó, they have especially strong connections to the rivers. The rivers are at the core of their livelihoods, such as fishing and household agriculture, of their communal practices and gatherings, and of their folklore, songs, and reverence for nature (Escobar 2008).

Programme Description

The Intergenerational Dialogue Programme was embedded with a wider UNESCO programme of Collective Healing Circles. Among other things, the UNESCO collective healing programme provides capacity-building for the facilitators of collective healing circles in communities which have suffered from colonisation and transatlantic enslavement (GHFP & UNESCO 2021).

In part, the idea of the intergenerational dialogues was to encourage young people from these same communities to take an active part in the collective healing circles. In preparation for this, they would be invited to dialogue in an open but structured way with their elders. The main purpose of the dialogues was to deepen trust and understanding between the generations. The dialogues provided an opportunity for the young people to find out more about the past of their communities and how this shapes their present realities, especially their ongoing oppression. At the same time, the elderly had the opportunity to recount their lived past and to explain the nature of the oppression and difficulties that they have suffered, and how they are different from the conditions of today. The dialogues also provided an opportunity for the elderly to explain the meaning of community cultural practices for the healing and resilience of the community. The programme saw such sharing as valuable given that many of these cultural practices are being eroded by the pressures of contemporary Colombian life. The dialogues also offered a space for the community to build together a shared vision for a better future, to reshape traditional narratives in the context of contemporary society. The programme was designed to allow young people to assume a leading role in all these dialogue processes.

This programme was carried out with partners in five countries, including Colombia. In Colombia, during 2023, six communities participated; these were 3 Afro-descendant communities from the Pacific region and 3 Indigenous communities in the coffee area of Colombia. The training was based on the guidebook for the programme (GHFP & UNESCO 2024). One can divide the programme into three phases.

1) Preparatory phase

Two young people from each community received capacity strengthening and in-depth training concerning the conceptual, ethical, and methodological foundations of the process. This capacity-building included:

- A background that contextualised the history of slavery and colonisation, both internationally and specific to Colombia. This outlined the structural social and cultural impacts of slavery and colonisation on the Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities in Colombia (Campbell et al. 2015).
- Capacity building to help young people recognise their communities' culture by strengthening their understanding of social dynamics, collective memory, and community solidarity.
- Capacity building in interview methods and life-narratives methodology and in how to facilitate dialogue spaces (Goodson 2023).
- How to gather community knowledge, treasures, and practices, and recognise them as healing tools for historical wounds. The programme included technical and ethical training in information collection, including audio recording, photography, filming, use of digital networks, and the application of informed consent.

2) Community work phase

After the capacity building, the young people interviewed 30 elders from their communities. The main aim of this phase was to strengthen intergenerational learning and bonds within the communities. This phase included:

- The analysis of community work, identifying intercultural similarities and differences;
- The development of individual and group dialogues aimed at collecting life stories, memories, and significant experiences of resilience;
- Collective dialogues and focus groups for the comparison of narratives;
- The co-creation of a deeper understanding of community dynamics, ancestral knowledge, and contemporary experiences for collective critical analysis;
- Trust building among young people, families, and the community.

3) Action and dissemination phase

This phase sought the projection of results and the sustainability of the process. It included:

- Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL), oriented toward continuous improvement of the process, including proposals for methodological and strategic adjustments based on results and feedback received;
- A review by participants;
- Articulation with local universities to raise awareness of the importance of the initiative and to disseminate the results.

The methodology was based on a qualitative and participatory approach, with training for the young people in interviewing, facilitating dialogues, and critical reflection. The process included the collecting of testimonies and narratives through audio recordings, photographs, videos, and writing.

Spiritual Harm

At this point we can introduce the notion of spiritual harm. How is the idea relevant to this context? Harm, like its counterpart, wellbeing, is often understood as reducible to the economic and the material conditions of life. Even psychological accounts of harm tend to portray it in terms of what people like and how satisfied they feel. These are the typical basic elements of objective and subjective contemporary accounts of wellbeing and harm. On their own, they seem to be inadequate to capture the kinds of harm that were perpetrated by enslavement and colonisation, when people were torn from their roots and when the innermost aspects of their culture and ways of life were almost destroyed. For these reasons, we need to speak about spiritual harm to indicate an especially grave kind of harm.

Such a notion, of course, is problematic. The idea of harm itself is difficult enough to understand; the additional concept of the spiritual may seem to render it too contentious. Nevertheless, we can attempt it. A person is harmed insofar as she is deprived of well-being. Wellbeing can be characterised as the non-instrumentally valuable aspects of living along four dimensions or aspects. These dimensions are: 1) the activities, experiences and processes that comprise what one does and what happens to one; 2) the emotional and appreciative awareness of these aspects of living; 3) one's relations, especially but not exclusively, to other people; and 4) self-consciousness and one's relation to oneself. Each of these constitute different aspects of living which can be non-instrumentally good, albeit each in a different set of ways (Thom-

son et al. 2021). Harm would be constituted by loss or deprivation along one or more of these dimensions (Thomson 1987). It is important to note that the third dimension is relational and can include other relations (apart from those to other people) that are non-instrumentally valuable. For instance, it may comprise relations to the rest of nature, to one's body and with a community, insofar as these are non-instrumentally valuable.

Given this departure point, spiritual harm can be described as a harm that is especially serious because of its nature. Even when material and psychological harm are great in quantity, spiritual harm is serious because of its quality. Quantity is one thing; quality is another. Spiritual harm is serious qualitatively because of the kind of harm it is. Intuitively, we might express this by claiming that it concerns the very core of one's being.

On this basis, one can argue that spiritual harm is a severing of our connection with the transcendent or the sacred. The starting point for this argument is the claim that the spiritual is comprised of the activities and experiences of a person's life that are non-instrumentally valuable precisely because they consist in an appropriate connection to the sacred, divine, or transcendent. This definition does not need to be made more precise, for instance, by tying it to a specific conception of the sacred. We can leave the conception culturally open-ended (Thomson 2025).

Spiritual harm is primarily a kind of harm to one's relation to the sacred, along the third dimension. However, this primary aspect of spiritual harm will typically also involve harm along the other dimensions. For example, concerning the first, it would consist in people being deprived of the activities and experiences that comprise such a relation, such as community practices and rituals. Concerning the second, it would involve being deprived of the emotional appreciation of those practices, and concerning the third again, also the interpersonal and community relations. Along the fourth, spiritual harm will also typically involve harm to one's sense of self.

This last point suggests a qualification, namely that appropriate connection to the sacred is not a stand-alone relation. This is because insofar as one is connected appropriately to the sacred, one would feel the non-instrumental value of persons. That is, one would feel one's own dignity or non-instrumental value as a person, as well as that of others equally. Thus, to count as spiritual, one's connection to the sacred would involve the capacity to appreciate emotionally the non-instrumentally valuable nature of persons, both oneself and others. The reason for this qualification is that the idea of a spiritual connection should have a broadly ethical content, and this content is best characterised in terms of the non-instrumental value of persons.

The concept of spiritual harm allows us to understand resilience as the capacity to not allow dehumanising acts to inflict such harms. Resilience makes it possible for people to mitigate and transcend spiritual harm even when they are being systematically dehumanised. Resilience is the cause without the effects. This diagnosis has important implications for healing practices. In many cases, Afro and Indigenous communities have been able to survive centuries of systemic dehumanisation because of their religious and spiritual traditions. Such traditions have enabled communities to separate how others treat us from how we treat ourselves. Even when the first dehumanises, this does not mean that the second need follow suit. People who are being dehumanised acquire resilience from, among other things, their spiritual practices, which allow them to maintain their connection to the sacred and to their dignity. In this way, these traditions may enable them to transcend the continuing systematic instrumentalisation of society. This indicates that collective healing practices should include spaces for communities to maintain and strengthen this aspect of their cultures, even when contemporary society tends to undermine it. Indeed, Indigenous, Afro, and other marginalised communities can learn (and have learned) from each other in this regard. Eventually, hopefully, such learning may help transform mainstream societies in which the value-inversions that turn people into objects predominate.

We need the concept of spiritual harm for two allied reasons. We require it to better understand the ongoing harms that were part of, and that resulted from, colonisation and enslavement. Without it, our understanding of these events and processes would be radically incomplete. If one were stuck with characterising colonisation primarily in terms such as material harms, right-claims and even emotional trauma, then one would have missed something of vital importance. One would have omitted the deeper harms that are inherent in the history and ongoing structural dehumanisation. On the one hand, spiritual harm requires the idea that a person is considered as an object: an 'I' is treated as an 'it'. It involves people being turned into commodities, and it tends to instrumentalise our self-perceptions accordingly. Spiritual harm involves such instrumentalisation. On the other hand, such instrumentalisation is also a feature of both colonisation and subsequent dehumanisation. Brought together, these two points indicate that spiritual harm is a necessary element of the dehumanising inherent in colonisation, slavery and subsequent racism.

We also need the concept of spiritual harm to comprehend better what local healing processes are, and what might count as deeper healing. In short, spiritual harm requires spiritual healing, and local traditions and practices reflect this. Acknowledging this kind of harm is a fundamental step towards recognising the existing collective healing processes of the communities that have spirituality at their core. To see them simply as cultural practices misses this point.

Spiritual harm should be distinguished from its causes and from its manifestations and expressions. The harm itself consists in a diminished appreciation and experience of a non-instrumentally valuable aspect of living, namely one's relation and connection to the sacred. In this case, such harm was and is caused by the historical and persistent, structural, violent dehumanisation of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in Colombia. The harming is different from the harm caused. The harm caused expresses itself typically as trauma, feelings of meaninglessness, loss, powerlessness, and inferiority.

There is a final clarification. The above is the framework for spiritual harm to particular people. However, this does not mean that it is an individualistic account. It is not individualistic because it recognises that relations to one's community, to other people, and to the sacred (*inter alia*) are direct aspects of well-being insofar as they are non-instrumentally valuable. Wellbeing is inherently relational. Furthermore, the account recognises that we all live in communities that have cultures, languages, and traditions (Thomson 2018). We are ineluctably social beings. Nevertheless, it is not an account of harm to a community as such (beyond the harm to its members), for such an account would require a theory of what a community is. This lies outside the scope of this paper, which is rather a characterisation of spiritual harm to members of communities.

Findings and Results

1) Spiritual harm in indigenous communities

Indigenous communities in Colombia have experienced spiritual harm in various way as a direct result of colonisation. These include territorial dispossession, forced evangelisation and the systematic denial of their cultures and worldviews.

One of the deepest harms has been the loss or weakening of native languages. Language is not merely a means of communication: it is also a cultural phenomenology, a set of ways of seeing and being in the world. It is a way of naming or classifying the world, including ancestral knowledge and rituals. Importantly for the Emberá Chami, it includes the ideas needed for relating spiritually to the territory, to the world of spirits and ancestors, and to the harmony of the cosmos in everyday life. Therefore, the loss of the language constitutes a collective spiritual wound insofar as it implies a loss of the connection to the spiritual dimension in the lives of the communities.

Likewise, the imposition of Catholicism and the stigmatisation of Indigenous spiritual practices as 'witchcraft' which generated confusion, fear, and self-denial, constitute spiritual harm. Many Indigenous peoples were forced to hide their rituals,

abandon their ceremonies, and publicly renounce their beliefs, producing a profound fracture in their spiritual identity. These processes delegitimised their knowledge, eroded collective self-esteem, and denied their own belief systems. This too is a form of spiritual harm because it severed their connections to the sacred.

Territorial dispossession and forced displacement also constitute another form of severe spiritual harm. For most indigenous groups, including the Emberá and the Emberá Chami, territory is not just a physical space, but it is more like a living being. It is where the spirits of the ancestors dwell. It is part of the identity and history of the group. When groups were dispossessed of their territories, they were torn from their relationships with the sacred in ways that constituted a dehumanisation. Some of the participants in the dialogues expressed this spiritual harm in the following terms:

‘...they largely lost their natural and spiritual bond with nature, having to abandon the trees that for them are their grandparents...’

‘...slavery sought to make the Indigenous race disappear from the face of the earth...’

2) Spiritual harm in Afro-descendant communities

For Afro-descendants, the historical experience of being enslaved, of being forcibly transported and torn from their land, community, and culture constitutes a form of spiritual harm, which has been transmitted across generations. Enslavement was a systemic dehumanisation, a denial of subjecthood and agency, and it has continued in the form of persistent structural racism which often perpetuates such denials in internalised forms.

Spiritual harm in Afro-descendant communities in the Chocó manifests itself as the tendency to feel powerless and as feelings of humiliation and resentment. Such feelings are associated with centuries of structural racism and social exclusion, which is manifest as the denial of rights. Prolonged over time, such emotions tend to erode dignity, affect collective self-esteem, and hinder the transmission of spiritual and cultural values to new generations. One young woman expressed this as follows:

‘...spiritual harm is related to powerlessness, prevention, resentment, and feeling humiliated...’

Afro-descendant spiritual practices were stigmatised. Funeral chants, *alabados*, collective prayers and other ritual expressions were treated as inferior rather than being recognised as legitimate forms of spiritual connection and healing.

One of the most immediate effects, particularly visible in regions such as Chocó, is internalised fear. Recently, the ongoing violence prevented participants from attending community gatherings. This resulting fear and trauma are not simply an emotional reaction to danger but are also an expression of the spiritual wounds pertaining to the connection to the sacred.

3) Healing practices

The notion of spiritual harm enables us to move beyond more conventional analyses of the damage caused by colonisation and enslavement. It places the idea of a sacred core of human life at the centre of an analysis of harm. One might understand this core minimally as the non-instrumentally valuable aspect of human life, the emotional appreciation of which constitutes both our dignity and our capacity to love others as beings of equal intrinsic value. More metaphysically, the spiritual may be understood as the activities and experiences of our lives that connect to the sacred in ways that sustain these non-instrumentally valuable aspects. From this perspective, spiritual harm is not only damage to the lives of individual people, but also to the cultural and symbolic systems that sustain the collective existence of peoples as communities with a shared spiritual life. It thus forms part of a shared tragic history. Healing requires that such history be overcome or transcended but not silenced (Thomson 2022). Although the communities have different healing practices, both reframe this history and provide resilience in the face of ongoing dehumanisation.²

While the dialogues revealed some important similarities between the two cultures, they also illustrated some general differences. Broadly speaking, the culture of indigenous peoples is focused more directly on their connection with nature and land, while the Afro-Colombians' is more associated with the expression of emotion and community, and with the worship of God. Although the Afro communities in rural areas of the Chocó do have strong connections to the land they inhabit and farm, and especially to rivers and sea around which their communities have grown, it is not sacred in the way the territories are for the Indigenous groups such as the Emberá.

For the Emberá Chami communities, healing is holistic. It encompasses all aspects of social life including the physical and territorial, which are at the same time spiritual. Healing practices are spiritual because they form a connection to the spirits and Mother Earth. Healing is a restoration of a cosmic balance in which the four elements dialogue with one another and receive the powerful energy of the Sun. Light is the vehicle that carries the community's prayers and requests for healing. Mother Earth is the force that enables this collective healing. This applies to sickness of the body, for when the spirit is ill, the spirit must be healed. For this to occur, the parti-

² The reframing of the history would be different in the two cases, however, as we explain later.

cipants in a healing process need to be deeply connected to the spiritual aspects of the world. Through ritual practices that involve, for instance, observing the trees and special breathing techniques, the group can transform suffering into opportunity and aggression into silence (Mosquera 2001). Ritual chants and dances also have a healing vibration that is gentle and harmonious. Emotions can be healed through the spirits of various plants, including the coca leaf, tobacco, and *yage* (Marulanda 2020, 2022).

For Afro-Colombians in the Chocó, healing is expressed culturally through rhythmic music and dance, and joyful movement and colour. In Afro communities, song and dance occupy a central cultural place as forms of community memory and resistance, and as an accompaniment to oral storytelling. The main forms of music are Currulao, Bunde, Abozao and Chirimía. These constitute ways to relate to the ancestors, to river spirits, and to other spiritual beings, such as saints and angels. The music expresses that to heal requires the giving of oneself: solidarity and generosity. Healing requires giving and receiving. Being open, sincere, and humble are healing qualities.

The directly spiritual aspect of healing occurs in rituals and prayers directed to saints, who are the agents of healing and intermediaries between this earthly realm and God. The ritual use of music can engender spiritual trance-like states in which it is possible to communicate with ancestors, saints, and angels. The meaning of these practices is transmitted through oral tradition, poetry and song. Healing is expressed as a profoundly communal act based on solidarity and shared emotion.

Whereas Indigenous peoples pay homage to the magical power of spirits and have practices aimed at maintaining the balance of the cosmos, Afro communities revere the power of saints and worship God. While Indigenous cosmogony was not heavily influenced by the Catholic church, that of Afro communities was. For instance, they look to ancestors, saints, and angels to provide spiritual protection and guidance (Mosquera 2001). Afro communities tried to protect their traditional beliefs and practices from Africa by employing Christian practices as a veil. They ended up fusing the two, reinterpreting and integrating Catholic views with more traditional African practices and beliefs (Duccini & Rabelo 2022). Although both communities sing and dance to honour ancestors, spirits, and deities, they are different in terms of rhythm and content. Afro-descendant expressions tend to be more joyful and vibrant, while Indigenous rhythms are gentler, like the dances performed in homage to Mother Earth.

In the Chocó, Indigenous and Afro communities have been living close to each other for centuries. For both communities, the sacred nature of life is very important. Both have practices and rituals connected to their ancestors. Both keep ancestral practices

alive by using medicinal plants, traditional prayers, and the knowledge of midwives, healers, and wisdom keepers. Like the Emberá Chami, the Afro people from Chocó employ plants for healing and cleansing, and their use is spiritual in the sense that these plants are beings.

In both groups, at the core of these practices is the re-signifying of death. Death transcends pain, transforms loss, and reaffirms the continuity of life beyond the realm of violence. The Emberá Chami consider death as a transcendence and a spiritual achievement, which is a cause for celebration because the spirit has fulfilled its natural purpose by journeying to another world. Ceremonies performed in celebration of this passing involve chants with drums and dance. Such rituals involve the use of tobacco smoke, sacred resins, and the aromas of natural plants such as *yagé*. These rituals are led by the spiritual leaders, who are the *mamos* or *taitas* (knowledge keepers), and *jaibanás* or shamans, who are all trained from childhood in order to communicate with the spirits. These rituals involve both cleansing ceremonies and practices that induce visions.

To honour the dead, Afro communities sing *alabados* during funerals. These are hymn like songs that accompany the soul on its journey and that strengthen the solidarity of the community. The music is often driven by the intense rhythms of drums, *marimbas*, and chants. Other sacred elements in funeral services include religious images, candles, and local plants.

Both the Emberá Chami and the Afro communities have maintained practices that aim to heal wounds, build resilience and resistance, and help re-signify events and places where they have suffered dehumanisation. The historical differences in the treatment of the two communities (territorial dispossession in the case of the Indigenous peoples, and extermination, enslavement, and extreme exploitation, in the case of Afro-descended people) have given rise to some different cultural expressions in healing processes.

This brief comparative analysis reveals that, despite cultural and territorial differences, both Afro-descendants of the Chocó and Indigenous communities of the Emberá Chami share a spiritual conception of life, in which individual wellbeing consists of the health of the soul or balance with the cosmos and the spiritual realm, in ways that express the continuity of ancestral memory and the collective wellbeing of the community.

4) Direct results

The Intergenerational Dialogue Programme answered several needs. In both groups, a major current concern is how to include and involve younger generations in con-

tinuing community traditions and in political action. In both communities, younger people are often subject to intense economic, social, and cultural pressures, which were largely unknown to previous generations. These pressures tend to seduce younger people away from traditional spiritual practices and substitute traditional culture with earning better and participating in the wider society. Many communities lack the systematic dialogue spaces for the younger generations to share their concerns about such pressures, and for the elders to communicate the meanings of traditional healing practices to the young. This constitutes an important field of rich unresolved contradictions. The IGD programme shows how encounters between young people and elders can help resolve such contradictions and thereby constitute a powerful element of symbolic healing and social reconstruction. Because of this, the programme had beneficial results for both the young and the elderly, as well as the community at large.

The young participants in the programme acted as agents of listening. Through the dialogues, they appreciated more deeply their historical past and the wounds that their communities have suffered. They were able to reflect on their own family traumas. In this process, they opened their hearts to painful stories about the past. Through this process, many were able to build closer relationships with their grandparents and elders. Because of this, they formed a better understanding of the need to avoid transmitting deep historical traumas to future generations. At the same time, the young people appreciated more keenly how their community's cultural practices are something to be treasured. These practices form the basis of the community's relations to the spiritual realm and, because of this, they comprise its capacities for healing and resilience. Incidentally, the young people also developed their communication skills and their ability to formulate questions and to engage in community work as a team. They also strengthened their compassionate listening.

The young participants expressed gratitude for the trust granted by the elders:

'Honestly, we were not very aware of everything you and your communities have been through. Thank you for sharing with us stories that are not usually told...'

For the elders, the presence of the young people renewed their hopes. They felt that their stories and understanding would not be lost, that their knowledge would be preserved. They felt that the new generations might continue to safeguard the traditions that embody a harmonious relation with the cosmos or the sanctity of the soul. Through the dialogues, the elders were able to reaffirm to the younger generations the meanings of their histories, knowledge, and practices. Through this, they discovered a new sense of hope. At the same time, the elders were able to better understand the pressures that the younger generation typically feel. Traditional knowledge

often sits in deep tension with contemporary science, and the elders were able to better understand this through the conversations.

In both groups, the young people concluded that the path towards healing is to strengthen human dignity through the spiritual practices of the community. The dialogues and the research carried out by the young people affirm that the historical wounds do not define the communities they live in, but rather they form a starting point from which greater resilience and deeper community can be built. Healing processes emerge not as a final cure but rather as a relational fabric in which young people and elders recognise their interdependence, which activates cultural practices with a spiritual basis.

Conclusion

Colombia is still recovering from 60 years of armed conflict that has caused the forced displacement of more than 7.6 million people (Colombian Governmental Historic Memory Center). Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities still endure the harmful consequences of this war and the earlier colonisation. For example, they suffer from forced displacement and the coercive recruitment of young people by illegal groups. They also undergo the ongoing structural consequences of colonisation, such as the lack of employment opportunities, and racial and gender discrimination.

Despite the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016, in some areas these conditions have not seen a substantial transformation. New armed actors have emerged, and the exploitation of an unequal socioeconomic structure has continued. For instance, Afro and Indigenous lands are still subject to land grabbing in areas rich in natural resources. In these areas, conditions have not improved substantially since the 2016 Peace Agreement. In this way, continuing armed conflicts in Colombia have overshadowed the impact of slavery and colonisation, even though the armed conflict is an on-going continuation of the latter.

As a result, some of the dialogues focused on the current traumas of this violent reality rather than the effects of historical colonisation and enslavement. Especially in the case of Quibdo, Chocó, the immediacy of the current violence rendered its historical origins as something seemingly remote. Participants wanted to talk about their current situation. Of course, they did, but from the point of view of the planners, this constituted a break in the planned trajectory of the dialogues.

Nevertheless, it was an instructive break, especially given the differences between the two communities described in this paper. We have seen that, despite the similarities, the experiences and culture of the two communities are significantly different. For

instance, Indigenous communities are more concerned with the preservation of their traditions and language within their territories. The spiritual core of their culture is ineluctably tied to their land in ways that bypass Catholic traditions. In contrast, Afro communities in the Chocó are more directly concerned with their relations and political rights within mainstream Colombian society, and the spiritual core of their culture is infused with Catholic traditions, as well as African ones.

The methodology established for the intergenerational dialogues is embedded within a broader collective healing programme. The latter tends to define the former. Both are described within the relevant handbooks. For the intergenerational dialogues, there are a list of suggested questions. The guidebook describes these questions as a suggestion rather than as a script; nevertheless, they do specify the broad problem-space and agenda of the dialogues. They predefine the problems that are posed. For example, an early question is: 'What would you say are the most important qualities to nurture in young people if we want to bring about a future of social justice and collective healing?' This is a very helpful question given the agenda of the programme. A slightly later question to the elders is: 'What were your experiences of discrimination, marginalisation, oppression or deprivation as a young adult, either as a victim or perpetrator of these?' Again, such questions are helpful given the aims of the collective healing programme within the broader context of the UNESCO programme. Otherwise, they are leading questions as they predefine the relevant problem-space as one of oppression, healing, and peace.

An alternative would be to initially leave the agenda wide-open and allow the elders and young people to define their own problem-spaces in the interviews. In contrast, under the current arrangement, the context is predetermined in terms of colonialism and enslavement, and by the question of how communities might best come to terms with these legacies. Indeed, these are laudable and noble aims, and they are clearly highly relevant. Nevertheless, it might be true that the communities themselves would not have defined the needed interchanges between the elderly and young initially in these terms. This doubt is supported by the observed differences between the two communities which suggest that their starting points might have been different. For example, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Afro communities might have had a more explicit political agenda than that of the Indigenous communities. Such an idea has credence because the Indigenous communities have something deeper to conserve than the Afro communities, who were severed from their roots. This idea also has plausibility because Afro communities tend to feel more keenly the need for greater equality within mainstream Colombian society and appreciate the necessity to integrate within the Republic as a civil society.

The point is not to advocate these specific issues as central. Rather, the point is to suggest that intergenerational dialogues require a preliminary step which is described by Freire (Freire 2005). This preliminary step is to allow communities to define their own problem spaces or questions rather than presupposing and imposing them. The initial generative themes raised by the community elders and young people might not pertain to colonisation and enslavement in a direct way. This is especially apparent when current violence overshadows the reality of the past. However, even without this obvious point, a more open-ended initial approach might allow some of the important differences between Afro and Indigenous groups to emerge in their full cultural and political significance.

It might be objected that this approach places an unrealistically onerous expectation on the young people who are steering the process. However, it need not. We are not suggesting that the content of the subsequent interviews and dialogues should be completely co-constructed along the lines suggested by Freire (that is, in terms of the generative themes that emerge from the community). Such a suggestion would indeed demand a lot of flexibility and sensitivity from the young facilitators. Rather, the suggestion is to have an additional open-ended interview *à la Freire* at the start of the process, before conducting interviews guided by the proposed questions that define the framework of the current programme. In short, despite our proposal, the young people can come to the interviews with some pre-set questions pertaining to the legacies of colonisation, enslavement, and the spiritual practices of healing. This is how the programme was originally envisaged, and this can remain in place. Nevertheless, the methodology can start with an interview that is more open-ended (without prompts), and in which the elders can define for themselves the agenda and problem-spaces with the young people. We predict that, with this additional element, the differences between the two groups would become more apparent and significant.

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‘Peace must be lived, not declared’: Intergenerational Dialogue and the Ocean of Peace in the Pacific

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Abstract: In 2023, the Prime Minister of Fiji publicly launched a proposal to secure a regional Declaration recognising the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace (OoP). The initiative has gathered momentum, with a formal declaration adopted by Pacific leaders in September 2025. Whilst driven at the elite political level, there is growing recognition among Pacific Islanders that peacebuilding efforts must also be rooted in local communities, particularly among younger generations who

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will carry this vision forward. Working with the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding, a civil society organisation based in Fiji with regional reach and building on stakeholder engagement undertaken in 2024 and 2025, the authors of this article sought to understand how local communities across Fiji interpreted the OoP and its relevance to the realities of their lives. Using local arts-based methods, including *Na Serekali Vaka Viti* (spoken-word poetry), alongside *talanoa*-based dialogic methodologies, the research created spaces for collective, intergenerational dialogue on what peace means to Pacific Islanders and how the OoP might be brought to life and sustained. The project generated outputs including collaborative poems and an OoP education resource pack, which are analysed as relational and future-oriented tools for translating policy ideals into community-centred outcomes that address local needs and priorities. This paper offers a reflective account of the project's early development, examining the ethical and methodological dimensions of delivering impact research in conflict-affected and post-colonial settings. It argues that initiatives grounded in traditional, Indigenous, and community-based intergenerational dialogue mechanisms can generate important insights into how global peacebuilding efforts can best support transformation and shared human flourishing. In doing so, it contributes to wider debates about localising and decolonising peacebuilding practice in the Pacific and beyond.

Keywords: Ocean of Peace; Pacific; peacebuilding; Fiji; intergenerational dialogue; arts-based research

Introduction

‘An Ocean of Peace will come to life if ...

Culture and People are at the heart of this work

Remembering that

Peace is lived not declared.’

In 2023, Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka announced a regional initiative to recognise and declare the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace (OoP) (Posada-Tellez, McInerney, and Farran 2025). What began as a diplomatic gesture quickly gained political momentum, with Pacific leaders endorsing an OoP Declaration at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders’ Meeting in the Solomon Islands in September 2025. The declaration articulates a vision of peace for the region as more than the absence of conflict: it is a living relationship between Pacific peoples, outsiders, and the natural world with the ocean at its heart (PIF 2025).

Pacific Island countries face a number of challenges to peace, including geopolitical tensions created by external players seeking to advance different security strategies in the region. AUKUS² and the development of nuclear-powered submarines have

² A trilateral security agreement between Australia, the UK, and the US.

alarmed parts of the region, as has the build-up of US military presence in Micronesia (Pacific Dialogue 2024). China's diplomatic and development agenda has also reshaped relations with Pacific leaders and traditional partners, whilst other actors, including Korea and Arab states, are seeking greater influence (Kaiku and Boie 2023; Tarte 2024). Although Pacific states insist that they are not 'pawns' in a power-play game, they remain vulnerable to debt diplomacy and dependent on foreign aid (Akbar et al. 2025). This is not least due to the negative consequences of climate change and the recurring economic impact of natural disasters. Peace is also disrupted by the environmental impact of resource extraction, poor administration of financial returns, and unequal wealth distribution (Tevahitua 2025). Whilst Fiji's history of coups – including those led by Rabuka himself in 1987 – gives its peace discourse a specific domestic resonance, civil unrest triggered by political events has also been experienced in Tonga, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and, most recently, Kanaky/New Caledonia (Prabhakar 2024).

The OoP Declaration is situated against this troubled backdrop, where regional security pressures are felt in Pacific Islanders' everyday life. Developed over a two-year period through official channels, the declaration has nevertheless sparked a deeper conversation across the region – in schools and universities, community halls, kava circles, and villages – about what peace really means to Pacific communities and how it might be sustained at a time when geopolitical and environmental challenges threaten the region's future.

The vision of an OoP rests on the notion that peace is a value inherent to Pacific peoples, their identities and practices. It draws on the 'Pacific Way', an expression used in the region to describe local approaches to politics and conflict resolution rooted in dialogue, solidarity, and trust (Lawson 2010). Yet, following the declaration's adoption, questions have emerged about what the OoP might mean in practice to Pacific Islanders. The institutional path taken by the proposal, through intergovernmental processes and regional diplomacy, can obscure the ways in which peace and non-peace are experienced by communities themselves. As Pacific youth leader Josie-Anne Ashley said to PIF leaders immediately after its adoption, 'peace must be lived, not declared' (Ligaiula 2025).

This dissonance between the policy language of peace and its lived experience calls for a better understanding of local Pacific perspectives on the OoP Declaration, particularly among younger generations tasked with carrying this vision forward. The declaration recognises that peace is an intergenerational responsibility and calls for inclusive participation by young people in building and upholding peace across the Blue Pacific Continent (PIF 2025). This emphasis on youth aligns with the region's

demographic realities: nearly 60% of the region's 14 million people are under 30 years of age (Pacific Community 2025).

Against this backdrop, the authors of this article conducted fieldwork in Fiji in 2024 and 2025 to explore the promise and challenges of the OoP from the perspective of local communities. Working with the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding (PCP), a Fiji-based civil-society organisation with regional reach, the authors engaged young people in Fiji through local arts-based methods, including spoken-word poetry (*Na Serekali Vaka Viti*) and *talanoa* – a Pacific practice of dialogue – to document youth concerns, priorities, and perspectives on the present and future of the Pacific.

Building on PCP's existing education materials, the project generated a set of creative and pedagogical outputs, including collaborative poems and an OoP Education Resource Pack (ERP). Designed to equip educators and youth leaders with tools for engaging young people in peacebuilding through dialogue, arts-based activities, and community action, the resource pack was conceived as a culturally responsive and relevant research output to extend the dialogue sparked by the OoP Declaration. Its development was guided by young people themselves and involved consultations with youth leaders in Fiji, including two of this article's authors. The poems emerging from the listening sessions were further developed by the Fijian members of the project team and were shared back with the communities involved. This process sought to ensure that Pacific voices remained at the centre of how peace was articulated and incorporated throughout the project's activities. The aim of both co-created outputs was to support intergenerational dialogue on peacebuilding in Fiji, and more broadly across the region, helping to lay the foundations for advancing the OoP among future Pacific generations.

This article offers a reflective account of the project's early development, examining the ethical and methodological dimensions of delivering impact research in conflict-affected and post-colonial settings. It argues that initiatives grounded in traditional, Indigenous, and community-based intergenerational dialogue mechanisms yield important insights into how global peacebuilding efforts can best support transformation and shared human flourishing. In doing so, it contributes to wider debates about localising and decolonising peacebuilding practice, including some lessons global peacebuilders can draw from the dialogic, relationship-centred approaches characteristic of Pacific peacebuilding traditions.

Because this policy initiative is so recent, scholarly engagement with the OoP has been limited, though interest has been growing. As an early effort to document how Pacific Islanders have encountered, contested, and transformed the concept in their own terms, the article contributes to an emerging conversation among academic and policy circles on the OoP. It also resonates with broader streams of literature in Pa-

cific studies and peace and conflict studies, demonstrating that intergenerational, creative dialogue is not only a research method but can be peacebuilding practice in itself.

This article starts by reviewing the emerging literature on the OoP, outlines the research design and methods, presents findings from the participatory and arts-based fieldwork, and reflects on the implications for the OoP and for debates on decolonial and local peacebuilding.

Literature Review

Since its inception at the 2023 UN General Assembly, the OoP has evolved from diplomatic rhetoric to a contested framework for Pacific peace and security. Early commentary situates the idea at a point of convergence between long-standing Pacific values and current security anxieties, linking it to regional histories of non-alignment, nuclear disarmament, and environmental diplomacy (Tevahitua 2025; Kaiku and Boie 2023). Nailatikau (2024a; 2024b) offers a reading of the OoP as part of Fiji's attempt to assert its political and moral leadership in the region, noting the tensions between Prime Minister Rabuka's peacemaking ambitions, a past troubled by coups, and domestic governance dynamics. This line of policy and academic analysis has pointed to the disjunction between aspirations for regional unity and security, and between domestic and geopolitical constraints.

As the OoP gained institutional traction, questions surrounding its limits and contradictions intensified. De Jong and Asafo (2025) and Tarte (2024) argue that the OoP's transformative potential depends on confronting the Pacific's growing militarisation and the persistence of colonial relations, including foreign military presence and strategic dependence. They warn that unless peace is conceived as a collective, value-driven project rooted in Pacific agency, the concept can be instrumentalised by external powers to serve their foreign policy agendas. Similar concerns are raised by Cade (2023) and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and Pacific Fusion Centre (2025), which question whether the region has the institutional mechanisms and the shared political will required to stand up for itself as a substantive zone of peace against increasing competition for geopolitical influence.

Another stream of analysis has focused on questions of participation and inclusivity. Farran's (2024) summary report of the listening sessions held in Fiji in 2024 demonstrates the value of creative and participatory methods in bridging policy frameworks with lived experiences of peace. Likewise, Kant, Wheeler, and Chung (2025) emphasise that the OoP's legitimacy hinges on meaningful inclusion of women, youth, civil-society, and non-sovereign Pacific communities, a claim echoed by a Pacific Dialogue (2024) report. These sources remind us of the value of moving the

OoP beyond high-level diplomacy and supporting the participation of local communities to bring the concept to life.

Despite the commentary that has followed the initiative's development, academic engagement with it remains limited. Most existing work has traced the policy's institutional evolution or contradictions from a high-level political perspective, but less has been written about how Pacific Islanders at the grassroots level understand and interpret the concept. This article begins to fill that gap by exploring how conflict and peace are experienced by communities in Fiji, and how, based on these lived realities, the OoP's principles can materialise from the ground up. Through arts-based methodologies, it examines how youth participation and creative practice enable local understandings of – and pathways to – peace to emerge, whilst throwing light on the values, emotions, and relationships that sustain it in everyday Pacific life.

Methodology and Research Design

This project followed a participatory, arts-based approach to explore how Fijian communities, especially youth groups, view the principles of the OoP and their role in advancing the initiative. The project grew out of collaboration with PCP, a Fiji-based peacebuilding organisation, and leveraged creative workshops, focus groups, and interviews to co-produce reflections on the OoP. From the outset, the research was conceived as an act of co-creation, based on listening and learning, rather than data extraction or awareness raising. The design drew on participatory and decolonial research traditions that challenge extractive modes of inquiry and seek to reallocate epistemic authority in the research process (Smith 2012; Chilisa 2019). Project members sought to integrate this dialogic ethos into all aspects of the work.

Situated in Fiji, this study was inspired by the cultural practice, peacebuilding approach, and research methodology of *talanoa*. *Talanoa* is a Pacific practice of respectful, open-ended dialogue, where people come together to share ideas, stories, and experiences, without predetermined expectations for agreement (Robinson and Robinson 2005). *Talanoa* dialogue resonates strongly with Pacific peacebuilding approaches and is used widely by PCP. *Talanoa* has also been applied as a research methodology and practice (Gremillion et al. 2021; Vaoleti 2006). Pacific scholars, however, emphasise that *talanoa* does not merely describe informal interviews or focus groups in the region (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba 2014). Nor is it a catch-all term for the myriad Pacific ways of knowing (Tunufa'i 2016). *Talanoa* is a relational practice of sharing and creating knowledge, shaped by openness, empathy, reciprocity, and careful attention to local context, meaning there is a tapestry of *talanoa* practices used across Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and related dialogic practices elsewhere in the region, including 'storian' in Vanuatu and 'tok stori' in Papua New

Guinea and Solomon Islands (Vaioleti 2006; Matapo and Enari 2021; Matthews 2024; Galokale 2025).

Inspired by Pacific scholars' ideas of *talanoa*-as-research and PCP's use of *talanoa*-as-peacebuilding practice, the project sought to create a research approach where knowledge emerged through dialogic exchange rather than rigid question-and-answer scripts. The objective was to facilitate a space where participants could use dialogue to interpret, critique, imagine, and culturally re-ground the OoP through lived experience. Drawing on Indigenous forms of knowledge exchange, *talanoa* functioned as both a research methodology and an attempt at a decolonial peacebuilding practice.

Collaborative dialogue with local partners commenced in March 2025, and fieldwork took place in September 2025 across multiple sites in Fiji: traditional iTaukei villages, including villages in Nadi District, Rakiraki Province, and Tailevu Province, alongside urban-based listening sessions at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and the University of Fiji. Additional sessions were held at the British High Commissioner's residence in Suva with representatives from government, civil society, faith-based organisations, media and arts collectives, and international institutions. A total of 186 individuals participated, of whom 86 were youth (i.e., under 35). The fieldwork built on earlier listening sessions conducted with 100 participants in 2024 in Suva, under the auspices of the British High Commission, which informed an initial poem and policy brief. In the 2025 fieldwork, the project team sought to engage with as much geographic and generational diversity as was feasible within a short timeframe, looking to offer a plural reading of the ways in which local actors produce and engage with narratives of peace and security.

Research Methods

The research combined participatory, dialogic, and arts-based methods. The listening sessions led by the research team included diverse methods, such as open dialogues, focus groups, interviews, creative co-production, and survey questionnaires to assess the impact of the sessions. Dialogues and focus groups provided open, inclusive spaces for participants to reflect on their lived realities of conflict and peace and their views on the OoP. Conducted in both English and iTaukei and facilitated by the authors and PCP staff trained in trauma-informed approaches, these conversations unfolded through semi-structured collective exchange with guiding prompts. The listening sessions combined the spontaneity of *talanoa* with the focus of small-group dialogue, which allowed participants to explore personal experiences whilst also identifying shared themes.

In several listening sessions, participants engaged directly with selected excerpts from the OoP Declaration. These dialogues invited reflection on the main factors disrupting peace at the community level and on the processes already in place to address them. This exercise provided a concrete anchor for the conversations and allowed participants to link the aspirations of the Declaration with the realities of everyday life.

Creative co-production also took place in the sessions, where young people and community members produced spoken-word poems, drawings, and handwritten textual commentary. In keeping with Pacific knowledge traditions, where storytelling, song, dance, craft, and poetry are vital epistemic practices, these arts-based approaches created culturally resonant spaces for dialogue, reflection, and shared meaning-making (Nabobo-Baba 2006). Artistic practice enabled participants to explore themes related to peace, conflict, and the OoP beyond the limits of conventional research and discussion (Leavy 2015; Lederach 2005; Shank and Schirch 2008).

The collaborative poems at the centre of this project draw on a poetic mosaic methodology (McInerney 2022), in which participants co-create spoken-word poems by each crafting one line in response to shared prompts and then weaving their lines into a collective whole. In this study, participants responded to ‘An Ocean of Peace is...’ and ‘An Ocean of Peace will come to life if...’, reflecting both personal experiences and collective aspirations. The result is a poetic dialogue created by each group offering a textured, multi-vocal articulation of what an OoP means and how it might be realised. Following the sessions, Fijian poets, youth leaders, and co-authors of this article, Brittany L.T. Nawaqatabu and James Rabuatoka, clustered all poems into themes and crafted two extended creative pieces. This process honoured each contributor’s voice whilst composing a shared summary and reflection that speaks with, rather than for, the communities involved.

Individual interviews complemented these collective dialogues and arts-based practices. Often conducted informally with youth leaders, educators, decision-makers, and community representatives, these one-on-one conversations allowed for more personal reflection and helped situate the group discussions within participants’ lived experiences and local contexts.

Analysis of fieldwork material followed a similarly interpretive process to identify recurring concerns and aspirations. These were refined through a collaborative process of recording, cross-checking, and reflecting on fieldnotes, interview material, questionnaires, creative outputs, and workshop responses as the fieldwork progressed and the project outputs developed.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed Newcastle University's ethical protocols, PCP's community engagement guidelines, and research guidance for working in the Pacific from the University of Otago, USP, and Massey University. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, which participants in listening sessions were asked to sign. Participants were given the option to withdraw at any time, and all information was anonymised.

Ethical practice was understood as reciprocity and respect, not just formal compliance with institutional requirements. The research treated participants as co-creators of knowledge, premised on recognising the value of shared authorship and voice (Lozano et al. 2023). All stakeholder engagement was designed to 'give back' something to the communities who opened their doors to the team, both through creative expression and collective reflection. The project aimed to create resources that could support ongoing local initiatives and education, a commitment that materialised in the co-development of the ERP, whose development was informed by the perspectives of young people, and the collaborative poems. After the sessions, each group's poem was transcribed and shared back in digital and print forms.

Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity were central threads to the project. In village settings, attention was paid to social hierarchies and customary practices. Listening sessions were structured to ensure participation from groups who might otherwise be marginalised, such as women and youth. The use of *Na Serekali vaka Viti* (spoken-word poetry) and *talanoa* was a conscious choice to ground the methodology in Pacific modes of dialogue and storytelling, which ensured that the process and its outputs resonated with local ways of knowing and communicating. The findings do not, however, claim to represent all Fijian or Pacific perspectives but instead offer a situated account of how the OoP was received, critiqued, interpreted, and imagined by participants across diverse Fijian sites.

The research team were acutely attentive to their positionality as external actors, aware of the privilege inherent in representing local experiences within academic and policy spaces. Collaboration and partnership with Fijian peace practitioners, youth leaders, poets, and communities were thus essential to the ethics and efficacy of this work. Pre-session briefings aimed at raising the team's awareness of contextual sensitivities and regular critical reflection with PCP staff and community partners helped the authors to maintain a sense of ethical reflexivity, applying a 'listening first' approach that centred Pacific experiences and expertise. In doing so, the project sought to balance the aims of conducting and disseminating research with the vital need for cultural awareness and respect with all stakeholders involved (Fujii 2010).

This reflexivity also extended to the institutional conditions under which the research became possible, including the role of the British High Commission in supporting earlier listening sessions and bringing different stakeholders together. That institutional umbrella provided convening power and visibility, enabling engagement with communities, government representatives, the military, international diplomatic actors, and representatives from other Pacific islands. It also conferred research credentials the team might not otherwise have had. At the same time, it drew attention to the ambiguities of conducting decolonial research through institutions historically entangled with colonial and geopolitical power and reinforced the importance of approaching the project with transparency and awareness of the colonial and geopolitical histories shaping external engagement in the Pacific.

Findings

This section presents findings from the 2025 fieldwork in Fiji, focusing on what the intergenerational dialogic research process revealed about conducting participatory, arts-based impact research in conflict-affected and post-colonial contexts. Instead of providing a comprehensive ethnography of Fijian understandings of peace, the findings reveal how participants engaged with the OoP Declaration, how dialogic and creative methods shaped their ability to exercise narrative agency, and how intergenerational and structural dynamics influenced perceptions of inclusion. The findings spotlight the relationship between research process and peacebuilding practice, showing how *talanoa* dialogues and creative exercises became spaces of reflection and local theorising about peace and non-peace. Excerpts of the collaborative poems are interwoven throughout to bring this creative dialogue directly into the analysis and allow participants to speak for themselves.

Lived meanings of peace

‘An Ocean of Peace is...

A symbol of harmony

And care

It is...

Togetherness

And unity’.

Across fieldwork sites – Suva and villages in Nadi, Rakiraki, and Tailevu – participants described peace as something practised through relationships rather than

declared through institutions. It was framed as a daily ethic grounded in harmony, respect, social inclusion, and shared responsibility. In village settings, peace was consistently linked to the reciprocal relationship and equilibrium between Pacific peoples and the natural environment, beginning with the ocean. One participant explained that peace is practised on an everyday basis, in how communities care for land, ocean, and for each other, which connected environmental protection directly to social cohesion.

'An Ocean of Peace will come to life if ...

We the Pacific people – define peace first

Peace in the Pacific way

And on Pacific terms.'

Village communities repeatedly described peace as inseparable from their livelihoods. When families had their basic needs met, peace could be sustained. As such, environmental degradation was seen as both cause and symptom of conflict. In the village in Nadi, the progressive loss of freshwater mussels due to factory pollution was described as a rupture in the social and ecological fabric; between different communities, between industry and villages, between present actions and consequences in the future. The health of land and ocean was seen to reflect the health of society.

'An Ocean of Peace will come to life if...

We care for one another

Knowing the ocean sustains us

Because peace is not just the absence of conflict

It is the presence and action of justice for one another.'

Participants in Suva had complementary perspectives. Students and civil society actors described peace as a practice of inclusion and accountability, grounded in mutual listening and empathy. Several called for peace education to begin early, so that young people could be taught constructive ways to resolve conflict. Across sites, understandings of peace resembled positive peace frameworks, which conceive of peace beyond the absence of violence, and as the presence of conditions for all persons in a society to flourish (Galtung 1969). This grounded understanding of peace diverged

from how participants perceived the formal, high-level policy language of the OoP Declaration.

The declaration-reality gap

Directly stemming from a focus on lived meanings of peace, the most consistent finding across research sites was the perceived disconnect between the declaration's vision and the realities of daily life across the Pacific. Participants valued the declaration's ambitious normative and political agenda but questioned the capacity of its framework to address concrete societal concerns. It was frequently described as words without work and as a symbolic gesture that could spark conversation but without substantive mechanism for peaceful transformation. Many in Suva traced parallels to earlier regional commitments, such as the Boe Declaration and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific, questioning whether there was anything genuinely novel and actionable in the OoP Declaration.

'It can't just be another document on the shelf...

An Ocean of Peace will come to life if...

It is understood and practiced daily

We need to get this down to the ground'.

This critique did not necessarily imply rejection of the declaration. Participants generally valued the aspiration to frame the Pacific as a zone of peace but interrogated whose voices had shaped that vision and whose realities it reflected. Some observed that the Declaration's language centred Pacific leaders rather than peoples, which reproduced top-down policy discourses disconnected from lived experience. Several commented that peace could not remain in capital cities but needed to reach villages and required support from locally led and owned planning and accountability.

'An Ocean of Peace will come to life when there is...

Nothing about us without us

By the people

For the people

With the people'.

The gap between peace policy and lived realities was vividly articulated in village settings. In Rakiraki Province, a proposed hotel development threatened communal

water and food sources. Villagers saw this as a betrayal of the declaration's spirit, since state officials endorsed the hotel's development whilst ignoring community appeals for dialogue. This dispute illustrated how state-sanctioned economic projects, even when they promise to bring socio-economic development, can destabilise social cohesion and environmental wellbeing, contradicting the declaration's agenda of regional harmony. In Tailevu Province, too, participants identified land boundary disputes, youth alcohol use, and climate-related pressures on food and water security as threats to peace. For village communities, peace was immediate and tangible, pursued through stable livelihoods and the resolution of peoples' everyday concerns. The language of the declaration, which echoed the rules-based international order, UN treaties, and geopolitical issues, was seen to be distant from these realities.

Meanwhile, participants described local peacebuilding practices that pre-dated and often outperformed policy frameworks. Examples included monthly *talanoa* dialogues to mediate village disputes, church-led initiatives to reduce alcohol consumption, collective clean-ups of rivers and forests, and community gatherings to build trust where social cohesion was affected. These were recognised as central to everyday peace but were largely neglected in high-level regional discourse. The declaration acknowledged peace as principle but not as the practice through which communities pursue and uphold it.

'An Ocean of Peace will come to life if...

Pacific People are able to realise their full potential

If our basic needs are met

Because only then will we be safe, valued, and actualised.'

Participants proposed practical ways to close this gap. They suggested national action plans with measurable goals, including through annual progress reviews, and youth representation in both village-level deliberation and regional political fora. Several advocated for integrating the declaration's principles into school curricula and using social media platforms like TikTok to engage younger audiences in public and civic debate. These proposals showcased an understanding that political rhetoric requires some form of institutional infrastructure to translate it into practice, something that participants argued was missing about the OoP framework.

Critiques went beyond implementation mechanisms. Participants frequently questioned who holds authority to define what 'peace' means to Pacific peoples. Civil society groups argued that the Pacific Way, one of the organising principles of the declaration, had become a political tool for governments and could be invoked se-

lectively to project harmony whilst perpetuating the oppression of women, LGBTQ+ people, and non-Indigenous communities across the region. One participant noted that men talk about peace in meetings, but that it is women who keep it alive every day through caregiving, mediation, and community work, though these forms of labour are seldom acknowledged as peacebuilding.

‘An Ocean of Peace will come to life if...

Women are empowered and protected

If everyone is connected

Knowing their roles

From grassroots to regional leaders

It is when we centre women’s voices through law

Using storytelling as intergenerational learning and dialogue’.

Others criticised the declaration’s silence on decolonisation struggles in West Papua, Maohi Nui (French-Occupied Polynesia), and Kanaky (New Caledonia), calling its references to sovereignty selective and politically convenient. For many it seemed as if Pacific Island leaders ‘talked the talk’ but did not ‘walk the walk’ and were hypocritical in advocating peace when their actions were not peaceful.

‘An Ocean of Peace will come to life if...

We are all free from violence

With decolonisation at the centre

Not tokenised

Or just rhetoric’.

Environmental concerns caused similar frustrations. Participants noted the omission of the deeply divisive issue of deep-sea mining and other socio-economic development projects across the region which contribute to the existential threats of climate change and rising sea levels. These omissions, some argued, undermined the declaration’s coherence.

Youth voices and intergenerational dialogue

Prompted by observations raised in a Track Two Dialogue held earlier in the year (Pacific Dialogue 2024; Akbar et al. 2025), youth engagement was a core area of interest throughout the research process, both methodologically and ethically. Young participants were invited into the project’s own listening sessions and dialogues as political agents capable of shaping how peace could be imagined and pursued. Arts-based activities, particularly the collaborative poetry and handwritten expressions, created space for young people’s affective and creative communication alongside structured dialogue.

Through the poems and participants’ reflections on the declaration, young people articulated aspirations for a better future, as well as criticism of the OoP Declaration. Peace was described as something built rather than borrowed, founded on meaningful inclusion of youth voices. In village settings, arts-based methods allowed dissatisfaction among young people with their position in the community to surface, both directly and indirectly. According to some older participants in Tailevu and Rakiraki, the community was not aware of such grievances among young people. An elder in Nadi highlighted that spoken-word poetry had proven important for young people to exercise agency and for elders to listen. The research team found that the creative process fostered emotional and political connection across generations, a dynamic very often missing in elder-centric village settings.

‘An Ocean of Peace will come to life if...

There is dialogue and unity between ethnicities

Elders and youth side by side

Declarations without community are worthless otherwise

We need *talanoa* to come together in trust’.

Talanoa dialogues allowed this intergenerational exchange to go further. Participants, particularly youth, described them as inclusive spaces where ideas and concerns could be shared without fear or shame. The conversation encouraged listening as much as speaking, which participants saw as positive in cultivating empathy. Elders in the village in Rakiraki, both men and women, expressed their worry over the youth’s increasingly disruptive behaviour, which included drinking, drug consumption, loud music, and poor discipline, all of which they argued was affecting the peace. This prompted a response by younger participants, who claimed elders did not listen to them and that building peace also meant being able to speak candidly,

securing their own space and place within the village, and to still be respected the next day. In all three villages visited, elders who initially dominated began inviting youth contributions, and younger participants grew more confident in raising their voices as dialogues progressed. Many young people reported valuing the opportunity to share with elders that they did not feel listened to in the community.

‘It will come to life if...

We

Listen

Listen

Listen

To the Pacific peoples and engage

in *talanoa*’.

Feedback gathered through questionnaires at the end of the small-group listening sessions held in Suva indicated strong approval of the arts-based and dialogic approaches used by the research team. Nearly all respondents agreed that the sessions helped build trust and respect among participants, enabled diverse perspectives to emerge, and reflected lived experiences accurately. Of the respondents, 88% said the format helped them to learn more about the OoP, whilst 73% felt the process helped them to think differently about it. Eighty-one per cent of respondents also noted that listening sessions should be used more often in policymaking, and 92% supported using arts-based methods like poetry and storytelling in other policy and/or peacebuilding work.

However, generational hierarchies remained prevalent, particularly in the most rural villages. In mixed sessions, youth often deferred to elders, and time constraints meant they were sometimes unable to articulate their perspectives. Some admitted avoiding direct criticism out of respect for communal hierarchies. Women, too, felt their voices were constrained and often ignored, and in segregated sessions they expressed that their everyday labour in service of the family and community was rarely recognised and given equal status to men’s public roles.

As such, whilst the use of dialogic and arts-based approaches did not fundamentally transform power structures in village settings, they did create the conditions for more equitable intergenerational dialogue. Young participants were deeply respectful of community traditions and did not look to overturn them but did seem keen to

participate in renewing them and making them more horizontal. Proposals for more peaceful village life included youth councils with advisory power, school-based dialogue forums, and greater representation in decision-making spaces. This displayed a desire for shared responsibility rather than rebellion. Although the OoP Declaration hints at greater youth inclusion and empowerment, sustained intergenerational peacebuilding may require not only cultural goodwill, but also institutional design and resourcing.

'An Ocean of Peace is...

The togetherness of life

It is knowing that if the ocean covers the world

Then peace can cover the world

It is hope and comfort

It is love

Respect

Understanding

Ending violence

And doing it together as one Pacific peoples'.

Co-developing the OoP Education Resource Pack

The ERP emerged from recognition that the research process itself could act as peace practice. Initially envisaged as a research deliverable, it evolved into a co-developed toolkit shaped through fieldwork sessions with participants, particularly young people.

'An Ocean of Peace is...

A shared vision for all of the Pacific

Safeguarding our future

It is applying peace in action

It is stability

It is people working hand-in-hand for a better future

It is preserving the environment for the next generation.⁷

In villages and in Suva, young participants emphasised that peace education must encourage youth agency. They argued that young people should be trained as facilitators and advocates of peaceful transformation, and not just targets of imposed top-down action. The ERP reflects this, framing young people as knowledge-holders, cultural guardians, and the next generation of peace leaders. Participants called for more meaningful pathways into decision-making spaces at all levels. For young people who had left the formal education system, participants argued that greater support was needed from community leaders, other youth, and religious actors. They also called for greater access to materials that used clear language and encouraged creative expression, leveraging Pacific imagery and symbols. These priorities directly informed the ERP's use of poetry, visual methods, and culturally grounded facilitation.

Social media emerged as a key theme. Youth in Suva saw the need for better guidance on constructive and peace-enabling online engagement, noting how misinformation and hate speech continue to grow, especially around inter-ethnic relations in Fiji. Participants saw the ERP as an opportunity to model positive digital activism, using platforms like TikTok and Instagram to promote peacebuilding, including issues such as climate justice and gender equality. This pushed the project to view learning beyond the classroom.

The final design reflected this feedback. Organised around three goals – deepening knowledge of Pacific peacebuilding, developing dialogue and collaboration skills, and promoting youth-led peace action projects – the pack became an evolving toolkit. Module activities combine storytelling, circle processes, arts-based initiatives, and *talanoa* dialogues, encouraging students to define peace in their own contexts and act as agents of transformation. PCP's facilitation support ensured that community voices shaped content and form, drawing on their existing peace education experience and remaining accountable to participants' priorities.

Peace research and action converged in this process. The research created encounters where new understandings of peace were co-produced through creative and dialogic community engagement. The ERP translated those understandings into practical learning activities that could be used by educators and youth leaders beyond the project's lifespan, connecting academic research with peace pedagogy and practice, and grounding peace education in Pacific-led visions.

Discussion

The findings expose the OoP simultaneously as a high-level policy aspiration and a promising strategic opportunity through which Pacific communities can negotiate how peace is imagined and actioned. They do not suggest a simple binary between macro-level regional security concerns and micro-level community understandings of peace, but rather show how pressures usually seen to belong to the elite policy realm are experienced through local politics of land, livelihoods, voice, and social cohesion. The research process casts light on the generative dimensions of participatory, dialogic, and arts-based peacebuilding in contexts marked by legacies of conflict and/or colonialism, where locally grounded knowledge practices can unsettle more extractive approaches to peace research. This section makes sense of these findings through three themes: how the OoP Declaration functions as a catalyst rather than a directive; how relational epistemologies can challenge dominant peacebuilding paradigms; and how the research process can itself become peace practice.

The OoP Declaration as a catalyst for peaceful transformation

For many participants across Suva and rural villages, the OoP Declaration was meaningful as a catalyst for conversations around peacebuilding at the community level. The declaration created space for Pacific Islanders to articulate their own visions of peace, often in tension with the abstract concepts expressed by regional leaders. Participants did not appear to have much faith in governments to operationalise the Declaration's principles but seemed optimistic that its language could be used as a normative commitment for holding power, both domestic and foreign, to account. In this sense, the potential of the declaration may rest in prompting collective reflections and action from below, rather than prescribing action from above.

Participants perceived a disconnect between the declaration's rhetoric and the lived experiences of Pacific Islanders, which represented fertile ground for contestation and reinterpretation. The absence of institutional mechanisms for implementation and enforcement, criticised by many, turned the declaration into an open text for local communities to think with and about, rather than to follow. Communities appreciated its potential to help them frame everyday struggles over land, youth unemployment, gender inequality, and environmental degradation as questions of peace and security. It also opened space for reflections on the military's role in past coups, the country's long-standing contribution to UN peacekeeping in the Middle East, and anxieties over foreign security forces across the region. The declaration's weakness thus became a strength, as it opened pathways for local ownership and appropriation, potentially transforming passive compliance into active critique and inviting communities to pursue a model of peace defined in their own terms.

This process of reinterpretation transformed the OoP Declaration into what Tsing (2005) describes as a ‘frictional encounter’: where global ideals and local normative worlds meet and (re)shape one another to produce a new reality. Across sites, participants demonstrated how the declaration’s values could be mobilised to expose contradictions between statist rhetoric and practice. Dialogue around the OoP allowed participants to name the tension between state-led development ambitions and community priorities and wellbeing, operating as a window of opportunity to re-think and reframe relations between state, people, land, and ocean.

This re-appropriation challenges the assumption that state-level political declarations are set up for failure in the absence of implementation and enforcement mechanisms. Participants questioned the premise that peace can be legislated from above, suggesting instead that the OoP Declaration’s greatest strength may be in its capacity to stimulate critical conversation – and plausibly action – around situated threats to peace. The declaration’s reach therefore matters, and the findings demonstrate that diffusion and pedagogy are important for transforming its content into collective reflection, and reflection into intention and action. What mattered most was whether it inspired communities to define peace for themselves and to translate the concept into meaningful agency. Through this process, the OoP became a living, breathing framework where peace could be continuously negotiated and reimagined.

Relational epistemologies of peace

The conversations that the declaration sparked mirrored an underlying philosophy of peace already built into everyday social structures in Fiji. Across workshops, peace was described as something to be sustained through relationships between humans and between humans and the natural world. This understanding draws from long-standing Pacific values, embodied by the Pacific Way discourse, where peaceful social relations rest on dialogue, solidarity, and trust. Participants spoke of peace as daily work carried out in the family, in religious spaces, at the workplace, and the community. Examples of peacebuilding practice included cleaning rivers, mediating disputes, supporting neighbours, and maintaining dialogue between elders and youth. Importantly, participants’ reflections suggested that these conversations generated new ways of thinking about protecting livelihoods and the everyday labour of sustaining peace. Peace, then, emerged as a dynamic process of maintaining human and environmental connection, and not an endpoint *per se*.

This relational worldview challenges Western approaches to peacebuilding that equate peace with stability or institutional consolidation. Environmental health, for example, was seen as integral to security. The pollution of waterways or loss of freshwater mussels was a socio-economic disruption undermining community cohesion

and belonging. The distinction between social and environmental peace thus breaks down, as both depend on reciprocity and balance between people and environment.

At the same time, participants noted that narratives of peace and harmony can propel inequalities. Appeals to respect and consensus, including through *talanoa*, were sometimes co-opted in a way that silenced women or discouraged youth from questioning authority. Relational peace, participants insisted, calls for critical engagement as well as empathy. That young people leveraged dialogic and arts-based methods to express dissent in culturally acceptable ways, and without confrontation, demonstrated that peace might rely less on eliminating difference than on preserving dialogue across it. This finding directly informed the design of the ERP, which includes exercises encouraging intergenerational discussion and creative expression.

The emphasis on relationality also demonstrated how Pacific Island communities conceptualise resilience and generate political meaning collectively. Women's groups exemplified this point through everyday peacebuilding, caring, nurturing, and community organising, which they noted often went unrecognised in high-level policy frameworks but remained vital to sustaining grassroots peace. Understanding peacebuilding as emotional labour and as a trust-building exercise from the ground up challenges the technocratic biases of external policy initiatives that privilege individualism over collective relationships.

Research as decolonial work

The participatory and arts-based methods employed simultaneously operated as research tools and peacebuilding practice. These approaches drew on local traditions of storytelling and collective dialogue, which made space for culturally resonant ways of sharing knowledge and perspectives. The emphasis afforded by *talanoa* on respect, listening, and acceptance of diverse views also informed how the research team engaged with stakeholders, as participants in a shared process of learning, rather than as external experts extracting knowledge. They also revealed how participation in social and political life is fundamentally shaped by power relations. Hierarchies of age and gender, in particular, influenced whose voices were authorised to speak in public settings.

Participants' feedback suggested that these approaches were experienced as meaningful spaces of participation and recognition. In both urban and rural settings, participants valued the opportunity to discuss their views and concerns regarding community life through dialogic and creative methods. These exchanges appear to have generated insights and forms of understanding rarely available through conventional policy frameworks. This response demonstrates how community-engaged dialogic

and arts-based approaches can embody the decolonial principles of reciprocity, localisation, and shared authorship in practice, and not just in rhetoric.

Recognising that greater participation does not necessarily redistribute power, the research team approached the project as an ongoing negotiation over how to define and advance inclusive peace. That some participants questioned and criticised the presence of foreign researchers exposed structural asymmetries that even the most participatory and collaborative projects cannot dismantle. This issue was not resolved by the research design nor the partnership with PCP and local youth leaders. Instead, it was treated as part of the contested ethical space of working across post-colonial divides. Transparency about such limits was itself a form of accountability and helped position the research as a contribution to a longer process of relationship-building rather than a one-off intervention.

The co-development of the ERP exemplified these commitments. Throughout the course of the project, the resource continuously evolved in dialogue with youth groups, educators, and PCP into a shared project to advance grassroots peacebuilding under the OoP banner. Participants' feedback shaped the content and pedagogical approach, developing an understanding that peace education must nurture youth agency, leverage creative methods, and address interconnected issues of environment, livelihoods, peace, and justice. The listening sessions, then, fundamentally informed the resource's structure.

This process illustrated how research can work as peace practice when collaboration between academics and local communities is genuine and reflexive. Yet, it also brought to light some constraints imposed by funding cycles and institutional expectations for deliverables. The tension between relational work and institutional timelines exposed structural obstacles that can constrain the co-production of knowledge and practice. The result was not perfect symmetry but mutual learning, as communities saw their ideas materialise in the ERP and other project deliverables, whilst the research team faced the realities and challenges of doing normative, participatory work from the grassroots while having to navigate international academic infrastructures.

The collaborative poems and the ERP can thus be seen as a tangible expression of the project's ethos. They demonstrate how research outputs can provide a means of mutual translation between community knowledge and policy frameworks and support inclusive intergenerational dialogue among local communities. In this sense, more than an ideal to be imposed from above, peacebuilding was interpreted and actioned as a collaborative and relational process taking shape from the ground up.

Localisation as epistemic transformation

Finally, the project's findings suggest that localising peacebuilding calls for more than adapting external frameworks to local settings. Rather, it demands a transformation in how peace can be known and practised. The dialogues sparked during the listening sessions, together with the co-production of the ERP, demonstrated this point. They showed how locally grounded pedagogy can carry conversations forward beyond any specific project's lifespan.

This reframing carries implications for scholarship and practice. It confronts the assumption that localisation is about better logistics or operations in the field (Ruggeri et al. 2016; Barakat and Milton 2020). Instead, it positions localisation as epistemic work, with a central role to play in (re)distributing authority over what constitutes legitimate knowledge and who gets to define how peace is understood and pursued. Participatory and creative methods contribute to this process by placing emotion and storytelling alongside more technocratic analysis. But participants' support for integrating such approaches into policymaking also signals that decolonising peace research requires structural transformation at the level of universities and funding institutions in the Global North, not just good intentions in the field. The project illustrates the potential and limitations of attempting such transformation within existing academic and funding systems, opening up space for asking what meaningful decolonial collaboration might require at the institutional level.

Further, the project spotlighted the ethical dimension of impact research in support of peaceful and shared human flourishing. Delivering tangible outputs, such as the ERP, policy briefs, and poems, can support community priorities, but only when given shape through sustained dialogue and local ownership. Impact becomes meaningful when it strengthens relationships, and not when it imposes results. Indeed, the project's development came to exemplify a form of research that can be both rigorous and generative, producing locally grounded knowledge whilst still contributing, even if only marginally, to the capacities and aspirations of those touched by its process and outputs.

Conclusion

The OoP Declaration represented the regional aspiration to project the Pacific as a zone of peace through Pacific agency and values. Following its adoption at the PIF leaders' meeting in September 2025, the research project set out to explore how local communities across Fiji made sense of and sought to shape that vision in their own contexts, with a particular focus on intergenerational dialogue. The main finding was that there is a significant gap between the declaration's high-level policy language and everyday lived experiences of peace and non-peace. The declaration's relevance

may therefore rest beyond the text itself, in the collective, intergenerational exchanges and actions it can inspire about what peace means in Pacific communities and how it might be built.

Project participants articulated thoughtful critiques of the declaration whilst also affirming the centrality of peace as a concept and practice inherent to Pacific peoples. They consistently returned to the idea that advancing an OoP depends on stable livelihoods, healthy environments, inclusive dialogue, and recognition of the communal and affective labour – disproportionately done by women – that holds the social fabric of communities together. This grounded understanding of peace challenges peacebuilding models that privilege technocratic frameworks over human and environmental relationships, symbolism over structural transformation, and policy language over the material and affective conditions in which communities actually work towards and sustain peace on a daily basis.

The research process itself became an exercise in collaborative meaning making around how the OoP might be advanced. The project's use of participatory, dialogic, and arts-based methods created spaces where participants could reflect on what peace means to them and how the OoP could be brought to life. For some participants, this process also opened up new ways of thinking about Pacific livelihoods and about what it means to protect the conditions that allow peace to endure. Beyond mere data collection, these encounters constituted peacebuilding work in that they generated pathways for collective theorising about peace and non-peace, particularly through intergenerational dialogue and creative expression in the co-development of the poems and ERP.

Participants' feedback indicated that these approaches were experienced as meaningful and transformative. Many described the process as empowering, noting that it helped build or restore trust, bridge generational divides, and allowed perspectives often absent from formal policymaking to emerge. The co-development of the ERP and poems pushed this work further by transforming research outputs into practical, relational tools that connected policy ideals to community priorities beyond the project's lifespan. The poems' cultural resonance and circulation back to communities helped ensure that Pacific voices remained central to how peace was understood throughout the project and in its outputs.

Nonetheless, the project also exposed tensions inherent to conducting peacebuilding research in sites with difficult legacies of conflict and/or colonialism. Despite the research team's partnership with PCP and a firm commitment to participatory approaches, the research was bound by the power asymmetries, both personal and institutional, that structure international academic work. These disparities are deeply embedded, and they suggest that decolonising peacebuilding research and praxis

requires transformation beyond methodologies. Indeed, it may demand a deeper-level redistribution of resources and voice within the institutions that produce and legitimise knowledge production.

Localising peacebuilding, then, is at its core about equalising epistemic relationships. It is about recognising and centring Pacific or other peoples' ways of knowing, speaking, building, and living peace. The widespread support among participants for greater integration of arts-based and dialogic approaches into policymaking shows that peace knowledge cannot be separated from the creative, relational processes that give it meaning. The OoP offers a promising framework to advance this agenda, but the extent to which it can deliver on its promise depends on whether it can strengthen existing practices of dialogue, reciprocity, and environmental protection that already build peace from the ground up, often without formal recognition or institutional support. Empowering young people to act as agents of positive transformation in their communities is vital to that end.

If the OoP can continue to nurture spaces where youth voices are heard, and where elders and young people think together without oppressive hierarchies, it may help advance its policy objectives. Not as a fixed text handed down from regional leaders, but as a framework through which Pacific communities negotiate and pursue their own visions of peaceful transformation and human flourishing. The peace knowledge and experience that emerged through these dialogues also points beyond the Pacific, inviting peacebuilders and scholars elsewhere to learn from the OoP, not just as a policy declaration, but as a catalyst for grassroots dialogue and action towards peace as a lived reality.

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The future is not simply somewhere ahead of us. It is already being formed in what communities remember and forget, in the relations between generations, and in the institutions, cultures, and ecologies that shape what becomes possible.

This second Special Issue on *Intergenerational Dialogue for Well-Being Futures* brings together papers from diverse geographical, cultural, and disciplinary settings. They explore historical memory and silence, belonging and epistemic authority, artistic and embodied practices, more-than-human relations, peace, and collective healing. Together, the papers challenge the assumption that knowledge and wisdom simply pass from older to younger generations. Inheritances are received, questioned, refused, renewed, and transformed, and dialogue may open possibilities without guaranteeing understanding, reconciliation, or repair.

To think through these processes, the volume develops the idea of *futures-forming*. Futures are contested, relational, shaped by what we value, and mediated by the structures within which we live. The question is therefore not simply what future we wish to leave to those who come after us, but what relations and conditions allow them to question what they inherit and to form futures of their own.

Futures are formed in dialogue. Hope is between us.



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