

Peer Review Article

# Where, Who, When in Systems Change:

## Using an Indigenous Knowledge Systems Approach for Perspective on Systems Change

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### Abstract

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

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

## Keywords

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

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## Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

social aspects of productivity represented by one organisation with no specific remit regarding children and young people.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

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

## Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Co-inquiry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Setting Circle: An IKS Process for Co-inquiry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Homelands

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

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



on protocols from the huge multitribal gatherings that occur in the Bunya Mountains on Wakka Wakka and Barrungam Country every three years...as they have done forever” (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 258).

This systems time and space was closed to outside kolabbers and focussed on IKS translators only. A total of 10 IKS translators were invited into this duwur<sup>4</sup>, during which Bunya Burra Murri Rangers—who actively care for Country, live in and on Country by the protocols and process patterns set out by Elderships (Bunya Mountains Elders Council, 2010)—connected national IKS Labbers with the knowledges which flow from the mountains. Time spent on Country together around our collective fires and shared ceremony and song, as is the protocol, enabled “individual self-determination while also binding us in networks of relational obligation that extend throughout a ‘*deep time*’ ontology encompassing both ancestors and descendants as stakeholders” (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 258).

This pattern was then opened up—more baulan<sup>5</sup>—for non-Indigenous kolabbers who were already partnering with First Nations community-controlled hubs. Here, a thirty-plus group of participants were hosted on Country. Ceremony and story were not shared here, like the earlier duwur. These participants were called in and songs sung to them of Country, time and place, balancing the unequal power relations which shapes our existence in mainstream Australian society. Coming into this special time and space, movement and memory of Bunya Burras was by First Nations invitation only. “Non-Indigenous affiliates (‘kolabbers’) are ... inducted and regulated through these protocols. We are responsible for their behaviour in the Lab and resolve any transgressions by ‘calling in’ rather than ‘calling out’” (Fletcher et al., 2023, p. 258).

I share this process of broader circle making, meaning matching, and field immersion as a way to place what we (JD and Amara) have done on a micro level as an institutional kolab into a broader macro level, where groups of knowledge makers, designers, influencers set circles in relation to each other and are cradled together in the same way by Bunya Burras, the great gathering or embassy mountains.

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

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<sup>4</sup> See [bpac.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final-Bonve\\_Buru\\_Booburrgan\\_Ngmmunge-301010-ss.pdf](https://bpac.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final-Bonve_Buru_Booburrgan_Ngmmunge-301010-ss.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See [www.credly.com/org/griffith-university/badge/first-nations-cultural-immersion](https://www.credly.com/org/griffith-university/badge/first-nations-cultural-immersion)

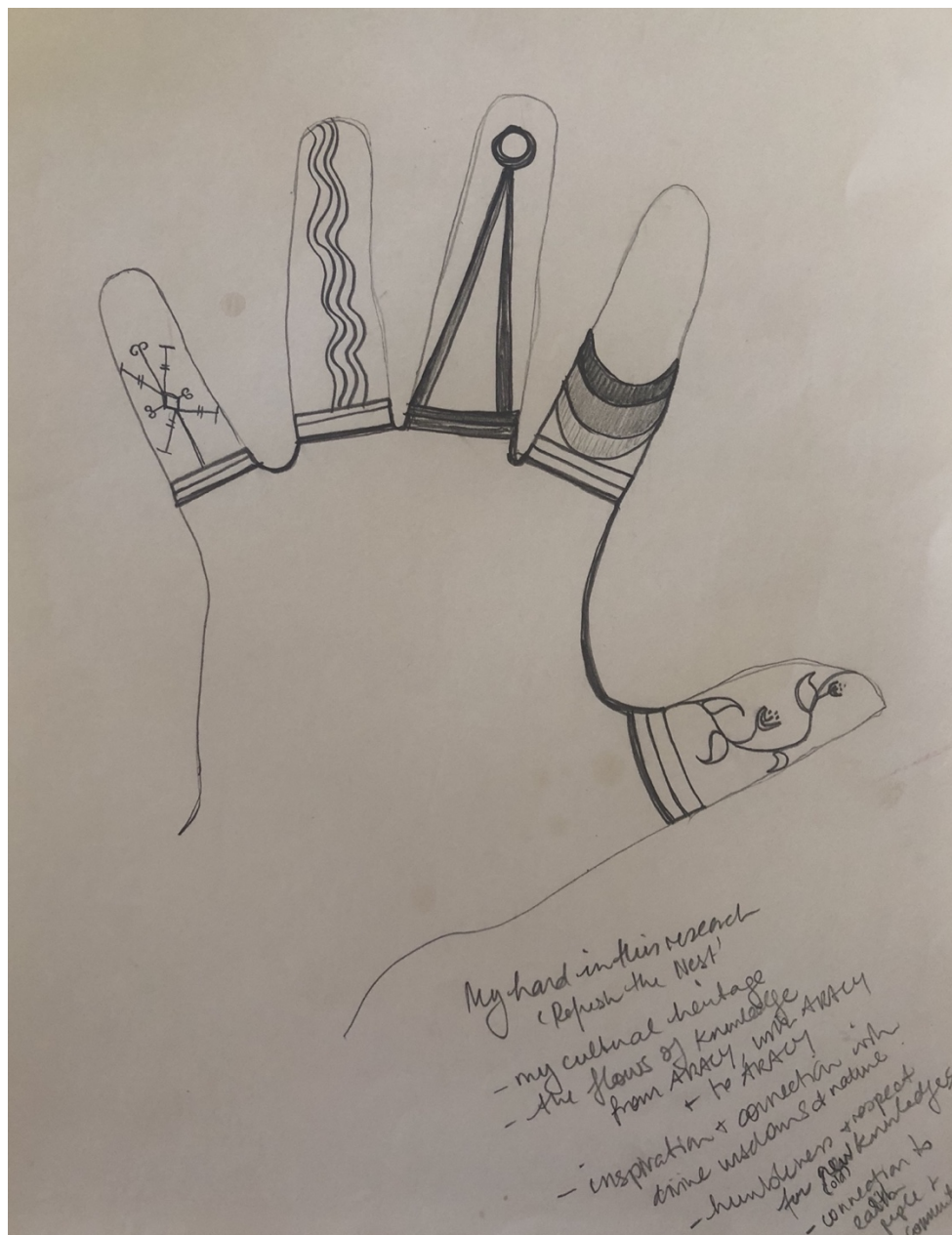
reflections on our time in duwur, are presented to indicate the power of this process. These reflections—an example of a “micro” application of IKS—are the emergence of our co-inquiry space, providing the basis for this paper and are written in the first person from a non-Indigenous perspective (see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

### Meanderings

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

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

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



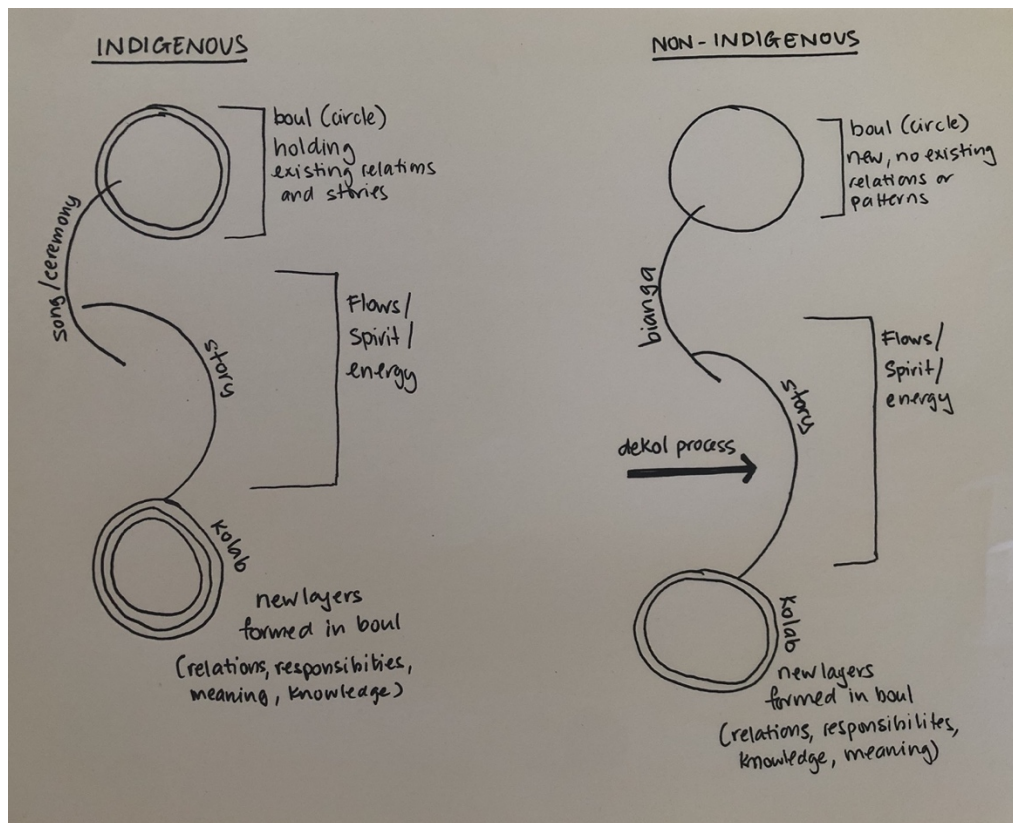
**Figure 1:** *My Hand in Research*

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## Third Space, Hybridity and Liminality

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Where is Systems Change?

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.*

*I will meet you there.*

—Rumi

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## Who are You in Systems Change?

*The assistance people need is not in learning about Aboriginal Knowledge;*

*it is remembering their own.*

— Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand talk: How Indigenous thinking can save the world*

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

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

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

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

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

## When are You in Systems Change?

*Times are urgent: let’s slow down.*

— Báýò Akómoláfé

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Provocation for Intergenerational Justice

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

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

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

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

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Ethics Statement

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

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