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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
Dr Ryan O'Byrne
Prof Emeritus Iftikhar H. Malik
Dr Ola Osman
Prof Garrett Thomson
Prof Paul Weller

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Editorial Introduction:

Intergenerational Dialogue, Wisdom and Well-Being

Scherto R. Gill[1]

Across cultures and continents, a living thread connects communities across time and space. It weaves through the stories that elders tell and the questions that young people ask, through ancestral practices renewed in contemporary circumstances, and through encounters where past and future meet in the present. This thread is intergenerational dialogue: a relational process by which communities sustain and pass on wisdom, cultivate collective agency, and imagine futures of shared flourishing. Whilst historical atrocities and continuing injustices, from slavery and colonialism to wars and capitalist extraction, have sought to sever communities from their ancestors, their land, and the sacred, this thread has not been broken. Instead, it has helped humanity preserve dignity, transform hardship into resilience, and sustain hope across generations.

This recognition lies at the heart of my decision to guest-edit this and next Special Issue of the *Journal of Dialogue Studies*. It is an understanding emerging from both intellectual inquiry and lived experience. Through the UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative, I have witnessed the generative power of intergenerational dialogue in communities across Africa, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East.[2] At the core of this initiative are community dialogue circles: intergenerational spaces in which people of all ages come together to acknowledge past wounds, reclaim wisdom and dignity, transcend divisions, and reimagine well-being futures. In these circles, dialogue helps communities re-stitch broken bonds, embrace relational integrity and assume courage to address systemic inhumanity (Volkan, 2025). Such encounters can shift fundamentally the ways that a community relates to its past and orients itself towards new possibilities. Indeed, the reverberations from these circles have created a palpable and contagious sense of hope.

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[1] Professor Scherto R. Gill is a researcher, educator and facilitator who creates spaces for deep listening and generative dialogue aimed at better understanding of global challenges. She is the Director of Global Humanity for Peace Institute, University of Wales Trinity Saint David. She is also Senior Fellow at the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation, an international peace think-tank based in the Southeast of England; and Life Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts (FRSA). Scherto coordinates the UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative. She is a board member of Spirit of Humanity Forum and Rising Global Peace Forum.

[2] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/collective-healing-initiative

At the same time, these circles are not all smooth sailing, and practitioners are confronted with challenges in this work: the persistence of structural inequalities that constrain who is in the circle and how they are listened to and heard; the risk of tokenism when dialogue is instrumentalised by institutional agendas; and the difficulty of sustaining meaningful exchange across generations in contexts of social fragmentation and political mistrust (see Casey Overton's paper in this Issue). These experiences have convinced me of the need to explore intergenerational dialogue conceptually, methodologically, ethically, pragmatically, and as a set of policy pathways.

This Special Issue is a response to that need.

An Urgent and Hopeful Imperative

The urgency of intergenerational dialogue is acutely felt across the contemporary global landscape. In this Special Issue, well-being futures names more than desirable outcomes or policy targets. It signals a normative horizon: the conditions under which communities can live with dignity, relational integrity, and ecological belonging, and can co-author the meanings by which a life goes well. Intergenerational dialogue matters here because it is one of the primary ways communities deliberate, contest, and renew those meanings across time, especially under conditions of historical harm and structural injustice.

Despite renewed global commitments, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the UN Pact for the Future (2024), transgenerational trauma, structural injustices, gender discrimination, limited youth participation, and fragmented political responses continue to impede collective progress. These are not merely technical failures of governance; they are relational breakdowns, compounded by the weakening of bonds between generations. Above all, they also reflect the marginalisation of those wisdom traditions (e.g. (religious, Indigenous, African, artisanal, place-based, and so forth) through which communities have historically made sense of suffering and cultivated agency.

Yet there is also reason for optimism. Across the continents, communities are demonstrating that intergenerational dialogue is a key pathway leading towards more just, inclusive, and flourishing futures (Gill 2025a). The UN Pact for the Future underscores the necessity of equitable intergenerational processes and collaborative approaches to multilateral governance. This Special Issue takes up that call by bringing together scholars, researchers, and practitioners from diverse disciplines, each exploring intergenerational dialogue as a transformative process and practice for communal well-being. The papers span different geographical regions, from Austria, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and Wales to India, Brazil, Kenya, Nigeria,

the United States, and Aotearoa New Zealand. They draw on richly varied intellectual traditions, including continental philosophy, decolonial theory, Islamic ethics, feminist praxis, Indigenous epistemologies, and process-oriented social inquiry. Together, the papers collectively reposition intergenerational dialogue from a facilitative technique to a multi-dimensional praxis: an epistemological framework for co-inquiry, an ethical discipline of listening and recognition, a political process challenging the asymmetries of power, and the institutional conditions that enhance trust and collaboration.

Concepts, Epistemology, and Ethics

A foundational question running through this Special Issue concerns the conceptual, epistemological and ethical dimensions of intergenerational dialogue. The UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative goes a step further, by reflecting on not only what it is, but also what it demands of us. Several papers take up this challenge with considerable force.

Min Young Choi advances a conception of intergenerational dialogue as an epistemological framework, drawing on qualitative research with Korean workers across cohorts of different ages. Rather than treating generational difference as a communicative problem to be managed, Choi argues that dialogue between generations can surface the taken-for-granted cultural and historical assumptions that shape divergent worldviews. When designed as a reflexive and context-sensitive process, intergenerational dialogue becomes a space for the co-construction of shared meanings. This is a significant conceptual contribution, moving the discourse beyond stereotyped age-defined categories towards a culturally grounded and decolonised understanding of intergenerational dynamics.

The epistemological dimensions of intergenerational dialogue are further enriched by Gareth Evans-Jones, who proposes the notion of dialogical justice within peacebuilding. Drawing on Levinas, Derrida, care ethics, and Indigenous relational epistemologies, including the Māori concept of *whakapapa* and Anishinaabe *mino bimaadiziwin*, Evans-Jones argues that justice in peacebuilding cannot be reduced to bounded events aimed at closure. Instead, justice must be understood as ongoing, relational, and intergenerational. At the heart of this framework is a practice of intergenerational listening: an ethical attentiveness to inherited harm, silenced histories, and the obligations we hold towards the generations yet to come. This resonates profoundly with the experience of the Collective Healing Circles, where listening is not merely a dialogue technique but an act of recognition and, ultimately, of love. In proposing a shift from resolution to relationship, Evans-Jones articulates a compelling vision of justice as always 'to come'.

Reece Sohdi brings a further layer of complexity by examining the politics and ethics of translation as a decolonial framework for intergenerational knowledge co-creation. Through a comparative analysis of Māori language revitalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand and Sámi youth political councils in Northern Europe, Sohdi foregrounds translation as a contested practice through which power, culture, and identity are negotiated across generations. Translation, in this account, is not a neutral linguistic bridge but an ethical and political act, one that demands attentiveness to untranslatability, refusal, and difference, and that challenges dominant Western assumptions of equivalence and universal intelligibility. In an era of digital expansion, Sohdi's work poses important questions about how Indigenous and intergenerational knowledges are preserved, transformed, and governed.

Cultural Transmission of Wisdom

If intergenerational dialogue is understood as an epistemological and ethical practice, then the question of what is transmitted across generations becomes paramount. The UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative has shown that communities do not merely pass down cultural artefacts; they transmit entire relational worlds of meaning, sustaining and renewing wisdom even under the most adverse conditions. The first papers in this Special Issue attend, with particular care, to these processes of creative transmission and regeneration.

Mini Chandran Kurian offers a richly textured qualitative study of fourteen folk artists and their families in rural India, practitioners of hereditary arts such as Kasuti hand embroidery, Pabu-ji ki Phad performance, and Ajrakh printing. Kurian's work reveals cultural transmission as a dialogic and co-creative endeavour: Elders impart narrative templates, technical repertoires, and affective models, while younger kin recalibrate these legacies in response to digital exposure, formal schooling, and market pressures. Yet, this dialogue is increasingly fragile due to the loosening of joint-family structures, as well as the pull of urban employment and the undervalued gendered labour. All of these threaten the relational space in which apprenticeship occurs. Kurian positions intergenerational dialogue as indispensable for both preserving intangible cultural heritage and sustaining the relational bonds through which cultural identity and communal resilience are achieved.

Babatunde Allen Bakare extends this concern to the Yoruba peoples of South-West Nigeria and their diaspora. Bakare examines how indigenous intergenerational dialogue and mediation subsystems have sustained Yoruba socio-political and cultural structures across centuries, including structured practices of conflict prevention, leadership succession, and moral instruction. Engaging Homi Bhabha's work on hybridity and identity formation, Bakare argues that these indigenous communication

systems remain vital for governance, social mediation, and the preservation of Africa's intangible heritage. He thus recommends their formal integration into civic education and diaspora engagement strategies. Here is a powerful example of the living thread at work: despite the colonial dislocations and the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans, Yoruba communities have sustained dialogic practices that continue to nourish collective agency and dignity.

Leticia Marques Camargo takes up the theme of transmission from a different vantage point, examining what she terms 'haunted genealogies' in a post-slavery community in Brazil. Drawing on an ethnographic and visual anthropological study, Camargo explores how family photo albums, oral narratives, and genealogical artefacts transmit nurturing wisdom as well as painful inheritances, such as illness, ill-fate and ancestral 'curses' that reverberate across generations. Through the lens of hauntology, she reveals how unresolved familial traumas persist, shaping embodied experience in the present. Camargo's work is a critical reminder that intergenerational dialogue must reckon honestly with the ambivalent dimensions of inheritance.

Justice, Identity and Politics

A number of papers in this Special Issue examine the transformative potential of intergenerational dialogue, focusing on how it can open pathways towards collective agency and just futures. These resonate deeply with the experiences of the UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative, where dialogue can be a site of contestation, where futures-making depends on confronting structural constraints (Gill 2025b).

Nicholas Forrest Frayne explores the politics of co-design through an intergenerational dialogue during a workshop aimed at creating a public memorial in the site of the former torture chambers at Nyayo House in Kenya. Bringing together survivors of the Moi regime and young Kenyans, the workshop comprised conventional group dialogue and architectural co-design. Frayne's analysis, drawing on Amartya Sen's deliberative idea of justice, Hannah Arendt's conception of political innovation, and Achille Mbembe's philosophy of disenclosure, identifies a crucial distinction: while dialogue served as a process of augmentation within existing frameworks of justice, co-design went further, opening up new solidarities and imaginaries. Justice, Frayne suggests, is not only retrospective but futural, and co-design is a practice through which new possibilities for justice can emerge.

Casey Overton brings the focus to Richmond, Virginia, examining the potential of Collective Healing Circle (CHC) practices in addressing racialised violence and spatial injustice. Overton's paper traces how intergenerational dialogue, beginning with CHCs, continued through Youth Leadership Programme research, and integrated in the engagement with the city's land-use policy overhaul. What is striking

about this contribution is its insistence on recognising young adults as a marginalised group whose identities intersect with race and gender. The braided threads of colonial worldviews that determine social status reveal the demand for intergenerational dialogue as a necessary component of social change-making strategies. Overton demonstrates that it is through intergenerational dialogue that communities can begin to contest and transform the very structures that constrain their flourishing.

Akangshya Bordoloi turns to the context of female sex-worker activism in New Delhi, proposing a renewed feminist historiography that challenges colonial moral frameworks and Eurocentric feminist theory. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted between 2020 and 2024, Bordoloi foregrounds an intergenerational sisterhood rooted in the historical legacies of collective solidarity, where sex-work NGOs emerge as mediating spaces linking grassroots realities with policy. Yet this sisterhood is not uncomplicated: embedded in historically layered Hindu cultural traditions, contemporary advocacy risks re-inscribing Vedic moral hierarchies. Bordoloi's paper, in its critical engagement with both the radical politicisation and neoliberal co-optation of the regulatory model, contributes to a gender-inclusive, culturally grounded, and justice-oriented governance framework, redefining feminist praxis from the ground up.

Conditions for Dialogue

The final cluster of papers turns to the intimate and often under-examined dimensions of intergenerational dialogue: the affective, spiritual, and existential conditions that make such dialogue possible, and the consequences when these conditions are absent or eroded. The UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative has consistently demonstrated that meaningful dialogue requires more than good facilitation; it requires the cultivation of trust, the creation of safe relational space, and the recognition that what is at stake in intergenerational exchange is nothing less than the continuity of love and meaning across time. These papers foreground the affective-spiritual micro-conditions without which 'dialogue' remains procedural.

Lin Zheng offers a searching exploration of intergenerational affective mismatch within the British Chinese diaspora. Through participant observation at a weekend Chinese school and semi-structured conversations with parents and educators, Zheng investigates how care expressed through sacrifice and control by first-generation parents frequently fails to register as love in an English-dominant, autonomy-valuing environment. What appears as conflict or apathy is, Zheng argues, unspoken love. The absence of shared ethical anchors, such as Confucian norms of filiality, is itself an intercultural pedagogical problem. Zheng proposes dialogic interventions, including bilingual mediation, narrative reframing, and intergenerational work-

shops, as pathways for deep encounters that make parental intentions legible without erasing younger generation's autonomy. This is a contribution of both ethical subtlety and practical significance, reminding us that the living thread between generations can become frayed, not through open conflict, but through a quiet failure of mutual recognition.

Beata Boór addresses the cultural and political dimensions of intergenerational dialogue on the meaning of work, focusing on the perspectives of young people in Austria. Boór's paper foregrounds the asymmetries of power that structure intergenerational dialogue itself: in ageing societies where older generations dominate political representation and policymaking, youth voices are frequently marginalised despite their heightened exposure to precarious working conditions, the climate crisis, and long-term structural uncertainty. Meanwhile, young people also demonstrate remarkable agency, engaging critically with dominant work ideologies through acts of resistance or reinterpretation, co-creating alternative frameworks based on autonomy, balance, purpose, and sustainability. Boór's work reconceptualises intergenerational dialogue as a site of both cultural co-creation and power contestation, amplifying the debates on intergenerational justice and the epistemic conditions for inclusive futures.

Shmailish Anwar brings the spiritual dimension of intergenerational dialogue to the fore, exploring how Muslim movements in the United Kingdom draw upon *tasawwuf*, the inner and ethical discipline of Islam, to strengthen community security. Reclaiming the term *tasawwuf* from its frequent reduction to 'Sufism', Anwar examines how two contemporary movements, the Hizmet Movement and Minhaj-ul-Qur'an International, cultivate civic literacy, empathy, and responsibility through practices of *sohbet* (conversation) and *halaqa* (learning circles). Grounded in Qur'anic narratives of humility, patience, and mutual trust, these gatherings transmit ethical and intellectual values across generations, linking spiritual formation to social harmony. Anwar's paper offers an important corrective to securitised and surveillance-based approaches to Muslim communities, demonstrating that sustainable community security is nurtured through moral, intellectual, and affective formation in intergenerational dialogue. This is, in the deepest sense, an account of wisdom being actively cultivated: spiritual traditions preserved and renewed across generations as a living source of dignity and social cohesion.

Weaving Futures in Dialogue

Taken as a whole, the papers in this Special Issue reveal the extraordinary breadth and depth of intergenerational dialogue as a field of inquiry, imagination, and transformation. They confirm that intergenerational dialogue is not merely a communic-

ative technique; instead, it is an epistemological framework, an ethical imperative, a political process, and a relational mode of being. Across their diverse contexts and traditions, these papers share a common recognition: that the future cannot be shaped adequately by any single generation acting alone, nor by institutions that treat the transmission of wisdom, knowledge, culture, and meaning as a one-directional process from old to young. Together, the papers attest that meaningful dialogue requires the cultivation of trust, the acknowledgement of asymmetry, and the willingness to be transformed by the encounter.

Indeed, intergenerational dialogue is fragile. The spaces for such dialogue are under pressure, threatened by the erosion of family, communal, and societal structures, the commodification of cultural heritage, the dominance of surveillance-based governance, and the digital mediation of knowledge. The task, then, is to embrace intergenerational dialogue by creating the structural, cultural, and relational conditions that make it possible.

It is here that the experience of the UNESCO Collective Healing Initiative offers both a cautionary and a reassuring note. We have learned that intergenerational dialogue, when grounded in genuine relational encounter, can be profoundly transformative: young people discover that their elders carry both pain and wisdom; elders discover that young people bring both resilience and vision. We have also realised that such transformation must be sustained with care and commitment, and above all, supported by structural conditions within which communities can determine their own pathways.

Whilst this Special Issue offers no definitive blueprint, it nevertheless extends an invitation: to take intergenerational dialogue seriously as a mode of co-inquiry and an emergent process of envisioning shared flourishing. As a whole, it attests that the living thread of intergenerational wisdom endures, and justice *à venir* (Derrida 1992) remains possible so long as we keep dialogue open. As Prof Youssef Mahmoud's Keynote reminds us, dialogue affirms the relational being that we are, always already constituted by those who came before us and responding to those who will come after us.

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Intergenerational Dialogue for Wellbeing Futures

Keynote by Prof Youssef Mahmoud[1]

I come to you not an expert but as an observer, as someone who has recently embarked on an unlearning, unknowing journey as a means of navigating the current civilisational unravelling unburdened by inherited mindsets and dominant paradigms. My contribution is to offer some provocative epistemic and process-related suggestions that you may wish to take into account as you embark on this timely Intergenerational Dialogue for Well-Being Futures.

Let me start with the concept of intergenerational. A critical epistemic lens would enable us to liberate the concept from the tyranny of age by decoupling it from fixed, biological lifecycles and redefine it around shared experiences, knowledge transfer, and collaborative action. It would demystify the notion that wisdom is the sole preserve of elders. Young people despite systemic exclusion, continue to demonstrate courage, creativity, and determination to lead transformative change. In this regard, the recent dramatic protests led by the so-called Gen Z in several countries offer, despite some setbacks, valuable insights.

One could also use the same epistemic lens to interrogate the dominant linear time assumptions that have incarcerated our understanding of 'futures'. Through questioning our linear understanding of future, we would make space for and elevate non-Western cosmologies where the past and future are in continuous dialogue with the present and where uncertainty about the unknown is embraced as a teacher.

With respect to the subject of human well-being, it became of interest as a distinct scientific concept in the latter half of the past century. It was seen as a necessary shift from a focus on primarily economic measures, such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the standard of living, to allegedly more holistic and progressive measures associated with the quality of life. It has moved since its inception on an acceler-

[1] Prof Youssef Mahmoud is a former United Nations Under-Secretary-General who has headed several UN peace operations in central Africa. Prior to these assignments, he held other senior United Nations positions, notably as UN Resident Co ordinator in Guyana and Director in the UN Department of Political Affairs. He is currently a Senior Adviser at the Inter national Peace Institute in New York, and a Visiting Professor at the African Leadership Centre in Nairobi, Kenya and King's College, London. He also serves as Co-Chair of Home for Humanity, a citizen-led movement for planetary regeneration.

ated, overwhelmingly positive, and largely unquestioned trajectory. It has now been adopted by a great many NGOs and international organisations, including the UN and is now one of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It has been hailed as a panacea for many societal ills, spanning health, inequality and even the environment without questioning or substantially modifying the economic and industrial paradigms at the root of these problems. These paradigms have shifted the responsibility of health and well-being from the collective to the individual. In fact, many critical studies have shown how neo-liberalism has commodified the pursuit of health, wellbeing and self-care, turning it into a profitable global industry for the benefit of the few.

This brings me to the process issue you may wish to consider as a means of ensuring that the futures you come up with in the course of your dialogue are not easily co-opted or stolen by contested systems and frameworks desperately bent on safeguarding their continued dominance. Some of you may have witnessed or experienced how some organisations in which you may have worked quietly metabolise potentially transformative efforts, absorbing critique, diluting alternatives. Wellbeing economy, innovative climate solutions, and even the decolonisation movement calling for epistemic and ontological freedoms have nearly all succumbed to capture by dominant systems.

One way to avoid such a capture or hi-jacking of innovative futures is to unpack the system's 'black box' in order to see not just how it thinks and operates, but how it reshapes those inside it. One favourite way systems under stress use to sustain their relevance is to encourage and even finance out-of-the box thinking as long as it does not question the box nor the hegemonic orthodoxies underpinning it. Understanding the 'black box' may help design more effective interventions in the contexts you are embedded in, while acknowledging that the capacity to freely act is almost always constrained.

Another way to resist system co-optation is to adopt a futures-back thinking approach often referred to as back-casting. Futures-back thinking is more than a framework: it is a provocation. It challenges us to break away from reactive present-forward thinking that externalises problems created by obsolete paradigms (such as climate change) with a view to finding solutions to them with the cooperation of a dominant system usually in crisis. Futures-back thinking leverages the disruptions created by crises to shift from refining the familiar to reimagining what is possible. It enables us to treat the future as a hopeful point of departure for transformation. One way of crafting a vision for well-being futures would be to co-imagine answers to futures-oriented questions such as: What futures can we imagine that ensure planet-

ary wellbeing? What types of architecture and leadership are needed to bring these futures about?

Once you have developed a future vision, the back-casting approach suggests bringing it to the present and identifying regenerative seeds visible in that present which can be harnessed to help realise that vision and simultaneously relinquish paradigms and ways of knowing and being that no longer serve that future. I should hasten to add that an effective implementation of such an approach calls for a particular kind of conscious leadership that sees the planet as a living unified whole, rather than a collection of separate parts.

This methodology is not 100% co-optation free. But it has been shown that starting with the future rather than improving an unsatisfactory present has better chances of succeeding than when the attention of a system in crisis is focused on shoring up its waning fortunes.

In sum, what is proposed above are some practical steps that can be taken to help safeguard the transformative potential of innovative initiatives that aim to shift from linear, human-centered approaches to wellbeing towards symbiotic cooperation with more.

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Conceptualising Intergenerational Dialogue: An Epistemological Framework through the Case of Korean Workplace Culture

Min Young Choi[1]

Abstract: A lack of understanding between generations increasingly generates social challenges in contemporary workplaces, hindering knowledge transfer, the maintenance of social ties, and the continuity of cultural practices (Burmeister & Deller 2016). As generational shifts become more visible, differences in values, expectations, and interpretations of work often lead to tension and conflict between older and younger generations, prompting growing interest in intergenerational dialogue as a means of fostering more inclusive and sustainable futures (Guajardo et al. 2025). However, dominant approaches to generational dynamics frequently rely on generalised categories that overlook the cultural and historical contexts in which generational perspectives are formed.

Drawing on a qualitative case study of Korean workers, this article conceptualises intergenerational dialogue not merely as a communicative exchange but as an epistemological framework through which values, and cultural assumptions are made visible, examined, and reconstructed. Intergenerational tensions are particularly salient in Korea, where rapid socio-economic transformation following the Korean War has produced pronounced generational contrasts. While younger generations increasingly challenge workplace practices shaped by Confucian values, these shifts reflect transformations grounded in enduring cultural logics rather than a complete rupture from the past.

The analysis is grounded in the Gestion et Société approach within the interpretive research tradition, which views culture as historically rooted yet continuously redefined through interaction. Based on 22 semi-structured interviews with Korean workers from different generational cohorts, the study adopts an emic and culturally sensitive perspective, using interviews as an analytical device to reveal divergent interpretive frameworks and underlying cultural references. The findings show that, despite generational differences, common ground can be identified when intergenerational dialogue is designed as a reflexive, context-sensitive process that surfaces assumptions

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and enables the co-construction of shared meanings. By moving beyond stereotypes, this study contributes to a decolonised and contextually grounded understanding of intergenerational dynamics.

Keywords: Intergenerational Transformation, Korean Workplace Value Change, Emic Perspective, Cultural Continuity and Rupture, Epistemological Framework, Intergenerational Perception Gaps

Introduction

Shaped by distinct environmental contexts, generational cohorts exhibit different work values, working styles, and desires. The ongoing generational transition toward an MZ-dominated[2] workforce, now accounting for more than one third of employees, poses complex challenges for intergenerational collaboration (Kim et al. 2023). A growing body of research within organisational settings examines generational gaps in work values and assumptions and identifies practices that promote collaboration across generations. As a means of mitigating conflicts, intergenerational dialogue has attracted growing attention, with the aim of fostering more inclusive and sustainable futures (Guajardo et al. 2025). It supports integration across generations, strengthens knowledge transfer and improves productivity while reducing segregation, discrimination, and social exclusion (Earl-Jones 2025).

As Sleap et al. (2013) demonstrate, dialogue is defined in various ways across disciplines, encompassing meanings that include conversation, shared thinking, and a broader range of activities aimed at understanding and fostering empathetic relationships. In this study, intergenerational dialogue is understood as a form of meaningful interaction and exchange between groups, involving structured activities that bring different generations to co-create shared norms and a common ground. However, in practice, intergenerational dialogue risks remaining limited, as guidelines are often perceived as vague by participants or remain confined to superficial engagement. Moreover, imposing a particular dialogue model without considering its acceptability to all parties risks cultural insensitivity and may fail to foster genuine engagement (Sleap et al. 2013). In Asian societies, where social interactions are shaped by relational hierarchies and embedded power dynamics, engaging participants openly in intergenerational conversations is particularly complex and therefore requires culturally sensitive approaches.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate intergenerational dynamics and to understand the cultural meaning systems through which actors make sense of intergenerational interactions in different ways. Specifically, it examines how different

[2] 'MZ' is used in Korea to refer to Millennials and Gen Z combined.

generations interpret collaboration, clarifies the gaps between these perspectives, and reveals how the values and beliefs underpinning them are shaped by specific sociocultural contexts. Through the analysis of empirical data, the study conceptualises intergenerational dialogue as an epistemological framework, with the aim of refining the concept for practical implementation. The empirical data for this study are collected through qualitative interviews with Korean workers. Importantly, the interviews themselves are not defined as instances of intergenerational dialogue. Rather, interviews are mobilised as a key analytical device through which intergenerational differences in perception can be examined and articulated. Used in this way, interviews enable a reflexive examination of differences in assumptions, demonstrating why such reflexive processes are essential for identifying common ground in intergenerational dialogue and how they can inform its practical enactment through in-depth case studies of Korean workers.

Context of Research

Aimed at understanding differences and advancing integration, intergenerational discourse can nonetheless reproduce boundaries between generations (Kuball et al. 2023). The stereotyping of generational traits can fuel indiscriminate othering, and biased perspectives give rise to mutual condemnation (Jauregui et al. 2020). The older generation is often portrayed as resistant to change, hierarchical, and authoritarian, whereas the younger generation is depicted as more individualistic, free-wheeling, prioritising themselves over others. Intergenerational discourse tends to be applied by relying on overly generalised categories, without considering the specific historical and sociocultural contexts in which a particular generation has lived. For example, in the Korean context, generational discourse often depicts younger generations as moving away from traditional collectivism and emphasising individual life choices, a shift portrayed as reflecting the influence of Western cultural values such as individualism and rationality.

In cross-cultural research, culture has long been defined within a positivist paradigm as a system of values mapped through cultural dimensions based on quantifiable scores (Hofstede 1980; Schwartz 1994). By reducing cultural differences to national scores used for linear comparison, such approaches tend to overlook the unique values, internal diversity, and contextual richness of individual cultures. Moreover, within this research paradigm, categorisations derived from Western contexts are often presented as universal , thereby marginalising significant cultural differences, and are frequently rooted in colonial discourses (Westwood 2006). Emerging in response to the limitations of positivist approaches, the interpretive paradigm emphasises the importance of local historical, social, and political contexts in understanding social phenomena. Culture is understood as a system of meanings, and cul-

tural differences are viewed as fundamentally constructed phenomena that emerge, are sustained, and are continuously reshaped through social interaction (Gertsen and Zølner 2020). As discussed by Chevrier (2024), these approaches are based on ontological perspectives that understand people as embedded in their social and cultural environments (Primecz et al. 2011). Knowledge is often described as socially constructed, yet individuals retain agency by actively interpreting and negotiating shared meanings within socially constituted frameworks. Drawing on an interpretive approach, this study analyses intergenerational interactions by situating generational cultural references within each society's cultural and historical trajectory. As part of a decolonising research agenda, the study adopts an emic approach that is culturally sensitive and grounded in local concepts in order to examine generational dynamics within a specific context.

Intergenerational conflict is particularly pronounced in Korea, where the 'Miracle on the Han River' transformed the country from poverty to prosperity within a few decades after the Korean War (Choi 2012). The sheer speed of this change has produced significant gaps in lived experience between generations. The rigid structures of the traditional Korean management model, deeply rooted in Confucianism, are increasingly challenged by younger generations (Park et al. 2018; Lee and Jeon 2023; Han 2023). The intensifying generational conflicts are well illustrated by the widespread use of the neologism '*Kkondae*'(꼰대), which describes older individuals perceived as clinging to outdated hierarchical values and resisting change, and frequently imposing their views on others (Lee 2020; Kim et al. 2021; Bu and Lee 2021). Young workers' expectations regarding management practices and organisational culture are accelerating changes in traditional Korean management styles (Lee 2020).

Recent studies on generational discourse in Korea argue that younger cohorts are challenging long-standing workplace practices, including strict hierarchical orders, rigid reporting lines, long working hours, and a workplace culture that demands dedication to work at the expense of personal life (Kim 2016; Park 2017; Kim 2023). While these practices underpinned growth in an earlier, developing-economy era and are still regarded as virtues by many older generation workers, younger cohorts, socialised in a different socio-economic context, are not aligned with these values and practices. Young Korean workers increasingly call for performance-based evaluation systems rather than seniority-based ones, alongside a more horizontal organisational culture, equal opportunities for promotion, and improved work–life balance (Kim 2016; Park 2017; Kim 2023). These shifts in values among younger generations can be understood as having gradually emerged alongside the introduction and diffusion of management by objectives (MBO) that has since become a standard model, developed in the USA, and has been implemented in Korean organisations.

This has led to significant changes in managerial practices and everyday collaboration (D'Iribarne et al. 2022). However, standardised models often clash with regionally specific cultural contexts, and the complexity of intergenerational relations cannot be adequately captured through simply categorised generational discourses. In the Korean context, rapid socio-economic transformation and the coexistence of enduring and emerging values render such simplifications particularly inadequate. Understanding intergenerational interaction therefore requires close attention to locally situated meanings and everyday practices. Responding to this need, this study adopts an interpretive, emic approach to examine how intergenerational dialogue is constructed and experienced within specific organisational and cultural contexts.

Research Design and Methodological Highlights

This study offers a multifaceted analysis of intergenerational perception gaps based on 22 qualitative interviews with Korean workers from two generational cohorts: 12 from Generation Y (1977–1996), 9 from Generation X (1965–1976), and 1 Baby Boomer (1955–1964) – following birth-year-based typologies used in Korean research (Ye 2009; Oh et al. 2014; Seo 2013; Kim 2016). The sample does not include office workers from Generation Z. Accordingly, in this study, the term younger generation refers to Generation Y (Millennials), while the older generation refers to Generation X and Baby Boomers. Although only one Baby Boomer was included in the sample, this reflects the broader Korean organisational context, in which most Baby Boomers have already retired and director-level positions are now predominantly occupied by Generation X. For analytical purposes, we therefore grouped Generation X and Baby Boomers together as the older generation, in contrast to Generation Y. Importantly, the interview sample consisted of participants who worked together within the same teams. This design enabled a parallel and cross-perspective analysis of intergenerational collaboration, allowing us to examine how members of different generations interpret the same collaborative practices and interactions from their respective positions.

The interviews were semi-structured and employed open-ended questions to elicit participants' own language and expressions. This approach made it possible to explore how participants construct meaning and interpret their experiences, while also capturing the fragmented nature of their representations of reality (Chevrier 2024). In addition, our analysis draws on participants' narratives from an emic perspective, highlighting the importance of indigenous concepts and cultural sensitivity (Chanlat and Pierre 2018; Mayrhofer 2017; Segal 2014; Chevrier 2024). While our approach shares certain analytical affinities with ethnographic research – such as attention to actors' lived experiences and locally situated meaning systems – it is not ethnographic in methodological terms. This study is an interview-based interpretive

inquiry that relies exclusively on qualitative interview data and does not involve participant observation or prolonged field immersion.

This study is particularly grounded in the *Gestion et Société* approach, which developed in France over several decades within the interpretive research tradition. This approach focuses on the deeper meaning systems through which actors make sense of situations and formulate their evaluations, rather than on synthesising the surface meanings of participants' judgments (D'Iribarne et al. 2022). It pays particular attention to the self-evident assumptions underlying actors' judgments and to the categories they use to describe their everyday reality. Within this perspective, culture is conceptualised as consisting of two articulated layers: an upper layer of ideals for living and working together – such as dominant norms, sanctions, and patterns of coordination and decision-making – and a deeper layer of shared, often subliminal fears, defined as the most feared social situations (Chevrier 2024). While shared meaning systems and mental frameworks tend to remain relatively stable within a culture, the meanings attached to specific situations may vary among its members. Based on this approach, the analysis of the empirical data followed an iterative process, with close attention paid to terminological overlaps, unexpected expressions, interviewees' hesitations or moments of embarrassment, as well as contrasts in the discourse (D'Iribarne et al. 2020). We paid particular attention to participants' interpretations of intergenerational interactions, especially moments of frustration, criticism, or anger, as these revealed the underlying concerns shaping their judgments and evaluations.

The *Gestion et Société* approach also claims that cultures are fluid and constantly redefined by social actors in interactions. In intergenerational collaborations, conflicts and differences between generations emerge from encounters between different meaning systems that are negotiated through interaction. Within these processes, the same management practices or modes of collaboration are reinterpreted – sometimes reinforcing existing norms and at other times reconstructing them with new meanings. Shifts in work values across generations, therefore, do not constitute a clean break from tradition; rather, they reflect transformations that remain anchored in enduring cultural foundations.

To explore these dynamics, we conducted a cross-analysis based on parallel interviews with co-workers from different generations, examining how each cohort interprets collaboration with the other. By focusing on points where generational perspectives intersect, we analyse how intergenerational collaboration is perceived, which myths are mobilised through misunderstanding, and which common roots are shared across cohorts. Building on this analysis, we identify continuity within

change by tracing how traditions are reconfigured across generations and by uncovering the fundamental values that underpin their shared cultural foundation.

To map cross-generational perspectives among Korean participants, we pose the following research question: Which cultural values and assumptions change, and which endure, across generations? The interviews conducted to address this question are not treated as instances of intergenerational dialogue in themselves. Rather, they are used as an analytical tool to reveal how different generations interpret and make sense of similar situations in distinct ways. To advance a substantive understanding of intergenerational dialogue as a practice, this study analyses participants' narratives to examine how individuals interpret one another across generational lines. Through this narrative analysis, we highlight the importance of reflexively identifying frameworks of perception and identifying common ground as a basis for meaningful intergenerational dialogue. Based on this analysis, we ultimately ask: How can intergenerational dialogue be understood as an epistemological framework – one that enables actors to recognise divergent meaning systems, reflect on their own interpretive assumptions, and rework them in relation to those of other generations?

Transformation of Korean Work Culture: Intergenerational Gaps in Perspectives

To analyse the interviews, we coded the transcripts and inductively identified and categorised themes recurrent across both cohorts. We then iteratively verified the analysis as the dataset grew. Prior research on generational discourse in Korea reports that younger workers hold heterogeneous work values and aspirations that differ from those of their older generation directors, and several of these representations align with our field research. However, our study adds an underexplored dimension by probing the perspective gaps between older generation directors and younger colleagues, decoding shifts in cultural norms, and identifying enduring values in the Korean mindset. We present our findings around three themes: the evolution of hierarchical order, communication codes, and workplace relationships.

Evolution of the hierarchical order

In the Korean workplace, Confucian values play a predominant role in professional interaction. Known in Korean as *Samgang Oryun* (삼강오륜, 三綱五倫)[3], Confucian principles delineate the moral and ethical obligations governing Koreans' social relations (Son, 1961). These principles structure hierarchical roles in both private life and the workplace and continue to shape social relations and interactions in contemporary Korea. Hierarchy organises roles within a vertical organisational structure, defining relations between older generation directors and younger workers and prescribing specific forms of respect and deference. However, understandings of the hierarchical order that has long underpinned workplace interactions and organisational structures in Korea are increasingly evolving.

Prior studies indicate that younger generations commonly reject hierarchies grounded in Confucian values, and they place greater emphasis on personal satisfaction and fulfilment in the workplace. Accordingly, young Korean workers seek roles that align with their values and enable them to realise their potential, rather than jobs demanding high work intensity within a rigid hierarchy.

Category	Researcher	Older Generations' perspective	Younger Generations' perspective
Hierarchical relations	Younggon Kim (2016)	Older generations are characterised by hierarchy-based authoritarianism. They seek hierarchical relations consistent with Confucian principles, emphasising deference/politeness toward elders. Generation X shows features between Baby Boomers and Generation Y.	Young Korean workers increasingly reject hierarchical relations and prefer to promote harmony within a horizontal structure.

[3] Samgang Oryun (삼강오륜, 三綱五倫) is a set of Confucian moral principles that historically guided social order and interpersonal conduct in Korea, and other Confucian-influenced societies. Samgang – the three primary hierarchical relations of sovereign-subject, father–son, and husband–wife – prescribes loyalty, filial obedience, and spousal fidelity. Oryun – the five key social relationships of father–son, ruler–subject, husband–wife, elder–younger, and friend–friend – specifies the corresponding virtues of affection (親), righteousness (義), proper distinction/roles (別), order (序), and trust (信).

Category	Researcher	Older Generations' perspective	Younger Generations' perspective
Hierarchical relations	Jae-heung Park (2017)	Korean older generation workers (born 1950–1970) are marked by authoritarianism and collectivism, stressing collective spirit toward state, society, and family. They share values of self-sacrifice and devotion for work, working intensively in vertical structures.	Young Korean workers (born after 1970) oppose authoritarianism and Confucian-linked collectivism; they are characterised by strong self-assertion and an individualist orientation.
Hierarchical relations / Work commitment	Ye-seul Kim (2023)	Korean older generation workers (Gen X, Baby Boomers) value moral duties and sacrifice for the organisation within a hierarchical structure.	MZ generations do not hesitate to resign if the work culture is oppressive or misaligned with their values and aspirations.

Table 1. Prior Studies on Hierarchical Relations in the Korean Workplace

Our research also reveals generational differences in how Koreans understand and evaluate hierarchical order in the workplace. Younger colleagues question traditional hierarchical norms, seek more horizontal and collaborative environments, and place greater value on recognition and opportunities for personal development. The decline of strictly vertical hierarchies is evident among young Korean workers. However, rejection of hierarchy alone does not capture the nuances of their shifting perspectives. Interview themes indicate that changes in hierarchy-related values and social norms do not follow a linear trajectory; they are complex and interwoven. Our analysis identifies enduring and changing values across five sub-themes – hierarchical order, expectations of leaders, relations to age, vertical vs. horizontal organisation, and the value of job titles.

Theme	Older Generations' perspective	Younger Generations' perspective	What persists	What is changing
Hierarchical order	Follow superiors' instructions; accustomed to directive, top-down styles.	Reject coercive orders and blind obedience; resist rigid hierarchy.	—	Tacit, hierarchy-imposed rules are no longer seen as desirable norms.

Theme	Older Generations' perspective	Younger Generations' perspective	What persists	What is changing
Expectations of leaders	Expect charismatic leadership and benevolent leader who looks after subordinates demands / closeness built through sharing the personal life.	Want friendly, approachable leaders in a more relaxed setting; seek recognition of individual performance and growth.	Recognition by superiors of contributions still serves as a motivating factor; mentoring expectations persist.	Preference shifts away from personal intrusion: juniors want work-focused mentorship without private-life overlap.
Relations to age	Age is a crucial criterion in workplace relations.	Share respect for age; seek guidance from *Seonbae* (선배; older/more experienced mentor) to learn tasks.	Deeply rooted respect for elders; experience wisdom/expertise; the *Seonbae* role remains essential.	Authority is less one-way: expectations move toward mutual respect rather than unilateral hierarchy.
Vertical vs. horizontal organisation	Emphasise following directives; chain of command runs top-down.	Prefer horizontal structures with open exchanges with superiors.	Across generations, respect for elders and *Seonbae* endures.	Shift toward more relational flexibility with superiors rather than full redistribution of authority/ autonomy.
Value of job titles	Uneasy about simplifying/flattening title systems.	Also reluctant to drop titles; uncomfortable using first names without titles; wish to keep hierarchical titles as rewards.	Titles still signal social achievement and external recognition.	Push for merit-based promotion (exceptional performance) over seniority; titles desired as rewards for results.

Table 2. Changes in Hierarchical Relationships among Korean Workers in this case study

Interview analyses indicate that, although leadership expectations and the cultural context have evolved, the leader's role remains pivotal – often within a still-paternalistic frame. Whereas loyalty and obedience to superiors were once demanded, younger Koreans now seek guidance and assurance that they are moving in the right direction; crucially, respect is contingent on demonstrated competence. Koreans tend to value leaders who motivate teams and recognise individual contributions, but personal legitimacy is built through a dual expectation: strong, charismatic authority coupled with human warmth and relational closeness (So 2010). The ideal echoes the Confucian gentleman, *Kunja* (군자, 君子) – embodying wisdom, endurance, self-control, integrity, and leading by example (Ryu 2018). The *Kunja* – a traditional archetype – continues to anchor ideals of virtuous leadership in Korea.

In Korean society, the unique term *Seonbae* (선배), akin to the Japanese *Senpai* (先輩), denotes a senior/mentor who supports and guides juniors with know-how and wisdom gained through broader experience. Younger colleagues welcome such mentorship when it is respectful, competent, and focused on development. Although many junior workers express a preference for 'flatter' workplaces, in practice *horizontal* tends to mean relational flexibility and reciprocity rather than a full redistribution of authority or autonomy. They ask for a friendly, approachable style and individual recognition and care, and they still expect respected leaders to mentor and provide guidance, inspired by the Confucian gentleman, *Kunja*. From a Western perspective, such as the French context that emphasises individual autonomy and respect for honour, this form of guidance may appear authoritarian or constraining (D'Iribarne et al. 2022). However, many young Koreans interpret it as an expression of responsible care on the part of a respected *Seonbae*.

Communication code

Communication challenges can arise between different generations, even when they share the same language. Previous studies highlight that young Korean workers are less hesitant than older generations to express their thoughts, preferring more open, reciprocal exchanges with their superiors.

Category	Researchers	Older Generations' perspective
Communication codes	Jin-sun Sul and Soo-yeon Kim (2022)	Older generations emphasise that internal communication problems are often linked to personal relationships and should be addressed by strengthening ties with younger colleagues.

Communication codes	Su-mi Ha (2021)	Older generations, having worked within hierarchical structures, are not accustomed to open communication; to communicate with the MZ generation, it should adopt a listening stance to foster openness.
Communication codes	Mi-ra Kim (2021)	Older generations are used to more one-way communication within a hierarchical structure.

Table 3. Prior Studies on Communication Codes in the Korean Workplace

In our interviews, directors from older cohorts reported difficulties communicating with younger colleagues. We map these shifts across four categories: politeness and formality; expression of opinions toward superiors; non-verbal communication; and expectations in workplace interaction.

In Korean culture, politeness functions as a central moral and social code rooted in Confucian principles (Lee 1986). Respect is conveyed through ritualised gestures – such as bowing – and through graded levels of formality that reflect age and status. Consequently, respect in Korea is more codified than in Western contexts. Our interviews with younger colleagues revealed frequent difficulties with these formalities: they prioritise practicality and efficiency over a perceived moral duty to maintain elaborate linguistic politeness toward older directors, including the heavy use of Sino-Korean expressions. Whereas older generations regard softened, face-to-face phrasing as respectful, younger Koreans favour direct, concise styles – especially in writing – which can at times produce misunderstanding.

Generational differences are also evident in how employees communicate with and respond to their superiors. Older generations tend to value immediate execution of instructions and express disagreement indirectly. By contrast, young Korean workers prefer to question instructions directly and seek open dialogue when they find it difficult to agree with their superiors. The older cohort – shaped by Korea's post-war decades (1950s–1980s) of national revival and rapid growth – often believed that immediate action accelerated progress, while younger generations, socialised in the 1990s amid technological and economic advances, place greater emphasis on deliberation, transparency, and collaborative problem-solving rather than rapid execution (Lim 2022). These differing approaches often create friction, yet juniors consistently express a desire for reciprocal communication with their superiors.

Non-verbal differences further illustrate this shift. Maintaining eye contact, once interpreted as disrespectful, is now understood by younger Koreans as a sign of engagement and attentiveness. Similarly, older-generation directors tend to value team-building activities outside work as a foundation for communication and cohesion,

whereas younger colleagues prefer clearer professional boundaries and expect feedback to focus on performance, development, and growth rather than personal closeness.

Despite these changes, a deep-rooted ethos of relationality persists in the Korean workplace. Younger colleagues continue to look to superiors for attentive listening, advice, and mentorship. Accordingly, effective leadership increasingly combines clarity and task orientation with empathetic communication, timely recognition, and development-oriented feedback. While communication codes are evolving, a stable intergenerational continuity remains evident in the value placed on respectful, trust-based relationships, grounded in mentorship and sustained forms of mutual obligation shaped by emotional bonds.

Theme	Older Generations' perspective	Younger Generations' perspective	What persists	What is changing
Politeness & formality	Deliver messages in person with softer phrasing; this is the most polite and respectful way to address superiors/elders.	Prefer a more direct style, especially in email; avoid set phrases older generation directors commonly use.	Respect and politeness still matter; honorifics/formal registers remain part of workplace language.	Greater emphasis on clarity and efficiency; reduced reliance on rigid formalities.
Expressing opinions to superiors	Tend to follow instructions; use euphemisms rather than stating refusal directly.	More willing to question instructions and state views openly; expect two-way dialogue.	Expectation of a respectful tone toward superiors, using an honorific language.	Shift from one-way deference to constructive challenge and dialogue with superiors.
Nonverbal communication (eye contact)	Direct/prolonged eye contact can feel impolite or uncomfortable.	Comfortable with eye contact; see it as engagement and interest.	Reading context and cues remains important to avoid misinterpretation.	Norms move toward more eye contact as a sign of participation.

Theme	Older Generations' perspective	Younger Generations' perspective	What persists	What is changing
Expectations in workplace communication	Build trust through sharing personal life and spending time together outside work; relationships first, then tasks.	Want task-focused, constructive feedback and mentoring; prefer clear boundaries around personal life.	Desire for mentorship from superiors	From closeness via personal life to professional guidance and recognition as the main currency of communication.

Table 4. Evolving Communication Codes in the Korean Workplace in this case study

Workplace Relationships

Younger Koreans' shifting values and career aspirations are reshaping workplace relations. Prior studies indicate that older generations emphasised dedication and commitment for work, contributing to the firm and to society in support of economic recovery and corporate development (Lee and Yoo 2013). By contrast, amid slower economic growth, younger cohorts prioritise meaningful work and work–life balance, rather than unreflective long working hours and success at any cost (Jang and Kim 2011; Seo 2013). Both generations nonetheless agree that harmonious relationships are central to a satisfying work life (Kim 2023).

Category	Researchers	Older Generations' perspective
Relationships with work	Mi-ja Jang and Deuk-sung Kim (2011); Yong-seok Seo (2013)	Baby Boomers frequently emphasise sacrificing their personal lives for work, society, and family – placing others' welfare above personal happiness. Gen X is associated with heightened individualism and egocentrism.
Relationships with work	Hye-jung Lee and Kyu-chang Yoo (2013)	Baby Boomers value contributing to societal and corporate development, strong work engagement, and professional success in a competitive environment.
Relationships with work	Ye-seul Kim (2023)	Older generations regard relationships as central to organisational culture.

Relationships with work	Byeong-cheol Lee and Jae-gyun Jeon (2023); Seung-jo Han (2023)	Older generations seek dedication to work and attach less importance to work–life balance.

Table 5. Prior Research on Intergenerational Gaps in Koreans' Relations with Work

Our interviews with Korean workers also highlight that one of the main challenges in professional life lies in managing conflicts within personal relationships in the workplace. The difference lies in how trust and bonds are built.

For older generations, close relationships with colleagues have traditionally resembled family ties, and family titles are often used when addressing co-workers – for example, one director interviewee referred to his superior's wife as 'sister-in-law.' Older generation directors commonly share aspects of their personal lives and spend time together after hours, blurring the boundary between work and private life – for instance, through late-night dinners and drinks or weekend workouts together. Younger Koreans, however, draw clearer boundaries and they ask for task-focused, constructive feedback and genuine career guidance. They are less comfortable participating in group chats that share personal details or in informal gatherings outside work, with some opting out altogether. Despite these changes, young Korean workers still value social integration. They prefer to keep work and personal life separate, yet in interviews they expressed a desire for substantive exchanges of opinion in the workplace. Within professional boundaries, recognition and encouragement from superiors remain important to their job satisfaction.

Koreans' sense of speed is often cited by foreigners as a defining feature of Korean culture and is encapsulated in the notion of *Ppalli-Ppalli* (빨리빨리). The repeated use of *Ppalli*, meaning 'quickly' or 'hurry up', emphasises the urgency of action. This orientation toward speed and efficiency is deeply embedded in Korean corporate values and practices, and speed management has been a key driver of Korea's rapid economic growth in the post–Korean War period (Lim 2022). Our interviews confirm that *Ppalli-Ppalli* remains a central organising principle of the Korean workplace. Although it has endured across generations, its underlying meaning has shifted. While older generation directors often expect prompt responses as a sign of respect and diligence, younger colleagues associate efficiency with shared preparation by all team members, including leaders, and with mutual support rather than speedy execution under pressure.

To foster team cohesion, the practice of *Hoesik* (회식) – company dinners involving alcohol – was once an important practice of Korean corporate culture (Cakar, U.

and Kim, H.-E. 2015). Heavy drinking was even considered a competitive asset, and attendance was often perceived as an obligation. Our interviews reveal that these norms are changing: young Koreans are less willing to accept such expectations. Older generation directors expressed disappointment at juniors' reluctance to attend, viewing shared meals as vital to team spirit. Younger colleagues, however, criticised these gatherings for being hierarchical and one-sided. Yet they do not reject social bonding altogether; instead, they favour alternative, more balanced activities – such as lunch gatherings at a restaurant or cultural outings – over alcohol-centred dinners. The tradition of convivial sharing thus endures, though now expressed in new and more diverse forms.

Intergenerational work practices are undergoing complex reconfiguration. Shifts in Koreans' work values are unfolding against deep cultural anchors. The continuity observed amid the quieter transformations led by younger cohorts indicates that certain cultural reference points persist in the Korean mindset. Korean work culture remains relationship-oriented, and elements of patriarchal leadership rooted in Confucianism continue to shape managerial expectations in more nuanced ways. Beyond generational differences, workplace relations are still marked by mutual evaluation and moral judgement. For younger Koreans – often perceived by older generations as free-spirited, independent, and self-centred – recognition from superiors remains important. To understand Koreans' interconnectedness in the Korean workplace and the complex relationships, it is essential to grasp culturally specific concepts such as *Jeong* (정) and *Uri*(우리we-ness).

The concept of *Jeong* (정) has no exact English equivalent. It denotes a durable relational bond characterised by warm affection, empathy, and a felt obligation that develops through shared time and experience (Park 2004). Once *Jeong* forms, relationships may involve voluntary acts of unconditional support and devotion, extending workplace ties beyond formal role boundaries. In organisational life, *Jeong* can infuse everyday interactions with deep empathy and trust, and this cultural logic remains salient for younger generations as well.

The concept of *Uri* (우리we-ness) literally means 'we, our, or us', but its meaning in Korean extends far beyond the grammatical sense. This concept indicates a tendency to emphasise a sense of belonging, shared identity, and relational unity (Yang 2019). In the Korean workplace, *Uri* fosters in-group solidarity and a felt sense of belonging. Koreans often use the plural even for first-person self-reference – colleagues commonly refer to their company or even their supervisor with *Uri*, as in *Uri Hoesa* (우리 회사, 'our company') or *Uri Sajangnim* (우리 사장님, 'our president'). Within organisations, the notion of *Uri* provides the emotional basis for belonging and mutual psychological support. Once relationships are established, people share *Jeong* – a

durable emotional bond marked by warm affection, empathy, and a willingness to help. Distinctively, compared with many Western forms of camaraderie, these bonds tend to be more enduring and can elicit personal commitment – even sacrifice. Although the generations differ in perspectives, social integration remains a key pillar of workplace well-being, and this relational ethos continues to shape Korean work values and mindsets across generations.

Theme	Older Generations' perspective	Younger Generations' perspective	What persists	What is changing
Social integration	Build family-like closeness with colleagues; weak boundary between work and personal life.	Keep a clear work–life boundary but want high-quality exchanges at work.	Social integration remains important for job satisfaction.	Juniors expect sincere interest in performance and constructive, encouraging feedback from superiors without intruding on personal life.
Ppalli-Ppalli (빨리빨리) ethos	Value immediate execution of superiors' orders.	Achieve speed via active participation and preparation by all, including leaders.	Speed is widely seen as a Korean strength in the workplace.	Speed ≠ mechanical obedience; it should be preparation- and anticipation-based, enabling efficient use of time.
Company dinners (*Hoesik,* 회식)	Participation long seen as a mandatory team-building duty.	Prefer diverse, convivial, often alcohol-optional activities for bonding.	Sharing convivial moments is still common.	Growing refusal to attend alcohol-heavy dinners; shift toward alternative formats (lunches, cultural events, cafés).

Table 6. Evolving Workplace Relationships Among Koreans in this case study

Intergenerational Dialogue: Bridging Perception Gaps

Korean workplace culture exhibits continuity within change: enduring cultural foundations alongside evolving expectations. However, both sides overlook the enduring values that underscore one another's interpretations and fail to recognise that the change sought by younger cohorts is not a wholesale revolution but an evolution.

Older generation directors frequently misinterpret younger colleagues' expectations and draw on media-inflected images of the younger generation to form negative judgments, often portraying them as selfish. Conversely, younger colleagues rely on biases embedded in their own interpretive frameworks, leading them to view older generations as authoritarian or coercive.

Interviewees noted that, in practice, organisations have introduced team-building programmes incorporating intergenerational dialogue, as well as informal lunch meetings between older generation directors and younger colleagues, with the aim of reducing misunderstandings and bridging differences in perspective. Yet even with these organisational initiatives in place, our interviews revealed persistent intergenerational disagreements that escalated into significant conflict, in some cases resulting in employee resignation and, in others, generating widespread distrust within teams. In these initiatives, opportunities are rarely created for different generations to explicitly articulate and critically reflect on how they understand collaboration and on the socio-cultural contexts in which these perspectives are rooted.

Intergenerational dialogue is not simply an exchange of opinions; it is a process of meaning making through interaction. Each generation makes explicit perceptions and values that have previously been taken for granted, compares differing interpretations, and reflects on the social and cultural contexts in which these differences have been formed. It is through such reflection that the sources of misunderstanding and the reasons why collaboration has broken down become visible within interaction. Work values such as autonomy, respect, and responsibility may be understood differently across generations, and these understandings cannot be assumed to be objective or uniform across contexts. In this sense, intergenerational dialogue serves as an epistemological framework for revealing and constructing knowledge, as well as for understanding how differing interpretations emerge and how meanings are formed within specific contexts. To narrow gaps in perspectives and align viewpoints toward shared goals, this process requires an understanding of the inherited cultural references that underpin individuals' sense-making of social situations, while also tracing changes and variations across generations.

Yet, in the ways individuals perceive reality and make sense of it, actors are often largely unaware of their own interpretive references (Chevrier 2024). They use cultural references naturally, enacting their implicit rules without necessarily being conscious of them. As a result, the cultural premises underlying judgments and evaluations tend to remain unexamined. In this study, interviews were mobilised to foreground the importance of such reflexive processes by making these taken-for-granted assumptions visible. While interviews serve as an analytical tool in this research, the

reflexive logic they enable can also be translated into practical stages of intergenerational dialogue.

For instance, intergenerational dialogue can move beyond the mere exchange of opinions by incorporating moments in which participants are explicitly invited to explain why they perceive particular behaviours, management practices, or collaboration styles as appropriate or problematic. Similarly, presenting the same concrete work situation or organisational practice to different generations and inviting them to reflect on how they interpret it can help surface divergent assumptions and meaning systems. Such practices encourage participants to recognise that their judgments cannot be neutral or universal but grounded in specific socio-cultural experiences.

At the same time, our findings indicate that a range of cultural factors hinder intergenerational dialogue in practice. Young Korean workers frequently reported feeling a substantial burden when attempting to express openly the difficulties they experience or the expectations they hold in collaboration with older generation directors. In the Korean context, where a strong culture of face saving referred to as *Chemyeon* (체면) prevails, such expressions may be perceived as potentially damaging to a superior's reputation, thereby generating discomfort and fear of relational harm. As a result, younger colleagues tend to engage in self-censorship, which constrains the possibility of candid dialogue.

Conversely, Korean older generation directors who have spent much of their careers within hierarchical, top-down organisational cultures often reported difficulty engaging in reciprocal forms of communication that involve the exchange of feedback with subordinates. Many lack experience with reflexive, dialogical practices that support the mutual exchange of expectations and perspectives in intergenerational dialogue. As a result, such dialogue initiatives often remain limited in depth.

These findings highlight the importance of designing intergenerational dialogue in ways that are sensitive to specific cultural contexts. In a cultural context where openly voicing one's opinions is difficult, alternative formats may be required, such as providing separate spaces for individuals to express their opinions, facilitating written exchanges, or allowing anonymous contributions. Such arrangements can help participants share their perspectives without fear of social or relational repercussions.

Although this study is grounded in a specific national context, its contribution does not lie in proposing the Korean case as a model transferable across cultures. More importantly, its value lies in demonstrating how interpretive frameworks intersect across generations, how misunderstandings and distrust emerge, and how enduring values persist despite these tensions. Attending carefully to cultural context when

designing intergenerational dialogue helps prevent situations in which participants' expectations and meanings are reduced to superficial exchanges. Building on this approach, future research that examines intergenerational dialogue within diverse cultural contexts could offer deeper insights into how such dialogue can be meaningfully enacted.

Based on our analysis, we propose understanding intergenerational dialogue for practitioners as a structured and rigorous epistemological practice composed of four key moves:

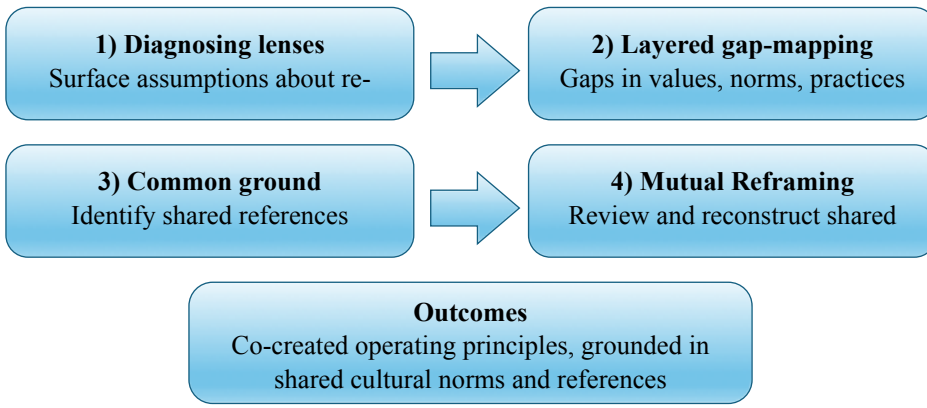

Table 7. Intergenerational Dialogue: Epistemological Practice

First, we need to understand how each generation's lenses are constituted – how members of each generation make sense of their experiences and values. In intergenerational dialogue, establishing new shared frameworks in intergenerational dialogue requires acknowledging that we routinely draw on unconscious cultural references to interpret the world. Since these references are taken for granted, they often operate beneath awareness and thus demand reflective processes. Clarifying their framework therefore entails repeatedly asking 'why' – to uncover why certain, seemingly obvious cultural references function as implicit grounds of judgement.

Next, layered gap-mapping makes generational differences visible and explicit. We identify where expectations diverge, how situations are interpreted differently, and how everyday interactions reveal distinct cultural assumptions. We then conduct a cross-analysis of intergenerational perspectives to understand the specific contexts in which their meaning-making is shaped and their work values are formed.

We then identify the overlapping values and norms embedded in each generation's assumptions and beliefs to establish common ground. In the Korean workplace, this involves surfacing shared core commitments – such as relationship-based mutual

respect, a sense of belonging and solidarity – so they can counter disparate misunderstandings and serve as a foundation for cooperation. While each generation may have different expectations about how these values are implemented, it's important to identify shared values that endure even as change unfolds.

Lastly, in joint sense-making, each generation reconstitutes shared frames rather than merely exchanging opinions. They first describe gaps in a multi-layered way, then hold focused, small-group discussions, review their insights together, and reconstruct common frameworks through the sense-making process. This work includes examining how individuals ascribe meaning to their own experiences and values, and it must be accompanied by a recalibration of the basic structures through which individuals interpret the world – that is, the cultural and social assumptions that determine what is taken as true and right.

That is how we move from disagreement to co-creation. Within this cultural framework, we examine how each generation constructs work values, interprets interactions with other cohorts, and justifies what it considers appropriate ways of working and collaborating. Despite distinct generational meaning systems, common ground can be identified and shared meaning co-constructed through active, reciprocal engagement, especially when facilitation is reflexive and sensitive to context.

Conclusion

Intergenerational differences in the workplace are often described through generalised traits. While these typologies offer a convenient shorthand for comparison, they risk oversimplifying lived workplace dynamics by detaching generational perspectives from their socio-historical and cultural contexts. Through the case of the Korean workplace, drawing on the *Gestion et Société* approach, this study demonstrates that generational perspectives are shaped by society-specific cultural logics that inform workplace behaviours and expectations within particular contexts.

All stages of intergenerational dialogue should therefore be designed and anchored in specific cultural contexts. Patterns commonly attributed to Millennials and Generation Z may appear as shared characteristics across borders, but this framing is insufficient to account for their specific ways of working together within particular social and cultural settings. In the Korean context, relational ethics such as *Jeong* (정) and *Uri* (우리, we-ness) remain deeply rooted in workplace interactions, even as younger cohorts reinterpret them through new expectations. For instance, what younger Koreans describe as horizontal working relationships rarely implies a complete dismantling of hierarchy or authority. Rather, it denotes relational flexibility – the desire for mutual respect, reciprocal communication, with the expectation that

leaders will provide guidance in a gentler way. They still value guidance, care, and mentorship grounded in the moral ideal of the *Kunja* (군자, 君子), the virtuous leader. By contrast, in the French context, horizontality tends to emphasise the protection of individual autonomy and dignity vis-à-vis authority, rooted in a fear of servility (D'Iribarne et al. 2022). These subtle but crucial distinctions highlight why context-sensitive analysis is indispensable in interpreting workplace change.

The central contribution of this study lies in conceptualising intergenerational dialogue as an epistemological framework rather than merely an exchange. Intergenerational dialogue is understood as a process of meaning-making through which actors surface taken-for-granted assumptions, compare divergent interpretations, and reflect on the socio-cultural contexts in which these interpretations are formed. Such dialogue requires deliberate reflexive processes, as individuals are often unaware of the cultural references that underpin their judgments. Continually asking 'why' becomes essential to surface the implicit grounds of evaluation and to recognise the cultural references through which meaning is constructed. Furthermore, the interview-based analysis adopted in this study not only served as a research tool but also illustrates how intergenerational dialogue can be designed as a reflexive, context-sensitive epistemological practice.

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, empirical work could examine how intergenerational dialogue conceived as an epistemological practice can be operationalised in organisational settings, for example, through facilitated workshops or long-term dialogue programmes, and assess its impact over time. Also, comparative studies across different cultural contexts would allow researchers to explore how intergenerational meaning systems intersect under varying cultural logics, thereby extending the contextual sensitivity advanced in this study. By foregrounding culture, sense-making, and reflexivity, this study contributes to a deeper and more practice-oriented understanding of intergenerational dialogue.

In addition, by acknowledging the dynamic nature of culture, this study examines how continuity persists within change, identifying shared cultural foundations across generations and fostering a basis for intergenerational collaboration. It demonstrates that sustainable intergenerational relationships are not achieved through the elimination of differences, but by creating conditions under which differences can be recognised, reflected upon, and transformed into shared frameworks for working together.

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Justice Beyond Resolution: Intergenerational Listening and Dialogical Justice in Peacebuilding

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Abstract: This article argues that justice-oriented practices in peacebuilding cannot be adequately understood as finite events aimed at closure, but must be evaluated as ongoing, relational, and intergenerational processes. Drawing on a Nilotic proverb and John Paul Lederach's notion of the 'moral imagination', it advances intergenerational listening as an ethical practice through which peacebuilding remains answerable to inherited harm, silenced histories, and future obligations. The article critically examines dominant transitional and restorative justice frameworks, arguing how their temporal and structural narrowing – especially their privileging of testimony, confession, and symbolic repair within bounded timelines – risks domesticating trauma and reproducing inequality.

In dialogue with Derrida's concept of *justice à venir*, Levinas's ethics of infinite responsibility, care ethics (Gilligan; Noddings), Iris Marion Young's account of structural responsibility, and Indigenous relational epistemologies (including Māori *whakapapa* and Anishinaabe *mino bimaadiziwin*), the article develops a relational ethical framework centred on attentiveness, humility, vulnerability, reciprocity, continuity, materiality, and pluralism. Within this framework, dialogical justice is not proposed as a comprehensive theory of justice, but as a normative-ethical orientation for evaluating peacebuilding practices according to their capacity for sustained, accountable listening across time, including attentiveness to silence and absence, with brief implications for more-than-human relations.

Methodologically, the article explores how this orientation can be operationalised through narrative inquiry, intergenerational testimony, and dialogical pedagogy, informed by the HURIER listening model. Two case studies – South Africa's unfinished reconciliation, and linguistic harm

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and repair in Wales following the Welsh Not – illustrate both the promise and the fragility of intergenerational listening, including risks of co-option and potential retraumatisation in dialogical settings. The article concludes by suggesting that peacebuilding requires a shift from resolution to relationship: a democracy of listening across time which binds recognition to material transformation and sustains justice as always 'to come'.

Keywords: Relational Ethics, Intergenerational Listening, Dialogical Justice, Restorative Justice, Transitional Justice, Moral Imagination, Ethics of Care

The Nilotic proverb, 'There is more wisdom in listening than in speaking' (Mele 2016, 255), provides a foundation for perceiving justice not as a moment of resolution, but as an ongoing ethical practice. While speaking is often associated with agency and restoration, this article argues that genuine understanding emerges through relationship rather than utterance alone. Justice in peacebuilding contexts should therefore be understood as a relational and intergenerational process, rather than a singular or finite act. This article does not propose a new general theory of justice; rather, it argues that peacebuilding processes can be evaluated as just or unjust insofar as they sustain accountable listening, structural responsibility, and intergenerational responsiveness beyond closure.

Although contemporary models of transitional and restorative justice have humanised post-conflict recovery, their emphasis on closure risks obscuring the unfinished legacies of trauma, inequality, and complicity which persist long after reconciliation is declared 'complete' (Murphy 2011; Adonis 2025). Such temporal narrowing confines moral vision to a single historical frame, overlooking the reverberations of harm across generations.

This article advances intergenerational listening as a practice of justice in its own right. It understands the living, ancestors, descendants, and ecologies as co-members of a moral community, and attends to speech, silence, and the structural echoes of violence over time. Unlike oral history or testimony, which record discrete narratives, this approach obligates institutions to act upon what is heard. Justice-oriented peacebuilding is thus reframed as ongoing responsiveness rather than an achieved end-state. As John Paul Lederach's concept of the 'moral imagination' posits, peacebuilding depends on the capacity to 'envision the web of relationships that includes our enemies as part of ourselves' (2005, 29).

Listening and Responding

Listening, as Elizabeth Parks reminds us, is never neutral: 'Our listening values impact our life choices and the ways that we pursue healthy communication' (Parks 2019, 11). To listen, therefore, is to make a moral choice regarding whose voices

'matter', which silences we bear, and which histories we allow to shape us. Intergenerational listening expands this ethic by attending not only to those who currently speak, but also to those whose voices have been lost to silence, marginalisation, or time (Weerawardhana 2018; Neufeldt 2021; Bowland et al. 2022).

The limitations of existing restorative justice models reinforce this need. As numerous scholars have observed, restorative and transitional justice processes, though transformative in intent, often privilege symbolic healing and interpersonal dialogue instead of structural and temporal justice (Braithwaite 2002; Daly 2008; Hayner 2011; Minow 1998; Ross 2003). These limitations reveal how reconciliation, when detached from redistribution and continuity, risks reproducing the inequalities it seeks to redress. Truth commissions and *gacaca* courts, for example, rely on testimony, confession, and forgiveness as instruments of reconciliation; however, they often assume that harm can be repaired within a single lifetime (Hayner 2011). Closure, rather than continuity, becomes the goal; but inequality and inherited grief persist long beyond institutional timelines. Indeed, Jacques Derrida's concept of *justice à venir* ('justice to come') provides a crucial philosophical grounding for this article. By distinguishing justice from law and insisting that it remains infinite, undecidable, and always deferred (Derrida 2002, 256), Derrida resists any attempt to finalise justice through institutional closure. Emmanuel Levinas's account of infinite responsibility complements this view by locating ethics in an enduring obligation to the Other which exceeds completion or reciprocity (1961). Together, these concepts reimagine justice as a relation which must be continually renewed; and at the heart of this renewal are relational ethics and listening.

The ethics of care of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984) in dialogue with feminist and Indigenous thought, position moral life in responsiveness and interdependence rather than abstraction. When extended across generations, this framework complements Iris Marion Young's view of responsibility as related to our participation in structural harm rather than individual guilt (2007, especially chapter 9). Intergenerational listening translates such responsibility into practice, for it enables a lived ethic of dialogue and attentiveness which has practical worth in application.

Comparable principles are also found in Indigenous philosophies. The Māori concept of *whakapapa* (genealogical connectedness) and the Anishinaabe *mino bimaadiziwin* ('the good life'), for example, both describe ethical life as a reciprocal relationship with ancestors, land, and future generations (Smith 1999; Simpson 2017). These traditions remind us that justice is not bound by human time, but is tied to continuity and care.

The endurance of justice, as such, depends on a disciplined attentiveness to memory and to those whose voices have yet to be acknowledged. As the Nilotic proverb teaches, wisdom does not begin with speech, but with the courage to hear and to listen. Doing so allows room for justice as a continued concept.

Thus, this article examines how justice-oriented peacebuilding practices might be evaluated when harms are structural and intergenerational, suggesting that such practices are most plausibly understood through their capacity to sustain accountable listening beyond institutional closure. This contribution is developed through (i) a relational-ethical framework, (ii) a critique of closure-oriented restorative and transitional justice, (iii) two case studies (related to South Africa and Wales), and (iv) methodological implications for operationalising intergenerational listening.

Theoretical Framework: Relational Ethics and the Ethics of Listening

Peacebuilding, as both a moral and a political project, must be grounded in relationships rather than abstract notions of right and wrong (Mihai 2016, 23–27). Its philosophical foundations require clarification, especially regarding how traditional moral theories fail to address the long, diffuse harms, that persist across generations. The relational turn in moral philosophy, foregrounding care, responsiveness, and vulnerability, provides a vital corrective for this endeavour (McHugh 2015, 70; Parks 2019, 193). When placed in dialogue with certain Indigenous epistemologies, this framework reveals peacebuilding as a practice that extends beyond the present generation, one which encompasses relations among peoples, species, and the earth itself.

As such, 'intergenerational listening' is to be understood in this analysis as the ethical disposition of attending to voices that traverse temporal boundaries by recognising the living, the dead, and the not-yet-born as co-constitutive members of a moral community. Such listening understands time as an ethical medium through which responsibility is mediated. Justice, in this sense, is not realised in a discrete moment of reckoning, but sustained through a continual responsiveness to inherited wounds, entangled complicities, and the futures that our present actions already implicate. This allows for continuous reflective engagement and discussion, and, for what Staunæs and Vertelyté term, 'a site for exploring and juxtaposing the heterogeneous experiential knowledge' (2025, 3).

In this regard, it should be noted that the present discussion treats 'relational ethics' as an umbrella term rather than a harmonised tradition. The framework is intentionally plural: drawing together approaches which share responsiveness and relational

accountability whilst retaining unresolved tensions (including tensions between asymmetry and reciprocity, and between proximate care and structural responsibility). Dialogical justice is thus proposed as a practice-orientation capable of working within this plurality rather than resolving it.

The ethics of listening

Within care ethics, listening is not merely a communicative skill but a constitutive moral practice. Gilligan and Noddings locate ethical responsibility in attentiveness to dependency, vulnerability, and context – conditions which require listening before judgment or action. To care is to receive the Other's reality as morally significant, even when it disrupts one's self-understanding or moral comfort. Listening, in this sense, is ethically prior to respect or beneficence: it is the means by which moral claims become legible at all. Extended intergenerationally, care ethics reveals how failures of listening – across time, memory, and inheritance – reproduce injustice even when formal reconciliation has occurred.

Listening, thus, is the first step in relational ethics, but it has long been marginalised in Western philosophy, overshadowed by speech and reason. Contemporary scholars have reframed listening as an ethical act in and of itself. As mentioned above, in *The Ethics of Listening* (2019), Parks situates listening within a moral economy shaped by power. Ethical listening, the volume's core thesis posits, requires awareness of whose voices are amplified or diminished, and humility regarding one's own positionality. In peacebuilding, this reflexivity ensures that listening becomes a vehicle for accountability rather than a reproduction of domination.

Gemma Corradi Fiumara, in *The Other Side of Language* (1990), contends that genuine listening resists the hegemony of discourse itself. For too long, Western philosophy's privileging of *logos* (assertion over reception) has silenced dialogue, and as such, restoring listening, Fiumara argues, recovers the very possibility of genuine encounter. Similarly, Jean-Luc Nancy (2007) defines listening as resonance rather than reception: an opening of the self to the world's vibrations. Understood in this sense, listening reveals our shared 'being-with', an ontological interconnectedness that grounds ethical life..

By drawing these thinkers into dialogue with one another, we see listening as an act of recognition which requires humility, courage, and generosity. To listen is not to withdraw from action but to sustain the relational fabric of peace.

Communication scholars have also developed models to clarify these component skills; a prime example being the classic HURIER model, first developed by Judi Brownell (1996). This model conceptualises listening as an active, multidimensional

process involving six interrelated stages: hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. Every stage reflecting a moral, as well as a cognitive, disposition.

When placed in dialogue with relational ethics, the HURIER model offers a practical vocabulary for ethical attentiveness. 'Hearing' and 'understanding' align with the virtue of receptive awareness; 'remembering' parallels the intergenerational continuity which is foundational for dialogical justice; 'interpreting' and 'evaluating' require humility and the recognition of one's own positionality; and 'responding' embodies vulnerability, the readiness to be transformed by what one hears.

In this sense, the HURIER model provides a communicative framework through which the discipline of listening (so often treated as abstract) can be cultivated pedagogically and institutionally. Integrating such models into peacebuilding education or restorative dialogue training could help operationalise intergenerational listening as a lived ethical practice rather than a purely moral aspiration.

Beyond deontological and consequentialist ethics

Deontology and consequentialism have long shaped Western moral thought, defining ethical action through adherence to universal duties or the calculation of outcomes. Deontology, from Kant (1785) to Rawls (1971), locates morality in duty and autonomy, while consequentialism, from Bentham (1789) to Mill (1863), treats morality as maximising happiness or utility. Both broad approaches often present ethics as abstract, rational, and timeless, offering clarity at the expense of moral intimacy (Murphy 2010, 123–27). They also struggle with historical and structural harms (including colonial dispossession, racialised inequality, linguistic suppression, and inherited trauma) because such harms unfold across institutions and generations. The critique is not that duties, outcomes, respect or responsibility are irrelevant, but that standard framings can be individualised and decision-focused. A relational listening approach thus supplements, rather than displaces, traditional moral vocabularies by clarifying the conditions under which claims of respect, benefit, and responsibility become credible; namely by sustained answerability, attentiveness to silence, and material implementation, thereby re-situating ethics within time, power, and relation.

Margaret Urban Walker's concept of moral understandings reframes ethics as the maintenance of trust and accountability within relationships, rather than a rule-following or outcome calculation. Moral life, Walker argues, is constituted by ongoing negotiation among interdependent agents (1998). Applied to peacebuilding, this means that understanding justice requires one to perceive it as a relationship continually remade through acts of listening, acknowledgment, and repair, not simply as

an institutional product. Such an approach offers an alternative to the historically dominant paradigms referred to above.

Relational ethics does not discard concepts such as responsibility, respect, or obligation, but re-grounds them in lived histories of power, dependency, and inheritance. What is at issue is not moral vocabulary as such, but its abstraction from temporal, relational, and structural conditions. Understood relationally, responsibility exceeds intention or benefit, and includes participation in inherited systems of harm; listening is the practice through which this responsibility is revealed and sustained.

Classical thinkers in relational ethics

The twentieth century marked a decisive turn toward relational ethics, particularly within feminist, existential, and dialogical traditions. Carol Gilligan's critique of Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development (1981) challenged the assumption that moral maturity consists in rational detachment. In their 1982 work, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan proposed an ethic of care grounded in attentiveness, contextual understanding, and responsibility within relationships. Moral reasoning, it was argued, emerges from responsiveness to concrete Others rather than from abstraction. Nel Noddings further developed this relational orientation in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), defining ethical life as a dynamic encounter between the 'one-caring' and the 'cared-for'. For Noddings, care is grounded in receptivity rather than sentimentality, requiring the disciplined practice of listening. In contexts of historical trauma, this involves attentiveness to silence, fear, and vulnerability that resist articulation.

Earlier existential thinkers anticipated many of these insights. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) situates freedom within reciprocal recognition, arguing that human freedom is realised through others rather than against them, a position that foreshadows feminist ethics of reciprocity (Yuan 2019, 83–86). However, de Beauvoir's ethics cannot be fully subsumed within care ethics, since *The Second Sex* (1949) foregrounds a persistent tension between autonomy and dependence, and centres on how women might resist reduction to the 'Other' and realise freedom within existential ambiguity. While care ethics emphasises empathy and responsiveness, de Beauvoir foregrounds freedom and responsibility within lived relations. De Beauvoir's insistence on mutual recognition anticipates restorative justice principles, where ethical repair begins through attentive listening and the restoration of relational freedom.

Relational ethics is radicalised further in Emmanuel Levinas's work, especially *Totality and Infinity* (1961). Levinas grounds ethics in asymmetry, arguing that responsibility for the Other precedes consent, reciprocity, or rational deliberation. The face of

the Other commands a response prior to choice, rendering ethics a condition of exposure and vulnerability (Levinas 1969, 51; 1998, 111). Applied to peacebuilding, listening becomes an act of moral risk: to listen is to allow oneself to be unsettled and claimed by another's suffering.

Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (1937) complements this account by distinguishing between the 'I–It' relationship, which objectifies the Other, and the 'I–Thou' relationship, which encounters the Other as a living presence. Dialogical and reciprocal, the I–Thou relation extends beyond individuals to encompass communities, generations, and even the non-human natural world. Together, these thinkers do not locate ethics in principle or calculation, but in ongoing dialogue and relational engagement.

As scholars of relational inquiry note (Clandinin et al. 2018, 19–23), ethical life unfolds within spaces of uncertainty and transition. At its core lies a stance of care inseparable from listening: a disciplined attentiveness which enables encounters across generational, experiential, and cultural divides. Listening thus becomes not only an act of care, but a practice of restorative justice, creating conditions for intergenerational recognition and repair.

Despite shared commitments, these relational traditions remain marked by tension. Levinas's asymmetry challenges Buber's mutuality; the focus of care ethics on proximate relations is critiqued by Young's account of structural responsibility, which extends obligation to institutional participation and inherited advantage. Indigenous relational ontologies further complicate dialogical assumptions by situating ethics within land, sovereignty, and cosmological timeframes. Rather than resolving these tensions, this article holds them in productive suspension. Intergenerational listening is not necessarily proposed as a synthesis, but as a practice capable of negotiating ethical plurality. Justice, in this regard, emerges from sustained responsiveness within difference, rather than from theoretical coherence: an approach essential for peacebuilding across histories of domination.

Indigenous relational ontologies

Many Indigenous philosophies expand this understanding by situating relation within temporal and ecological continuities. In Māori thought, *whakapapa* (often translated as 'genealogy') signifies an interwoven web connecting the living, the dead, and the unborn (Smith 1999). Listening to the voices of ancestors through story, ritual, and land becomes an act of moral repair, resonant with the aims of intergenerational peacebuilding.

Among the Anishinaabe, *mino bimaadiziwin* ('the good life') describes existence lived in mutual respect among humans, animals, spirits, and land, which is continually evolving (Simpson 2017). As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains, this worldview allows for continuous reflection and, at times, a challenge for one another to strive toward 'the good life', rather than simply adhering to set rules or certain dominant theories. Simpson comments how this 'web of ethical relationships [...] working in [a] cohesive manner with each other' may allow for 'more life and propel the continuous rebirth of [*mino bimaadiziwin*]' (183), thus requiring an embedding of care in the daily practice of reciprocity.

Both *whakapapa* and *mino bimaadiziwin* reveal ethics as inherently temporal and ecological. Responsibility reaches backward to those who shaped our world, and forward to those who will be its inheritors. Justice, in this light, is not a verdict but a dialogue across time – a conversation which includes all life – and requires deep listening, especially to those whose stories have been silenced. Intergenerational listening thus becomes an act of decolonial care, rejoining what has been severed and re-establishing relationships where erasure has occurred.

Informed by these traditions, relational ethics understands justice as a temporally responsive practice of ethical renewal rather than resolution, shifting the emphasis from closure to connection and grounding peacebuilding in the discipline of listening.

Beyond conventional restorative justice

Viewed through the lens of ethical listening, restorative justice displays a recurring orientation toward closure rather than continuity. In peacebuilding, justice cannot be adequately assessed as an achieved end-state, but must be evaluated through the relationships and conversations it sustains over time. Although truth commissions, reconciliation courts, and restorative forums have become moral touchstones of post-conflict recovery, their emphasis on dialogue and healing often entails a temporal narrowing, framing justice within a single generation or historical moment. The concern here is not to redefine justice, but to caution that closure-oriented evaluations risk obscuring ongoing and intergenerational harms.

The late twentieth century saw a proliferation of transitional and restorative justice processes, from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to those in Sierra Leone, Peru, and Guatemala (Hayner 2011). These initiatives redefined justice as repair rather than punishment, prioritising dignity over vengeance, and dialogue over silence. However, as Priscilla Hayner notes in *Unspeakable Truths* (2011), such commissions are chronologically constrained, designed to 'close chapters' of history by containing trauma within defined timeframes. They privilege

immediacy over inheritance, assuming that confession, forgiveness, and recognition can achieve moral repair in a single cycle. Mahmood Mamdani cautions that such practices risk turning justice into a project of 'national forgetting', allowing societies to narrate peace as completed rather than ongoing (2001).

The TRC, for instance, was grounded in Christian moral language of confession, forgiveness, and redemption, but often failed to address the enduring racial and economic inequities which apartheid entrenched (Fullard & Rousseau 2008, 225). Rwanda's *gacaca* courts, while extraordinary in intent, focused on individual accountability while leaving intact the historical hierarchies that fuelled the genocide (Geraghty 2020, 593–7, 609). In both, the drive toward closure risked reproducing injustice under a new guise. Resisting this type of narrowing does not mean rejecting restorative justice but expanding its temporal horizon by understanding justice as sustained and dialogical rather than a singular act of reckoning.

Structural and Historical Blind Spots

Temporal narrowing is inseparable from structural narrowing as both are characterised by the tendency to focus on interpersonal harm whilst overlooking systemic injustice. Restorative frameworks presuppose identifiable victims and perpetrators, yet many conflicts are embedded in structures such as colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, and endure through institutions and narratives rather than individual acts.

Fiona Ross's ethnography of the South African TRC shows how gendered harm was often marginalised in favour of politically palatable stories of racial reconciliation (2003). Women's testimonies were celebrated when they affirmed narratives of national unity, yet their more complex experiences with poverty and domestic abuse were sidelined; thus, Ross exposes the gap between recognition and repair: the state may acknowledge suffering symbolically while leaving its material conditions untouched. Similarly, other scholars, such as Teresa Rhodes McGee (2014) and Vahagn Avedian (2024), argue that reconciliation processes often domesticate trauma, converting pain into narratives of harmony while structural inequality persists. Hence, reconciliation without redistribution may offer catharsis without transformation.

These dynamics reveal how temporal and structural blindness reinforce one another. When justice is temporally narrow, it cannot perceive the slow violence of inequality; when structurally narrow, it cannot hear the intergenerational echoes of harm. The challenge, therefore, is to articulate an understanding of justice that can attend to history, remaining responsive not only to acts and events but also to conditions, silences, and absences.

The problem of closure

The longing for closure promises moral relief, but it can become a form of silencing. Derrida's reflections on *justice à venir*, expose the limitations of finality. For Derrida, law may be finite and enforceable, but justice is infinite, unrepresentable, and always deferred. As such, justice, is not something peacebuilding practices can accomplish once and for all, but something they must continually strive toward.

Applied to peacebuilding, this insight unsettles the desire to 'move on'. Reconciliation cannot be achieved once and for all, because the suffering of the Other (remembered or inherited) always exceeds containment (Levinas 1969, 244; Stauffer 2015, 7). Premature closure becomes a form of moral fatigue: the wish to escape the unending demands of responsibility. It converts mourning into forgetfulness, substituting comfort for vigilance. If justice is always 'to come', ethics requires continuity rather than completion, by ensuring a willingness to remain answerable to what cannot be fully repaired. Listening, in this sense, becomes the discipline through which justice endures.

Intergenerational Listening as a Transformative Practice

Relational ethics conceives moral life as responsiveness; intergenerational listening gives that responsiveness temporal form. More than a communicative method, it is a moral orientation, an openness to past and future as living presences within the present. Conflict and trauma are transmitted through silence as much as through speech; to build peace requires not only dialogue between immediate survivors and perpetrators, but between generations (Panikkar 1995, 46).

Unlike oral history or testimonial archives, which tend to record memory as fixed narrative, intergenerational listening is dialogical and relational. It does not seek to collect stories but to create moral space where memory and vulnerability coexist. It rests upon three interlinked virtues: attentiveness, humility, and vulnerability.

Attentiveness calls for sensitivity to silence, to the ruptures and pauses where pain resides. Dori Laub, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing* (1992), describes trauma as producing 'speechlessness', where silence is not absence but excess. Listening, then, requires patience with what cannot yet be said.

Humility, following Michael Rothberg's concept of the implicated subject (2019), recognises that we are all entangled in histories of harm, as beneficiaries, descendants, or inheritors. Humility thus demands we listen without the illusion of innocence, transforming empathy into accountability.

Finally, vulnerability draws on Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004), which identifies our shared fragility as the ground of ethical relation. True dialogue entails risking discomfort, remaining open to being changed. Together, these virtues sustain what might be called 'dialogical justice' – a justice not achieved through verdicts or settlements, but through the enduring skill of listening.

In practice, these approaches are often enacted through facilitated dialogical formats, such as listening circles, intergenerational workshops, and community dialogue forums, which create structured, trauma-attentive spaces where memory can be shared, held, and translated into ongoing responsibility. This relational orientation finds a concrete expression in the UNESCO Intergenerational Dialogue & Inquiry (IDI) programme, a community-based initiative designed to address the long echoes of historical trauma. The IDI brings elders and young adults together in structured processes of deep listening and dialogue to explore the enduring impacts of slavery, colonialism, and other forms of dehumanisation. Through shared storytelling and inquiry, participants re-narrate silenced histories, reclaim cultural and spiritual wisdom, and collectively imagine more humane futures.

The process unfolds through five interconnected practices: dialogue and inquiry, storytelling, reclaiming wisdom, building resilience, and systemic transformation. These steps mirror the moral movement outlined in this article – from listening to recognition, and from recognition to renewal. By linking cultural restoration with structural change, the IDI demonstrates how intergenerational listening can operate as restorative and dialogical justice in practice. It recognises that repair cannot end at empathy; it must extend to transforming the conditions which perpetuate inequality and silence.

In this sense, the UNESCO IDI provides a living illustration of justice as listening: a framework in which intergenerational dialogue becomes both the means and the measure of ethical transformation.

In light of this analysis and the discussion above, it is possible to identify key guiding principles whereby intergenerational listening is active, not passive, and restorative justice via dialogue can be achieved:

- Attentiveness: Cultivate the capacity to notice speech, silence, and structural violence; listen with pace and sensitivity to trauma.
- Humility: Acknowledge one's implication in harm; resist innocence narratives and remain open to correction from those most affected.

- Vulnerability: Accept the risk of transformation; prioritise safety without sanitising encounter into performance.
- Reciprocity: Share the responsibility of listening, while weighting it toward those historically silenced.
- Continuity: Embed listening within enduring institutions (such as schools, archives, councils) so it outlasts projects and funding cycles.
- Materiality: Link recognition to material change; ensure that stories lead to policy and structural transformation.
- Pluralism: Extend justice to more-than-human relations (land, language, and ecosystems) wherever harm has been enacted.

Case studies

The commitments outlined above become visible when applied to lived contexts. The following two case studies illustrate both the promise and fragility of intergenerational listening as a form of relational and restorative justice. Before turning to the empirical material, it is important to clarify that intergenerational listening functions here as an analytical lens rather than a retrospective justification. Dialogical justice evaluates peacebuilding practices in terms of their ability to maintain responsibility beyond institutional timelines, remain attentive to silence, absence, and inherited harm, and allow for ongoing revision by future generations. The case studies are therefore presented as diagnostic sites through which the ethical demands and vulnerabilities of intergenerational listening come into view, rather than as confirmations of a settled framework.

i. South Africa: revisiting unfinished reconciliation

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) remains one of the most iconic experiments in moral repair (Krog 2017, 21–22). Established in 1995, it sought to replace retribution with testimony, to heal a nation through the power of truth-telling. For many, it offered catharsis as victims' stories were heard publicly, perpetrators confessed, and forgiveness was exalted as national virtue (Guthrey 2015, 41–42). Yet, as Claire Moon observes in *Narrating Political Reconciliation* (2008), the TRC also enacted a 'narrative closure' that foreclosed ongoing accountability. It framed reconciliation as a story already told, not one still being written.

However, the material legacies of apartheid expose this incompleteness. Only a fraction of the reparations recommended by the TRC were ever paid; by 2010, fewer than 20,000 victims had received the modest one-off grants of $30,000 (Hayner

2011, 210). Land redistribution, a central promise of post-apartheid justice, remains starkly unequal: as of 2022, roughly 8% of agricultural land had been transferred to Black South Africans – far short of the government's 30% target (Hall 2022). Income inequality remains among the world's highest, with a Gini coefficient hovering around 0.63 (World Bank 2023). Economic apartheid, in other words, endures.

The 'born-free' generation (those born after 1994) have since challenged this narrative. Their protests against inequality, from #RhodesMustFall to #FeesMustFall, reveal the unfinished work of reconciliation (Tagwirei 2025, 110–11). These movements enact a form of intergenerational listening through engaging both with the testimonies of their elders and the silences those testimonies left unspoken by holding the democratic present accountable to the moral debts of the past.

ii. Wales and the 'Welsh Not'

While South Africa exemplifies a context of overt political violence, linguistic and cultural repression can also constitute profound forms of intergenerational harm. Wales offers a compelling case of how trauma, silence, and identity intertwine across centuries. Central to this history is the 'Welsh Not' (WN), a nineteenth-century wooden token hung around the necks of children caught speaking Welsh in schools, symbolising the systematic punishment of the language (Johnes 2024, 52–58). The WN emerged within a wider anti-Welsh discourse, most infamously articulated by the 'Treachery of the Blue Books' (*Brad y Llyfrau Gleision*) of 1847. Commissioned by the British Government and authored by English-speaking Anglican commissioners, the blue-covered reports portrayed Welsh speakers as immoral and backward, attributing perceived social deficiency to the continued use of Welsh. As Sam Adams reflects, such attacks inflicted enduring damage on Welsh self-respect, reinforced by public commentary depicting Welsh as a 'semi-barbarous language' that excluded its speakers from civilisation (Adams 2000).

In practice, the WN transformed linguistic discipline into bodily humiliation. Children still wearing the token at the end of the school day were often singled out and beaten, making pain a tool of shame and enforcing the message that dignity required linguistic conformity (Birch 1977; Brooks 2017, 82). This routine violence embedded associations between Welsh, inferiority, and punishment within collective memory. The psychological effects were enduring: many parents ceased speaking Welsh to their children to protect them from stigma, producing generational estrangement from linguistic inheritance. As Jenkins notes, this was not merely language loss, but a form of deep psychological harm inflicted upon a minoritised people (Jenkins 2007, 214).

These wounds did not end with language revival. Contemporary efforts to preserve Welsh, while vital, can risk exclusion when linguistic purism marginalises non-Welsh-speaking citizens. As Raymond Williams (2003) warns, a language of belonging can become a language of boundary. One generation's fear of extinction mirrors another's fear of exclusion, both shaped by the same colonial wound.

Intergenerational listening offers a form of 'linguistic restorative justice' (Gavrielides & Artinopoulou 2016, 302), creating dialogical spaces where Welsh and non-Welsh speakers can share experiences of loss, pride, and alienation. In line with González and Buth's call for a restorative justice language that dismantles colonial frameworks (2019), linguistic justice in Wales involves reviving and normalising Cymraeg as a living language of community and belonging. Legislative measures – including Welsh Language Acts (1993, 2011, 2025), the establishment of the Welsh Language Commissioner (2011), and the Curriculum for Wales (2021) – reflect institutional attempts to support this process. However, healing depends on dialogue without purity, ensuring language fosters solidarity rather than shame.

Indeed, intergenerational listening carries risks. Žižek cautions how reconciliation rituals could depoliticise injustice by domesticating antagonism (2008, 8–10; 2009, 71–74), while Fassin warns that compassionate listening can replace redistribution with sentiment (2012, 1–5; 2013, 36–38). Feminist and decolonial scholars highlight how dialogical forums may reproduce hierarchies or retraumatise participants when governance and consent are weak (Ahmed 2012; Tuck & Yang 2012; Llewellyn & Philpott 2014). These critiques insist that dialogical justice bind listening to material change; centre process governance and employ trauma-informed practice; and retain conflict's political edge. Listening, therefore, must be a vehicle of accountability rather than a theatre of care.

Seen through the lens of relational ethics, the case studies explored illustrate that peace is not achieved once and for all, but is practiced time and again through listening. In South Africa, intergenerational dialogue exposes the limits of moral recognition without material justice; and in Wales, it reveals how cultural wounds echo long after overt violence ends. These lessons invite a shift from reflection to method.

The following section examines how narrative inquiry, intergenerational testimony, and dialogical pedagogy can operationalise this ethic of listening, framed as an exploration of implications rather than a comprehensive methodological or political theory. Its purpose is to indicate how intergenerational listening may be operationalised in practice and how dialogical justice can re-orient the evaluation of peacebuilding processes, while recognising that a fuller theorisation of pedagogy and democratic practice lies beyond the scope of the present analysis and warrants dedicated future inquiry.

Methodological implications: from ethical orientation to practice

For intergenerational listening to move from ethical ideal to lived practice, it needs ways of working which sustain relationship, vulnerability and reciprocity across time and culture. Methods are never neutral; they reveal what we count as truth, which forms of memory are authorised, and which participants are treated as knowers rather than objects. In research and policy contexts, 'method' often implies control or extraction (knowing about others), yet peacebuilding and restorative justice depend on knowledge that is relational and emergent, formed *with* others. For this reason, the approaches considered here are not offered as techniques to be applied mechanically, but as ethical orientations that place listening before mastery and relationship before data. The purpose is practical: to show how intergenerational listening can be sustained in settings where harm is inherited, silenced, or structurally dispersed.

Narrative inquiry and storytelling

Human beings are *homo narrans*, storytelling creatures (Heinen 2009, 196).[2] In peacebuilding contexts, narrative is not merely expressive; it is political, because conflict is fought through competing accounts of meaning – who is remembered, who is silenced, and how communities narrate themselves into being. Narrative inquiry offers a way to treat these struggles over memory as ethically significant without collapsing them into either statistics or spectacle. In *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, Clandinin and Connelly conceptualise narrative as both method and phenomenon, studying lived experience through stories and the contexts that shape them (2000). Their emphasis on temporality, sociality, and place resonates strongly with intergenerational listening, which understands memory as unfolding across time, mediated through relationships and embedded in particular landscapes.

The strength of narrative inquiry lies in how it can humanise structural harm without reducing it to individual pathology. It honours narrators as moral agents and co-authors of meaning rather than simply as sources of data. In settings shaped by inherited trauma, whether post-apartheid South Africa or postcolonial Wales, narrative methods can trace how resilience and injury travel across generations, often through what is not said as much as through what *is* spoken. Storytelling can also

[2] It should be noted that this perception of human beings as *homo narrans* would be contested by such thinkers as Gelen Strawson (2004). 'Against Narrativity'. *Ratio* (new series). XVII (4), 428–52.

function as a form of 'narrative repair': to tell one's story is to reclaim agency over suffering and reweave moral identity disrupted by violence (Frank 1995). For communities recovering from erasure, storytelling can become a collective act of resistance, asserting presence against historical denial (Andrews 2014; Jackson 2002; Frank 1995; Smith 1999). In this sense, narrative inquiry aligns with relational ethics by foregrounding empathy, attentiveness, and co-presence. To listen to another's story is to enter a relationship of witness, one that, as Levinas would insist, precedes judgment (1969, 198).

However, narrative approaches carry risks that are particularly relevant to a justice-oriented framework. The emotional immediacy that makes storytelling powerful can also narrow its scope (Nussbaum 2001, 338). When stories are detached from structural analysis, they can drift into therapeutic individualism, framing systemic injustice as personal recovery. Institutions may also embrace 'storytelling for change' as a visible gesture of care while avoiding political and economic reforms. In such cases, narrative becomes aestheticised and listening becomes symbolic reconciliation rather than a catalyst for transformation. A relational listening approach therefore requires narrative inquiry to remain politically awake: stories must be connected to the conditions that produce harm (inequality, dispossession, institutionalised exclusion) so that recognition is linked to material follow-through.

Intergenerational testimony projects

Intergenerational testimony projects extend narrative inquiry by weaving individual stories into living archives wgich connect generations and challenge silence. By bringing elders and youth into dialogue, such projects turn testimony from mere evidence into a relational act of recognition (Gill 2025). They help address a recurring problem in transitional and restorative justice: that harm is often treated as something that can be contained within an institutional timeframe, rather than transmitted through inheritance, education, family silence, and economic structure. Testimony projects can counter this by sustaining memory in relational spaces where responsibility can be renewed.

A well-known example is the Canadian Indigenous context documented by Paulette Regan in *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010). In settings shaped by residential school trauma, testimony becomes not only about telling but also about unsettling – confronting one's position within ongoing colonial systems. What matters methodologically is that testimony here is not a one-way extraction of stories but a dialogical practice with ethical demands: reciprocity, consent, and responsibility. The value of such projects lies partly in their resistance to erasure. Unlike state archives, they transmit affect, gesture, and silence; they can preserve what formal records flatten.

For communities facing linguistic or cultural trauma, listening to elders can become a form of reclamation and refusal of forgetting.

However, testimony is also vulnerable to co-option. When states collect stories without structural reform, memory is domesticated; when governments display dialogue as reconciliation, empathy risks becoming performance (Robinson 2021, 188). This is precisely where dialogical justice, as an evaluative orientation, can help: it does not simply ask whether testimony occurs, but whether it generates sustained answerability and material transformation. The methodological challenge is therefore governance: testimony must remain dialogical rather than monumental, and it must confront the power structures that made it necessary rather than becoming a substitute for structural repair.

Dialogical Pedagogy

Education is among the most contested spaces for intergenerational listening because it sits at a threshold between past and future, inheritance and innovation. Dialogical pedagogy matters here not as an additional topic, but because it offers a concrete institutional location in which listening can be cultivated as a civic and ethical practice. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* critiques the 'banking model' of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into passive students, reproducing hierarchies of domination and silence (Freire 1970). Against this, Freire proposes dialogue as a practice of freedom: teacher and learner co-create meaning and develop critical consciousness (*conscientização*). This is relevant to peacebuilding, where inherited narratives of guilt or victimhood can be reproduced uncritically unless education becomes a space for ethical encounter and reflexive listening.

bell hooks extends this vision in *Teaching to Transgress* by framing education as an act of love and courage (hooks 1994). For hooks, the classroom can become a microcosm of democracy where marginalised voices are recognised as sources of knowledge rather than included tokenistically. In the context of intergenerational listening, dialogical pedagogy can model the kind of ethical relationship this article defends: attentiveness to power, willingness to be changed, and commitment to shared responsibility.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the constraints on dialogical pedagogy are real. Such education demands time, trust, and facilitation that many institutions cannot provide, and it often encounters resistance from curricula shaped by nationalist or neoliberal agendas which prefer simplified, 'neutral' histories. Under these pressures, dialogue can become performance rather than transformation. The point, however, is not to idealise education but to locate a plausible site for practising listening as a durable social capacity. When it succeeds, teaching as dialogue

keeps alive the possibility of ethical renewal: classrooms and community projects become laboratories of listening where justice begins again in each exchange (Llewellyn & Philpott 2014, 44). A comprehensive theory of dialogical pedagogy is beyond the scope of this article; here it is offered as a concrete implication and a promising site for future empirical and institutional work.

Taken together, these methodological implications support a single claim: methodology is ethics in motion. Narrative inquiry, testimony projects, and dialogical pedagogy show how intergenerational listening can be operationalised without becoming merely symbolic. However, they also show the fragility of such work – its susceptibility to co-option, depoliticisation, and aestheticisation. This fragility is not an argument against listening; it is an argument for evaluating listening practices by whether they remain accountable, reciprocal, and materially consequential.

Political and democratic implications: Toward dialogical justice

The democratic implications of intergenerational listening treated in this article are in an indicative rather than exhaustive manner. As such, the aim is modest: to indicate how dialogical justice may re-orient democratic imagination without claiming to provide a complete theory of democracy. Intergenerational listening reframes peacebuilding as an ethical relation across time, prompting political philosophy to confront a basic limitation in liberal models: they often treat justice as a matter of closure (verdicts, settlements, and resolutions) while the moral weight of historical harm resists completion and reverberates across generations. The consequence is not that justice must be redefined in general, but that justice-oriented processes in peacebuilding should be evaluated by whether they sustain answerability beyond institutional timelines.

From restorative to dialogical justice

Dialogical justice is not presented here as a comprehensive or abstract theory, rather, it is proposed as a normative-ethical orientation for evaluating justice-oriented practices in peacebuilding. Whereas distributive, retributive, or restorative approaches often assess justice in terms of outcomes, resolutions, or institutional endpoints, dialogical justice evaluates practices according to their capacity for sustained, accountable listening across time. Its concern is not what justice is in general, but how peacebuilding processes remain answerable to silenced histories, inherited harm, and future obligations. In this sense, dialogical justice reframes justice as a relational discipline rather than a destination: resisting premature closure while binding recognition to material and structural transformation.

Restorative justice marked a moral advance over retributive models by shifting attention from punishment to repair, and from guilt to responsibility. Yet restorative frameworks can still be drawn toward closure, the restoration of a social order presumed worth returning to. Dialogical justice rejects this teleology. It is not about returning to harmony but about remaining in relation, even amid disagreement and grief. This claim resonates with Iris Marion Young's account of responsibility as shared, forward-looking, and structural rather than individual and retrospective (Young 2011). It also aligns with Hannah Arendt's view of freedom as enacted through plural action and appearance to others, where political life is sustained through ongoing encounters rather than final settlements (Arendt 1958). In this view, justice-oriented practice is not something done for others, but something practised *with* others: the discipline of staying in relationship when leaving would be easier.

This orientation depends on holding together accountability and vulnerability. Accountability requires confronting implication in inherited harm; and vulnerability requires openness to being changed by others' pain. Kelly Oliver's notion of witnessing beyond recognition helps articulate why listening is ethically demanding: one must be moved by another's testimony without claiming ownership of it (Oliver 2001). Judith Butler likewise insists that moral subjectivity arises through exposure to what we cannot fully know about ourselves (Butler 2005). Accountability without vulnerability risks arrogance; vulnerability without accountability risks sentimentality. Together, they sustain the moral rhythm of dialogical justice: honest implication coupled with open listening.

This contrast can be stated simply. Restorative justice often works within bounded timelines and life-worlds: it seeks to settle a conflict, produce a truth, and reach a shared outcome. Dialogical justice remains open-ended: it treats truth as co-formed through continued listening, and it attends not only to interpersonal relationships but also to structures – institutions, ecologies, memory – that require ongoing revision and answerability. The point is not to replace restorative justice wholesale, but to supply evaluative criteria that can identify when restorative processes become closure-oriented performances rather than sustained practices of responsibility.

Democracy across generations

Dialogical justice also reimagines democracy, but here too the claim should remain bounded. Liberal democracies typically limit participation to the living, even though political decisions bind the dead and the unborn alike. Intergenerational listening challenges this limitation by expanding the democratic circle to include those whose voices are temporally absent. Avishai Margalit argues that remembering responsibly

is a civic duty: it prevents moral erasure and sustains accountability to the dead (Margalit 2002). Hans Jonas extends this responsibility forward, urging action compatible with the permanence of human life and the moral claims of future generations (Jonas 1979). Intergenerational listening embodies both movements: it honours ancestral voices while caring for those yet to come. In this sense, democracy becomes dialogical – listening backward and forward, rather than confining justice to the present tense.

This temporal expansion also gestures beyond human generations. Indigenous and ecological thought remind us that listening is not limited to human speech. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the earth as a living interlocutor, speaking through renewal and decay (Kimmerer 2013). While a full ecological political theory is beyond the scope of this article, the point is consistent with its central argument: justice-oriented peacebuilding cannot treat land, language, and ecology as mere background conditions when they are often sites of harm and inheritance. Dialogical justice thus points toward a broadened moral community in which accountability includes more-than-human relations – not as a metaphysical addition, but as a practical recognition that dispossession and ecological devastation are intertwined with forms of colonial and structural violence.

These democratic implications are intentionally sketched rather than fully developed. Their function is to mark a horizon for further inquiry: how institutions might embed intergenerational listening, how democratic practices might register obligations to the dead and unborn, and how ecological and Indigenous insights might reshape the governance of repair. Pursuing those questions would require sustained comparative analysis and institutional study, and therefore, belongs to future research. Rather than advancing a comprehensive theory, this article proposes dialogical justice as a provisional ethical orientation for considering how peacebuilding practices sustain accountable listening over time and relate recognition to material transformation.

Conclusion

While restorative justice marks a moral advance over punitive or retributive models, it remains limited by its pursuit of closure. Its focus on immediate reconciliation and personal accountability cannot, by itself, address the afterlives of structural and inherited trauma. The past does not end; its silences persist. Justice in peacebuilding, therefore, must be approached as a relational and ongoing practice that spans generations, identities, and wounds. Relational ethics provides its philosophical ground; intergenerational listening gives it form, as a responsiveness to others and to history.

This article has traced a movement from restorative to dialogical justice: a justice that remains open, relational, and accountable across time. Restorative processes such as South Africa's TRC or Rwanda's *gacaca* courts transformed moral imagination but confined reconciliation to a single historical moment. By contrast, dialogical justice insists that repair must be continuous, linking ancestors, descendants, and the more-than-human world. Drawing on Levinas's ethics of responsibility, Gilligan and Noddings's ethics of care, and Indigenous epistemologies of *whakapapa* and *mino bimaadiziwin*, we have outlined a framework in which justice lives through relationship rather than resolution.

Conceptually, this frames justice in peacebuilding as dialogue rather than decision: an ongoing co-creation of ethical relationship sustained by moral imagination and by what Derrida terms *justice à venir* – the insistence that justice remains open, unfinished, and answerable to what exceeds the present. Listening itself becomes an act of justice: to listen is to recognise another as a moral presence; to refuse is to perpetuate exclusion.

Methodologically, peacebuilding must be practiced in terms of relationship. Narrative inquiry, intergenerational testimony, and dialogical pedagogy demonstrate how knowledge can emerge through humility and vulnerability while exposing the fragility that accompanies authentic encounter. Such fragility is not failure but the price of sincerity; as Levinas reminds us, responsibility begins in vulnerability.

Politically, this calls for a democracy of listening which hears across time. Speech without listening becomes a monologue of power; intergenerational listening envisions democracy as a temporal dialogue among the living, the dead, and the not-yet-born. Following Margalit's *Ethics of Memory* and Jonas' *Imperative of Responsibility*, justice entails remembrance and foresight alike, extending moral community to the more-than-human world. And it could be argued that the seven guiding principles identified above are key to this approach.

Ultimately, peacebuilding is not a resolution but the ongoing dialogue through which justice endures. To listen is to resist amnesia and keep faith with both memory and possibility. Reconciliation, in this light, is a means of carrying justice forward across lifetimes rather than a final act.

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The Politics and Ethics of Translation: Navigating Generational Dialogue and Linguistic Borders Shaped by Colonial Histories and Future-Oriented Resistance

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Abstract: This article explores the politics of translation as a critical and decolonial framework for understanding intergenerational dialogue and knowledge co-creation in global contexts. Situated at the intersection of decolonial theory, translation studies, Indigenous scholarship, and critical intergenerational studies, it examines how translation operates as a contested relational practice through which power, culture, and identity are negotiated across generations. Drawing on decolonial thought and debates on epistemic justice and relational ethics, the analysis foregrounds translation as an ethical and political act rather than a neutral linguistic bridge. Through a comparative analysis of two case studies – Māori language revitalisation initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand and Sámi youth political councils in Northern Europe – the article illustrates how intergenerational translation mediates between ancestral epistemologies and contemporary sociopolitical realities. These cases reveal translation as a site of both continuity and struggle, where linguistic, cultural, and digital borders are navigated in ways that sustain collective well-being while also exposing tensions around authority, representation, and legitimacy. Engaging critically with traditions in decolonial pedagogy, Indigenous language revitalisation, and critical dialogue studies, the article situates translation as a practice shaped by colonial histories and future-oriented resistance. It advances the position that ethical translation demands attentiveness to untranslatability, refusal, and difference, challenging dominant Western assumptions of equivalence, transparency, and universal intelligibility. In an era of digital expansion and algorithmic mediation, translation emerges as a key site for interrogating how Indigenous and intergenerational knowledges are preserved, transformed, and governed. By reframing translation as a decolonial praxis of care and co-existence, grounded in these scholarly traditions, the article contributes to

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contemporary debates on collective futures, intergenerational well-being, and the epistemic responsibilities of intercultural engagement.

Keywords: Intergenerational Dialogue, Decolonial Translation, Epistemic justice, Knowledge Co-creation, Indigenous futures, Digital Colonialism

Introduction

Translation is often thought of as a technical task, the carrying of meaning from one language into another. Yet in contexts marked by colonialism, displacement, and cultural suppression, translation cannot be reduced to mere linguistic practice. It is instead a deeply political, ethical, and generational act that determines whose knowledge survives, whose values are dignified, and how communities sustain belonging across time. In societies where language has been a site of domination, translation becomes a process through which communities not only articulate methods of survival but also envision alternative futures. Translation is therefore better understood as an interplay of practice and belonging: an intergenerational negotiation that involves memory, cosmology, and lived experience as much as it does words. In this sense, translation is inseparable from intergenerational dialogue, understood here not simply as communication between age groups, but as a structured relational process through which knowledge, authority, and responsibility are negotiated across time.

This paper situates translation within the wider frame of intergenerational dialogue, responding directly to the conversation on how intergenerational practices shape collective wellbeing futures. The intention here is to move beyond narrow linguistic or technical accounts of translation and critically engage with its political and ethical dimensions. Translation operates at the intersection of power, language, and identity, and its role in intergenerational dialogue reveals how communities navigate historical injustices and the asymmetries of the present while imagining futures that are inclusive, just, and sustainable. The argument advanced is that translation is not a neutral mechanism of communication but a relational practice through which belonging is either sustained or eroded. Intergenerational dialogue, within this framing, becomes both the condition and the consequence of translation: it is through dialogical encounters between elders and youth that meanings are contested, reworked, and made viable for the future.

Colonial variance, language, and the politics of memory

This requires careful attention to the colonial histories that have shaped contemporary translation practices. Too often, colonialism is framed as a singular project, but, in reality, it operated in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways, including in non-

settler colonial and imperial formations where linguistic governance functioned differently but no less forcefully. British settler-colonialism frequently sought to erase Indigenous languages entirely, often through the imposition of schooling systems designed to assimilate children into English-speaking norms. French colonialism, by contrast, relied on the *mission civilisatrice*, an ideology of cultural assimilation that imposed the French language as a marker of civilisation and progress. Russian and Soviet imperial legacies took different forms, combining Orthodox Christianity and socialist ideologies to suppress Indigenous, Muslim, and Turkic identities across vast territories (Cooper 2005; Tlostanova 2015). In Northern Europe, Sámi communities were subject to internal colonial practices through nation-state expansion, border-making, and assimilationist language policies, including boarding schools and the restriction of Sámi languages in public and political life. These practices were not only linguistic but mnemonic: they shaped whose histories could be narrated as national memory and whose knowledge was relegated to the margins or rendered unintelligible within state archives and political discourse. Each of these trajectories reveals that colonial power was, in part, exercised through language and translation, yet in ways that varied according to ideological, territorial, and cultural logics. By acknowledging these differences, this article resists the tendency to homogenise colonialism and instead foregrounds how translation is always contextually situated.

Belonging and intergenerational transmission

Translation, then, is simultaneously about the politics of memory and the politics of the future. When Indigenous languages were suppressed in schools and public life, the act of speaking one's mother tongue became undignified, marked as inferior, or actively punished. Generations of families experienced shame and disruption as their cultural lifeworlds were rendered illegitimate (Battiste 2013). Translation in these contexts is not just a question of rendering one language into another, but of negotiating the very possibility of being: whether communities are able to pass down values, beliefs, and practices in ways that affirm rather than diminish their identities. The revitalisation of suppressed languages, as seen in Māori contexts, demonstrates that translation can also serve as a site of reclamation, revalorising that which had been silenced and affirming the collective being of a people (Higgins, Rewi & Olsen-Reeder 2014). Such revitalisation efforts depend upon sustained intergenerational dialogue, in which memory is not merely preserved but actively reactivated through pedagogical, cultural, and political exchange.

At the same time, translation mediates cultural belonging. Belonging is not an abstract condition but a lived practice of mutual and intergenerational recognition, inclusion, and participation in collective life (Yuval-Davis 2011). Intergenerational dialogue makes these processes explicit: it requires communities to reflect on what

knowledge, heritage, and practices are held as valuable, how they are described, and how these cultural values are transmitted across generations. Translation is therefore not only about ensuring continuity but also about reinterpreting traditions informed by the ways in which these traditions have been lost and disrupted via colonial processes, in ways that resonate with younger generations. This involves negotiation: elders act as custodians of memory and values, while younger generations may challenge, adapt, or reframe these traditions in response to contemporary realities. Translation mediates this process, carrying meaning but also adapting it, ensuring that belonging remains dynamic rather than static. Here, intergenerational dialogue can be understood as a site of ethical tension and creative possibility, where asymmetries of authority, experience, and expectation must be navigated rather than assumed away.

The paper argues that translation should be understood as a decolonial praxis, not only in the sense of resisting historical domination but in line with Mignolo's (2011) insistence that decoloniality is about being 'for' something rather than only 'against' colonial legacies. If communities are against the silencing of their languages and traditions, what are they for? What values do they hold close, and how do these values guide the work of intergenerational dialogue? Translation becomes the site where such questions are negotiated. It is here, at the site of translation as process, that communities articulate being not as constituting recognition by the dominant order, but as the capacity to live well on their own terms with regards to autonomous and authentic belonging. It is here, too, that belonging is affirmed through collective practices that anchor communities to their past while orienting them towards futures of justice and well-being. Ethical challenges surrounding translation, such as the risk of extraction, misrepresentation, or retraumatisation, are therefore inseparable from decolonial concerns with power, positionality, and relational accountability.

This article therefore advances a clear statement of intent: to critically examine translation as a practice of intergenerational dialogue that holds profound implications for how communities confront colonial legacies and build futures of belonging. It develops this argument in three steps. First, it situates translation within broader theoretical debates about colonial variances, epistemic justice, and intergenerational praxis. Second, it explores two detailed case studies: Māori language revitalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand and Sámi youth political councils in Northern Europe. These cases are not treated as interchangeable but as sites of comparison that reveal both convergences and divergences in how translation operates across different colonial contexts. Third, it reflects on the ethical and methodological challenges of studying translation, particularly in a digital age where Indigenous knowledges risk

being 'archived' into static forms, potentially undermining the living and relational character of these traditions.

Conceptual Foundations and the Politics of Belonging

Translation has often been understood through the narrow lens of linguistic transfer, yet in contexts of coloniality and postcoloniality it is more accurately described as a deeply political act that mediates power, identity, and knowledge. Scholars have long cautioned that translation cannot be reduced to a neutral or mechanical process. Spivak (1993), for instance, highlights how translation frequently silences or domesticates subaltern voices by forcing them into dominant epistemic frames, while Cronin (2006) emphasises the 'micro-politics' of translation in everyday exchanges. The decision of what to translate, how to translate it, and for whom, is always implicated in broader struggles over recognition and epistemic justice. Translation is therefore inseparable from colonial histories in which language became a central tool of domination but also of resistance, and where the politics of belonging were – and continue to be – negotiated through practices of linguistic and cultural mediation.

Colonialism cannot, however, be treated as a singular or homogeneous phenomenon. Empires deployed language and translation differently depending on territorial, cultural, and ideological conditions. French colonialism is often associated with an assimilationist model that elevated the French language as a universal medium of civilisation. British colonialism, by contrast, relied on a complex combination of indirect rule and linguistic hierarchy, in which English was institutionalised as a superior language of administration and education, even while local vernaculars were tolerated as markers of the 'native' (Pennycook 1998). Russian colonial expansion entailed different logics altogether: in parts of Central Asia and the Arctic, Orthodox Christianisation and Russification overlapped with attempts to manage linguistic diversity across Muslim, Turkic, and Indigenous communities (Tlostanova 2012). These trajectories illustrate how translation was mobilised variably as assimilation, stratification, or management that has been always bound to the imposition of political authority, yet never in identical ways. A critical analysis of translation in intergenerational dialogue must remain attentive to such variances, recognising that colonial translation produced not one singular legacy but multiple fractured inheritances.

Translation in these settings was never only linguistic; it also entailed cultural, spiritual, and epistemological conversion. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) has described the colonial imposition of European languages as the theft of memory, where children schooled in English were alienated from ancestral knowledge systems. At the same time, translation could become a site of refusal: oral traditions sustained in local lan-

guages resisted codification, hybrid linguistic forms undermined colonial categories, and silence itself became a strategy of withholding sacred knowledge from colonial capture (Simpson 2017). These acts of generational continuity highlight translation not only as a mechanism of domination but also as a praxis of survival, where communities preserved being by controlling what was shared and what remained untranslatable.

It is within intergenerational dialogue that the stakes of translation are perhaps most visible. Elders often speak in a way that carries the weight of ancestral histories, cosmologies, and lived experiences of colonial disruption. Younger generations may inhabit hybrid cultural spaces shaped by migration, globalisation, and digital technologies, which provide new idioms but also risk distancing them from the depth of ancestral expression. Translation across these generational positions is both a possibility and a danger: it can bridge gaps of understanding and belonging, but it can also reduce complex traditions to consumable fragments. The critical question becomes not whether translation occurs, but how it is practised and under what conditions being is preserved or eroded.

Dialogue is frequently celebrated as a space of reciprocity and mutual respect. Freire (1970) framed dialogue as an act of co-creation, essential for liberation from oppressive systems. Yet the promise of dialogue cannot be taken at face value. In contexts where intergenerational or intercultural encounters are mediated through digital infrastructures, what is called dialogue may resemble one-sided consumption. Knowledge uploaded to online archives, for example, risks being stripped from its relational and ritual contexts, transforming living traditions into static 'resources' to be browsed without accountability (Christen 2011). Couldry and Mejias (2019) extend this critique to argue that digital platforms are infrastructures of extraction, where human relations and cultural knowledge are translated into data commodities. When intergenerational dialogue unfolds within such structures, translation risks becoming a form of epistemic dispossession rather than an act of mutual recognition.

Belonging is not a static identity but a lived process of being situated within narratives of past, present, and future (Yuval-Davis 2011). Intergenerational belonging is particularly precarious where language loss, displacement, and assimilation have fractured cultural transmission. Younger generations may experience alienation from ancestral traditions, while elders may grieve the erosion of linguistic worlds. Translation becomes a site where belonging is renegotiated: it can serve as a bridge that reweaves generational continuity, but it can also expose tensions between continuity and transformation. Battiste (2013) has argued that decolonising education requires precisely this negotiation highlighting opportunities for creating conditions for In-

digenous knowledge to flourish in contemporary forms without being fossilised or commodified. Translation in intergenerational dialogue is thus not simply about preservation, but about cultivating dynamic belonging that affirms both heritage and change.

To conceptualise translation in this way demands a shift from resistance alone to affirmation. Mignolo (2011) cautions that decoloniality cannot be defined solely by opposition to coloniality. If the aim is only to dismantle, the question remains: what is being built in its place? Translation as a decolonial praxis must therefore be understood as world-making, as a commitment to values that communities want to carry forward into the future. This reframes translation not merely as an act of bridging linguistic or generational gaps, but as an epistemological framework. An orientation towards relationality, reciprocity, and the construction of plural futures. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) describe this as a politics of being 'for' rather than 'against': affirming knowledge systems, the continuity of cultural values, and the possibility of intergenerational flourishing.

Such a rethinking of translation situates it at the heart of the broader project of intergenerational dialogue. It is not only a technical means but a political and ethical commitment that determines whether dialogue can move beyond tokenism towards collective well-being. Understanding translation as both a practice and a framework illuminates the stakes of the case studies that follow, where the revitalisation of Te Reo Māori and the political activism of Sámi youth are not simply examples of cultural survival, but complex negotiations of belonging and epistemic justice through translation. These cases reveal the promises and tensions of intergenerational translation in distinct contexts, yet also provide a comparative lens for re-imagining dialogue as a practice of healing and future-making.

Case Studies in Translation and Intergenerational Dialogue

As discussed, intergenerational translation is neither a neutral exercise of linguistic transfer nor a straightforward mechanism of cultural preservation. Instead, it is always an epistemic and political negotiation, shaped by historical trajectories of colonialism, contemporary power structures, and the aspirations of younger and older generations. To illuminate these complexities, this section turns to two case studies: Māori language revitalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand and Sámi youth political mobilisation in Northern Europe. Both reveal how translation functions as a site of intergenerational dialogue, continuity, and rupture. They also expose the risks of epistemic flattening when Indigenous knowledges are mediated through dominant institutions, digital technologies, and international policy discourses. Importantly,

by comparing these contexts side by side, a more nuanced understanding emerges of translation as a situated praxis – one that cannot be theorised monolithically but must account for diverse colonial histories and epistemological orientations.

Māori language revitalisation – translation as healing and adaptation

Māori language revitalisation exemplifies translation as a process of both cultural survival and transformation. Following the devastating effects of British settler colonialism – including the systemic prohibition of *te reo Māori* in schools, punitive assimilationist policies, and urbanisation that disrupted intergenerational transmission (Walker 2004; Smith 2021) – by the mid-twentieth century Māori language was in precipitous decline. Census data from 1976 showed that fewer than 20% of Māori children could speak the language fluently (King 2018). This rupture spurred a grassroots mobilisation to reclaim linguistic ownership, culminating in the *kōhanga reo* (language nest) movement launched in 1982.

Kōhanga reo represent more than immersion preschools; they embody intergenerational healing. By positioning elders (*kaumātua*) as linguistic and cultural anchors, the movement re-inscribed translation as a collective and spiritual practice, drawing on *whakapapa* (genealogy) and *tikanga* (customs) to situate children within ancestral knowledge systems (Higgins & Rewi 2014). Translation here is not the neutral transfer of vocabulary but a process of epistemic continuity where ways of speaking are inseparable from ontologies of land (*whenua*), kinship, and spirituality.

Yet revitalisation simultaneously demands adaptation. New vocabulary creation, such as *rorohiko* (computer, 'electric brain'), illustrates how translation stretches to accommodate technological modernity (Harlow 2007). This raises critical questions: does such adaptation preserve epistemological integrity, or does it risk assimilating Indigenous worldviews into Western conceptual logics? Digitalisation intensifies this dilemma. Online dictionaries, AI-driven translation tools, and gamified language apps expand accessibility but risk decontextualising language from its cultural lifeworlds.

The Māori case thus highlights the tension between translation as epistemic survival and translation as epistemic reduction. On one hand, intergenerational dialogue sustains belonging and identity; on the other, the translation of *te reo* into digital and institutional frameworks risks stripping away spiritual dimensions, reducing living language to static data. The stakes are not only linguistic but existential: as Smith (2021) argues, revitalising *te reo* is inseparable from decolonising epistemologies themselves.

Sámi youth political councils – translation as representation and visibility

In contrast, Sámi political mobilisation demonstrates translation as a strategy of intergenerational negotiation across linguistic, institutional, and geopolitical borders. The Sámi, Indigenous peoples inhabiting Sápmi (spanning Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia), have historically faced cultural suppression under assimilationist policies, including forced boarding schools, linguistic prohibition, and land dispossession (Porsanger 2011). While revitalisation efforts continue for Sámi languages, many of which are critically endangered, youth political councils illustrate how translation is not confined to language but extends to political representation and epistemic recognition.

Sámi youth councils (*Sámi Nuorat*, *Sámi Ungdomsråd*) emerged to bridge generational divides and provide institutional platforms for young Sámi voices (Josefsen, Mörkenstam & Saglie 2014). They serve as translational forums in two senses: first, linguistically, by negotiating between the multiplicity of Sámi languages and dominant state languages (Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish); second, epistemologically, by translating Sámi values of land stewardship, collective decision-making, and spiritual relations into frameworks legible to state institutions and international bodies like the UN.

However, these translations come at a cost. To secure recognition, youth leaders often adopt the idioms of rights-based discourses, which privilege individual rights and liberal-democratic language over relational, collective epistemologies (Kuokkanen 2007). This generates epistemic friction: the Sámi concept of *siida* (a community-based unit of governance tied to land and kinship) resists neat translation into Western political categories of 'council' or 'association'. The act of translation thus risks epistemic dilution, even as it facilitates visibility and advocacy.

Digital platforms both extend and constrain Sámi youth politics. Social media campaigns, such as protests against mining projects in Jokkmokk, Sweden, enable transnational solidarity through hashtags like *#DecolonizeSápmi*. Yet the affordances of digital media often demand simplification: nuanced epistemological debates are compressed into viral slogans, privileging visibility over relational accountability. Furthermore, linguistic hierarchies persist online, where dominant Scandinavian languages often overshadow smaller Sámi languages, exacerbating internal inequalities (Pietikäinen 2015).

The Sámi case thus foregrounds translation as political visibility and intergenerational negotiation but also highlights the risks of reduction when epistemologies are mediated through institutional or digital filters. Unlike Māori revitalisation, where

translation centres on continuity of language, Sámi youth politics foreground translation as a balancing act between recognition and reduction, continuity and compromise.

Translation as situated praxis

Placing these cases in comparison illustrates that translation is not a singular practice but a situated praxis shaped by colonial histories, sociolinguistic conditions, and political economies. Māori revitalisation and Sámi youth politics both demonstrate that translation is not only about words but about epistemic survival and futurity. Yet they diverge in how translation is institutionalised and operationalised.

Māori revitalisation centres community-driven institutions such as *kōhanga reo*, where intergenerational dialogue is embodied through elders teaching children. Translation here is primarily horizontal (within communities) although it extends into vertical negotiations with the state and digital platforms. Sámi youth councils, by contrast, exemplify translation as vertical negotiation, where young leaders act as intermediaries between Indigenous communities and state/international institutions. This structural positioning shifts the locus of power: while Māori revitalisation foregrounds epistemic continuity, Sámi youth politics foregrounds epistemic negotiation.

Furthermore, both cases raise urgent questions about digital translation. While digital tools expand access, they risk turning Indigenous knowledge into what Hennessy (2012) terms 'digital artefacts' which can exist detached from their spiritual, relational, and performative contexts. In Māori revitalisation, this manifests in concerns over AI-driven translation eroding the spiritual depth of *te reo*. In Sámi youth politics, social media amplifies Indigenous visibility but risks flattening epistemic complexity. Together, these dynamics reveal the double bind of digital futures: necessary for survival but potentially undermining the very relationalities they seek to preserve.

At stake across both cases is what Mignolo (2011) describes as a shift from being 'against' coloniality to being 'for' alternative epistemologies. Māori and Sámi practices of translation illustrate this generative orientation: revitalisation and youth mobilisation are not only defensive struggles but affirmative acts of world-making. Translation thus emerges as a practice of belonging, where intergenerational dialogue is not simply preservation but the continual negotiation of values, identities, and futures.

Translation in Digital Futures and Reflexive Translation

The previous sections have situated translation as a contested epistemic practice within intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, and this contemporary moment demands that this understanding be reimagined in light of digital transformation. As dialogue increasingly migrates into online spaces, digital infrastructures which include social media platforms, AI-driven translation tools, and data repositories reconfigure the conditions under which intergenerational knowledge is created, stored, and shared. These shifts hold both promise and peril for the politics of intergenerational translation. They make possible unprecedented connections across geographic and cultural borders, yet they also risk flattening epistemic diversity and disembedding Indigenous and local knowledges from their relational contexts.

Thus, digital technologies act as new sites of translation: not merely linguistic or cultural, but algorithmic and infrastructural. Algorithms, archives, and data flows mediate which knowledges are visible, which are valued, and which are erased. In this sense, the politics of translation extends beyond language to encompass what Couldry and Mejias (2019) term *data colonialism*: the appropriation of human life, relationships, and knowledge as data resources within capitalist systems. When Indigenous stories or languages are digitised without community control, they risk becoming what Christen (2011) calls 'digital cultural property' – circulating as detached cultural artefacts rather than as living expressions of community and spirituality.

Digital translation as opportunity and risk

In the context of Māori and Sámi futures, the digital sphere embodies this double edge. Māori *te reo* revitalisation increasingly relies on digital platforms, from online dictionaries like *Te Aka*, to gamified learning applications, to speech recognition projects that use machine learning to improve pronunciation. These tools democratise access, especially for diaspora Māori who may lack immersion environments. Yet when digital systems model linguistic 'correctness' according to computational rather than cultural logics, they risk institutionalising a form of algorithmic authority (Carlson 2017).

Similarly, Sámi digital initiatives such as *Giellatekno* (language technology research) and *Divvun* (proofing tools) have made Sámi languages visible in cyberspace, yet these achievements coexist with persistent hierarchies. Dominant languages (Norwegian, Finnish, Swedish) remain default system languages, while smaller Sámi languages receive less investment. The Sámi case foregrounds how digital infrastructures reproduce the very asymmetries they purport to dismantle (Pietikäinen 2015). While digital translation amplifies visibility, it simultaneously enacts what Couldry

and Mejias (2018) describe as a 'colonial continuum', embedding historical patterns of extraction within digital architectures.

This raises a deeper question: what happens when knowledge, which in Indigenous cosmologies is fundamentally relational and performative, becomes archived in static digital forms? Hennessy (2012) warns that such digitisation risks transforming living practices into 'dead heritage' – detached from the affective and spiritual bonds that give them meaning. Digital archiving can unintentionally perpetuate colonial epistemologies by privileging permanence, legibility, and universal access over transience, secrecy, and sacredness: values central to many Indigenous knowledge systems. The digital, in this sense, both extends and constrains intergenerational dialogue, opening possibilities for new forms of relational knowledge while simultaneously raising complex ontological and ethical questions about presence, embodiment, and the mediation of cultural memory. These are issues that extend beyond the scope of this article but warrant further critical exploration in future research.

Intergenerational dialogue, belonging, and the digital

At the heart of these dilemmas lies the question of belonging. Belonging is not a static identity but a lived and relational process of being situated within narratives of past, present, and future. Within intergenerational and decolonial contexts, belonging becomes deeply entangled with epistemic recognition: the extent to which one's ways of knowing are acknowledged, authorised, and sustained across generations. Rather than constituting an epistemic condition in itself, belonging shapes the social and political conditions under which knowledge is recognised as legitimate, transmissible, and meaningful. In this sense, struggles over language, translation, and dialogue are simultaneously struggles over who is able to participate in the making of collective memory and future imaginaries. In the Māori and Sámi examples, belonging is continuously negotiated through acts of translation between ancestors and descendants, between oral and digital forms, and between community and state.

Digital spaces complicate these negotiations. While social media platforms have enabled youth-led movements like *#DecolonizeSápmi* or Māori content creators on TikTok to reach global audiences, they also mediate belonging through performative visibility. The demand for constant representation can flatten complex intergenerational dialogues into consumable narratives. As Ahmed (2012) reminds us, visibility does not equate to inclusion; indeed, it can sometimes reproduce marginality by situating the visible subject as an object of gaze rather than a participant in dialogue.

At the same time, younger generations increasingly treat digital platforms as legitimate sites of cultural authorship and epistemic belonging. The emergence of Indigenous digital storytellers, artists, and educators demonstrates how translation can be-

come a creative, future-oriented practice. These actors engage in what Lewis et al. (2018) term *Indigenous futurisms*: the reimagining of digital and technological spaces through Indigenous epistemologies, within, and often in tension with, Western state and technological infrastructures. Rather than positioning modernity as something external to or wholly rejected by Indigenous communities, these practices demonstrate how modernity is selectively reworked, inhabited, and re-signified through Indigenous priorities, values, and temporalities. In this sense, the digital is not opposed to Western modernity but becomes a site where its assumptions are unsettled through Indigenous presence, agency, and continuity. The digital, then, can be reclaimed as a decolonial site of imagination. It presents a medium for intergenerational storytelling that affirms continuity within transformation while remaining embedded in, and constrained by, broader Western sociotechnical systems.

Studying translation in digital and intergenerational contexts

Examining translation within these entangled digital and intergenerational contexts demands methodological reflexivity. Traditional ethnography, often oriented toward static cultural representation, struggles to capture the fluid, networked, and algorithmic dynamics of digital dialogue. Scholars such as Pink et al. (2016) advocate for *digital ethnography*. This is a methodology attentive to relationality, temporality, and mediation. In studying intergenerational dialogue, this requires not only observing interaction but tracing how meaning circulates through platforms, interfaces, and infrastructures.

However, a decolonial methodological stance also calls for ethical humility. As Smith (2021) and Kovach (2009) emphasise, research with Indigenous and marginalised communities must prioritise relational accountability, informed consent, and the co-production of knowledge. Translation itself becomes a methodological metaphor: researchers must translate between academic and community epistemologies without appropriating or distorting either. This involves asking not only *how* we study translation, but *for whom* and *to what ends*.

Towards ethical and reflexive translation

Across these reflections, a central thread emerges: the future of intergenerational dialogue depends on cultivating an ethics of translation grounded in relationality, and epistemic plurality. This entails recognising that translation is not an end in itself but a continual process of negotiation that must remain open to untranslatability. As Apter (2013) notes, moments of opacity – where meanings cannot be perfectly rendered – are not failures but opportunities to preserve difference and complexity. Such opacity can be reinterpreted as a form of epistemic being, allowing

knowledge to remain embedded in its context rather than subsumed into universal categories.

Ethical translation, then, requires attentiveness to both what is said and what cannot (or should not) be said. In intergenerational contexts, this means honouring the right of elders to withhold sacred knowledge and the right of youth to reinterpret tradition in their own terms. It also involves designing digital systems that respect these boundaries: for instance, Indigenous data sovereignty frameworks like the CARE principles (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) offer a blueprint for ensuring community ownership over digital knowledge (Carroll et al. 2020).

Ultimately, the politics of translation in intergenerational dialogue is inseparable from the politics of future-making. As Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue, decoloniality is not simply about deconstructing the past but constructing the conditions for pluriversal futures in which multiple worlds and ways of knowing can coexist with being. The challenge lies in balancing continuity with transformation, openness with protection, and global connectedness with local rootedness.

To reimagine translation as an ethical, reflexive, and decolonial praxis is to envision dialogue not as consensus but as co-existence, not as the erasure of difference but as its recognition. In a world increasingly mediated by digital technologies, this means designing infrastructures that honour intergenerational relationality as spaces that allow ancestral wisdom and emerging knowledge to meet on equal terms.

Conclusion

Translation, as explored throughout this paper, emerges not merely as a linguistic process but as an ethical, relational, and decolonial practice that sustains intergenerational dialogue and cultural continuity. Across contexts – from Indigenous knowledge transmission to digital and algorithmic mediation – translation is shown to be both a site of possibility and tension. It can bridge generations, languages, and epistemologies, yet it can also reproduce historical asymmetries when detached from context and relational accountability. The Māori and Sámi case studies demonstrate that translation is most powerful when grounded in reciprocity, belonging, and respect for epistemic plurality.

In digital futures, the politics of translation takes on renewed urgency: technologies that promise inclusion can simultaneously entrench exclusion if not critically designed and governed. An ethics of translation therefore requires reflexivity, humility, and recognition of untranslatability as a space of being rather than deficit. To imagine translation as a practice of coexistence rather than assimilation is to envision

intergenerational dialogue as a collective act of care. It means creating spaces, dialogue, and minds to honour difference, sustain connection, and to shape more just and plural futures.

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Of Cradles and Chariots, and Epics on Scrolls: Intergenerational Dialogue and Cultural Transmission

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Abstract: Intergenerational dialogue constitutes a critical mechanism for sustaining intangible cultural heritage in South Asia, yet its dynamics and vulnerabilities remain under-studied in sociological literature. Addressing this lacuna, this article presents a qualitative study of fourteen folk artists and their family members – practitioners of hereditary arts such as *Kasuti* hand embroidery, *Pabu-ji ki Phad* bard performers, and *Ajrakh* printing in rural India – to examine how cultural transmission is a dialogic, co-creative endeavour. When a grandfather and grandson sit together to embellish a panel, each interprets and modifies the design in the light of age and experience; far from static, the transmission process is an evolving conversation, keeping culture relevant. Elders impart narrative templates, technical repertoires, and affective models of emotional intelligence, while younger kin recalibrate these legacies in response to digital exposure, schooling, and market volatility. Such reciprocal re-articulation sustains cultural identity and social cohesion and enables communities to mobilise ancestral wisdom against caste discrimination and existential erasure.

Yet this dialogue is increasingly fragile. The loosening of joint-family architectures in India and the aspirational pull of credentialled urban employment compress the time-space coordinates in which apprenticeship can occur. Smartphones broaden aesthetic horizons while normalising consumerist subjectivities that devalue artisanal labour. Gendered labour, often undertaken by grandmothers and mothers, remains undervalued despite its centrality to cultural continuity. As

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youth negotiates emergent identities – class mobility, caste dissent and gender equity – ancestral repertoires risk being reframed as burdensome markers of marginality rather than sources of pride.

The study therefore lays emphasis on cultural identity and resilience as a community-level achievement derived from sustained intergenerational relationality. It positions intergenerational dialogue as indispensable both to preserving intangible cultural resources and cultivating harmonious social cohesion, while fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.

Keywords: Folk Art, Intergenerational Dialogue, Cultural Transmission, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Identity, Resilience

Introduction

Gowri Hiremath bends over her Kasuti embroidery on the beautiful black Ilkal sari, which will be a part of a bridal trousseau. Geometric designs derived from architectural motifs, such as the *gopuram* (a large pyramidal tower over the entrance gate to a temple), the *kalasha* (pot), the *tulsi* plant (sacred basil), cradles, and chariots spring up against the dark fabric. Elephants, cows, parrots, bulls, and peacocks alternate with flowers and creepers in a riot of red, blue, green, yellow, and white threads; the work is so immaculate and precise that the finished design looks perfect on both sides. A variety of stitches come into play named 'ele', 'menti', 'negi', 'gavanti' and 'marige'.

Gowri's twelve-year-old granddaughter Harini watches her intently and works alongside, using a single needle – as tradition demands – and a tracing design on loosely woven net matting placed over the fabric, so that she can do it accurately. The matting is pulled off after completing the task. Among the qualities that the Kasuti artist comes to acquire over the years are patience and concentration. Each thread must be counted: the patterns often involve complex mathematical calculations, ensuring precision and symmetry.

Meanings and understandings are co-produced in an interaction between participants, 'involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge' (Edwards and Holland 2013, 62). When Gowri and Harini sit together to embellish a Kasuti saree, each interprets and modifies the design in the light of age and experience. Gowri imparts technical knowledge while explaining the significance of the art; all the while, Harini is decoding emotional signals in her grandmother's facial expressions, tone of voice and artistic expression, sometimes posing queries. The shared experience offers not just narrative templates and repertoires, but also affective models of emotional intelligence. Harini will, in time, recalibrate these legacies in response to her own digital exposure, schooling, and the prevailing market volatility.

Their dialogical interaction has set into motion a bidirectional flow of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. In this study, dialogue is interpreted as a two- or multi-way communication method that is 'grounded in active listening and mutual learning practices between members of different generations, which is meaningful for all parties' (Tanghoj 2023, 13). Not synonymous with a 'discussion, chat or conversation', 'dialogue' can be understood instead, as the forming of 'emotional bonds, such as respect, trust, and concern, besides inculcating an ability to listen' (Burbules 1993, xii). Reciprocity is an inherent part of dialogue.

As a dialogical process, intergenerational dialogue can be described as a two-way communication process in which participants both give and receive (Kvernbekk 2012, 966). It is a structured, intentional conversational exchange between people of different generations aimed at creating shared understanding, meaning, and new ideas. The shared experience of cultural safeguarding that Gowri and Harini carry out together is a form of intentional dialogue that is an integral part of the folklorist's work (Thurston 2024): cultural transmission as co-production.

The theorisation of intergenerational dialogue enriches our existing understanding by providing a robust framework to analyse and leverage the dynamic exchange of knowledge, values, and experiences across age groups. By setting up a shared space where cross-age connections can be made, intergenerational dialogue can broadly ensure the transmission of cultural knowledge in a mutually respectful way. It can provide a structured approach to bridge generational gaps and foster resilience. As Hawes writes in her work on dialogues for peace, 'with dialogue, the outcome, (consensus, conversion, victory) doesn't drive the process. The process is the outcome' (2006, 263).

Intergenerational dialogue therefore constitutes a critical mechanism for sustaining intangible cultural heritage in South Asia, yet its dynamics and vulnerabilities remain under-studied in sociological literature. Addressing this lacuna, this article draws on an ethnographic study of fourteen hereditary practitioners of folk arts and crafts in rural India, along with their family members who contribute to the creative process, totalling 42 participants. It reflects on the nuanced ways in which intergenerational dialogue enables cultural transmission and social cohesion.

Here, 'intergenerational dialogue' refers to interactional exchanges, both oral and embodied, through which cultural knowledge is co-produced under recognisable dialogic conditions. These include reciprocity that could be partial and asymmetry in expertise and authority shaped by hierarchical relations; elders and master practitioners typically hold custodial knowledge and decision-making power, while the younger generation occupies learner roles even as they introduce new preferences and possibilities. Moments of interruption with questions or suggestions become the

norm; at times there is contestation where the older and younger members disagree on creative aspects or on what constitutes 'tradition' and what innovation is permissible. The term 'dialogue' is used here to underline the ways in which they respond to one another, the negotiation and boundary-setting, and how it simultaneously mediates continuity and change across the three hereditary art forms – Kasuti, Pabu-ji ki Phad, and Ajrakh. All three of these arts, like many other folk arts and crafts in the country, are built on the foundation of myth and storytelling, which can be interpreted as processes of 'making meaning and coherence from often chaotic life experience' (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait 2000, 614).

Running through the accounts is the thread of resilience – a quality that is normatively understood as the capacity to withstand adversity and maintain competent functioning (Kaplan, Turner, Norman, & Stillson 1996, 158). Resilience can also be interpreted as compassionate, flexible, with 'self-righting tendencies' (Vaillant 1993, 248), and 'both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back' (Goldstein 1997, 30).

This inquiry leans into that capacity for renewal and explores the theme of resilience embedded in the lived experiences of a Kasuti hand embroidery practitioner in Karnataka, the *bhopa* and the *bhopi*, who are bards performing the Pabuji ki Phad epic in the desert regions of Shekhavati in Rajasthan, and the Ajrakh block printers of Kutch in Gujarat.

Throughout this article which draws on the narratives of folk artists in India, I have consciously adopted a writing style that departs from the restrained neutrality of conventional academic prose. To honour the lives and knowledge systems of marginalised communities, it feels essential to write in a form that is itself relational, sensory, and alive. Robin Wall Kimmerer advocates a writing practice that listens as much as it analyses (2017). Similarly, Hilary Cremin (2018) and Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983; 2005) have shown that scholarly storytelling can be a moral and aesthetic act, one that respects the dignity and voice of those it represents. This more vivid, embodied mode of writing becomes a small decolonial gesture, resisting the flattening tendencies of technocratic language and instead making space for rhythm, texture, and feeling as legitimate ways of knowing. While doing so, I also take inspiration from Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's methodology of portraiture which is 'a blend of aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor' (2005, 6) to (re)present the research participant through the subjective, empathetic, and critical lens of the researcher (1983, 10).

Cultural Transmission through Intergenerational Dialogue

Article Two of the 2003 UNESCO Convention defines 'intangible cultural heritage' as 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.'

In many cultures such as India, storytelling and oral traditions have been the primary means of transmitting knowledge between generations. Cultural transmission and intergenerational dialogue are interdependent. Performative folk arts like storytelling, singing, and dancing can be powerful tools for conveying cultural values and traditions. The lyrics of the epic song, for instance, are based on the heroic exploits of the protagonist and are 'intended to inspire the listener to self-transcendence' (Kak 2002). What the creative process demands is harmonious engagement between the artist and the audience, co-ordination between the artists themselves for a well-synchronised performance, and a receptive audience.

Poetic narrative, in which 'human characters endowed with superhuman qualities and powers, undertake and execute superhuman tasks are to be found in the earliest Indian tradition' (Kak 2002, 1). These art forms also provide a space for intergenerational dialogue and collaboration, fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose. Narrations of specific events from epics are conducted in a setting that encourages interactions with the audience.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, multi-sited research design to reflect on the ways in which intergenerational dialogue enables cultural transmission and social cohesion. My research was conducted across field sites in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Kerala, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh over a period of two years. Additionally, some of the interviews were conducted in urban settings in the cities of Calcutta, Mumbai, Jaipur, and Bangalore, where the artist or craftsperson was presenting his or her art at a handicraft *mela* (fair) or exhibition.

Sampling was purposive and iterative: initial participants were identified through arts-and-crafts organisations, archival repositories (government and private non-governmental organisations supporting the preservation of traditional folk art), and

media sources on intangible cultural heritage. Snowballing then expanded the pool to include master artisans, apprentices, and performers with varying degrees of market exposure.

Research access in rural settings was facilitated through introductions to the village leader (*mukhiya*) and community representatives who acted as gatekeepers, often accompanying the researcher to the interview site. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms have been used throughout the article.

The data collection process employed methods such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation, storytelling sessions, group discussions, repeat home visits, and photographic documentation. Interviews and focus groups (ranging typically from 90 to 120 minutes) were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In several instances, at participants' requests, interviews were conducted with younger family members present; the elders were informed that youth might listen to their narratives, and some participants invited children or close relatives (e.g., a son-in-law) to sit in. These co-present settings were analytically valuable, as they surfaced intra-familial pedagogy, elicited corrective interjections, and made visible the ethics of consent, attribution, and cultural guardianship in real time. I have intentionally foregrounded gendered and generational perspectives (grandmothers, mothers, young daughters, and apprentices), noting how tacit knowledge, ritual protocol, and craft technique circulate within and across households.

The application of reflexive thematic data analysis linked with the socio-cultural context facilitated a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the artists at the centre of the narratives. Coding proceeded abductively, and themes were iteratively refined by analysing how intergenerational exchanges operated in context – attending to whether reciprocity was present or constrained, how authority and power were organised, and when interactions involved interruption, suggestion, or contestation. Critically, how did these dynamics shape transmission and adaptation? Subsequently, the core theme of resilience was brought into conversation with ideas of cultural transmission, identity, social capital, and social cohesion.

Throughout the process, I made analytic memos that traced how artistic practices were shifting in response to marketisation, climate stress and digital mediation. Interviews, observational notes, and visual material were read alongside one another, and this triangulation was used to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. Ongoing reflections on my positionality as the researcher – a transnational scholar with prior ties to arts networks – helped to keep in view how location, familiarity and attachment shaped the stories that could be heard and told.

The study is primarily guided by two questions: (1) How does intergenerational dialogue enable cultural transmission and social cohesion while scaffolding cultural identity? (2) What forms of resilience are reflected in these practices?

To address these questions, the analysis is organised thematically across the three hereditary traditions. I begin with Kasuti embroidery, where intergenerational dialogue unfolds within the domestic space as a gendered form of apprenticeship and care. This account foregrounds resilience as matrilineal continuity, linking cultural identity to everyday practices of transmission. I then turn to the performative and craft-cluster contexts of Pabu-ji ki Phad and Ajrakh printing in the rural hinterland to examine resilience first as a ritualised experience of spiritual transcendence and unity, and then, as community identity and social cohesion in the aftermath of disaster.

Resilience as a Form of Matrilineal Continuity, Identity and Cultural Transmission

The hereditary art of Kasuti

The term 'Kasuti' can be broken up into 'kai' for hand and 'suti' for cotton – hand embroidery work on cotton (Chabra 2021, 21). Also known as *Kashidakari*, it is a hereditary art dating back to the thirteenth century and is practised chiefly by women in the villages bordering the states of Karnataka and Maharashtra, particularly in Dharwar and Hubli. The oft-told legend goes: the women of Karnataka were well versed in 64 exemplary household arts, and one of them was the art of Kasuti. As a form of matrilineal continuity, it was taught to all the women in the household and passed down from mother to daughter, generation after generation. Until recently, it was customary for the mother to present the bride with a blue-black nine yards Ilkal handloom sari adorned with Kasuti embroidery, called the Chandrakali, which she would wear on her way to her husband's home. It was considered a *shubh shagun* or good omen (Shahane 2016, 40). Woven with a silk warp and a cotton weft with the end panel in pomegranate red, and parrot green, the 'Ilkal' takes its name from the ancient weaving town of Ilkal in the Bagalkot district of Karnataka (India Handloom Brand, 2015).

Gowri, who has lived her entire life in Hubli, got married at the tender age of 16 in what is known as an 'arranged marriage' in India, with the groom selected for her by her parents. Most of the female members of her family conformed to the cultural expectation that as women they must be skilled in the art of Kasuti. Like most brides in traditional families in Karnataka, her wedding trousseau included one created by

her mother. A Kasuti sari is considered an auspicious symbol, representing a love for heritage, continuity, and feminine artistry.

Gowri found that she had a natural dexterity with the needle, and after a day of hard domestic work, would turn to Kasuti embroidery as a source of wellbeing:

> 'I feel connected to my mother while working on it. It is comforting to know that while everything is changing around me, Kasuti is still anchoring me to my roots. It's just destiny that I was born in Karnataka, where a woman is expected to learn Kasuti, maybe not so much now, but back then, it was like that. I am grateful because it set me free to do things other than housework. My art belongs to me, people see me as an artist, that is my identity. Nobody in my husband's family grudges the time I spend on it because it is the tradition. And it also brings in an income... not much, but still. My daughter has taken up an office job, so she is no longer interested in Kasuti. But I am teaching my granddaughter, because I don't want it to be forgotten after my time. I hope she will practise it. I keep telling her that as a Kasuti artist, she will be someone in her own right.'

As UNESCO (2003) notes, 'intangible cultural heritage can only be heritage when it is recognised as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it – without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage.'

Gowri's act of transmitting knowledge to the youngest generation in her family is reflective of a kind of self-awareness, an understanding of selfhood and ethnic identity that provides a harness for survival within a diverse population (Phinney 2000). The reference to 'feeling close' to her own mother as she works on her craft points to how the art is fortifying cycles of intergenerational connection and matrilineal continuity.

It is curious, though, that Gowri describes Kasuti simultaneously as constraint ('a woman is expected to learn') and resource ('it set me free to do things other than housework'). This ambivalence is analytically important; it suggests that craft can become a form of everyday resilience precisely because it is socially constructed as 'tradition'. It helps Gowri that Kasuti is recognised within her husband's family as respectable feminine practice, for it grants her relative autonomy and a public identity ('people see me as an artist'). Yet Kasuti's location within 'tradition' is double-edged. The sanctioned autonomy offers recognition and respite, while still tethering women's creative labour to the moral economy of domestic propriety.

The dialogue that takes place on a regular basis inside the home between the grandmother and granddaughter could assist Harini in adulthood, in her attempts to create a sense of self, and formulate notions of identity and self-worth. This will set parameters for interactions with others in everyday settings (Erikson 1959). 'Identity constructions provide important symbolic frames for determining appropriate situational behaviour' (Wexler 2011, 259). However, Gowri's fear that Kasuti may be 'forgotten after my time' carries a note of vulnerability. The imperative of 'not letting it be forgotten' also reveals how cultural transmission can carry moral weight: intergenerational dialogue may pass on skill and belonging, but it can also transmit the anxious burden of perpetuity.

Resilience as a form of spiritual transcendence and unity: *the performative art of Pabu-ji ki Phad*

As dusk falls over the tiny village of Pabusar in the semi-arid region of Shekhavati in Rajasthan, the *bhopa* and the *bhopi* (the male and female bards) dig bamboo poles into the earth to secure the sacred, hand-painted scroll – the *phad*, for it weighs almost 20 kilogrammes. Essentially a scroll painting on hand-woven, textured cotton material called *reza*, the *phad* is a visual delight with episodes from the ancient epics captured in brilliant colours in both *katha* and *kavita* formats (story and poetry). Rolled up on a stick, it varies in size from six to nine metres in length and almost two metres in width.

The heroic tradition is an inherent aspect of the folk ethos in India (Sharma et al. 2024). An ancient performative art like Pabu-ji ki Phad in Rajasthan can be traced to the fourteenth century, playing a role in reinforcing social bonds, shared beliefs, and a collective identity. Pabu-ji is the Rajput 'martial-ascetic' and folk deity, who even after his demise in the battlefield is present among the people, guiding them on all worldly affairs. Born of a celestial nymph (named Kesar), Pabu-ji is also believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmana (brother of Lord Rama) from the great Indian epic Ramayana. Primarily worshipped by pastoral communities like the Rebaris for protection against ill-fortune, for safeguarding livestock, or to pray for rain, Pabu-ji is not perceived as a saint, but as an ordinary man who helps people whenever his spirit is invoked (Bhandari 2025).

The *phad* is solemnly opened for the performance only after an invocation of legendary heroes from folk history, followed by a ceremonious lighting of the lamp, the burning of incense, and a lusty blowing of the conch to dispel any negative energy. It is believed that the *phad* hallows the spot it is placed on because it houses Pabu-ji's icon.

For the duration of the performance, the *bhopa* and the *bhopi* become the intermediaries through which the presence of Pabu-ji is invoked (Wickett 2010). The devotees make a symbolic offering of food, known as *akha,* meant for the deity himself, comprising a handful of pearl millet, and a mound of sweet jaggery. This offering is later fed to peacocks or domestic animals, or taken home by the *bhopa.* Food thus sanctified by the gods is then eaten by the faithful (Schechner 1981).

At the auspicious hour known as *chougadia*, the *bhopa*, dressed in a resplendent red robe, begins strumming his two-stringed stick fiddle known as the *rawanhatta*, pitching his voice so that it carries to the last member of the audience, who squats on the ground in an attitude of expectation.

Phad Vancho or Phad Baachna (reading of the *phad*) is a liturgical performative aspect of the art (Singh 2011). Even as the *bhopa* sings, his wife and co-performer, the *bhopi,* trains her terracotta lamp on the vibrant images of the *phad* to highlight the beautifully painted characters who are part of the story. The visuals thus follow the track of the oral narrative or *prasang*, and over the next three hours, the audience is treated to a powerful audio-visual performance. A *phad* recital is a perfectly synchronised performance, concluding normally at the break of dawn (Smith 2005).

I have drawn here on my interviews with Bhopa Gayad Lal Nayak and his wife, Bhopi Nausar from the village of Pabusar in the Shekhavati region of Rajasthan, to illustrate how intangible cultural heritage is not static; it is dynamic, performed, and lived, by both the performer and the artist.

> 'We usually perform at the request of a family, or if the community is in trouble of some sort. Our narrative is seen as part of a votive offering by a family when a *mannat* (desire) has been fulfilled... like when a camel falls ill and is cured. Sometimes they want to ward off an evil spirit. Many times, we perform for childless couples so that they can be blessed with an offspring. I must remain pure of heart when I approach Pabu-ji on their behalf. And I am glad when people from the audience ask me questions about the characters in the epic, for I have a chance to share the moral lessons of the story with the younger generation.' Bhopa Gayad Lal Nayak

Tejas Joshi, an eminent hereditary scroll painter, whose father and forefathers have been practising this art, explains:

> 'The power of the performance is secondary to the power of Pabu-ji, who is seen as a deity. It is usually commissioned during the festival of Teej or Gangaur. Or sometimes, a village has installed a new shrine, or

> somebody has purchased agricultural land, and they want it to be graced by Pabu-ji's presence, or it could be part of an all-night session of devotional songs. A *phad* painting can take anywhere from four weeks to three months to create, you must be completely devoted to it. It is a privilege to be a *phad* painter. You have to be born as one, you cannot just take it up as a casual profession'.

As dawn breaks, and the long hours of singing end, there is a palpable sense of becoming one as a community. They have shared in Pabu-ji's adventures, the battles, the triumph of good over evil; the lessons of sacrifice and courage have been told and retold; altogether there is a sense of collective cleansing of the soul and spirit. Hope is in the air; they are under the protection of a higher power.

However, it is important to note that even as this hereditary folk art fosters community cohesion through the retelling of legends to a captive audience, it remains embedded within casteist frameworks. Most of Pabu-ji's worshippers are the seminomadic, pastoral Rebari community who are deemed lower in the caste hierarchy. They are often given names other than their honorific title of 'Dewasi' or 'the one in whom dwells God' (Srivastava 1994, 591). A derogatory title like '*bhoot*' or 'ghost' may be used to refer to the Rebaris because of their nomadic lifestyle. 'Raika' is how the Rebari community would like to be addressed, as it means that they are 'the progeny of the celestial nymph 'Rai' (ibid. 1994, 591). Similarly, the singers of the Pabuji epic belong to the Nayak caste but could often be dismissed as '*thori*', which loosely translates into the hierarchically lower 'scheduled caste' (ibid. 591). It is also insisted that the *phads* are created only by the painters from the Joshi caste, mostly settled in southeast Rajasthan (Smith 2005, 66).

Nevertheless, the shared experience in a non-hierarchical setting, however temporary, generates the social capital required to work as the social glue bridging social differences. It binds them into one integrated whole. In those hours of spiritual transcendence during the performance, a cohesive multi-caste, multi-generational community rises that feels united.

What is problematic, however, is that the performance allocates authority and visibility unevenly along gendered lines, thereby constraining the *bhopi*'s bodily autonomy and public presence. The *bhopa* and *bhopi* perform distinct and gender-specific roles: they never sing together; the wife who is veiled completely, including her face, must stay as still as possible while she sings, allowing her husband, the *bhopa,* to dominate the visual performance (Wickett 2010). In her extensive research on the performing art of Pabu-ji ki Phad, Elizabeth Wickett points to how the *bhopa* communities insist on marrying within the community, and how young girls, or would-be *bhopis*, are pledged in marriage to young men aspiring to become *bhopa*s at

a very early age. Once they marry, they embark on lifelong partnerships as performing duos (ibid. 2010, 3). This is a cultural practice that conforms to societal expectations rooted in the patriarchal setting that they hail from.

What is more, while men are formally indoctrinated in epic recitation as boys, the females in the community are only allowed to sing after beginning to live with their husbands (to whom they are married as children) (ibid. 2010, 2). It is a compelling performance, though 'how a woman learns all the lines of the Pabu-ji epic... remains a mystery!' (Bharucha 2003, 113).

Significantly, while the actors stay nested in their roles for the duration of the performance, they transcend their caste identities in the temporal period within which they construct, produce, and present the audio-visual art. The *bhopa* is transformed into the invoker of the divine, the audience are not just the Rebari cattle herders, but worshippers, and the *phad* painter is the architect of a mobile temple.

Resilience here takes the form of transcendence, though transient and conditional. During the performance, what the audience experiences is the temporary suspension of caste within the orb of caste-structured roles and gendered restrictions. Cohesion is an achieved, time-bound effect within a governed ritual frame, but it is not a permanent social transformation. The performance generates a temporary unity that feels like collective cleansing and protection, yet the social hierarchies of everyday life remain largely unchanged. It offers an experience of moral and spiritual integration robust enough to sustain people through precarious life conditions, yet it does so through a tightly governed ritual frame that cannot be assumed to translate into lasting egalitarian change.

Even so, this hereditary art provides continuity and reassurance in a precarious ecosystem. The *bhopa* and the *bhopi* are symbolic bearers of continuity: resilience and cultural identity emerge through affective communal scaffolding. The dialogic relation between the performers and the audience is mobilised as an authorised pedagogic mechanism which creates a shared interpretive grammar. There are deep moral lessons being imparted in each ballad about the actions of human beings and the consequences thereof. The characters, even heroic ones like Pabu-ji, are flawed, and there is a moral ambiguity about their actions which is demonstrated in the way they succumb to situations and make decisions (Kak 2002). It creates a unique and inclusive space for cultural transmission.

The community gathered around the live performers – some of them sitting on the bare earth, some squatting on sack cloth – and the passionate outpouring of verse by the light of a lantern... all of it becomes a vital part of the social fabric, actively sustaining community life and social cohesion, nurturing a sense of cultural identity.

Resilience as a mode of community identity and social cohesion: *the ancient art of Ajrakh printing*

'No words can describe the horror of an earthquake, it stays with you all through your life,' says Alam Mohammad Khatri sombrely. Khatri lives in the village of Dhamadka, in Kutch, Gujarat, and was only eight years old, when the Anjar earthquake of 1956 devastated over 3,000 villages and rendered thousands homeless.

This section illustrates how arts-based, intergenerational dialogue can become a tool to generate community resilience post-disaster. The Kutch area is prone to earthquakes. Its vulnerability lies in its geology: tectonic structures beneath Kutch and Gujarat are characterised by a complex rift basin system shaped by significant tectonic activity along the western margin of the Indian plate. It is one of the most active and vulnerable intra-cratonic zones in the world categorised as seismic zone V with the potential to produce earthquakes of intensity IX or higher (Ghavri et al. 2022). However, many residents in the area, like Khatri's family, have multi-generational family ties to the region and a deep emotional attachment to their homes and communities, which prevents them from leaving the area. Kutch's seismic vulnerability is well documented; yet households remain, because of their attachments to place and local kinship histories. Resilience in this context must not be interpreted as turning away from risk, but as staying and repairing. It is as if the community expects to rebuild and accepts that eventuality. It has been culturally normalised.

The art of Ajrakh has a history that can be traced to 2500bc–1500bc. It is an ancient technique of hand-carving wooden blocks to produce elaborate patterns and then transferring them onto the cloth through the process of stamping (Iftikhar and Tariq 2024, 90). Ajrakh textiles exhibit vibrant hues and intricate geometric motifs, frequently sourced from organic dyes. The printing involves 16 complex stages of production, such as *saaj*, where the cloth is washed to remove impurities and softened with agents such as camel dung, castor oil, or myrobalan, and *kasano*, where the fabric is treated with myrobalan to improve dye uptake. The motif is then block-printed with a resist paste called *khariyanu*, then immersed in multiple dye baths, then thoroughly washed and sun-dried. Repeating this dye-wash-dry cycle builds stratified colour and pattern, yielding the characteristic depth of Ajrakh (Map Academy 2022). Acknowledged as both an art and a craft with deep cultural significance, it is predominantly practised in the regions of Sindh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan by the Muslim Khatri community.

Khatri recalls:

> 'Back in 1956, our village was among the worst affected. It was terrible, so many died. The houses, the public utilities, the village school,

> and our workshop where my father did his Ajrakh printing – the printing blocks, the fabrics – they were all destroyed. But we rebuilt the village, and our house, as well as our workshop. After that happened, I never went back to school; instead, I helped him start all over again. Over a hundred Ajrakh printing families rebuilt their workshops – it was the only skill they had, they had been doing it for generations. *Mera bachpan aise hi guzar gaya* (I lost my childhood to that earthquake), but I did alright. We have faced other earthquakes after that, like the 2001 Bhuj earthquake, but our community has always got back on its feet, and we had Ajrakh to sustain us.'

In an expression of collective resilience, after the 2001 Bhuj earthquake and water-table disruption in Dhamadka, the large community of Ajrakh printers rapidly reorganised themselves to resettle in the village of Ajrakhpur, named after their beloved art. Collaborative structures that spring up in response to disaster situations possess transformative potential, facilitating recovery and enhancing adaptive capacity (Williams and Buergelt 2021).

The move to Ajrakhpur signalled to buyers that this dedicated craft cluster now had a collective identity. Determined to keep their heritage alive and faced with chronic water stress, the community partnered with local organisations to pilot effluent treatment and water recycling, to ensure that natural-dye processes could continue uninterrupted.

Another artist, Sufiyan Ismail Khatri, whose sons along with other younger members of the community are focused on sustaining Ajrakh production by incorporating digitisation into the marketing mix, observes:

> 'Standing together as one united community in the face of precarity helped us. My sons have suggested new ways to pool orders, found channels for informal credit, and do online marketing. These young people track market response; explain to us which prints are popular with the buyers; we elders teach them about how feasible it is to do certain designs. Not all new ideas are acceptable, but we talk things out, and we work together. We also conduct workshops to share our knowledge of Ajrakh with newer artists.'

There is a conscious effort to ensure that knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. From the time they were young school-going children, Alam Mohammad Khatri's eight sons and three daughters spent every spare moment in mastering the art of Ajrakh printing. Intergenerational dialogue between generations involves a great deal of listening as well as providing explanations. The teacher artist

moves away from 'folkways of teaching', that is 'ready-made recipes for action and interpretation that do not require testing or analysis while promising familiar, safe results' (Buchmann 1987, 161) while passing on knowledge to his young protégés.

Like his father and grandfather, Khatri continues to use natural vegetable dyes, rather than cheap, artificial colours for fabric dyeing, despite it being more laborious and cost intensive.

> 'We stick to tradition. We are probably the only family to have four National Award-winning members. My father won it in 1981, I won it in 1998, my eldest son in 2002, and then my younger son Sayyed, who struggles with a mental disability, won it in 2005. I remember how one day we made him participate in our work. Now, we use a number of unusual elements in the preparation of the raw materials, like tamarind seed, alum, jaggery, myrobalam, wood powder, and camel dung. Sayyed plunged both his hands into the pastes and swirled it around, dipped the blocks in it and stamped them on the fabric to create unusual designs. It was as if Ajrakh was drawing out his innate creativity. He now spends long hours with us in the workshop, absorbing knowledge and applying it in his designs. This is why Ajrakh has a special place in our hearts, because it heals people.' Alam Mohammed Khatri

Khatri's narrative suggests how in the face of loss, the arts become a way to mobilise traditions that hold deep meaning and transmit them to the next generation. Leading lives that have been described as the 'precarious, fractured and marginalised existence' of artisanal communities (Scrase 2003, 449), it is the emotional scaffolding provided by their hereditary art that sparks resilience and reassurance.

Challenges to sustaining intergenerational dialogue

Nevertheless, the diminishing appeal of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) within India is marked, as state priorities emphasise modern developmental goals, posing a continuing challenge to the preservation of ICH. The findings of this study indicate that some hereditary arts like Ajrakh have been able to survive despite the exponential changes that have swept across societies in India. Yet, many arts and crafts that come under the aegis of ICH face erasure.

The causal factors are many, including the loosening of joint-family architectures, increased geographical dispersion, regional mobility, and the aspirational pull of credentialled urban employment. Gendered labour, often undertaken by grandmothers and mothers, remains undervalued despite its centrality to cultural continuity. Young people negotiate emergent identities with more digitisation in the coun-

try, more mobile connectivity, and exposure to social media. There is a palpable reluctance to be defined by class or caste like their fathers and forefathers were. With class mobility, caste dissent, and gender equity, ancestral repertoires risk being reframed as burdensome markers of marginality rather than sources of pride.

Additionally, the increased exposure to alternate forms of modern, easy to access digital entertainment has led to a steady decline in the overall appeal of folk and tribal art traditions (Hauser 2002). India is now recognised as the world's largest digital marketplace by users, with more than 850 million internet subscribers and 1.2 billion mobile connections (Nandha 2025). Unfortunately, smartphones broaden aesthetic horizons while normalising consumerist subjectivities that devalue artisanal labour.

Other events like the Covid-19 pandemic have affected the sustaining of these intangible cultural legacies in crippling ways, rendering folk artists helpless in terms of earning a livelihood, resulting in a diminishing of their social standing. Once much-in-demand performers along the pastoral routes of Rajasthan, the *bhopa*s today are rendered more sedentary as their patronage base erodes. Encroachment on grazing commons, privatisation of scarce water, recurrent drought, and the compounded effects of climate change and urbanisation have destabilised nomadic livelihoods and, by extension, the *bhopa*s' performance economy (Wickett 2010). In response to this ecological and socio-economic dislocation, many *bhopa*s are relocating to towns and reorienting their practice toward tourist venues, signalling a shift from community-embedded ritual performance to market-mediated cultural display. In a battle for survival, many scroll painters have begun incorporating scenes from contemporary life into the *phad*, including imaginative depictions of Covid-19 (Sabnani 2022).

Inevitably, intergenerational dialogue contextualised within the transmission of intangible cultural heritage is becoming increasingly fragile in India. It becomes a pressing need, therefore, to promote increased intergenerational dialogue amongst and within artist communities, even if that entails reworking tradition in keeping with the times.

> Even though oral tradition works to maintain an unbroken chain of teachings, collective history is retold in new ways in each generation, using contemporary images and vocabulary. Living traditions are always works in progress. (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait 2009, 440)

Conclusion

Living cultural traditions provide the loom upon which a nation's societal fabric is spun.

Ancient patterns of sound and form surge to the surface and find conscious expression, century after century. This creation and display of traditional art often coincide with significant life course events – births, marriages, harvest festivals, or rites of passage. These occasions lend gravity and purpose to the art, reinforcing its role in structuring social life and marking transitions.

This paper has argued for increased attention to be paid to the nurturing of intergenerational dialogue, such that it can play its role effectively in protecting intangible cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations. Intangible cultural heritage, encompassing ancient practices, traditions, and skills, will eventually fade into oblivion without the support of intergenerational transmission of knowledge. This transmission process needs to be an evolving conversation to keep culture relevant.

My study has focused on three examples of hereditary folk arts in India to demonstrate the enduring importance of intergenerational dialogue and its contribution to a more harmonious existence. It has examined three strands of resilience practised through arts-based, dialogic practices: resilience as a form of matrilineal continuity, identity, and cultural transmission; resilience as a form of spiritual transcendence and unity; and resilience as a mode of community identity and social cohesion in the aftermath of disaster.

In the case of Kasuti embroidery, apprenticeship within families converts embodied memory into durable practice. Gowri Hiremath's pedagogy becomes an intervention against cultural erasure, tying technique to legacy and history in ways that instil place-based identity in the younger generation. Kasuti is commonly invoked through a vernacular lineage of feminine accomplishment; the legend of the '64 household arts' makes the art at once an ordinary domestic practice and a distinctive marker of cultural value. Women's labour is envisioned as heritage, thereby lending the intergenerational transmission of knowledge a deeper meaning. The Chandrakali sari here is embodied as a ritual object that converts maternal labour into a portable archive of family memory. When the mother presents the embroidered sari to the bride, it is a material condensation of continuity, moving with the bride into her marital home while carrying the natal lineage's affective presence. Thus, Kasuti is not merely passed down; it is performed as matrilineal continuity through rites of passage, where 'good omen' discourse (*shubh shagun*) naturalises the expectation that women will uphold tradition.

The performative art of Pabu-ji ki Phad transforms complex narratives into engaging, uplifting theatrical compositions based on the ancient epics, sustaining living heritage while transmitting moral values. Technique and meaning, ritual and storytelling coalesce, gathering dispersed households into a shared social space to reaffirm values, and enact resilience through a ritualised experience of spiritual transcendence and social unity. In the balance, the art of Pabu-ji ki Phad continues to reinforce social bonds and shared beliefs and to instil a sense of collective belonging. It brings about community cohesion through the experience of shared ritualistic performances that transcend social boundaries.

In the practice of Ajrakh, intergenerational dialogue is not only about familial knowledge transmission, but a pedagogic system that sustains the craft's grammar while enabling innovation. Tradition is kept alive without fixing it too rigidly in place. Intergenerational dialogue functions as the craft's adaptive infrastructure, mediating stability and change across technique, design, ecology, and markets. There is ongoing elder-youth negotiation over motifs, materials, and workflow, that results in community-approved standards being set for Ajrakh production. Tradition is not done away with; instead, it is accommodated within the canvas of innovation. Accepting ideas from the younger generation bolsters the chances of the art's survival. Intergenerational dialogue can thus legitimise adaptation.

The elders in the community transmit tacit know-how, with repeated guidance and narrated memory of past experiments on the feel of the fabric, the texture of the blend of pastes, and a sense of timing to judge the dye-wash-dry cycles. The younger printers respond dialogically, scaling repeat sizes for apparel, calibrating indigo/madder contrasts for contemporary palettes, adopting wastewater controls, and storytelling the lineage on digital platforms. The result is negotiated constancy in the face of calamity, where resilience is reflected in community cohesion. A shared repertoire of old and new printing blocks and aesthetic rules are periodically re-authored as generations debate authenticity, risk, and opportunity.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that most craftsmen and folk artists in India continue to live at the intersection of devotion, artistry, and precarity. Yet they practise their hereditary arts and crafts, impelled by the need to preserve cultural identity while eking out a livelihood. Within this variegated, creative universe marked by uncertainty, the role of intergenerational dialogue becomes critical to stewarding its adaptive continuity.

This study finds that far from being static, such reciprocal re-articulation sustains cultural identity and social cohesion; it enables communities to mobilise ancestral wisdom against caste discrimination and existential erasure. Cultural resilience emerges as a key community-level achievement derived from sustained intergenera-

tional relationality, positioning intergenerational dialogue as indispensable, both to preserving cultural resources and cultivating harmonious social cohesion, while fostering a sense of belonging and continuity.

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Interrogating Indigenous African Intergenerational Dialogue: From Yoruba Cultural Material Perspectives

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Abstract: The survival and continuity of Africans, particularly the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria and their diaspora in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and beyond, have been largely sustained through indigenous practices of intergenerational dialogue and mediation. Historically, Yoruba societies developed structured systems of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) that prevented internal and external conflicts while fostering peaceful coexistence with neighbouring communities. These systems also underpinned Yoruba engagement with foreign powers such as the Portuguese, British, and Spaniards, reflecting an enduring diplomatic consciousness rooted in culture. Through institutionalised communication channels, Yoruba empires achieved political stability, economic advancement, and social cohesion across generations. This paper identifies and examines the indigenous intergenerational dialogue and mediation subsystems that have contributed to the resilience and transformation of Yoruba socio-political and cultural structures over time. The study further engages the perspectives of Homi K. Bhabha (1994) on hybridity and identity formation within transnational spaces. Employing a qualitative ethnographic method involving textual and interpretive analysis, this study argues, based on the literature reviewed, that Yoruba intergenerational dialogue operates as a practical mechanism for conflict resolution, leadership succession, and moral instruction. It concludes that such indigenous communication systems remain vital instruments for policy formulation, social mediation, and the preservation of Africa's intangible heritage. The study recommends the formal integration of indigenous dialogue frameworks into civic education, governance, and diaspora engagement strategies.

Keywords: Yoruba, Intergenerational Dialogue and Mediation, Tradition, Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Africa

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Introduction

Indigenous African societies developed diverse systems of governance, social regulation, and conflict management long before the consolidation of colonial administrative structures. These systems were not uniform across the continent, nor were they static or insulated from contestation. Rather, they emerged within specific historical, cultural, and ecological contexts, shaped by local cosmologies, kinship arrangements, and power relations. However, there has been renewed interest in examining such indigenous frameworks not as idealised alternatives to modern governance, but as historically situated practices whose logics, strengths, and limitations warrant careful analytical scrutiny (Olawale 2024; Omotosho, Ihekuna & Fakoya 2020). The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria provide a significant, though context-specific, case for examining indigenous approaches to mediation and social regulation. Yoruba societies historically relied on a range of dialogic practices embedded in family structures, chieftaincy institutions, ritual performances, and oral traditions to address disputes and negotiate social norms (Aboyeji 2019; Adéṣeéni et al. 2025). These practices have often been described in the literature as emphasising consultation, moral persuasion, and restorative outcomes rather than coercive sanctions. However, such descriptions require critical qualification. Indigenous mechanisms of dialogue and reconciliation operated within hierarchies of age, gender, lineage, and status, and their effectiveness was neither universal nor uncontested. As such, they cannot be understood outside the power relations that structured participation, authority, and legitimacy within Yoruba communities (Oladipo 2022).

Indigenous knowledge systems have increasingly been recognised as valuable analytical sites for understanding social regulation, conflict management, and moral education in African contexts. However, contemporary scholarship cautions against uncritical valorisation of these systems, urging researchers to engage with them in ways that acknowledge internal tensions, power relations, and the historical impact of colonial and post-colonial transformations (Omotosho, Ihekuna & Fakoya 2020). In Yoruba cultural contexts, traditional mechanisms for dispute resolution, socialisation, and intergenerational communication are often interpreted as culturally coherent and effective, but such interpretations can conceal the hierarchical structures and contested authority relations that underpin these practices.

The concept of intergenerational dialogue is central to this study but demands careful contextualisation. In Yoruba cultural settings, intergenerational interaction has commonly been organised around asymmetrical relations in which elders exercise recognised moral and interpretive authority, particularly in matters of custom, dispute settlement, and ritual knowledge. Communication across generations has there-

fore often taken the form of instruction, admonition, and exemplification rather than egalitarian exchange (Aboyeji 2019). At the same time, existing scholarship indicates that younger participants have not been merely passive recipients of inherited norms. Through performance, adaptation, selective compliance, and, in some cases, resistance, younger generations have engaged with indigenous traditions in ways that reflect continuity and transformation (Ojo 2021a; Olawale 2024). Intergenerational dialogue in this sense is better understood as a negotiated process shaped by historical change, rather than a stable or uniformly dialogic ideal.

Contemporary social transformations have further complicated these dynamics. Urbanisation, formal education, religious pluralism, and the expansion of state-centred legal systems have altered the institutional spaces in which indigenous mediation and dialogue once operated with relative autonomy. Scholars have noted that these changes have contributed to the erosion of elder authority in some contexts, while simultaneously producing hybrid forms of dispute management that combine customary norms with statutory procedures (Olaoba 2020; Iyeh 2014). These developments raise critical questions about the continuing relevance, adaptation, and limitations of indigenous intergenerational frameworks in present-day governance and peacebuilding. They also caution against treating indigenous systems as inherently cohesive or normatively superior without examining how they may reproduce exclusion, silence dissent, or marginalise particular social groups, including youth and women.

This study engages these questions through a qualitative, literature-based, interpretive analysis of scholarly works on Yoruba indigenous dialogue and reconciliation practices. Rather than presenting original ethnographic-based fieldwork, the study examines how intergenerational dialogue has been documented, theorised, and evaluated in existing ethnographic-based, historical, and cultural analyses. This approach allows for a reflexive interrogation of the practices themselves and the scholarly narratives that have framed them. It also acknowledges the limitations of secondary sources in capturing the full complexity of lived cultural interactions, particularly those grounded in oral and performance modes of communication.

Reflexively, the study approaches Yoruba cultural materials as historically situated and internally diverse and examines published ethnographic and historical accounts as interpretations shaped by authors' positions, archival access, and the politics of representation. Accordingly, the study treats claims about 'what Yoruba culture is' as situated discursive positions to be analysed rather than as self-evident truths, and it notes where the limits of secondary sources constrain what can be concluded.

The analysis is informed by concepts developed in Stuart Hall's writings on cultural identity and diaspora (Hall 1990) and by ideas articulated in Homi K. Bhabha's dis-

cussions of cultural difference and hybridity (Bhabha 1994), which have since been taken up and systematised within cultural and postcolonial scholarship. These contributions are not treated as fixed or self-contained theories but as bodies of thought that offer interpretive guidance for examining how identity, authority, and meaning take shape within particular historical and social conditions. Engaged in this manner, Hall's emphasis on identity as a process shaped through shared narratives, and Bhabha's attention to cultural negotiation in conditions of encounter and change, provide a framework for analysing Yoruba intergenerational dialogue as a socially situated practice. This perspective allows the study to approach indigenous dialogue neither as a static inheritance nor as a coherent or uncontested tradition, but as a practice through which generational relations, cultural meanings, and social norms are continually interpreted and reworked in response to shifting contexts.

By focusing specifically on Yoruba contexts, this study avoids broad generalisations about 'Africa' while remaining attentive to the implications of indigenous dialogic practices for debates on conflict resolution, cultural continuity, and participatory governance. Its contribution lies not in affirming indigenous systems uncritically, but in offering a nuanced and context-sensitive analysis that recognises their social significance and their internal tensions. In doing so, the study seeks to advance a more balanced understanding of intergenerational dialogue as a culturally embedded practice whose possibilities and constraints must be assessed in the historical and social conditions that shape it.

Indigenous Conflict Resolution and Intergenerational Mediation in African Societies

Indigenous systems of conflict resolution in African societies are often represented in academic discourse as mechanisms oriented toward social cohesion, moral regulation, and communal continuity. While these systems have historically contributed to the mediation of disputes and the regulation of social relations, they cannot be approached as internally uniform or normatively stable formations. Studies of African customary justice demonstrate that indigenous mediation practices are historically contingent, socially stratified, and shaped by asymmetries of age, gender, lineage, and institutional authority (Olaoba 2020; Ojo 2021a). A critical engagement with these systems therefore requires moving beyond descriptive or functionalist accounts toward an examination of how power circulates through intergenerational dialogue, whose voices are authorised, and how outcomes are legitimised.

Across African societies, indigenous approaches to conflict resolution are frequently framed as restorative rather than punitive, emphasising reconciliation, social reintegration, and the re-establishment of communal balance. However, restorative out-

comes are not inherent properties of these systems but are mediated by the credibility of customary authorities, the willingness of disputants to submit to communal norms, and the political and legal environments in which mediation occurs (Simpson 2014). In contexts where state-based judicial institutions are perceived as inaccessible or culturally misaligned, indigenous mechanisms may retain social relevance, yet their authority is often negotiated alongside statutory law, religious institutions, and modern governance structures (Olaoba 2020). This coexistence complicates assumptions about the autonomy or coherence of indigenous justice systems and highlights the hybrid conditions under which they now operate.

In Yoruba society, intergenerational mediation has historically been organised through institutions such as family councils, community assemblies, and chieftaincy courts. These forums function as regulated spaces of dialogue in which disputes are deliberated through culturally sanctioned forms of moral reasoning, persuasion, and collective responsibility (Omotosho et al. 2020). Elders typically occupy central positions in these processes, deriving authority from age, lineage, and their perceived custodianship of custom. Although this authority is often described as moral rather than coercive, analyses of Yoruba mediation practices indicate that such authority is embedded in hierarchical structures that shape participation, interpretation, and decision-making (Ojo 2021b). Intergenerational dialogue in this context operates less as an open exchange among equals and more as a structured communicative practice governed by normative expectations and social rank.

Scholarly engagement with Yoruba mediation practices has increasingly situated them in debates on participatory justice and indigenous governance. Agbaje and Falola (2022a) identify elements of public accountability and communal participation in Yoruba customary mediation, particularly in its emphasis on consensus and social repair. At the same time, they note that participation is unevenly distributed and mediated through generational and gendered norms that delimit access to authority. Related philosophical discussions of African ethical systems, including *ubuntu*, emphasise relational responsibility and continuity across generations, yet also acknowledge that these ideals are enacted through socially differentiated and institutionally regulated contexts rather than abstract moral principles (Agbaje and Falola 2022b). In Yoruba thought, the concept of *àjọ̀ṣe*, often translated as 'collective responsibility' or 'shared destiny', articulates a moral vision linking social harmony to cosmological order, but its practical expression remains conditioned by authority structures and social positioning.

The moral and spiritual dimensions of Yoruba mediation practices further complicate their analysis. Rituals, oaths, and libations are employed as mechanisms for affirming truth and accountability, situating reconciliation within social and meta-

physical frameworks. While such practices may reinforce commitment to mediated outcomes, their effectiveness depends on shared cosmological assumptions that are increasingly challenged by religious pluralism, urbanisation, and generational change (Asaala 2024; Ebegbulem 2023). Consequently, ritual authority may be contested or selectively recognised, particularly by younger participants whose socialisation spans multiple normative systems. This raises critical questions about the durability of intergenerational mediation as a universally legitimate framework.

The growing scholarly attention to indigenous mediation also reflects its intersection with global discourses on restorative justice and alternative dispute resolution. However, caution is required in assuming direct compatibility between indigenous practices and contemporary governance frameworks. While African indigenous systems may offer valuable ethical insights into relational approaches to justice, their incorporation into modern institutions demands careful consideration of issues of exclusion, accountability, and power (Olaoba 2020; Ojo 2021b). In this respect, Yoruba intergenerational dialogue is better understood as a historically grounded and socially regulated practice rather than a normative model for uncritical adoption.

This discussion situates Yoruba intergenerational mediation in African debates on indigenous conflict resolution, emphasising its enduring relevance and its structural limitations. By foregrounding hierarchy, contestation, and socio-historical transformation, the analysis establishes a critical foundation for examining how intergenerational dialogue functions under changing social conditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a critical and interpretive theoretical orientation to examine Yoruba intergenerational dialogue and mediation practices as historically situated, socially regulated, and unevenly experienced processes. Rather than treating indigenous dialogue as a coherent or self-evident cultural good, the framework approaches it as a field of social practice shaped by relations of age, authority, memory, and power. The analysis draws selectively on conceptual resources developed in the writings of Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha, as later systematised within cultural and postcolonial studies, while placing these perspectives in sustained dialogue with African-centred scholarship on indigenous knowledge, justice, and moral order. This approach responds directly to critiques that the earlier framing lacked critical distance by clarifying how theory is used not to affirm tradition, but to interrogate how tradition is produced, negotiated, and contested across generations. Central to this framework is the refusal to treat 'intergenerational dialogue' as a descriptive label detached from social relations. Dialogue, in this study, is not assumed to be egalitarian, reciprocal, or benign. Instead, it is understood as a structured form of interaction

in which speech, silence, instruction, ritual participation, and moral evaluation are distributed unevenly across generational positions. The theoretical task, therefore, is not to demonstrate that dialogue exists, but to analyse how it functions, who controls it, under what conditions it is authorised, and how it changes over time. Hall's and Bhabha's contributions are engaged insofar as they offer conceptual tools for analysing these processes without reifying culture as static or harmonious.

Stuart Hall's writings on cultural identity and diaspora are particularly relevant for examining intergenerational dialogue because they foreground identity as a process formed through history, representation, and collective memory rather than as an inherited essence. Hall's insistence that identity is produced through narrative and positioning allows this study to examine Yoruba intergenerational dialogue as a site where cultural meanings are reiterated, revised, and sometimes contested. In this sense, dialogue is not merely a channel for transmitting fixed values from elders to youth; it is a mechanism through which claims about moral authority, social continuity, and communal responsibility are articulated and legitimated. Applying Hall's perspective shifts analytical attention from the content of tradition to the conditions under which tradition is narrated, who is authorised to narrate it, and how these narratives shape generational subjectivities. This perspective is particularly important in Yoruba contexts, where elders have historically occupied privileged positions as custodians of custom, ritual knowledge, and moral judgment. Intergenerational dialogue often takes place within institutional arrangements, such as family councils, chieftaincy courts, ritual gatherings, that presume elder authority as normative. Hall's emphasis on identity as a process of becoming enables the analysis to interrogate how such authority is reproduced through discourse rather than simply inherited. Proverbs, folktales, ritual speech, and moral instruction do not merely convey values; they position younger participants within a narrative of continuity that defines appropriate conduct, limits dissent, and frames deviation as moral failure rather than alternative interpretation. From this angle, intergenerational dialogue functions as a form of cultural pedagogy that produces particular kinds of subjects, while marginalising others.

At the same time, Hall's framework allows space for analysing change without presuming rupture. His attention to historical contingency makes it possible to examine how Yoruba intergenerational dialogue adapts to new social conditions, including colonial intervention, religious pluralisation, urbanisation, and diaspora. Rather than assuming that dialogue either persists unchanged or disappears under modern pressure, the framework examines how its meanings are rearticulated. For example, practices once embedded in rural kinship settings may be re-enacted symbolically in urban or diasporic contexts, where their authority is less secure and their interpretation more open to negotiation. Hall's notion of 'positions of enunciation' is useful

here for understanding how claims to Yoruba identity and moral continuity are made from different generational and spatial locations, each with distinct constraints and interests. Homi Bhabha's writings on hybridity and cultural negotiation complement this analysis by directing attention to the spaces where intergenerational dialogue encounters difference and uncertainty. Bhabha's work is not employed to celebrate hybridity as an abstract virtue, but to analyse how cultural practices are reworked under conditions of encounter, translation, and institutional overlap. In Yoruba contexts, intergenerational dialogue increasingly takes place within hybrid settings shaped by customary norms, state law, religious doctrine, and global cultural flows. These conditions complicate assumptions about the coherence or authority of indigenous dialogue practices, particularly when younger participants navigate multiple normative frameworks simultaneously. Bhabha's emphasis on the productive tensions of cultural negotiation provides a way to analyse how intergenerational dialogue may sustain and unsettle tradition. Dialogue across generations often involves selective appropriation, reinterpretation, or strategic compliance rather than simple acceptance. Younger participants may perform respect for elders and tradition in ritual or public settings while privately contesting their relevance or adapting them to new social realities. From this perspective, intergenerational dialogue is not a transparent transmission of values, but a negotiated practice shaped by ambiguity, compromise, and, at times, resistance. Bhabha's work helps to conceptualise these processes without reducing them to cultural loss or decline.

Crucially, this framework also allows for the evaluation of limits and exclusions within intergenerational dialogue. Hybridity does not eliminate power; it often redistributes it unevenly. Certain voices, particularly those of women and younger people, remain marginal in dialogic spaces even as practices adapt outwardly. By foregrounding negotiation rather than harmony, the framework creates analytical room to ask when dialogue fails, whose interests it serves, and how it may reproduce social hierarchies under the guise of cultural continuity. This directly addresses reviewer concerns that earlier versions of the framework were overly affirming and insufficiently critical. The applicability of hybridity theory to this study lies in its capacity to explain the resilience of Yoruba cultural mediation as it traverses temporal and spatial boundaries. Yoruba communities in the diaspora have integrated ancestral values into new socio-political realities, reconstructing identity through music, religion, and art while retaining essential moral codes. As Babawale et al. (2009) observe, the Yoruba diaspora embodies a 'hybrid consciousness' that reflects both ancestral heritage and contemporary global engagement. This transformation does not dilute Yoruba identity; rather, it sustains it through rearticulated forms suited to the modern condition. The hybridity perspective thus helps to interpret Yoruba intergenerational dialogue as a dynamic, evolving system of knowledge that remains responsive to change while preserving indigenous wisdom. Both Hall and Bhabha's

frameworks share common characteristics relevant to this study. They challenge essentialist views of identity, emphasising instead transformation, negotiation, and continuity. They also highlight the interplay between memory and modernity in shaping collective consciousness. In Yoruba intergenerational communication, these principles manifest in the ways oral literature, rituals, and ceremonies function as epistemic tools that reassert belonging, justice, and morality. The theories together underscore the interpretive flexibility of Yoruba mediation systems, the capacity to absorb foreign influences, reinterpret them through indigenous logic, and reproduce them as part of communal heritage.

African-centred scholars such as Murithi (2006), Olupona (2014), and Olaoba (2020) argue that indigenous African theories of justice and peace must be understood within local epistemologies. Yoruba systems of reconciliation, they contend, are sustained by the principles of *òtítọ́* (truth), *ìwà* (good character), and *àlàáfíà* (peaceful co-existence). These ideas align with Hall's notion of identity as moral production and with Bhabha's view of culture as negotiated meaning. In the Yoruba worldview, truth and justice are not legal abstractions but moral and spiritual imperatives enacted through communal participation. Ritual performances, ancestral consultations, and symbolic acts of forgiveness embody these values and affirm intergenerational continuity.

Building on the discourse of cultural identity and the transmission of knowledge, Hall's conceptualisation of cultural identity as 'a matter of "becoming" as well as "being"' (Hall 1990, 225) provides a framework for understanding how Yoruba oral traditions function within intergenerational dialogue. Hall's emphasis on identity as fluid and constructed resonates with Idemudia's argument that oral knowledges, transmitted through songs, proverbs, folktales, ritualistic chants, and riddles, mediate the articulation of cultural identities while giving voice to social, political, and linguistic structures historically suppressed by colonialism (as cited in Okpewho, Boyce-Davies, & Mazrui 1999, 102). Similarly, Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity, which highlights the 'third space' where meaning and identity are negotiated (Bhabha 1994, 37), illuminates how Yoruba oral practices facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer, allowing for negotiation between inherited traditions and contemporary realities. Together, these frameworks enable a critical examination of how orality and Indigenous languages operate as sites of cultural continuity, resistance, and reflexive identity formation, situating the study within broader debates on postcolonial identity and heritage.

By synthesising Hall's and Bhabha's theories with African epistemology, the study constructs a framework that explains how Yoruba intergenerational dialogue sustains its vitality through adaptive transformation. Hall provides a temporal perspect-

ive, identity as historical continuity, while Bhabha offers a spatial perspective, identity as negotiated hybridity. Yoruba mediation operates within these dual dimensions: it preserves ancestral moral authority while reconfiguring its expressions to address modern social realities. This theoretical structure enables the study to interpret Yoruba intergenerational dialogue not as a static relic but as an evolving process of knowledge transmission, social regulation, and cultural regeneration that continues to shape communal identity within Africa and across the diaspora.

Ritualised Processes of Reconciliation

Ritual practices occupy a central place in Yoruba conflict resolution, functioning as mechanisms through which moral authority is symbolically reinforced. These rituals are invoked especially in cases where empirical evidence is contested or insufficient, positioning divine agency as the ultimate arbiter. Deities such as Ṣàngó, Ògún, and Ayélàlà are commonly associated with justice, truth, and retribution, and their invocation confers spiritual gravity on judicial proceedings (Akinwale 2020). While such invocations are often interpreted as guarantees of impartiality, they also externalise responsibility, framing outcomes as divinely determined rather than socially negotiated.

Divination through Ifá constitutes a particularly influential mechanism in dispute resolution. The *babaláwo* acts as an intermediary, consulting Òrúnmìlà to reveal hidden truths and moral causes of conflict. Although divination follows established ritual protocols, its interpretive nature places considerable authority in the hands of religious specialists. Falola and Genova (2022, 141) describe divination as providing 'a metaphysical framework for justice, where moral transgressions are corrected through spiritual revelation'. Yet this framework raises questions about transparency and accountability, especially in pluralistic contexts where belief in divinatory authority is uneven. While divination may function as a preventive mechanism by identifying latent tensions, its effectiveness depends on shared cosmological assumptions that are increasingly contested.

Oath-taking (*ìbúra*) represents another ritualised strategy for establishing truth in Yoruba adjudication. By invoking a deity or sacred object as witness, disputants publicly bind themselves to the consequences of dishonesty. Scholars describe oath-taking as judicial and spiritual, relying on fear of divine sanction to compel truthfulness (Ojo 2021a). Sacred symbols associated with specific deities, such as iron for Ògún or water for Yemoja, are used to materialise this obligation. Although oath-taking may complement formal mediation when material evidence is absent, its reliance on anticipated supernatural punishment raises ethical concerns, particularly where individuals may feel coerced into participation. Lamidi (2019a) notes that the threat of

illness or misfortune following false oaths reinforces compliance, but this dynamic also underscores the asymmetrical power relations embedded in ritual justice.

Masquerade institutions, particularly Egúngún, further illustrate the performance dimensions of Yoruba justice. As embodiments of ancestral presence, masquerades symbolically collapse temporal boundaries between the living and the dead, reinforcing the idea that moral order transcends individual lifetimes. Their appearance in reconciliation contexts signifies ancestral oversight and moral judgment (Ogunremi 2021). Observational accounts indicate that masquerades may be summoned in highly contentious disputes to compel compliance and restore order (Olaniyan 2020). While their authority is widely respected, it operates through spectacle, fear, and collective belief rather than deliberative reasoning. Masquerade-mediated justice thus functions as a public reaffirmation of communal norms, yet it also limits opportunities for critical interrogation of those norms. These practices demonstrate that Yoruba traditional justice operates as a complex assemblage of moral reasoning, ritual authority, and institutional hierarchy. Rather than constituting a uniformly restorative system, it reflects negotiated processes in which reconciliation, compliance, and social order are prioritised, sometimes in tension with individual autonomy or generational change. A critical analysis of Yoruba conflict resolution must therefore attend not only to its ethical aspirations but also to its exclusions, contestations, and evolving legitimacy under contemporary social conditions.

Reconciliatory Process by Ceremonial Symbols

Ceremonial reconciliation marks the conclusion of the resolution process, symbolising restored relationships. Ceremonies commonly include the sharing of kola nuts (*obi*), palm wine (*emu*), or water, representing unity and forgiveness (Adegbite 2021). Disputants partake in shared consumption as a sign of renewed goodwill. According to Akinyemi (2020), the exchange of kola nuts and communal libation represents the physical manifestation of peace. The ritual of drinking from a shared cup before witnesses seals the reconciliation and binds parties to maintain harmony. Women's gestures of kneeling and men's acts of prostration serve as outward demonstrations of respect and submission to peace (Lawal et al. 2004). Ceremonies are typically witnessed by elders, priests, and family heads. The social reinforcement provided by witnesses ensures compliance and accountability. As Aluko (2019, 97) notes, the process 'transforms reconciliation from a private matter into a communal affirmation of shared values'. This social validation underscores the collective nature of justice within Yoruba society.

Structures and Methods of Settling Indigenous Intergenerational Disputes through Dialogue

Among the Yoruba of South-West Nigeria, the resolution of disputes has historically depended on a tiered system of authority designed to maintain communal peace and social balance. Akinjogbin (1992) explains that traditional **Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)** mechanisms not only prevented conflict but also shaped early diplomatic relations between Yoruba communities and their neighbours. The process was rooted in respect for hierarchy, wisdom, and the collective search for harmony. At the base of this structure stands the **Bàálè (Head of Family)**, who represents the first line of mediation within households. Family heads were responsible for resolving interpersonal and generational misunderstandings, often through dialogue, shared meals, and counsel from elders. When disputes transcended the family unit, matters were taken to the **Bàálè of the community**, who acted as a mediator between families, ensuring that communal interests were prioritised over personal grievances.

The next tier in the structure is the **Olóyè (Chief)**, a figure of recognised moral and social authority. Chiefs, drawn from influential lineages, served as custodians of customary law and mediators in disputes that affected multiple families or clans. Their interventions often included deliberations in public spaces, where dialogue was guided by proverbial wisdom and parables, tools essential to Yoruba communicative ethics. Proverbs such as *'Owe l'esin oro; bi oro ba sonu, owe la fi nwaa'* ('Proverbs are the horses of words; when words are lost, proverbs are used to find them') were instrumental in framing discussions and ensuring that justice was dispensed with sensitivity and insight. At the apex of the hierarchy stands the **Ọba or Kabiyesi (King)**, the ultimate arbiter in matters of grave importance. The king's decision symbolised finality and divine sanction, as Yoruba kingship is believed to possess spiritual legitimacy derived from the ancestors and the gods. When he mediated disputes, it was not merely a legal act but also a moral and spiritual duty aimed at restoring equilibrium within the community. The Yoruba traditional system of justice is frequently described as an integrated framework combining spirituality, communal participation, and moral instruction. While this characterisation captures important dimensions of indigenous jurisprudence, it risks obscuring the ways in which justice is socially constructed, contested, and exercised through hierarchical authority. In Yoruba epistemology, justice (*òdodo*) is closely associated with truth (*òtítọ́*) and moral rectitude, concepts that are often framed as divinely sanctioned rather than purely human constructs (Aboyeji 2019). However, the invocation of divine order does not eliminate interpretive mediation; instead, it situates justice within a moral cosmology that is administered through specific institutions and actors.

The *Baálẹ̀* (village head) or *Ọba* (king), supported by councils of elders (*ìgbìmọ̀*), occupies a central role in adjudication and mediation. Their authority derives less from coercive enforcement than from their recognised capacity to interpret custom and embody communal values (Olaoba 2020). This moral authority, however, is not neutral. It is embedded in structures of age, lineage, gender, and political power that shape access to justice and influence outcomes. Olaniyan (2020) identifies three interconnected dimensions of reconciliation in Yoruba society: adjudication or mediation of disputes, ritual processes aimed at restoring social harmony, and preventive mechanisms designed to forestall future conflict. While these dimensions illustrate the systemic breadth of Yoruba conflict resolution, they also reveal how justice is exercised through normative expectations that prioritise social cohesion, sometimes at the expense of dissenting or marginal voices.

Claims that Yoruba justice systems privilege moral persuasion over punishment must therefore be approached with caution. Persuasion operates within a framework where refusal to conform may attract social stigma or spiritual sanction. The belief that ancestral forces oversee judicial processes reinforces compliance and discourages perjury, but it also places moral pressure on disputants to accept outcomes framed as cosmically endorsed. As Oseni (2021, 88) observes, 'the fear of ancestral retribution functions as a moral compass in Yoruba adjudication'. This moral economy enhances the perceived legitimacy of decisions while limiting the space for contestation, particularly for younger participants or socially subordinate groups.

Traditional methods of dialogue often involved **face-to-face discussions** in communal settings, where participants sat in circular arrangements symbolising equality before wisdom. The use of **proverbs, parables, and storytelling** allowed disputants to reflect upon moral lessons and find acceptable resolutions without humiliation.

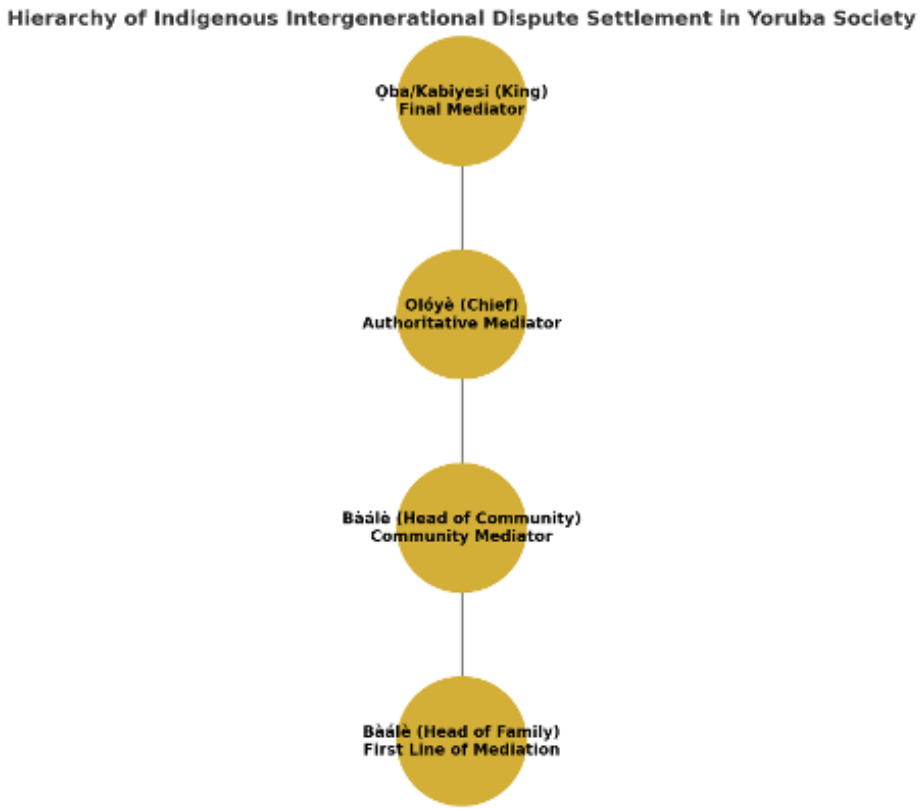

Figure 1: The diagram illustrates the hierarchical order of Yoruba indigenous dispute settlement systems, showing the flow of mediation from the family unit to the royal authority.

Healing and Reintegration after Conflict

In Yoruba indigenous reconciliation practices, healing is not limited to the formal resolution of a dispute but is understood as a gradual process of relational repair involving emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions. Rather than assuming that reconciliation automatically produces social harmony, scholars emphasise that post-conflict healing requires deliberate symbolic and communal actions that address residual tensions and moral accountability (Murithi 2006b; Oseni 2021). These processes are intended to stabilise relationships and re-establish trust, yet their effectiveness depends on collective participation and acceptance of the normative frameworks that govern them.

Ritualised forms of healing may include sacrifices, prayers, and purification rites aimed at addressing perceived spiritual imbalance following conflict. Such practices are commonly interpreted as mechanisms for cleansing participants of lingering resentment and restoring moral equilibrium (Adebayo 2019). However, these rituals also function as social performances that publicly mark the transition from conflict to reconciliation, reinforcing communal expectations of closure. Songs of forgiveness, collective meals, and ceremonial gatherings are often incorporated to signal reintegration, but these symbolic acts should not be understood as erasing underlying grievances. Instead, they serve to reframe conflict as a collective experience requiring communal resolution, thereby prioritising social continuity over individual redress.

Several scholars describe Yoruba post-conflict practices as approximating principles of restorative justice, particularly in their emphasis on repair, acknowledgment, and reintegration rather than punishment (Falola 2022; Oseni 2021). While this comparison is analytically useful, it must be treated with caution. Restoration in Yoruba contexts is embedded in hierarchical moral orders that shape who is forgiven, under what conditions, and on whose terms. Healing rituals may therefore reinforce social conformity and moral obligation, limiting the space for dissent or alternative interpretations of justice. The psychological benefits attributed to shared ritual healing are thus inseparable from the social pressures that accompany reintegration into communal life.

Preventive Mechanisms of Conflict Avoidance

Preventive mechanisms form the third dimension of the Yoruba reconciliation framework. These include community education, public admonition, and the use of proverbs to instil moral consciousness. Proverbs such as *'Bí a bá rí ìjà, kí a tó dáké, ẹ̀jẹ̀ á wó'* ('If one fails to intervene early in a quarrel, blood will be shed') serve as moral guidance promoting early intervention (Lamidi 2019a). Elders often issue warnings or blessings during ceremonies to caution individuals against future misconduct. According to Olaniyan (2020, 113), the Yoruba believe that 'advice from elders is a preventive ritual in itself'. Such verbal acts of correction maintain peace through continual moral education. The institutions of *Oro* (public discourse) and *Ìpàdé ìdílé* (family meetings) function as platforms for pre-emptive mediation, where disputes are discussed before they escalate. These preventive mechanisms sustain intergenerational communication and reinforce accountability among community members (Olaoba 2020).

Contemporary Relevance of Yoruba Reconciliatory Practices

In contemporary Nigeria, Yoruba reconciliatory practices retain their value as culturally grounded mechanisms for resolving disputes where formal systems are ineffective. Their principles have informed modern community peace committees, alternative dispute resolution (ADR) frameworks, and hybrid judicial systems (Akinwale 2020). Scholars advocate for integrating these indigenous models into national peacebuilding strategies (Agbaje & Falola 2022). The participatory nature of Yoruba reconciliation ensures inclusivity, while its moral foundation strengthens compliance. By involving spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions, these practices address root causes of conflict more effectively than formal court processes (Ojo 2021). This continuity affirms their global cultural significance and relevance to intercultural dialogue.

Intergenerational Dialogue and Indigenous Reconciliation in Yoruba Cultural Systems

Existing studies of Yoruba reconciliation practices suggest that intergenerational dialogue plays a central role in mediating conflict and transmitting moral norms. However, this dialogue is neither spontaneous nor symmetrical. It is structured through institutionalised authority vested primarily in elders, whose interpretive control over tradition shapes the reconciliation process. Younger participants are often positioned as recipients of moral instruction rather than co-creators of ethical meaning, raising questions about agency, consent, and generational voice.

Intergenerational reconciliation in Yoruba contexts therefore operates as a regulated communicative process rather than an open exchange. While elders frame reconciliation as collective learning and moral correction, the hierarchical nature of this dialogue may constrain critical engagement, particularly when younger individuals contest inherited norms. This tension underscores the need to examine how reconciliation practices evolve under conditions of social change, urbanisation, and generational reconfiguration. Understanding indigenous reconciliation as a dynamic, negotiated practice rather than a stable cultural inheritance allows for a more critical assessment of its possibilities and limits in contemporary African societies. Drawing extensively from *Indigenous Conflict Management Strategies in West Africa: Beyond Right and Wrong* (Adebayo, Lundy, Benjamin, & Adjei 2014), as well as related ethnographic and literary sources, the findings establish that the Yoruba model of mediation is guided by principles of moral equity, collective responsibility, and social restoration. These elements form the foundation of what Adeyemi (2014) calls a 'participatory and dialogical peace culture', one that transcends punitive measures in

favour of healing fractured social relations. The evidence synthesised from ethnographic accounts reported in prior studies and other secondary sources reveals that Yoruba conflict resolution operates on three main pillars: dialogue, spiritual sanction, and ritual affirmation. These pillars, which constitute an intergenerationally transmitted system of peacebuilding, demonstrate how Yoruba traditional society integrates justice with spirituality and morality. Adesina (2015), in his chapter *Ilepa Among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria: What Do the Dead Have to Do with Peace and Conflict?*, emphasises that reconciliation within Yoruba communities is 'a duty owed not only to the living but also to the ancestors, who are the moral witnesses of social conduct.' The invocation of ancestral spirits during reconciliation ceremonies affirms that peace and justice are continuous moral obligations rather than isolated events. This belief establishes an ethical connection between generations, ensuring that each act of reconciliation reinforces the community's collective memory.

Similarly, Adeyemi (2014) demonstrates in *Indigenous Methods in Conflict Resolution: The Example of Yoruba Society* that elders and other respected figures act as custodians of the moral order, serving as mediators through communal dialogue. Decisions are not imposed; rather, they are achieved through 'consensus-building rooted in orality and shared ethics.' This process, often taking place in the *ilé-ọba* (palace court) or family compound, involves the careful use of proverbs, idioms, and parables that embody Yoruba philosophy. Proverbs, according to Agbaje (2002), 'are the elders' weapons', used to diffuse tension and introduce wisdom into heated exchanges. Such linguistic artistry reflects the Yoruba conviction that words can heal wounds, as expressed in the saying: '*Ọ̀rọ̀ ẹni ló ń tún ìjà ṣe*' ('It is speech that repairs broken relationships'). Hence, language becomes not only a medium of communication but also a moral instrument through which peace is restored.

The literature synthesised in this study indicates that Yoruba orature, poetry, chant, and satire continue to function as an informal but highly effective mechanism of social regulation. Ajibade (2015) argues that oral performances 'serve as instruments of moral correction and reconciliation' (234). Through song and satire, mediators and poets appeal to conscience rather than coercion. Adejumo (2008) similarly describes Yoruba satire as a powerful tool used to sanction erring members and restore communal order. These oral forms are performative tools that help disputants to reflect, repent, and reintegrate into society. Indeed, as Bauman (1986, 2) observed, 'the symbolic forms we call folklore have their primary existence in the action of people and their roots in social and cultural life'. Thus, Yoruba oral traditions are not passive remnants of the past but active mechanisms of peacebuilding that link cultural expression with moral responsibility. The integration of spiritual belief into reconciliation is one of the most striking findings of this study. Ritual acts such as oath-taking (*ìbúra*), libation, and the sharing of kola nuts or palm wine are central to the affirma-

tion of peace. Adeyemi (2015) notes that these ceremonies are not mere formalities but sacred commitments. They transform verbal agreements into covenants under divine supervision. The ritual of oath-taking, often invoking Ogun, the deity of iron and justice, is considered the highest form of truth verification. A person swearing falsely before Ogun risks severe misfortune or death. Such beliefs create a self-regulating moral system where truth-telling is preserved through the fear of divine retribution. The use of ritual symbols thus ensures that reconciliation has moral and metaphysical weight.

The study also finds that the Yoruba reconciliation model extends beyond conflict settlement to include moral education and social reformation. Through intergenerational dialogue, elders impart lessons of tolerance, patience, and fairness to younger members. As observed in *Teaching and Propagating African and Diaspora Hybrid Culture* (Babawale, Alao, & Omidire 2009), the transmission of cultural knowledge and ethical values across generations is a vital process that ensures the continuity of African civilisation within and beyond its homeland. Within Yoruba society, this process occurs in domestic and public spaces, from family gatherings to community festivals. By embedding moral instruction in storytelling and ritual, the Yoruba have institutionalised intergenerational learning as a living tradition of peace.

A further observation concerns the adaptability of Yoruba reconciliation in modern settings. Despite the dominance of Western-style legal systems, Yoruba communities continue to rely on traditional councils, family elders, and community assemblies to manage disputes. Ojo (2021) reports that these indigenous mechanisms are frequently preferred to formal courts because they prioritise truth, empathy, and reintegration over procedural technicalities. This preference demonstrates that Yoruba peacebuilding is anchored in social legitimacy rather than bureaucratic authority. The hybrid coexistence of traditional and modern systems, as noted by Falola and Agbaje (2022), exemplifies how indigenous models evolve without losing their moral essence. This corresponds with Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, which asserts that cultures adapt and renew themselves through negotiation and reinterpretation in changing environments. The findings also highlight gender inclusivity in Yoruba intergenerational dialogue. While men often preside as formal adjudicators, women contribute significantly as informal mediators, counsellors, and organisers of reconciliation ceremonies. Their role, especially within domestic and market contexts, embodies empathy and emotional intelligence. Oyěwùmí (1997) argues that Yoruba society traditionally functioned on complementarity rather than gender hierarchy, allowing women to act as moral stabilisers within the family and community. The symbolic use of food, song, and ritual gestures led by women during peace ceremonies signifies healing and renewal, reinforcing social cohesion and emotional restoration among disputants.

Yoruba reconciliation practices possess multiple dimensions, legal, spiritual, moral, and pedagogical, which together produce a sustainable framework for peace. The Yoruba definition of justice transcends punishment; it is encapsulated in the pursuit of social harmony. As Fadipe (1970, 239) earlier observed, 'No wars were undertaken until the possibilities of settlement by diplomatic means had been exhausted'. This enduring ethos continues to guide Yoruba society today, where disputes are approached as opportunities for restoration rather than retribution. The study demonstrates that Yoruba intergenerational dialogue and reconciliation rituals are not antiquated customs but dynamic moral systems that adapt to evolving socio-political realities. Their effectiveness lies in their ability to integrate ethics, spirituality, and community participation into a coherent process of peacebuilding. The Yoruba belief that '*Àlàáfíà ló jẹ́ ìyẹ́ fun ìlú*' ('Peace is the adornment of the town') encapsulates this philosophy. It is a reminder that true peace is not imposed but cultivated through collective moral engagement.

This study, therefore, affirms that Yoruba indigenous reconciliation systems offer profound lessons for contemporary African governance and global peace studies. They reveal how dialogue, moral accountability, and intergenerational wisdom can coexist with modern legal frameworks to produce a more humane and enduring peace. As Adesina (2015) aptly notes, the Yoruba have never separated peace from justice, nor justice from morality; their society stands on the conviction that truth and reconciliation are inseparable.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that Yoruba traditional systems of conflict resolution and intergenerational dialogue remain indispensable to understanding how indigenous African societies maintain social balance, justice, and moral order. The philosophical and cultural structures underlying these systems provide a sustainable and community-based approach to peace maintenance. Building on these findings, several recommendations are proposed to ensure the preservation, revitalisation, and modern applicability of Yoruba indigenous practices in contemporary governance and social development.

First, there is an urgent need to institutionalise indigenous mechanisms of conflict management within local and national governance frameworks. State institutions, particularly local government councils and customary courts, should formally integrate Yoruba traditional peace processes, such as the use of elders' councils, family assemblies, and communal consultations, into their dispute settlement procedures. These methods have historically proven effective because they are accessible, participatory, and culturally legitimate. As Adeyemi (2014) notes, 'justice among the

Yoruba is achieved through dialogue and consensus rather than adversarial contest.' Formal recognition of these indigenous systems would not only ease the burden on overstretched legal institutions but also restore public trust in the justice process, which is often eroded by bureaucratic delay and corruption.

Second, cultural education must be revitalised as a key instrument of conflict prevention. The transmission of moral and ethical values through storytelling, folklore, and proverbs should be reintroduced into school curricula and community programmes. These oral traditions embody social principles such as empathy, fairness, and accountability. As Babawale, Alao, and Omidire (2009, 47) assert, 'the continuity of African civilisation depends on the preservation of its modes of moral instruction.' Incorporating these teachings into formal education would cultivate a generation that understands the importance of dialogue, restraint, and communal harmony in resolving disputes. Educational institutions should collaborate with traditional knowledge custodians, poets, and cultural practitioners to create spaces where young people can learn indigenous approaches to peacebuilding.

Third, the study recommends that traditional authorities, cultural organisations, and non-governmental bodies strengthen platforms for community mediation through regular cultural festivals and peace assemblies. Many Yoruba festivals such as *Bàtálá*, *Egúngún*, and *Òkè'bàdàn* historically served as opportunities for restoring social balance, where disputes were addressed before the renewal of the annual cycle. Reviving these cultural institutions would enhance social cohesion and provide neutral grounds for dialogue. The inclusion of youth and women in these forums is essential, as their participation ensures inclusivity and continuity in peace culture. Oyěwùmí (1997) observes that 'the Yoruba social structure operates on complementarity rather than hierarchy', and this principle should guide modern conflict management strategies by valuing contributions across gender and age (64).

Fourth, the preservation and documentation of Yoruba oral traditions should be prioritised through digital archiving and research collaborations. With the gradual decline of oral transmission due to urbanisation and technological influence, there is a risk of losing the linguistic and performative heritage that sustains Yoruba conflict resolution practices. Institutions such as universities, cultural centres, and heritage commissions should establish projects to record and translate proverbs, chants, songs, and mediatory performances that encapsulate indigenous ethics. This would not only preserve cultural identity but also provide valuable resources for comparative studies in peace and governance.

Fifth, the study recommends a closer engagement between traditional leaders and modern governance systems in addressing communal disputes, political disagreements, and inter-ethnic tensions. As observed by Ojo (2021a), indigenous mechan-

isms retain moral authority at the grassroots level, where state institutions often have limited influence. Traditional rulers, chiefs, and elders should therefore be included in peace committees and conflict management boards, not as symbolic figures but as active facilitators of dialogue and truth verification. The moral capital of traditional institutions can complement the procedural framework of modern legal systems, resulting in decisions that are fair and socially legitimate.

It is recommended that policymakers, scholars, and development partners adopt a multidisciplinary approach to understanding African models of peace management. Anthropological, historical, and linguistic research should be integrated with legal and political studies to produce a comprehensive understanding of indigenous justice. Such collaboration would allow African societies to build hybrid systems that draw on traditional wisdom while meeting the needs of modern governance.

The findings reaffirm that Yoruba traditional approaches to conflict management represent an enduring philosophy of peace grounded in moral obligation, communal accountability, and spiritual consciousness. The Yoruba understanding of social harmony does not separate justice from morality or peace from ethical behaviour. As Adesina (2015) remarks, 'The Yoruba see justice as a covenant among generations, a trust maintained through truth, dialogue, and collective will' (82). This worldview underscores the community's emphasis on truth-telling, restitution, and reintegration as the foundation of peaceful coexistence. Despite the challenges posed by modernisation, religious pluralism, and legal formalism, Yoruba indigenous methods continue to offer valuable lessons for contemporary conflict management. Their emphasis on dialogue over confrontation, restoration over punishment, and moral persuasion over coercion provides a model for societies struggling with persistent division and institutional distrust. By acknowledging and adapting these indigenous frameworks, African states can move towards more humane and participatory forms of governance. Moreover, the transnational experience of the Yoruba, spanning West Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas, demonstrates that cultural identity can evolve without losing its ethical essence. Through intergenerational dialogue, communities preserve their memory and recreate their social order in changing environments. Peace is not a static condition, but a collective commitment renewed through moral action and shared understanding. The study therefore concludes that integrating Yoruba indigenous systems of conflict management into modern governance structures will not only strengthen community relations but also contribute to the global discourse on sustainable peace. It is a call to return to the wisdom of ancestral ethics, where justice is measured not by punishment but by the restoration of human dignity and the reaffirmation of social trust.

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Material and Immaterial Transmissions: Intergenerational Dialogues and Haunted Genealogies in Post-Slavery Brazil

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Abstract: This paper explores how material and immaterial transmissions within kinship networks shape intergenerational dialogue and collective memory in **Barão de Juparanã**, a community in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, locally known as the 'city of cousins'. Drawing on ethnographic and visual anthropology research, I examine how family photo albums, oral narratives, and genealogical artefacts reveal not only biological inheritance but also social, emotional, and supernatural 'contagions' including illness, misfortune, and ancestral 'curses' that reverberate across generations.

Moving beyond genealogy as a tool for lineage tracing, the study foregrounds a broader conceptualisation of inheritance that encompasses both nurturing legacies and harmful transmissions. The analysis engages with the notion of hauntology, in which unresolved familial traumas and afflictions persist, haunting the present and shaping embodied experience. This ambivalent inheritance invites a rethinking of kinship as a site of ongoing negotiation between memory, identity, and healing.

The research also critiques biomedical models of disease transmission by incorporating culturally embedded interpretations of illness and fate, thereby underscoring the need for culturally responsive approaches to public health. Through intergenerational dialogue, families produce alternative temporalities and systems of knowledge that challenge dominant narratives while reinforcing communal resilience and practices of social repair.

Ultimately, the paper argues that attending to both material and immaterial forms of transmission within genealogical practices offers critical insight into futures of collective well-being, particularly in contexts marked by racialised, gendered, and historical inequalities. It contributes to ongo-

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ing debates on the transformative potential of intergenerational dialogue in fostering inclusive, justice-oriented social futures.

Keywords: Intergenerational Dialogue, Black Feminist Anthropology, Genealogy, Hauntology, Inheritance, Dialogical Care

Introduction

The district of Barão de Juparanã, in the municipality of Valença in Rio de Janeiro's Paraíba Valley, is locally known as the 'city of cousins', a nickname that refers to the density of overlapping lineages and repeated cousin marriages that have marked the community for generations. The district bears the name of Manoel Jacintho Nogueira da Gama (1830–1876), the Baron of Juparanã, a powerful coffee planter who fathered twenty-six children with five enslaved women: Floriana Paulina, Semiana Florentina, Geralda, Emília Dorotheia, and Manoela Agostina. Upon his death in 1876, these children inherited the Sant'Anna estate and remained in relative isolation, many later marrying within the extended family and settling in houses they also inherited in Juparanã, a planned district built to justify the passage of the Dom Pedro II railway and facilitate the export of coffee from the Baron's estates. The concentration of inherited land, limited mobility, and locally circumscribed kinship networks produced a social landscape in which endogamy was structurally sustained. It is from this context that the expression 'city of cousins' emerged, not as a metaphor but as a lived reality, shaping how people imagine ancestry, destiny, and belonging.

The text moves as a *ritornello* (Stengers 2005, 2015): a rhythm of return that revisits blood, resemblance, inheritance, and care, each time differently. This recurrence is not structure but attention, a way of staying with what persists, listening to how transmission thinks.

This article thus situates itself within a dialogical anthropology (Jackson 1998; Lassiter 2005) in which kinship and ethnography are not merely objects of study but forms of conversation and co-presence. To attend to transmission here is to attend to dialogue, to the ways the past speaks through the living. In what follows, I develop this approach by arguing that genealogical practices in Barão de Juparanã constitute a form of dialogical care: a relational process through which families interpret repetitions of suffering, negotiate the ambivalences of inheritance, and craft possibilities for living with unresolved histories. Rather than treating genealogy as a record of descent, I approach it as an ongoing, contested, and ethically charged practice through which the past becomes actionable in the present.

In speaking of dialogue, I refer not only to interpersonal exchange but to the ongoing relational process whereby people respond to what precedes them, as gestures, names, afflictions, and obligations that call for interpretation. Dialogue, in this sense, is not merely conversational but temporal and intergenerational: it is the work of attending to inherited matters and deciding how to carry them forward. What I describe as dialogical care emerges from this labour of response, in which kinship becomes an ethical practice of listening to persistence, recognising ambivalence, and crafting forms of endurance.

Genealogy as Artefact and Method

The genealogical method has long shaped anthropological understandings of kinship. Rivers (1906; 1910) formalised it as a scientific technique for mapping descent, and Lévi-Strauss (1949; 1969) transformed genealogical diagrams into structural models that rendered social relations as fixed and universally legible. Later critiques unsettled this assumption. Schneider (1984) showed that categories such as 'blood' and 'marriage' are culturally specific moral symbols rather than neutral descriptors, while Carsten (1995; 2000) reframed kinship as relatedness, that is, an ongoing process made through everyday practices rather than a pre-given structure. Sahlins (2011) sharpened this shift by distinguishing genealogy as a record of filiation from kinship as a wider mutuality of being.

My ethnography takes these critiques seriously but does not abandon genealogy. Instead, it reframes it: genealogy emerges as a vernacular artefact in constant becoming, continuously constructed and reconstructed by interlocutors as a way of thinking through inheritance, affliction, and responsibility. In Barão de Juparanã, people do not merely appear on charts compiled by an anthropologist; they produce genealogies themselves. They add, correct, and dispute names, attach photographs and oral histories, and mobilise diagrams to reason about the recurrences that trouble the present. Genealogy, in this context, is not a retrospective map of a fixed structure but a living document, a method-in-use whereby families debate causation ('it runs in the family'), proximity ('blood too close'), and the moral claims that flow from these assertions. Such experience-near explanations resonate with anthropological discussions of how illness and affliction are understood as circulating within families through relational and moral idioms, rather than as strictly biological inheritance (Grøn and Meinert 2019).

This reorientation from genealogy as the researcher's instrument to genealogy as a native artefact, has far-reaching consequences. First, it alters the epistemic status of genealogical materials: charts, albums, and annotated lists are not inert records but media that actively produce social worlds. A diagram linking suicides across genera-

tions conjures vulnerability; repeated names such as Anna materialise devotion. Second, genealogy functions as a site where plural aetiologies are reconciled into practical reasoning. When families narrate cancers, depressions, and suicides as inherited, they do so through layered idioms that combine biomedical heredity, spiritual notions of curse, and the social physics of consanguinity. The artefact provides a platform where these idioms are negotiated, allowing families to decide how to interpret a death, how to warn a child, or whether to seek medical treatment or fulfil a vow. Third, genealogy renders kinship visible on the body itself. Resemblance in eyes, smiles, or gait is apprehended as transmissible evidence of belonging, making bodies into sites where kinship becomes morally actionable. Finally, genealogies fold history into the present. The founding violence of slavery and the orchestrated marriages that followed (including whitening projects) are not regarded as closed chapters of the past but as ongoing transmissions whose effects reverberate today.

Inspired by Saidiya Hartman's reflections on the faint traces and dispersed genealogies that remain in the afterlife of slavery (2007; 2019), genealogy here is understood as a living practice of care or, more precisely, a vernacular form of attention through which kinship and memory persist despite historical rupture. **This practice, however, is never straightforward: genealogies also bring to the surface ambivalences, disagreements, and the everyday politics whereby families decide what to transmit, contest, or carry.**

In this sense, genealogy in Barão de Juparanã is both object and operation: an artefact families craft to argue with time, make affliction legible, and assign obligations; and simultaneously a method that allows the anthropologist to follow these arguments as they ramify through names, bodies, saints, and blood. Rather than opposing 'substance' and 'code' or 'nature' and 'culture', vernacular genealogies braid them together: blood is material and moral; names are identifiers and injunctions; gestures are likeness and claim. In short, as practised in Barão de Juparanã, genealogy *does* kinship.

Memory as Ongoing Transmission

In Barão de Juparanã, memory is not primarily a private faculty but a collective practice sustained through artefacts. Photographs, albums, and notebooks circulate among relatives, activating recollections and debates each time they are opened. A faded image may prompt a story about resemblance, illness, or an old alliance; a list of names may be corrected, annotated, or contested, triggering conversations about who belongs to the family line. In this sense, remembering is not the passive preservation of a fixed past but the iterative reworking of history in the present, a process that resonates with classic discussions of social and embodied memory (Halbwachs

1992; Connerton 1989). These artefacts do not simply store the past; they mediate the act of recalling, making memory a shared labour that unfolds in relation.

Episodes of suffering such as suicides, cancers and depressions, turn private pain into collective memory, making affliction intelligible through its return in names and gestures. These mnemonic practices are inseparable from vernacular theories of health. As medical anthropologists have long noted, local aetiologies of illness – linking bodily states to kinship, morality, and history – constitute not naïve explanations but sophisticated frameworks whereby people interpret vulnerability and assign responsibility (Good 1994; Kleinman 1988; Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987). As families recount patterns of repetition, they turn memory into a diagnostic framework: suicides, cancers, and other afflictions are said to 'run in the family' not only in a metaphorical sense but as an embodied condition carried through blood. Expressions such as 'blood that does not oxygenate', or the idea that unions between 'cousins too close' produce fragility, translate biomedical notions of heredity into local idioms, while at the same time expanding them into moral and historical registers.

Families speak of cancer and depression as hereditary, but also as signs of imbalance, punishment, or unfinished history. The very idiom of blood is never just biological: it is simultaneously a substance, a fate, and a moral charge. By narrating affliction in this way, memory itself becomes a form of medical reasoning, one that frames diagnosis and orients care.

This appropriation of biomedical language does not replace local theories; it coexists with them. Medical explanations of heredity, for instance, are reinterpreted through genealogical charts that also register consanguinity and tragedy, producing **plural aetiologies**. A genetic account of vulnerability gains force when plotted onto a lineage already known for suicides.

What these scenes show is that memory, transmission, and genealogy form a single relational field: a mode of attention whereby families negotiate what persists, what matters, and what can be carried into the future.

Material and Immaterial Transmissions

The notion of transmission therefore stretches beyond the transfer of assets to encompass the circulation of afflictions, resemblances, and obligations. These practices are not only interpretive but dialogical.

These immaterial transmissions cannot be disentangled from material ones: a piece of land, a surname, or a photograph carries with it the traces of previous lives and is

never inherited alone. It is always accompanied by burdens and expectations, by stories of who owned, suffered, or died before.

To capture this dynamic, I explicitly draw on Jacques Derrida's formulation of *hauntology* in *Specters of Marx* (1994). Derrida introduces hauntology to describe a temporal condition in which the past is neither simply absent nor fully present but persists as a spectral inheritance that troubles linear notions of history and transmission. My use of the expression 'haunted genealogies' draws on anthropological engagements with hauntology and kinship (Derrida 1994; Meinert 2016), while grounding the concept ethnographically in the post-slavery genealogical practices observed in Barão de Juparanã. In this sense, inheritance is not a matter of stable continuity or voluntary reception, but an injunction, something that precedes the subject and demands a response (Derrida 1994).

Read ethnographically, this concept allows me to describe how families in Barão de Juparanã live with unresolved histories that continue to press upon the present. What is transmitted is never only life-giving: it is also haunted by such unfinished matters as slavery's violence, forced intimacies, repeated cousin marriages, suicides, depressions that resurface in bodies, names, and narratives.

These hauntings, however, are not experienced as a single, cohesive legacy; they are unevenly distributed, differently named, and sometimes resisted or denied. The same genealogies that sustain attachment can revive stigma, reopen conflicts, or silence particular lines of descent. Families are inhabited by what has not been settled, and the present is structured by these recurrences, not as a stable continuity, but as a shifting field of obligations, disagreements, and attempts at repair.

Seen from this perspective, kinship is not only about descent or alliance but about living with transmissions that are ambivalent, carrying both nurture and burden. These transmissions are rarely harmonious; they are sites where obligations are negotiated, where some lines of descent are emphasised while others remain fraught, silenced, or contested. Their effects are uneven, shaped by differential access to care, recognition, and the ability to name what one has inherited. Such hauntings make genealogy less a static record than a field of ongoing transmission.

In this article, I argue that genealogical practices in Barão de Juparanã constitute a form of dialogical care: an ethics of attention through which families interpret the recurrences of suffering, negotiate the ambivalences of inheritance, and keep open conversations with the living and the dead. I approach genealogy as a practice of transmission that weaves together material and immaterial inheritances as bodily, affective, and spiritual. This framing grounds the ethnographic analysis that follows

and situates the article's contribution within debates on kinship, memory, and intergenerational well-being.

The following section outlines the research context and methods through which these haunted genealogies were encountered and co-produced.

Research Context and Methods

This article is based on long-term ethnographic research conducted between 2011 and 2018 with descendants of five enslaved women whose lives were historically connected to the household of Manoel Jacintho Nogueira da Gama, Baron of Juparanã, in the Paraíba Valley, Rio de Janeiro. Fieldwork combined participant observation, repeated visits, and the cultivation of relationships with interlocutors who were themselves engaged in reconstructing and debating their family histories.

All personal names that appear in this article are real and used with the informed consent of the individuals and their families. Because genealogy is itself the object of analysis, anonymity would obscure the relational patterns, recurrences, and cross-generational connections that my interlocutors wished to make visible. Throughout my long-term engagement in Barão de Juparanã, participants consistently expressed the desire for their names and those of their ancestors to remain identifiable as part of the genealogical work they actively co-produced. The use of real names therefore reflects not only a methodological necessity but an ethical commitment to honouring their intentions and sustaining the dialogical and collaborative ethos of the research. Alongside these interactions, the research involved the examination of private archives, such as photo albums, genealogical charts, notebooks, and public collections, particularly the IPHAN archives in Vassouras, which provided historical materials that anchored contemporary narratives in a longer genealogy of slavery and kinship.

Audiovisual practice was central to the ethnography. I treated filming as a form of fieldnote – an embodied and revisitable record of encounters. Revisiting the recordings revealed gestures and tones that exceed speech. Yet filming was never a neutral act. Consent was not a single event but an ongoing negotiation: permissions were verbal, situated, and revisable. This participatory process resonates with what Luke Lassiter (2005) terms 'collaborative ethnography', where interlocutors act as co-theorists and co-authors in the making of anthropological knowledge. Sharing images and drafts of genealogies became a research practice in itself, moments of co-authorship that generated further conversations, corrections, and emotional investments.

I was recognised not only as a researcher but as a 'cousin', a bearer of the same bloodline whose meaning the families sought to reinterpret. This dual position – insider

and observer – produced both intimacy and ethical tension. My interlocutors entrusted me with documents, family photographs, and stories that had long remained private; in turn, I assumed the responsibility of returning what was shared in forms that honoured their intentions. This reflexive stance echoes what Kim TallBear (2013) articulates as an approach that may be read as *autogenealogical, one* that challenges colonial separations between observer and observed and reclaims kinship as a mode of critical inquiry. It also echoes Michael Jackson's (1998) proposal of an 'ethnography of intersubjective exchange', where knowledge arises from the space between voices rather than from observation alone. Many conversations unfolded within the space of kinship itself: on verandas, during meals, in the quiet act of handling an old photograph. The field was sustained not by formal interviews but by trust, affection, and a shared curiosity.

This methodological entanglement shaped the very substance of the research. As Duarte and Gomes (2008) suggest, working among one's own kin demands a continuous oscillation between proximity and distance, empathy and analysis. Rather than erasing this tension, I made it explicit: familiarity became both method and data. What I call 'haunted genealogies' are thus not only the families' creations but also the condition of the research itself as an intersubjective process in which memory, affect, and ethics are co-produced.

Even after the formal conclusion of fieldwork, these relations have endured. Descendants continue to contact me, sometimes to share new materials, sometimes to ask for photographs of ancestors they never met. The research thus persists as part of the family's own genealogical labour. Ethnography, here, is not an act of extraction but of return: a continuous dialogue through which the boundaries between researcher and interlocutor, method and kinship, and archive and life remain productively porous.

At the same time, my position as both relative and researcher shaped what could be said, withheld, or assumed in our conversations, reminding me that this dialogical method carries its own limits and blind spots, inseparable from the kinship relations that made the research possible.

The following ethnographic narratives illustrate how these methodological entanglements take form in everyday life. Through the stories of Anita and Arthur, and of their descendants, Cláudia and Osmar, we can observe how genealogy becomes a living medium whereby families interpret recurrence, affliction, and care.

Consanguinity, Suffering, and Recurrence

Among the stories most insistently retold in Barão de Juparanã is that of Anita (Anna) and Arthur. They were relatives, cousins raised within the overlapping networks of the estate and family, and eventually married. During my fieldwork, their story often surfaced as a key to understanding what people called 'the closed blood' of the family. Their son Adaury recalled that 'they simply knew each other', a natural consequence of shared upbringing.

Arthur and Anita were second cousins, both descended from the Baron and his daughters and embodied the dense intermarriages that defined the community. Within the family, this closeness of blood is frequently invoked to explain a shared predisposition to illness and psychological fragility. What is most disturbing in this family's narratives is not only the recurrence of suicide, but the repetition of its form. Anita's mother – Arthur's first cousin – took her own life by setting herself on fire. Years later, Arthur died by suicide in the same way. One of their daughters, Cici, also took her own life, and a niece of Cláudia would later do the same. This sequence is never treated as coincidence. The repetition of suicide and, strikingly, of the gesture itself, is remembered as evidence that something circulates through blood, proximity, and shared histories. These deaths do not accumulate as isolated tragedies; they form a chain that demands interpretation, vigilance, and care.

Cláudia Valéria, a great-granddaughter of the Baron, articulated this with diagnostic clarity. Cousin marriage, she said, 'produced an entire group of people with neurological problems', and 'new generations came with the same issues'. She also used the image of 'blood that does not oxygenate', a local idiom to account for physical and emotional weakness, and connected it to subtle bodily signs (such as a curved left little finger), neurological disorders, and cancer: 'Cancer also runs in the family... both cancer and suicide'.

Her cousin Osmar reinforced this understanding, linking his own depression to the family's history and attributing part of it to consanguinity, as a doctor once told him. When he listed the suicides among close relatives, his account translated personal loss into an intergenerational pattern, something that gained force precisely because it was remembered, plotted, and discussed through albums, spoken histories, and family charts.

These repetitions are the living effects of a racial order that persisted after abolition. As Saidiya Hartman (2007) reminds us, the afterlife of slavery structures intimacy itself, determining the possibilities of affiliation and protection available to Black and mixed-race families. Christina Sharpe's (2016) notion of living 'in the wake' likewise illuminates how kinship and care are practised under conditions of ongoing

racial exposure. In Barão de Juparanã, genealogical repetition thus bears the imprint of this structural history: the haunting is not only familial, but social and racial.

In the case of Anita and Arthur's children, the narrative records a long and devastating sequence of deaths across decades, several from cancer, one by suicide, and others from various illnesses, forming a chain of loss that Adaury described as a process of 'enduring death through repetition'. This continuity gives kinship a temporal thickness: each death recalls the previous ones, linking names, gestures, and ways of dying, turning genealogy into a living archive of affliction and memory.

Read together, these layers form a practical diagnosis that orients vigilance, care, and decision making about future marriages, about when to seek medical help, or about how to interpret a new illness. The power of such diagnosis lies not only in medical vocabulary but in the work of memory and artefactualisation (albums, lists, genealogical diagrams) that renders recurrence visible and therefore socially actionable.

The story of Anita and Arthur and of their twelve children thus shows how consanguinity becomes a way of thinking about sedimented vulnerability and how that vulnerability is traced and named within genealogies produced by the family members themselves. This is not genetic determinism, but an account of how blood, resemblance, and temperament intertwine to make sense of lives shaped by loss. Genealogies thus become tools for thinking the present and orienting the future.

I realised that genealogy was not only their subject, but also the medium of conversation, each recounting both explanation and care. Such gestures resonate with what Christina Sharpe describes as living and thinking in the wake (2016), a mode of attending to the living and the dead within the ongoing and unfinished conditions of slavery. I refer to these interwoven acts of remembrance, narration, and care as haunted genealogies.

The following sections trace how these haunted genealogies expand into other registers such as religious, moral, and therapeutic, where transmission itself becomes a form of healing. In this sense, narration becomes not only a form of memory but a labour of care that sustains relation across loss and time. In that sense, 'haunted genealogies' name not only the persistence of the past but also the shared labour of making its echoes legible.

Cláudia and Osmar: The Language of Blood and the Work of Reflection

If Anita and Arthur's story traces the material and affective consequences of consanguinity, the reflections of their descendants, particularly Cláudia Valéria and Osmar,

reveal how these histories are continually interpreted and reinterpreted in the present. Both are engaged in a sustained effort to understand the recurrences that haunt their family, weaving together medical reasoning, genealogy, and moral reflection. Our conversations often took place at their homes, surrounded by albums and notes spread across tables, as we tried to reconstruct who belonged to which branch and what each name evoked.

For Cláudia, what the family experiences is the biological and emotional outcome of generations of cousin marriage. When she pointed to the slight curvature of a finger shared by many relatives, or when she recalled the suicides and cancers that punctuate the family's history, her tone oscillated between analysis and care, recognising in her own body the marks of inheritance.

Her cousin Osmar offered a more intimate version of this same reflection. Sitting in the living room where family portraits hang on the wall, he situated his own depression within the family's story, saying that 'it came with the blood'. He remembered being told by a doctor that the high number of suicides might be connected to kin marriages, but his understanding went beyond medical explanation. For him, the repetition of illness and death expressed both a biological fragility and a shared emotional inheritance, or rather a way of feeling and enduring, that had been passed down. As he spoke, the sentence carried the weight of familiarity: a register in which memory was both confession and diagnosis. He later died of cancer, adding his own body to the chain of afflictions he described.

Both Cláudia and Osmar use the language of science such as genes, blood, inheritance, but they also exceed it. Their speech moves between diagnosis and storytelling, between personal experience and collective interpretation. When they speak, they are not simply explaining; they are theorising kinship through their own lives. They treat the family's history as both archive and mirror: something to study, to interpret, and to learn from. This mode of reflection blurs the boundaries between ethnographic and vernacular theory. In these conversations, interpretation was not my privilege as a researcher; it was already being done within the family's own idioms of thought.

Their reflections also reveal a quiet, ethical dimension. To speak of blood that does not oxygenate is not only to name a condition, but also to recognise a form of shared responsibility: a call to remember, to warn, and to care. Each new death reopens the conversation, reactivating the genealogy as an instrument of attention and prevention. These are not merely stories of fatalism, but of vigilance and repair: ways of turning affliction into knowledge, and memory into care.

Such dialogues made visible what I call the moral labour inherent to genealogical work: the effort to interpret suffering in ways that preserve continuity without surrendering to repetition. Listening to Cláudia and Osmar was to witness thought in motion: not theory applied to life, but life becoming theory. Their language of blood was at once analytical and affective, diagnostic, and protective. In the course of these exchanges, the work of genealogy took shape as a shared effort to hold suffering without allowing it to harden into fate.

Haunted Genealogies

What these stories set in motion is not a stable account of descent but an ongoing work of interpretation through which kinship is continually made and unmade. Within this terrain of interpretation, repetition is not evidence of fate but a language whereby people reflect on the persistence of suffering and on the fragile balance between biology, history, and morality. What circulates through the lineage is not only disease or disposition but also a form of knowledge, that is, an embodied archive through which families theorise the relationship between inheritance and endurance.

Listening to these stories over the years, I came to see that what my interlocutors call 'blood' operates as both medium and metaphor, a way of connecting body, memory, and responsibility. Each conversation about illness or temperament, each gesture of resemblance identified in a photograph, extended the family's interpretive work, turning memory itself into a diagnostic practice. In those moments, the ethnographic encounter ceased to be a site of observation and became instead a shared exercise in thinking and feeling through transmission.

These genealogies are not haunted merely because the past returns, but because the past demands explanation. Each repetition reactivates the family's interpretive labour: to narrate is to attend, to name patterns, to make the invisible legible. In this sense, the ethnographic process mirrors the families' own work: both are practices of attention that transform recurrence into reflection.

In these conversations, kinship emerges not as a fixed inheritance but as an ongoing negotiation of how to live with what has been received. The recognition of resemblance such as in names, faces, gestures, or ailments, becomes a way of sustaining dialogue across generations. To speak of 'blood that does not oxygenate', to trace the recurrence of cancer or depression, is also to participate in an unfinished conversation about responsibility and repair. The ethnographic relation itself becomes part of that conversation, extending the family's reflections into new forms of representation and return.

Such exchanges, though rooted in local idioms, echo broader ethical questions about care, accountability, and healing in post-slavery societies. In the idiom of Barão de Juparanã, to inherit is to remember and to respond, to recognise the weight of what persists and to rework it into possibility. Through these haunted genealogies, the family make kinship not only an inheritance of blood, but an ethics of attention.

To listen to these haunted genealogies, then, is to recognise that the past is never inert. It persists as substance and as story, in the body and in the telling, yet it also carries the possibility of transformation. Each act of narration, each reinterpretation of an inherited wound, opens the chance to reframe what is transmitted, not as destiny, but as dialogue.

In this sense, the ethnography itself participates in the same movement it describes. As families in Barão de Juparanã transform inheritance into interpretation, the research becomes another form of transmission: a reciprocal act of remembering that turns affliction into knowledge and knowledge into care.

Naming and Religious Devotion

The recurrence of the name Anna across generations in Barão de Juparanã is inseparable from the family's enduring devotion to Sant'Ana, the grandmother of Christ. During my visits, it was common to find her figure placed beside old photographs of female ancestors, sometimes framed in the same glass, as if the saint and the foremothers watched over the house together. Sant'Ana occupies a privileged position in the moral and visual order of the household, a figure who embodies origin, instruction, and protection, and whose presence sanctifies both the family's past and its continuity.

To name a daughter Anna is thus an act of devotion and lineage-making. It binds the newborn both to a saint and to an ancestral sequence of mothers and grandmothers who have carried the same name. This female line of transmission is not symbolic alone; it is enacted in the daily life of the household. Mostly women are the keepers of the altars, the guardians of photographs, the transmitters of stories. Through these arrangements, women reaffirm their roles as mediators between generations, translating the saint's protective power into the language of kinship.

Until the mid-twentieth century, this devotion overflowed the domestic space. Every year, in July, the extended family and former workers of the estate returned to the Sant'Anna plantation, where the chapel dedicated to the saint stood and where generations of relatives had been baptised, transforming the *fazenda* into a vibrant site of reunion. People recall the celebrations with affection: the arrival of relatives from distant towns, bands playing in the yard, dances under paper decorations, shared

meals, and prayers that blended festivity with reverence. 'Everyone came back home,' one interlocutor remembered. The saint's day was the family's own temporal anchor: a sacred and social return to the land of origin.

The festival reactivated both religious and genealogical ties. It was a pilgrimage to ancestry, where descendants honoured not only Sant'Ana but also the memory of their foremothers. During the celebration, ritual, memory, and kinship condensed in ways long discussed in anthropology, producing a space in which sacrality and genealogy became materially intertwined. In this sense, the saint's feast formed a genealogical topology, by which I mean a terrain where land, lineage, and devotion converged. Through collective celebration, the territory itself was reanimated: its chapel, trees, and soil serving as mnemonic anchors for belonging, a sense of being gathered by blood and faith at once.

In Brazil, such devotion thinly outspread what Roger Bastide ([1960]1978) described as a zone of interpenetration of civilisations, where African, European, and Indigenous religious systems coexist and transform one another. Bastide noted that Brazilian religiosity often works through compartmentalisation, or rather, the capacity to inhabit multiple religious logics simultaneously, without contradiction. Within this broader framework, the devotion to Sant'Ana in Barão de Juparanã can be understood as part of a hybrid religious ecology, where Catholic devotion, Afro-Brazilian cosmologies, and kin-based memory are not in opposition but in resonance.

Although no one explicitly identifies Sant'Ana with an *orixá* (an Afro-Brazilian deity within a Yorùbá-derived cosmology), her attributes such as seniority, wisdom, care for descendants, and association with earth and water, quietly recall those of Nanã, the Afro-Brazilian orixá of ancestry, mud, and time. As in the Afro-Brazilian world described by Bastide, this is not a matter of substitution but of co-presence. The saint and the orixá inhabit parallel moral universes that can be lived together, each amplifying the other's power to protect and to connect. Through Sant'Ana, the family draws on a reservoir of symbolic strength that is both Christian and ancestral.

This layered devotion gives form to what might be called a theology of kinship. Sant'Ana's image sanctifies the circulation of names and the endurance of female care. Her feast day calls dispersed descendants back to the land, while her domestic altars preserve the everyday link between generations. Through her, the family's genealogical imagination becomes spiritual: life and lineage are understood not only as biological continuities but as sacred transmissions, where protection, suffering, and memory circulate together.

Each Anna thus inherits more than a name. She inherits a position of mediation, the everyday work of navigating between the living and the dead, faith and ancestry, the saint and the family. This mediating role is not fixed or formalised; it emerges in practice, through gestures of care, memory, and obligation that place certain women at the hinge of multiple worlds. In this sense, Sant'Ana devotion in Barão de Juparanã exemplifies the interpenetration that Bastide saw as the foundation of Brazilian religious life: a simultaneous inhabiting of multiple genealogies – Catholic, African, familial – that, together, sustain a living continuum of memory and care.

Gestures and Physiognomy as Forms of Transmission

Beyond violence and the transmission of names, family in Barão de Juparanã is conceived as a mark inscribed upon bodies. Faces, gestures, and temperaments are read as visible continuities of kinship, signs whereby people recognise one another and themselves. These recognitions were constant throughout fieldwork. In living rooms, during family gatherings, or while looking at old photographs, someone would suddenly pause and say: 'Look! The same eyes,' or 'The way she walks is pure Grandma.' Such observations are not casual; they are acts of recognition that affirm belonging and extend kinship into the visible.

As Deleuze ([1968] 1994) reminds us, repetition is never the simple return of the same but the persistence of difference through time. Faces in Barão de Juparanã are read in this double register. A gaze, a smile, or a gesture becomes an archive of shared life, linking descendants to their ancestors while also marking the slight displacements that make each person singular. In my fieldwork, resemblance was never treated as coincidence. For those who inherit these gestures, likeness is destiny: 'there's no escaping it', as one relative told me. The recognition of resemblance becomes an embodied affirmation that the past continues to inhabit the present, even as it appears in a new figure. To identify a shared gesture or expression is to locate oneself within a lineage that is both visible and affective, where continuity is felt precisely through the repetition of altered forms.

When faces, gestures, and even ways of walking are identified as genetic inheritances, they embody what my interlocutors made visible as an entanglement between biology and memory. Cultural inheritances such as comportment and expression are perceived as extensions of invisible substances such as blood, genes, and family essence. In such recognitions, the boundary between 'nature' and 'culture' dissolves. As Schneider (1980) and Carsten (2004) note, kinship mediates substance/law and nature/culture; in Barão de Juparanã people move fluidly between these domains. Osmar explains his depression through his psychiatrist's account of genetic transmis-

sion, while Cláudia attributes 'a lack of oxygenation in the blood' to cousin marriages that produced 'a bunch of crazy people.'

These expressions are not mere metaphors; they are embodied theories. When someone says 'it's the same smile,' or 'he has her blood,' they are performing an interpretation that binds the visible to the invisible. Through these embodied recognitions, kinship becomes an image of the liminal space between biology and society. As Strathern (1992) argued, this tension is not specific to any one cultural setting; it is a condition of kinship itself. In Barão de Juparanã, however, it is through faces and gestures that the past most vividly persists.

Personhood as Dividual

In Barão de Juparanã, kinship is not only represented through genealogical charts or family albums but also embodied in gestures, voices, and affects. What circulates between people such as blood, substance, expression, and memory, constitutes the very fabric of personhood. During fieldwork, I often felt that individuality was not conceived as separation, but as a form of composition: a body woven from traces of others. A smile, a timbre of voice, or even a habitual way of pausing in speech could evoke an ancestor as vividly as a photograph. People rarely spoke of such continuities as imitation; rather, they were recognised as inheritances, living residues that connect the living to the dead.

This understanding resonates with Marilyn Strathern's (1988) concept of the *dividual*: the idea that a person is made of parts and relations rather than bounded individuality. Each life in Barão de Juparanã appears as a fragment of a larger collective composition, a mixture of inherited gestures, shared afflictions, and transmitted memories. I often heard people describe themselves not in singular terms but through relational predicates: 'I have her temper,' 'his eyes,' 'our sadness.' Each expression marked an affiliation, a thread in the web of shared substance that defines existence.

In this sense, kinship functions as a system of ongoing composition. To exist as a person is to carry the marks of others, visibly in the face, audibly in the voice, emotionally in one's temperament. As Cláudia once remarked, 'We all carry a bit of the same story; even when we don't talk about it, it shows.' Such remarks reveal an ontology of relation, where the self is understood as a continuation rather than a unit.

This permeability also extends to the moral and affective realms. The repetition of gestures, illnesses, and names does not simply reproduce the past; it reconfigures it. Each resemblance, each recognition becomes a negotiation between continuity and transformation. To understand Kinship as a practice of composition is to take it seri-

ously as an art of making persons through what they share and what they endure. I noticed how this art of composition was performed in everyday acts: in the way people compared hands or eyes, but also in how they retold the same story of an ancestor to explain a habit, a reaction, or a fear. To narrate oneself was always, in some measure, to narrate others.

The dividual person is therefore not a metaphor but an ethnographic reality. In Barão de Juparanã, lives are literally interwoven. Memory, substance, and gesture circulate like currents within a single body that exceeds the boundaries of the self. To speak of inheritance is to speak of co-presence: the dead inhabit the living, and the living sustain the dead through recognition and care.

To be someone, in this world, is always to be more than one, to be part of a collective portrait whose image is never finished. During my final visits, when families gathered to compare new photographs or remember those who had passed, I saw this multiplicity opened as both grief and continuity. The shared smile, the tilt of a head, the tone of laughter. These small likenesses became affirmations of existence across time. Personhood, here, is not an individual possession but a relational composition: a practice of living together in, and through, one another.

Transmission, Religion, and Healing

If the previous section explored haunted genealogies as forms of remembering and reasoning through affliction, what follows considers how these same genealogical practices opened within the domains of faith, care, and everyday healing.

Transmission appears not as an abstract mechanism but as a lived relation: a form of attention that ties generations through bodies, gestures, memory, and faith. The language of inheritance that my interlocutors use as blood, resemblance, name, devotion is also a language of care. To recognise a shared trait is to assume responsibility for it; to name an affliction as hereditary is to warn and protect. Through these acts, the past becomes a means of looking after the present.

The idea of healing in this context cannot be separated from genealogy. It involves acknowledging what circulates: the visible and the invisible, the remembered and the repressed, and transforming it through speech, prayer, and recognition. During fieldwork, I often witnessed how illness and memory were narrated together: the cancer of an aunt recalled the depression of a grandfather, which in turn evoked the silence of enslaved ancestors whose stories remained untold. Healing, then, begins not with erasure but with encounter. As bell hooks reminds us, the practice of care is inseparable from a love ethic that transforms pain into connection and responsibility (2000). Audre Lorde likewise insists that such care is not sentimental but erotic in

the deepest sense – a mode of power rooted in the capacity to feel and to sustain life (1984). These gestures of affection, protection, and endurance animate the healing work carried out by many women of Barão de Juparanã.

These vernacular practices of care echo what Julie Livingston (2012) calls the improvisational work of sustaining life amid precarious infrastructures, and what João Biehl (2005) describes as fragile yet vital networks of attention that emerge in contexts of social abandonment. In Barão de Juparanã, healing likewise outspreads through improvised circuits of relation between kin, saints, and the dead. Biehl and Ghodsee (2020) has more recently emphasised that care, as a dialogical practice, entails listening to suffering as a site of knowledge, an idea that resonates strongly with the conversations in Barão de Juparanã.

In Barão de Juparanã, well-being is the capacity to sustain relation in the presence of pain, turning repetition into reflection through vernacular forms of care. As Claudia put it, 'talking about them is what keeps us from getting sick.' Her phrase captures a profound truth: that the health of a family, and perhaps of a society, depends on the possibility of conversation between the living and the dead. The genealogical artefacts, the festivals of Sant'Ana, and even the recognition of a familiar gesture all operate as infrastructures. Such everyday acts of remembrance exemplify what I call *dialogical care*: the transformation of transmission into ethical relation through conversation and co-presence. They allow the past to remain active, audible, and open to reinterpretation.

In this sense, the ethnography contributes to a broader rethinking of intergenerational well-being as a process of relational repair. It shows that dialogue is not only verbal but material and sensorial, occurring in the act of touching an old photograph, lighting a candle, or recognising a resemblance. These gestures are forms of communication across time, through which care is transmitted and history becomes inhabitable again.

What the families of Barão de Juparanã reveal is that kinship is also a moral practice of listening: an art of staying in relation with what has been transmitted, even when it wounds. Healing, here, is not the opposite of affliction but its transformation into connection, it is the possibility of living well with one's ghosts.

In the vocabulary of this special issue, such practices offer an example of dialogical well-being: a mode of life sustained through reciprocity, remembrance, and care for what endures. By listening to these haunted genealogies, we learn that the future of well-being does not lie in forgetting the past, but in cultivating the capacity to speak with it.

Conclusion: Dialogues of Inheritance

What the families of Barão de Juparanã reveal is that inheritance is not a static transmission of blood or property, but a continuous act of interpretation. Haunted genealogies weave together material and immaterial forms of inheritance – bodily, affective, and spiritual – producing an ethics of attention that I describe as dialogical care. To inherit, in this world, is to enter into conversation with the living and the dead, with gestures, names, illnesses, and blessings that continue to move across generations. The genealogies that I encountered are not merely records of descent; they are repertoires of care, living diagrams whereby people learn to endure what persists.

When Cláudia, Osmar, or Adaury recount their stories, they are not only remembering; they are thinking, producing theories of life, heredity, and vulnerability that emerge from within the family's own vernaculars. These theories do not oppose biomedical or academic ones; they coexist with them, expanding what we mean by knowledge and healing. As in dialogical anthropology (Jackson 1998; Lassiter 2005), their reflections emerge through exchange rather than extraction, revealing knowledge as a shared achievement between interlocutors and showing that well-being does not depend on escaping inheritance but on reworking it. To speak of blood, to recognise resemblance, to recall the saint's protection are ways of engaging inheritance that transform repetition into reflection and relation into responsibility.

In this sense, the haunted genealogies of Barão de Juparanã make a critical contribution to debates on intergenerational well-being. They show that the future of health and coexistence lies not in forgetting the wounds of the past but in sustaining dialogue with them. As Tina Campt (2017) suggests, such practices involve a form of listening attuned to the frequencies through which Black life endures, imagines, and insists on otherwise futures. What emerges, then, is an anthropology of listening, in which ethnography becomes a means of perceiving how futures are constructed through the reinterpretation of inheritance (Biehl and Ghodsee 2020), in which ethnography becomes a means of perceiving how futures are constructed through the reinterpretation of inheritance.

The families' haunted genealogies remind us that every archive of suffering also contains the potential for healing: traces of endogamy, illness, and silence that once produced stigma now become sources of reflection and intimacy. In transforming inheritance into dialogue, these families reimagine kinship as a moral and imaginative space – one in which the past can be spoken to, rather than spoken for.

For anthropology, this means moving the study of kinship, memory, and post-slavery histories beyond the analysis of descent and towards the practices whereby life is sustained after catastrophe. The ethnography of Barão de Juparanã invites us to take

seriously these vernacular genealogies of survival, to see in them not pathology, but thought.

In foregrounding these practices of attention, the article contributes to wider debates on intergenerational well-being by showing how families cultivate forms of endurance that are neither therapeutic nor reconciliatory, but dialogical.

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Designing Justice: The Politics of Collaborative Architectural Design at the Former Torture Chambers at Nyayo House

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Abstract: In 2013, the Kenyan Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) recommended that the former torture chambers at Nyayo House be transformed into a public memorial. The chambers were used under the Moi regime (1978–2002) to torture political dissidents. To date, memorialisation remains deferred amid ongoing state injustices. Working from the specificities of the Kenyan political context, this paper examines the politics of co-design through an intergenerational dialogue and design workshop on Nyayo House, run in Nairobi in 2024. Bringing together survivors and young Kenyans, this workshop was structured in two parts: the morning as a conventional group dialogue and the afternoon as a co-design session for the creation of a memorial at Nyayo House. By examining this workshop through first-hand descriptions and interviews with participants, this paper critically investigates (1) how knowledge transmission diverges between dialogue and architectural co-creation, and (2) what the political effects of such knowledge transmission might be. It engages with Amartya Sen's deliberative idea of justice, Hannah Arendt's conception of political innovation, and Achille Mbembe's philosophy of disenclosure to understand the multiple forms of justice at play. Dialogue appears as a process of augmentation that aids in the implementation of justice as defined through the TJRC, while co-design is found to go beyond extant political relations as a politics of innovation. This recasts justice as a futural practice that opens up new solidarities and imaginaries of justice, situating co-design as a key practice for justice in contexts such as Kenya, where memorialisation can be deployed to enact political closure.

Keywords: Architectural Theory, Co-Design, Justice, Kenya, Political theory, Postcolonialism

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Introduction

Nyayo House is a banal government office tower set amidst the diesel-filled bustle of downtown Nairobi, a major African metropolis (Fig. 1). Built in 1982, it is a familiar landmark for the city that stands at the intersection of Uhuru Highway and Kenyatta Avenue. Outside, Kenyan Defence Forces guard the entrance and exits, weapons on display, ensuring that no one lingers on the street outside or sneaks a photograph of the building. Inside the fence, patient Kenyans wait in long lines to have their passports renewed by a slow bureaucracy, sometimes spending hours weaving through the parking spaces surrounding the building. The wide staircase at the front leads into a dimly lit lobby where elevators take visitors and employees to the many government departments and offices housed across the 26 floors above.

Figure 1. Nyayo House from Kenyatta Avenue. Photo by author, 2023.

Out of earshot of the buses and *matatu*s (minibuses) on Kenyatta Avenue, tucked in a corner of the basement of Nyayo House, lie twelve derelict torture chambers used between 1982 and 1993 to incarcerate and torture around two hundred political

dissidents during President Daniel Arap Moi's regime (1978–2002). Several of these 'dissidents' advocating for a democratic Kenya died at Nyayo House, most in the brightly lit interrogation rooms on the topmost three floors, connected to the subterranean cells by an express elevator. Those who survived were incarcerated at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison nearby. Those who survived both the torture and imprisonment faced extreme ostracisation from their home communities, as even associating with someone marked as a 'saboteur' was dangerous. Several survivors had to move across the country to find new communities, further isolating them after extreme brutalisation at the hands of the government. After twenty-four years of power, and two successful but bloody re-elections in the 1990s, Moi lost the 2002 election to Mwai Kibaki, his former Vice-President and a prominent figure in Kenyan politics. On February 11, 2003, the former torture chambers at Nyayo House were opened for the first time.

This public event promised a new era for Kenya and the transformation of the site into a memorial, placing Nyayo House within a broader transitional justice paradigm in which memorialisation offers a form of 'symbolic reparation' for survivors and aids in moving a society towards a post-conflict state of peace. Yet, over two decades later, little movement on that promise has happened, even after the completion of the Kenyan Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC, 2008–2013) in which this memorialisation was explicitly recommended, thereby configuring Kenya as a 'post-conflict' polity. Today, the small, dark cells gather dust as the chambers go untouched and unmemorialised (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. The former torture chambers at Nyayo House. Photo by author, 2024.

At this current juncture, Nyayo House is neither an active site of violence nor a memorial, occupying a liminal status. Mirroring a wider pattern of partial or deferred political change following the Moi era, this liminality troubles conventional accounts of 'post-conflict' transition to peace through which the relationship between memorialisation and justice is typically understood. Without full memorialisation, Nyayo House cannot be understood as a form of symbolic reparation. This means that the legacies of Moi era violence can continue to go unattended until the state implements the recommendations of the TJRC. Justice is relegated here to juridical terms, remaining deferred until memorialisation and other forms of reparations are supported by the state. Rethinking how justice might be claimed beyond this constrictive deferral acquires urgency in this context, as the legacies of past injustices continue to impact the lives of not only survivors but young Kenyans at the forefront of political activism today.

Despite its liminal status, Nyayo House continues to anchor calls for redressing Moi era political violence and appears to be of relevance to young justice activists advocating for political transformation. As part of a research project studying the links between Nyayo House and justice, the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) hosted a day-long workshop in September 2024 in Nairobi focused on intergenerational knowledges at Nyayo House. This research event brought together twenty-nine participants: primary survivors, secondary survivors, young social justice activists, and students of architecture at the University of Nairobi.[2]

Organised collaboratively by the author and Wachira Waheire, a survivor of Nyayo House and a human rights activist, the workshop was held as part of a wider doctoral research project by the author focused on the role played by Nyayo House as an architectural site of violent memory in localised negotiations and conceptions of justice. The site was 'accessed' through in-person visits, archival research, and 46 in-depth interviews with survivors, secondary victims, and young Kenyans; many of the participants in the workshop were also interviewed about Nyayo House prior to the event, where they shared their thoughts on Nyayo House and expressed interest in engaging further. These interviews were framed by a phenomenological approach that foregrounds 'human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity' (Pollio et al. 1997, 5), emphasising that research is an intersubjective production between participants sharing and diverging in their experiences. Working within this paradigm and a wider action-research orienta-

[2] These participants were recruited in close collaboration with Wachira Waheire, who has been heavily engaged in justice and survivor advocacy since the 1990s. The social justice activists are associated with the Mathare Social Justice Centre, while the students responded to a call disseminated by faculty at the University of Nairobi.

tion, the research is understood as a partnership through which all participants (myself included) can collaborate to achieve our goals. This paper builds on one element of the wider research project to examine the specific contribution of a dialogue- and design-mediated engagement with Nyayo House. All participants in the day did so on the basis of a shared belief in the importance of Nyayo House to justice in Kenya. In addition, they all agreed explicitly[3] to have their names and images openly associated with the research on the grounds that their specific experiences and stories should not be hidden, repressed, or even anonymised; to do so would continue to legitimise the government's silence on the truth of Nyayo House. In addition, this event was seen to be part of the implementation of the recommendations of the TJRC – a need that is widely acknowledged by both state and non-state actors in Kenya. However, following a duty of care, only survivors' names have been kept unaltered as state-driven violence in Kenya is largely aimed at young Kenyans, and the political landscape remains volatile in the lead-up to the 2027 elections.

The day was structured as both an intergenerational dialogue on justice and a co-design session aimed at collectively imagining the transformation of the former torture chambers at Nyayo House into a public memorial. While these two aspects of this workshop were developed to complement each other, what emerged was a picture of two distinct modes of engagement with justice as it relates to Nyayo House. The first unfolded in line with established conventions of justice dialogue, with participants sharing multiple experiences of injustice as a group. In the second mode, participants engaged in a collaborative design practice, working in smaller groups with architectural materials and speculative design processes to imagine the future of Nyayo House together. Understanding precisely how these two modes of intergenerational engagement overlap and diverge and what kinds of politics might be embedded therein forms the basis of this article.

Through a close analysis of fieldnotes taken during the workshop alongside follow-up interviews with the young 'non-survivor' participants, this essay investigates (1) how knowledge transmission diverges between dialogue and design-mediated co-creation, and (2) what the political effects of such knowledge transmission might be. While interviews with all participants would provide deeper insights into the forms of politics that this event produced for survivors of Nyayo House, understanding how the event affected those participants born after the Moi era was prioritised amid

[3] This research received ethics approval from the University of Cambridge under ID AHAET/23764/ETH/21, and all participants have consented following acknowledgment of the uses and dissemination of the research. This research also received approval from the Kenyan government, under license no. NACOSTI/P/24/36965.

funding and logistical limitations since, as several survivors identified, memorialisation is for future generations.

Despite its limited ability to engage with all participants through follow up interviews, this paper argues that political imaginaries of justice are effectively produced through the inclusion of collaborative design following and in addition to dialogue-based forms of knowledge sharing. Through the co-design portion of the day, participants with divergent relationships with Moi era political violence – survivors, secondary victims, 'non-survivors' – appeared to become implicated in a collective future, thereby recasting those relationships. While the dialogue portion of the workshop helped to consolidate the truth of survivors' experiences of violence, stabilising the past, the co-design portion reworked those experiences through constructing a fundamentally uncertain and imaginative sense of the future. This futural and unstable process for intergenerational solidarity formation relies on the fundamentally speculative and uncertain character of design, suggesting that it provides a critical practice for imagining new political futures. This process can, I argue, be understood as a politics of *disenclosure*, following the political philosophy of Achille Mbembe (2001, 2019, 2021). This politics emphasises the imaginative production of innovative, open relations that can provoke new horizons of political action, establishing co-design as a key practice for going beyond the augmentation of extant political relations. The politics embedded within the co-design portion of the workshop suggest that by deploying intergenerational co-design as a grounded mode of engagement with past injustices at Nyayo House, the contentious ideals of peace and justice in Kenya can be both challenged and given new meaning in pursuit of a more just future. Moreover, this paper argues that co-design offers a novel practice of justice in contexts where the state appears reluctant to meaningfully break from structures of past political violence.

Building on the local dynamics of Nyayo House, this paper considers first the Kenyan context before delineating the dialogue and the co-design portions of the workshop. In the final section, it turns to a wider theorisation of the politics of these modes of engagement. This theorisation is grounded by Mbembe's emphasis on temporality and subjectivity in postcolonial politics, Michael Rothberg's (2019) elaboration of the 'implicated subject' as a category for considering justice beyond juridical frameworks, and Hannah Arendt's (2018) seminal conception of action and natality in political innovation.

Non-Transition and Peaceocracy: Memory Dialogue and Justice Beyond the Kenyan State

In August 2013, the TJRC published its final report, in which it explicitly recommended the conversion of the former torture chambers at Nyayo House into a public memorial (TJRC 2013, 31). This conversion of Nyayo House was intended to be a form of symbolic reparation for survivors, situating memorialisation in Kenya within a global transitional justice paradigm in which sites of violence are regularly turned into political spaces of education, testimony collection, and emotional connection with past violence (Sodaro 2018; Hamber et al. 2010; Olick 2007). In the words of a recent UN special report on transitional justice and memorialisation, such a conversion is meant to 'create the conditions for public debate within society on the causes and consequences of past crimes and violence and on the attribution of direct and indirect responsibility' (UN 2020, 18). While this UN report acknowledges the potential for sites of memory to also be weaponised, it maintains a normative framing of memorialisation as a linear process towards what it identifies as 'the political goal of establishing democracy and a culture of peace' (19). In this framing, the use of memorialisation to uphold oppressive political structures is implicitly understood as a failure of its promise to contribute to peace.

Yet in Kenya this conflation of democracy and justice with peace is highly problematic. Today, the Kenyan state operates as what has been called a 'peaceocracy', in which an entrenched political elite can maintain structural power inequalities and forms of repression by delegitimising political dissent as an undemocratic threat to 'peace' (Odote 2020; Lynch et al. 2019). Peace here appears as a discursive regime which upholds stability and national unity and which is manifested as a lack of political contestation (Lynch 2018; Branch 2014). Peace is defined in negative terms as the absence of overt violence, opening space for 'stability [to be] used to justify the use of state power as an instrument of control' (Lynch 2018, 56; Brown 2013). To build peace in this context does not require the uncovering of systemic injustices; rather, the potential for such injustices to destabilise established politics is construed as a threat to peace. Memorialisation might achieve its goal of peace while also upholding oppressive modes of political power.

In this context, peace means something quite different to John Paul Lederach's (1997) influential conception of peacebuilding as 'a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships' (20). Peacebuilding for Lederach is a holistic term that links together multiple efforts to change conditions of injustice. Transitional justice, on the other hand, is typically predicated on a linear temporality that strictly demarcates pre- and

post-conflict times, and constructs instances of past violence as 'complete, as an object to be overcome' (Miller 2023; Davidovic 2025). Yet this linearity of transition can frame the past as surmountable, refusing to acknowledge the provisionality and partiality of the events being overcome and ignoring the debris of injustices that continue to reverberate and haunt 'post-conflict' life (Whigham 2022; Bevernage 2012). On the surface, this ambition to create a 'break' with the past appears to differentiate transitional justice from peacebuilding as 'peace is not seen merely as a stage in time or a condition. It is a dynamic social construct' and, as such, is a process, not an end (Lederach 1997, 20). The peace narrative in Kenya, however, emphasises linear progression and relies on the fear of recurrence, thereby bringing peace into alignment with transitional justice, reinforcing the UN report's linking of memorialisation, transitional justice, and peace as intertwined endeavours that aim to overcome past violence.

Post-Moi regimes insist on overcoming the past through only *partial* transformation of political power, performing an image of change while lacking a solid break with the past (Brown 2013). The ongoing regime of 'peaceocracy' enables the legacies of dispossession, torture, sexual violence, and murder to continue to resonate within everyday life, particularly in informal urban districts, even as electoral violence decreases, and the new 2010 Constitution enshrines a right to 'dignity' for all Kenyans. Under the aegis of peace, justice can appear as a stabilising force for the political status quo, allowing 'transition' under post-Moi regimes to unfold in practice as an apathy towards redress of postcolonial atrocities.

Nyayo House, within this context, cannot contribute to justice in its conventional role as a form of 'symbolic reparation' towards peace. More precisely, should Nyayo House contribute to 'peace', as the UN report argues that it must, then is this a conception of peace as Lederach defines it, or one that is used by the state to repress political contestation and transformation? The discursive instrumentalisation of peace to legitimise violence has rendered it problematic as a framework for understanding how memorialisation might contribute to justice.

Despite the coercive deployment of peace and the state's apathetic response to political transformation following the Moi era, Nyayo House is not entirely repressed, erased, nor inaccessible. Visits to the basement chambers have been allowed in the past and several survivors have visited the site, returning as part of larger memorial events held there despite significant bureaucratic hurdles placed in the way by the National Intelligence Services (NIS).[4] In some of these visits, survivors have been joined by family members and younger Kenyans, many of whom were born after the

[4] The NIS was formerly Special Branch and ran the torture chambers under Moi. They remain in control of access to the site.

Moi era and who engage closely in justice activism. These visits are, by all accounts, powerfully emotional events. In the words of one survivor, these visits remind him that 'we lived to tell our story' (Njoroge, J. interview, Nairobi, August 15, 2024). For the young Kenyans, these visits help to actualise survivors' experiences, placing them in the past by immersing them in the 'violent environment' of survivors' stories (M. interview, Nairobi, August 21, 2024). Visiting the site, clearly, is an important avenue for intergenerational knowledge transmission, and can help ensure that past injustices are affectively understood in the present.

However, those visits are few and deserve to be unpacked in a separate work. For most Kenyans, Nyayo House is only accessible in its bureaucratic function, as the site for passport renewals and other forms of everyday state functioning. The violent history of Nyayo House is known, but the chambers, tucked out of view in a back corner of the basement, exist only as whispers for most people, stories from an older generation. Nyayo House does not feature in official narratives; the Nairobi National Museum of Kenya (NMK) does not mention postcolonial violence in any exhibition.[5] Without public memorialisation, Nyayo House is left to impact Kenyan political life as an indirect encounter, a discursive anchor for an older generation's stories and a metonym for state violence.

The question is raised, then, as to how efforts to memorialise Nyayo House might be considered a factor in claiming justice, and what justice might mean in this context. While the latter question will be addressed towards the end of this paper, we can turn now to a recent mode of memory work through which Nyayo House has been engaged: an intergenerational justice dialogue.

Witnessing and Deliberation: The Limits of Collective Dialogue

On September 14, 2024, a workshop examining the links between Nyayo House and justice was held in Nairobi. Collaboratively organised by Nyayo House survivor Wachira Waheire and the author, this event brought together twenty-nine participants for a day to engage in intergenerational dialogue and the collaborative design of a memorial at Nyayo House. The participant group was composed of six primary survivors, eight secondary survivors, eight young social justice advocates, and seven architecture students. Eighteen in this group had visited Nyayo House, while eleven had not, setting the scene for knowledge transfer of not only experiences of state violence across generations, but of varying intimacies with Nyayo House.

[5] The exhibitions assessed were those at the Nairobi branch of NMK on November 28, 2023.

As laid out in the programme booklet given to participants, the event sought to establish: (1) a common understanding of how the landscape of justice in Kenya has changed across generations; (2) what memorialisation at Nyayo House means to various participants; and (3) a set of 'architectural priorities' that can aid in the development of a memorial for Nyayo House. The day-long event was structured in two sessions, with the morning as an intergenerational dialogue and the afternoon as a co-design session. The three goals were to be covered through these two collective formats for engagement with the intersection of justice and Nyayo House, understood to be a significant symbolic and material site of violence. The two forms of engagement were intended to build on each other, with the morning helping establish a common foundation for the afternoon's co-design session. While this linear structure of the day positions the co-design as reliant on the morning, and so its effects cannot be fully extricated from those of the morning, participants were able to identify distinct forms of knowledge transmission between the two parts of the day. Nonetheless, the political valence of the co-design session should not be considered as fully independent of the dialogue, but rather as a critical additional practice that allows for this engagement with justice to go beyond current political horizons.

After a round of introductions over tea, each person shared their experiences and thoughts on the core ideas of the workshop. Each participant stood up and spoke to the group, sharing intimate memories of torture at Nyayo House; the hurt felt in the absence of loved ones killed by the state; the forms of systemic violence that continue to harm the urban majority living in the poorer Eastlands of Nairobi; and the more banal forms of injustice such as corruption that permeate everyday interactions with state actors. As more participants spoke, responses to others' experiences were included by several participants.

We can understand this format of dialogue as a form of witnessing. The potential for the act of giving witness to alter one's relationship to past violence has become integral to studies of trauma in diverse contexts that examine how survivors mobilise and produce social identities to navigate the aftermath of violence (Schwab 2010; Douglass and Vogler 2003). Psychologist Orla Muldoon's (2024) sustained exploration of the social psychology of trauma demonstrates that the act of sharing traumatic experiences can help survivors of many forms of violence to develop new social and political relations that can collectively empower then to 'push back against problematic or even oppressive systems and structures' (140). Despite the 'unassimilable wound' of trauma, the discursive act of sharing their stories can ameliorate the world-destroying effects of violence by enabling survivors to build new relations and thus reinhabit the social, temporal, and spatial world that was brutally destroyed through the act of torture (Carruth 1996; Scarry 1985).

Following the established idea that words performatively enact meaning, rather than simply connoting syntactical meaning, the act of speaking with another involves them in a common production of meaning, potentially changing not only survivors' relationships with past violence but also the relationships that non-survivors hold (Wittgenstein 2009; Austin 1979). In their work on witnessing, Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler (2003) argue that for one person's agony to be believed by those who did not experience it, there must first be 'some kind of "connection" with them' (38). At the workshop, all participants shared a willingness to listen to each other's experiences, setting the groundwork for the active reception of survivors' experiences. This pre-established connection between participants offers the possibility for dialogue to augment the interpretive frameworks through which different people's experiences are received, made meaningful, and can come to inform new perspectives.

This understanding of dialogue aligns this portion of the workshop closely with deliberative approaches to justice. A deliberative approach to justice emphasises finding consensus on a given topic of debate, a 'common ground' from which claims of injustice can be assessed (Barker 2017). Here, justice requires open deliberation on the truth of the claims and on how best to redress the injustices, aiming to approach a state in which the given injustices are removed from society or at the least minimised (Dryzek 2013; Sen 2009). The resultant 'more just' society can be approached progressively through augmenting the conditions of debate between varying positions as they enter into common agreements.[6] This deliberative approach to justice has had far-reaching uptake in democratic theory and functions as a normative basis for liberal polities throughout the world (Wenman 2018, 82–86).

Yet for this deliberative approach to justice to work, key assumptions need to be maintained: the participants in the debate need to subscribe to the same principles of fairness, tolerance, and reciprocity, even if the precise articulation of those principles needs to be worked out collectively. The normative basis for these ideals is conventionally provided on the one hand by the formal structures of law, which establish the conditions of equality needed for marginalised voices to enter into the debate, and on the other by the social norms which condition the reception of such voices. The legal structures are not relevant in the case of this intergenerational dialogue, as no officials were present, those structures were already at work in the testimony collection process during the TJRC, and pathways for redressing injustices on those terms had been identified in the TJRC Final Report but not implemented. In fact, as demonstrated above, conceiving of justice in juridical terms, replete with a reliance on peace and transition, can serve to circumscribe what avenues for claiming

6 Following Amartya Sen, this idea of deliberative justice does not subscribe to a transcendentalist conception of a 'perfectly just' society, as per John Rawls (1971).

justice are considered legitimate and close off new forms of political organisation that seek alternate modes for constituting power. The social basis for deliberation, however, is important for making sense of how the dialogue portion of the workshop contributed to justice.

While a thorough exposition of how social norms are produced is well beyond this paper, we can understand that they are shaped both through embodied encounters with the material world and the discursive contexts within which we appear and speak with others. The former point will be picked up through the later discussion on architectural co-design, which involves collaborative negotiation with the materiality of Nyayo House. The discursive contexts of our lives are of immediate relevance since dialogue always emerges within the constraints of language. We can understand that by introducing new information into our discursive context, dialogue can come to inform the social norms through which injustices are understood. This 'informational basis' for justice has been extensively unpacked by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (2009), who argues persuasively that we need to be exposed to new perspectives in order to ethically assess injustices. Balancing the need to establish an objective, 'position-independent understanding of the world' (161) and the importance of a view embedded in one's lived experiences and perspectives, Sen foregrounds that 'social evaluations may be starved of useful information and good arguments if they are entirely based on separated and sequestered cogitation' (242). To assess an injustice therefore requires a common give-and-take of positional perspectives, both altering the wider understandings of the group and having one's own understandings altered in turn. This deliberative approach situates the dialogue session of the workshop on Nyayo House as a potential contributor to justice through the key role that openly speaking together plays in altering the informational basis of social norms. In this case, these norms relate specifically to the forms of violence perpetrated by the Moi government at Nyayo House.

Despite making sure that each person was able to share their thoughts and experiences, the perspectives of participants were not equally valued, and the give-and-take of the dialogue was asymmetrical. As might be expected, given that the workshop was predicated on an examination of the links between Nyayo House and justice, the differences in the immediacy of injustices experienced and their connections with Nyayo House came to define hierarchies within the dialogue. Survivors' and secondary victims' lived experiences were given priority, and they each spoke first and often for longer than other participants. The young Kenyans all structured their contributions as reflections on survivors' words and on the forms of injustice that they have experienced in Kenya today, establishing a hierarchy within the group. Amongst the young Kenyans, a further striation could be seen as many of the university students come from middle class backgrounds while the social justice advocates come from

the poorer districts of Nairobi's informal Eastlands; the forms of injustices faced diverged accordingly, with the university students speaking of corruption, and the justice advocates speaking about extrajudicial police killings. While these groupings do not account for the plurality of represented perspectives and the many overlaps between these categories, they help us to make sense of what kinds of alignments in knowledge might have been created through the morning dialogue session.

As seen in the youth group's consistent deference and reference to the older group's experiences, the truth of what happened to survivors of Nyayo House was given priority within the dialogue. This survivor-oriented alignment provides an important balance to the state's apathy towards platforming those experiences, redressing the lack of voice produced in victims of Nyayo House through torture and subsequent social ostracisation, and then through the non-memorialisation of Nyayo House in a post-Moi Kenya. In helping give voice to survivors, the dialogue upheld in part the promise of memorialising Nyayo House, which was to give public space for engagement with survivors' experiences of state violence on the assumption that a common rejection of such violence will emerge.

From interviews with the participants, the dialogue portion of the day enabled young Kenyans to understand survivors' experiences better, therefore helping them make an informed assessment of how current injustices might relate to those older forms. For one young social justice advocate, anonymised as T, 'the morning session is where [he] got to understand the real life of those who went through the torture chambers' (T., interview, online, October 23, 2024). The 'quite detailed' and 'precise' descriptions that survivors gave in the morning enabled T to situate the architectural representations used in the afternoon in relation to those stories. In effect, the experiences delivered by survivors in the morning dialogue session expanded the discursive context through which T could make sense of what happened at Nyayo House.

For survivors, the dialogue effectively exposed a new generation to the realities of the Moi regime, producing shared perspectives that can more accurately assess how contemporary injustices might relate to Moi-era political repression.[7] However, this collective format offered limited opportunity for true *dialogue* in the sense of a fluid back-and-forth event and instead unfolded as a series of statements of personal ex-

[7] In the months leading up to this workshop, thousands of Kenyans protested twice a week against corrupt governance, unified eventually under the motto of 'Ruto Must Go'. William Ruto, the incumbent President, responded with extreme police violence. Dozens were killed throughout mid-2024 and by the end of 2024, an estimated 82 people had been abducted, echoing Moi-era tactics of political violence. In 2025, similar protests and responses were repeated. See: KNCHR 2024; KHRC 2024.

periences with limited space for response. For those who did not directly experience the violence of Nyayo House, like T, this didactic structure was highly informative but not *implicating*. This lack of implication, I argue, reveals the limits of dialogue as a form of justice and indicates the importance of including co-design in intergenerational dialogue. We can turn briefly here to Michael Rothberg's (2019) conceptual category of the implicated subject to understand this central distinction, which will be used throughout this remainder of this paper.

Rothberg develops the category of the 'implicated subject' to blur the boundaries between victims, bystanders, and perpetrators of violence, and work out the complex forms of political action that are possible for subjects 'still somehow caught up in the events' (61). The 'implicated subject' gives a name to those who, while not guilty of past crimes, still have a responsibility for justice – that is, for altering the structural continuities that extend historical violence into present subjectivities. Building on Arendt's (2003) notion of collective responsibility, implication reminds us that 'most subjects find themselves enmeshed in histories and structures of violence they may not realise they inhabit and help prop up' (Rothberg 2019, 49). The injustices of the Moi era, which are closest to survivors, already implicate young Kenyans, even if they do not self-consciously engage with those legacies. For Rothberg, attuning people to the varied ways that we are already implicated in particular moments and sites of violence offers a means of reconfiguring the bonds of responsibility between victims and perpetrators or, going beyond these conventional categories, between young Kenyans and the former torture chambers at Nyayo House. These bonds, it must be emphasised, are produced through subjectivity, through the foundational ideas that people hold about their identities at individual and collective levels.

The informative structure of the morning dialogue portion of the workshop set the scene for a common understanding of what happened at Nyayo House, scaffolding the afternoon session, where a deeper engagement with Moi-era violence could unfold. Yet this common understanding of survivors' experiences did not appear to *implicate* 'non-survivor' participants in new political subjectivities. Important as it may be for establishing new reference points for interpreting contemporary political agitation, the forms of subjectivity and group identification that each participant brought with them to the event did not appear to be altered through the dialogue portion of the day. This may be because all participants joined the event with the empathetic understanding that each other's experiences are of value. In this sense, the participants were already consciously implicated in each other's experiences, and so the dialogue did not cause a reconfiguration of those implications. This raises the question of whether this mode of dialogue can do more than strengthen the informational basis of deliberative ideas of justice. When the participants in the dialogue

are already aligned in their sensitivity to victims' claims of injustice, it appears that the goals of dialogue, as it relates to justice, should remain modest.

While this dialogue session was important for helping non-survivors know more about the Moi era, it remains largely within a normative political framework that sees justice as a matter of enhancing the deliberative conditions of tolerance and rational decision making through which injustices can be ethically assessed and ultimately remedied towards peace. This dialogue did enhance these deliberative conditions, strengthening the participants' agreement that Nyayo House must become a memorial. However, the wider liberal ideals which undergird memorialisation have fallen flat in Kenya, appropriated to maintain structures of injustice in the name of 'peace', and to defer transition by extending deliberation without action until an undecided future date. Even if participants now (more deeply) share a common set of agreed-upon truths, anchored by survivors' lived experiences, the wider structures that predefine the relationship between Nyayo House and justice remain unchallenged. Nyayo House remains contained within the horizon of present politics. The dialogue has *augmented* but not *innovated* on present political relations, leaving justice to be pursued within extant politics.

To go beyond extant political relations requires more than the introduction of new knowledge of the past and of its legacies. It requires a shift in subjectivities, a shift in how people define their senses of self and community. Before defending this proposition through the philosophy of Achille Mbembe, we need to understand the second half of the workshop in which participants engaged in collaborative design, generating a future-oriented imagination that, I argue, effectively reconfigured their experiences with past violence and, thus, their subjectivities.

Temporalities and Materialities of Co-design: Innovation Through Architectural Praxis

Following a shared lunch, the participants were divided into mixed groups of around five and tasked with designing a set of architectural ideas for a memorial at the Nyayo House torture chambers. Through this design-oriented process, the young Kenyans engaged in a speculative praxis with other participants that reconfigured how they placed themselves in relation to torture at Nyayo House. Co-design has for some time been explored within architecture and planning theory through the politics of participation and commoning, with co-design practices critically positioned as a means to approach 'just' spaces that serve communities on the inhabitants' terms (Huybrechts 2020; Kelly 2019). While co-design can also hide the imbalances and inequalities in whose voices are present or dominant in the participatory forums, co-design is normatively seen as a method for co-producing knowledge about a given

place and suggesting appropriate means for intervening in that place (Sendra 2024). Yet co-design, on these terms, is reduced to a 'good practice' for knowledge production, neglecting the power of political imaginaries in transforming power relations. It is this latter point that I will focus on.

Going beyond knowledge sharing within a deliberative conception of justice, the co-design session appears to have effectively enabled a collective intervention into the future of Nyayo House, allowing 'non-survivors' to lay claim to Moi-era violence as implicated members of a wider community that lives together with the legacies of Nyayo House. This, as will become clear, suggests that architectural co-design might free participants' capacities to effectively 'carry the torch' from the generation that directly experienced the injustices at hand.

For E, one of the student participants, the co-design session was more than a case of sharing knowledge. Rather, it was the active creation of something *new* together:

> I have what I know, and they have what they had to experience. We could find somewhere in the middle because we were looking to the future of the site. Like two tree branches into a big stem (E., interview, online, October 2, 2024).

E explains here that there are multiple sets of knowledge that came together through the workshop to create something new – a 'middle' stem that grew through an engagement with the future of the site. This futural orientation differs significantly from the morning session, where past experiences and present understandings of injustices were the focus. Multiple experiences were not simply shared, for her, but were drawn together into a *new* future that exceeded what she brought to the session and what others brought. This same point was made by another young participant, A, who says that

> I always see the wall that was almost demolished, the bullets, the sealed elevator. I feel like I have been there already. Even if they never open it, I feel like I can tell the next generation what happened there, what it is like, everything (A.., interview, online, October 3, 2024).

What we read here is that his engagement appears to have produced an experiential transfer of survivors' senses of ongoing injustices – a transfer of their stories, experiences, and their struggles to find justice. This is, again, the emergence of a *new* experience through the co-design session that is akin to a physical visit to the site. Key within this is his identification of the materiality of Nyayo House, the 'wall that was almost demolished' and other physical qualities that he collaboratively engaged with through design. There is in this new experience an architectural quality that did not

appear in the morning session. The two descriptions of the co-design session indicate the importance of (1) engagement in the future, and (2) the materiality of architectural design. The question, then, is what such futural and material dimensions of co-design say for the politics of this mode of intergenerational engagement. We must turn to architectural theory to understand this.

There is a long history in architecture of examining design as a creative praxis. For Dalibor Vesely (2004), an architectural historian and theoretician, making (*poiēsis*) is a process of bringing 'into being something that did not previously exist. This bringing into being is a creative step that transforms the open field of creative possibilities into a representation articulated by gesture, word, image, or concept' (14). Architecture here includes the built object as well as its representations. From this understanding, Nyayo House is both the material site and the printed photographs, isometric drawings, and sketches brought to the workshop and made during it by participants.

Following Vesely, architectural praxis can be understood as an innovative act that transforms a multitude of potential futures into a material manifestation that both embodies the field of inherited ideas, images, experiences, and capacities, and exceeds those inheritances. Vesely draws extensively on phenomenological studies of sensation and perception that show how 'he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at [...] he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 134–135). In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2012, 1968) phenomenology, the simultaneous communicability we hold with the material world is complemented by its excess, refusing to be fully captured within the extant sensory dispositions that people hold at any one time. This excess comes from the element of 'unknowability' that is present in the world at all times; the fact that we are placed in a world that includes others (both human and other-than-human) means that we are not entirely in control of our actions, which can get taken up by others, setting in motion further new relations (Merleau-Ponty 2012). This excess is what allows for the creative act of designing to bring into being something new, inaugurating new relations in the world.

Co-design expands these conceptions of architectural praxis into the political realm, involving the 'human capacity for action, for beginning new and spontaneous processes' (Arendt 2018, 230–31). From Hannah Arendt (2018) we can understand that action is the 'political activity par excellence [and that] natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of the political' (9). Building from the fact of the plurality of human life, Arendt's category of 'action' names the process of 'founding and preserving political bodies' through the appearance with others, proclaiming ourselves as people (8–9, 175–246). Natality, the condition of beginning anew,

opens the possibility for breaking from extant conditions of appearance – which are contingent on the array of inequalities which structure public life – and thereby radically reconfiguring politics. However, as Mark Wenman (2018) argues through a critical assessment of Arendt alongside several 'agonistic' theorists, politics can unfold in two modes: as augmentation and as innovation (14). While natality allows for both modes of political action to emerge, they occupy different paradigms of transformation. Augmentation improves upon extant political conditions, which in the case of Nyayo House would refer to the implementation of the TJRC recommendations to transform the site into a form of symbolic repair. Innovation, on the other hand, is revolutionary in that it introduces radically new temporalities, possibilities, and conditions for appearance.

Architectural praxis, which for Vesely was considered in terms of individual creativity, can also be practised collaboratively and, as such, unfolds within and as a space of appearance. Co-design thus offers a particularly political mode of engagement with Nyayo House. Not only does architectural praxis in itself allow for the creation of new worlds through the material articulation of possible futures, but when pursued collaboratively, it might be considered a mode of political action that goes beyond augmentation, entering the realm of innovation. Yet simply innovating political relations does not automatically equate to justice. Bringing decolonial ideas of justice to bear on political innovation will help clarify this problem before returning to the specificities of the workshop on Nyayo House.

Extending the work of Frantz Fanon (2004) and Édouard Glissant (1997), decolonisation for Achille Mbembe (2021) must be understood as a process of 'disenclosure', which he identifies as a process of opening up established structures of power in order to create new worlds, new imaginaries, and new possibilities for life. This political concept builds closely on Mbembe's analysis of postcolonial power as a matter of subjectivity. Through several works, Mbembe situates the production of subjectivity as the site where injustices are worked out, laying the groundwork for intertwining justice and subjectivity, going beyond juridical approaches which overemphasise the state and law as the space of justice (Mbembe 2001, 2019; see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). For Mbembe, 'becoming-human-in-the-world is a question neither of birth nor of origin or race. It is a matter of journeying, of movement, and of transfiguration' (Mbembe 2019, 187). Dehumanisation, then, is an ontological process of opposing and fixing our given capacities for journeying, for inventing new horizons of subjectivity, and for pursuing new actions in a shared world. The torture chambers at Nyayo House were described by one survivor as 'eroding that humanity' which each person holds, 'severing those relations so that [...] you are dehumanised' (Manje, K., interview, Ruiru, August 12, 2024). To repair that dehumanisation must, following Mbembe, involve the production of new relations and capacities for the invention of

new subjectivities.[8] This emphasis on transfiguration and movement frames justice as more than a retrospective process of 'dealing with' past violence, as transitional justice proposes (Mueller-Hirth and Oyola 2018). Through disenclosure, justice might be understood as a creative practice of inaugurating new trajectories for past violence and new forms of political subjectivity. While Arendt's notion of natality also links subjectivity with politics, Mbembe's disenclosure provides an ethical argument for working to ensure that new trajectories are *open* to further transfigurations. It is not enough to create new beginnings; for creative praxis to actively produce a more just future it must operate to enhance further capacities for innovation.

Returning to E's words on the co-design workshop, we can understand that the creative praxis of co-designing a memorial at Nyayo House was explicitly oriented towards an uncertain future. The morning session prioritised survivors' memories of violence, allowing the common understanding of the Moi era as a violent time to be reinforced. While this strengthened a common foundation for diverse participants to engage in the architectural session, the afternoon was characterised by a futural orientation that diverged from the preterite orientation of the morning. This futurity is where the politics of co-design can be most clearly seen.

Despite participants' vast differences in their relation to violence at Nyayo House, the future of the site is equally open to all participants: a 'big stem' that is undecided until the moment of articulation as *a design*. The moment of articulation is always provisional in that it remains a gesture of what might yet happen; architectural drawings remain *incomplete*, suggesting a future building whose materiality will exceed that of the drawing, and which therefore cannot be captured fully in representations. The practice of co-design establishes a common future that is articulated collectively through the design, but which cannot be reduced to the drawing, leaving the future to remain open-ended. The politics of co-design can thus be understood as emergent in the unstable provisionality and futural orientation of architectural praxis.

Yet architectural praxis is *material*, too. The moment of articulation and the materials used to do so play a part in structuring the imaginaries at play, since intangible ideas and speculations always have a material counterpart (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 10). The afternoon involved a process of puzzling out the many images, drawings, and stories that were given to the participants (Fig. 3). For half of the participants, the

[8] This emphasis on the inauguration of new relations aligns closely with Hannah Arendt's emphasis on 'natality' as a fundamental part of the human condition. For Arendt, our capacity to create new relations is integral to what distinguishes human life from nature and is the 'miraculous' arena through which political freedoms are contested, negated, and expanded. See: Arendt 2018, 8–9, 247.

images of Nyayo House and drawings were familiar, relating to their memories of past visits to the site. This was particularly true for survivors, who would narrate their experiences of torture in the smaller groups to help everyone make sense of the images. The small metal strips at the cell doors, for example, were to help keep water in during torture; the peepholes were for observation; the white room was an administrative room. These memories were key for the groups to collectively make sense of the materiality of Nyayo House, and then to imagine its future together.

Figure 3. The materiality of co-design. Photo courtesy of Charles Mwaniki BIEA. 2024.

To design a future memorial at Nyayo House, 'the only perspective that [participants] had was through the eyes of the survivor' (F., interview, online, October 5, 2024). F, a young student who has never been to the former torture chambers, identifies here the importance of navigating the materials for design *with* survivors, entangling dialogue and making as two aspects of the architectural praxis at hand. The photographs and drawings directed how participants established the collective 'site' for the future memorial, materially anchoring the basis for intervention in the architecture of Nyayo House. The materiality of the co-design can be understood as a key element in creating a *common* future, since these things are equally given in the practical conditions of design.

Complementing the openness of the future of Nyayo House, the commonness of these materialities might account for the intergenerational implication that non-sur-

vivors underwent through the co-design session. When A says, 'I always see the wall that was almost demolished, the bullets, the sealed elevator [and] I feel like I have been there already,' these imaginings are created through the interplay between the given mediations and survivors' stories within the architectural praxis. A draws attention to the possibility that despite not visiting the site, one can nonetheless form a strong experience of it through engaging with the design materials alongside the stories of survivors. It is this experience that A has gone on to 'tell the next generation', effectively becoming a witness himself, blurring the boundaries between 'survivor' and 'non-survivor'. While not all interviewees described such intergenerational implication so ardently, elements of this same intergenerational implication can be seen in E's metaphor of the 'big stem' and F's description of 'getting closer and closer' to the site through the collaborative design session. This implication is, following Rothberg, a shift in political subjectivity that goes beyond augmentation and enters the realm of innovative action, or the inauguration of something new. Returning to Mbembe's conception of disenclosure as a mode of creating a more just, humanising future, the instability of the imaginaries produced through co-design positions the afternoon portion of the day as a particularly potent political practice of justice.

The Politics of Co-Design: Augmentation, Innovation, and Disenclosure

This essay set out to investigate (1) how knowledge transmission diverges between dialogue and design-mediated co-creation, and (2) what the political effects of such knowledge transmission might be. It appears that the combination of close engagement with design materials alongside the inherently futural orientation of design produced a degree of implication for the participants. Their senses of the future of Nyayo House were altered through the design process, setting up a provisional and collective conception of a space that could one day become realised. While the morning session effectively strengthened the discursive base for making sense of Nyayo House, its focus remained in the past, in what happened, to whom, and for what reasons. The present featured in relation to the past, as a space where meaningful change needs to be implemented, yet the future remained in the background. In contrast, the afternoon placed the future front and centre, shaping the contours of the intergenerational engagement through provisionality, uncertainty, and openness.

Two politics can be seen that relate to the morning and afternoon sessions: augmentation and innovation. The former can be understood as the strengthening of the conditions for deliberation on the legacies of the Moi era, and increased public will to push the government to implement the recommendations of the TJRC. The morning approached justice along these lines, drawing attention to the continuing injustices that survivors and young Kenyans faced through a lack of meaningful ad-

dress of past violence. Yet a wider discussion about political imaginaries remained absent. The afternoon, however, left the past behind, save as a cue for making sense of the site towards future-oriented intervention. The afternoon provided a creative intergenerational praxis that expressed a collective vision of the future and in doing so implicated young participants in the experiences and subjectivities of survivors. Through its futural temporality and uncertain, speculative imagination, the co-design portion of the day contributed an open-ended mode of political innovation. The authorship of Nyayo House, held firmly by survivors in the morning, became shared as the site was articulated as a provisional and collective vision of the future. This futural engagement innovated current political subjectivities, bringing into being new relations with the site and with each other that go beyond the survivor/non-survivor divisions that were brought to the workshop.

While augmentation and innovation are both valuable modes of political action that can seek to pursue justice within current political channels and beyond them, the value of co-design lies in its fundamentally open-ended, speculative character. By theorising co-design as a process of disenclosure, it can be understood as a key contributor to justice not only in the Kenyan context, but in other polities across Africa, and indeed across the world, that are characterised by prolonged and incomplete transitions away from violence. The inclusion of design practices in processes of justice seeking offers a new frontier for imagining alternative political relations that address, but are not circumscribed by, past structures of violence. Taken as a whole, the intergenerational dialogue and design workshop linked Nyayo House with justice as both an augmentation of current calls to implement memorialisation and an inauguration of new political relations. While the former is critical to achieve modes of repair for survivors, as identified by the TJRC and the wider framework of transitional justice, the latter is where co-design makes its central contribution to justice. As such, co-design might be considered a form of engagement with justice that goes beyond current political realities to provoke alternatives that, even if they remain unbuilt, might come to produce new political relations and communities attuned to disenclosure.

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Intersecting Age: The Necessity of Intergenerational Dialogue Inquiry for Gender, Racial, and Spatial Justice

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Abstract: Richmond, Virginia, as an epicentre of racialised violence in the United States, carries an outsized burden of responsibility for leading a national effort toward racial and economic healing. Richmond's generational trauma remains embodied in public policy and the psyches of dislocated descendants. These policies were originally rooted in a colonial worldview that exaggerates and fabricates biological determinants for social categories like race, gender, and age. This paper examines the transformative potential of a Collective Healing Circle practice to explore how biologically contrived social categorisation impedes spatial justice, gender equity, and racial healing.

Richmond's intergenerational dialogue, beginning with race-focused Collective Healing Circles, continued in new form through Youth Leadership Program research in partnership with a focus group of central and south-eastern Virginia youth and young adults. An impending overhaul of Richmond's land-use policy has presented another fertile opportunity for intergenerational engagement in the public sphere. This paper draws from Richmond's Collective Healing Circles, youth researcher perspective, and proposed zoning district survey as its core wells of data which, together, expose connections between Richmond's racial history and persisting intergenerational tensions, particularly concerning spatial and economic justice.

Young Virginians' struggle for access in shaping our own futures indicates marginalisation not only along racial or gender lines, but age also. Recognising youth and young adults as a marginalised identity allows the braided threads of these stories to foreground the consistencies in colonial worldviews that determine social status by race, gender, and age. The interrelated nature of these forms of social classing reveals the demand for intergenerational dialogue as a necessary component of our social change-making strategies.

Keywords: Richmond, Black American, Youth Identity, Racial Justice, Land-use, Spatial Justice

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Introduction

The areas of Southeast Virginia and Richmond, Virginia, are cultures formed by a uniquely lengthy history of chattel enslavement. Prevailing colonial interests consistently infringed on the humanity of those instrumentalised or discarded by a regime that narrowed human flourishing according to a strictly selective conception of humanity. This was justified as a sort of natural selection in that its outcomes were attributed first to biological and, by extension, economic persistence through the competition and hostility of an alleged natural order. Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and Hortense Spillers upset and expose this paradigm as one designed in the interests of a particular elite whose emergence was paradoxically engineered and inhumane.

This elite clawed their way above their unwilling competition by the formation and use of contorted knowledge systems wherein their favoured hierarchy could be expressed and executed under a guise of objectivity. Natural sciences, but biology in particular, would be manipulated to contrive a new human taxonomy. Due to Richmond's and the surrounding areas' reliance on hierarchical modes of production held in place by a bio-economical 'rationale', this region was pioneering in its construction of racism on what is now considered United States soil. Virginia's innovation in racialised power and Richmond's significance in antebellum life and economy necessitated just as formidable an underbelly of violence with unyielding cruelty reserved for those against whom biological arguments could be meted. This extractive gaze set upon human bodies distorted lines of difference, especially in the perception of the chosen elites who benefited from others' disempowerment. Race and gender surface as a well-trod terrain in political warfare against these marginalised groups, yet these are not the only exploitable areas of biological difference. Along with these, chronological age was more subtly and quietly entering the political conflict zone so as to serve, in this case, colonial interests.

For this system of oppression to effectively supply pervasive control, white patriarchal supremacy permeated every establishment and institution it designed. Virginia's racial hierarchy also had to be baked into the design of physical space, which diminished agency and freedom of movement for all beyond the confines of the white male elite. Spatial justice recognises a need for minoritised or otherwise targeted populations to reclaim space from the dominating interests of an overrepresented elite. Richmond birthed and rebirthed its moral deficits into its urban design, leaving the built landscape still begging for redemption. This healing and reparation is the goal of spatial justice, a concern shared by youth and young adults in Richmond with recognition that they confront a unique presentation of colonial dominance based on age.

Following a history of identity-based discrimination, Richmond's intergenerational friction reveals itself in electoral, policymaking, and grassroots contexts. The city's recent history is bursting with youth and young adults' assertions of agency and leadership potential even in the face of structural barriers. In all areas of collective power-building, young people are showing up with compassionate concern for co-creating more sustainable futures through spatial justice priorities. In a revelatory flourish of young-adult participation, Richmond's unfolding land-use reconstruction has captured the attention of younger Richmonders hopeful for a new spatial justice trajectory in the city. Local research capturing younger people's experiences and perspectives reveals consistent preoccupation with housing access as related to experiences of age marginalisation. Richmond youth and young adults are, according to these surveys, aware of a more at-risk standing where denial of access to spatial resources expresses a local history of hostility towards younger people. In response to structures of dominance imposed upon us, Richmond youth and young adults are imposing ourselves in change-making contexts across the city in a commitment to reversal of historical harm.

Richmond History and Healing as Social and Spatial Justice Concerns

If racism is the emblematic bald eagle of the United States, Richmond, Virginia may be its wings. After the first victims of the Middle Passage were trafficked to the shores at what is now Fort Monroe in Newport News, Virginia, this perverse and exploitative engine of chattel slavery would come of age in Richmond to power the nation's economic metastasisation. This colonial experiment was concocted around trafficking and enslavement of African people as forced labour on sprawling swaths of stolen land far exceeding what colonists had capacity to groom and breed at profitable scale. Colonists rescued from the land's vengeances – epidemic, war, and starvation – they found capacity to design and build a social hierarchy to secure forced labour for generations (Horton 2005). While Richmond is not among the country's oldest cities, its role in chattel slavery has shaped its structure and culture.

Richmond was thus incentivised to submit to colonial influences. Virginia law would be formed around its own industry priorities instead of those that could allow its future status as a commonwealth to ring true for all. The denial of access to humanity, some of which this paper will discuss, was neither invented in nor unique to Richmond. The city and state did become innovators in cultural engineering. 'Sociogeny' would become Frantz Fanon's name for this process by which we co-create one another and, perhaps inadvertently, socially locate human identity (Fanon 1952). Understanding this process as collective, however, is not an insistence on its universality.

Northampton County, Virginia's 1655 Johnson v. Casar case was the first legal instance of race-based enslavement for life (Sweet 2005). By 1662, Virginia would legally profess enslavement as a generational curse shackled to a Black person's maternal line. The nation's most profitable offspring would be birthed by Black mothers. By this action, the Black, female-assigned body was targeted as the sacred source yet ideological antithesis of the white patriarchal enterprise. This flourishing business experiment found sections of the gendered social script to be overwhelmingly inconvenient in the case of Black assigned females.

Hortense Spillers exposes the ungendering of the Black female, in part, through a denial of kinship. Black women were not allowed to rear their own children despite this being considered essential to womanhood. The sordid occasion of chattel enslavement was worth race disrupting, if not superseding, gender in the way Black women's bodies are targeted within this expression of patriarchy. The morally bereft reproduction obsession is notably most concerned with assigned females of 'childbearing age', meaning that the sexual and reproductive violence against Black childbearers also encouraged the targeting of barely pubescent children, which would continue into their younger adulthood. Children are also victims of shattered kinship by family separation (Spillers 1987). In these official and unofficial plantation politics, race, gender, and age collide in the slaveholder's wet dream and a Black girl's nightmare.

As the maleficent masters continued their ancestral rituals of raping their labour to rape the land, this production-obsessed violence always fixed its licentious gaze on bodies that were the most visible site of production:

> Virginia became what was known as a "breeder state" – human beings were literally grown as a cash crop. One successful entrepreneur bragged that his plantations had produced 6,000 children for sale. And so, the great trading center of Richmond came into its own. By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, the downtown area known as Shockoe Bottom was the largest slave-trading district in the United States north of New Orleans. And more important than its size was that Richmond was now the hub, the fountainhead, of the U.S. slave trade. (Edwards 2015)

Within the next century, a number of this nation's founding fathers would be reared in Virginia (The Founding Fathers: Virginia, 2018). As they came of age with their autonomy intact and asserted their public voice, Richmond's industrial promise hosted their phallus-focused fantasies of financial 'freedom'. As enslavement began, voting was allowed for any free man. Following Richmond-area Bacon's rebellion, Virginia's General Assembly heeded a warning from King Charles II to restrict voting to

landowners (McClellan 2023). While such laws were not unique to Virginia, a racially defining event inciting its codification is worth mention. Michele Alexander is one among many who pinpoint Bacon's rebellion as also inciting the legal differentiation of Black enslavement as a permanent status to be distinguished from white indentured servitude (Alexander 2013). Slaveholders would consequently prioritise the enslavement of Black people as most socially and economically advantageous.

It was, in part, Bacon's rebellion that ensured that only white, propertied men would be granted voting rights, further cementing rights to land and power mediated by the body. Richmond's growth in industrial capacity being directly linked to chattel slavery impacted the design of its contours. Without belabouring this work with a comprehensive historical survey of metro Richmond's both racialised and spatial abuses, major turning points protrude from central Virginia's historical arc. Ben Campbell quotes Marie Tyler-McGraw acknowledging how Richmond zoning in 1911 constituted, as she says, 'the most elaborate and comprehensive racial zoning code in the nation, the first major attempt to control property values using government power to separate racial groups' (Campbell 2011, 143). Once this was declared unconstitutional, Virginia's attempt to use its own miscegenation laws as a tool for segregation was also blocked by the United States Supreme Court. Despite the most insidious of property laws being unabashedly unconstitutional, every single Black neighbourhood was redlined by all major Richmond banks (Campbell 2011).

This flashpoint in Richmond's history of racialised control over not only property ownership but the social architecture of its urban environment accentuates the relationship between how the United States treats people and the land as an intertwined relationship. This is the core concern of spatial justice which considers how our social hierarchies are expressed through the control, allocation, and design of physical spaces like cities (Hoang et. al. 2024). PolicyLink's 2025 report, 'Grounding Justice' contributes to a spatial justice vision for the nation and locales with histories mirroring Richmond's. Including a brief quote from Edward Soja's *Seeking Spatial Justice*, the report defines spatial justice:

> Popularized by geographer Edward Soja, spatial justice posits that space is inherently political: it is produced by, but also produces, the social relations in which we live. The concept emphasizes the "fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them." It offers a framework for interrogating how spatial arrangements reinforce social inequities and provides tools for imagining more equitable spatial futures. (Hoang et al. 2024)

Racism in the zoning and land-use policy would cement the link between land and human capital – the foremost perversion of the colonial experiment where America's

unrepentant original sin could fester. This is a primary but inexhaustive manifestation of colonial control of the land via its reductive gaze upon bodies. The land and human bodies are thereby captured within Western colonial imagination in which both are reduced to their production value as assigned by biology. While discussion of these tragedies of race and gender rightfully preoccupies social justice discourse, the body contains other more creative terrain with which rights can be granted and denied. In consideration of the colonial construction of biological age, this work will discuss further how Richmond's aversion to spatial justice continues to impact youth and young adults in particular.

Colonial Bio-Logic and Age Constructs

Paleness, property, and a penis, the three precious jewels of white supremacy's royal diadem. One accesses power only by way of patriarchal potential or proximity. As land accumulation became the spine of the proto-United States' economy, the elite of this nation-to-be would leverage their monopoly on spatial design to centralise power amongst their preferred bodies. So too was the land an unwilling body exploited for its production value. Spatial justice then demands that the land not be subject to colonial fabrications of body hierarchy so as to prevent the inevitability of our built environments producing, expressing, and enforcing body-blamed disparities.

Fanon recognized the colonial worldview's fixation on the spatial – the body in particular, as Sylvia Wynter would augment his sociogenic principle in her work. Wynter then challenges the imperially convenient knowledge-making that produces our biological understandings. Uncovering the wedges driven between social-biological, mind-body, and so on, Wynter affirms the social as the dominant determinant of coloniality's biological understandings. Where race as a social construct has its origins in religious or creedal values, this would give way to the need for secular, spatial, and 'natural' excuses for the subjugation of Blackness (Wynter 2003). The body became the emphasis of marginality for an ulterior economic (and then social) motive, as intellect rose to a privileged position following Enlightenment. Each iteration ensured race as increasingly biological yet no more objective.

Cartesian dualism expanded to prioritise spatial, embodied realities for sociopolitical categories and perpetuated an extant hierarchy between alleged thinkers (i.e., capital) and labourers. This hierarchy exists within all Wynter's 'genres' of being human. She celebrates what an era of social progress like the 60s, especially in the feminist movement, had to offer in exposing what she names as the Janus face of the West – a fundamentally flawed epistemology that destroys the overrepresented 'man' it claims to create (Wynter 2003).

Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí also takes issue with the perverse imbalance of what she calls the Western bio-logic while offering an alternative cultural understanding of biological age. Oyěwùmí's examination of the power-defining role of seniority within Yoruba worldsense offers a challenge to the Western bio-logic which, albeit inconsistently, restricts power by chronological age. In Yoruba culture, seniority is not necessarily age-dependent. Yoruba seniority, in many cases, might be more accurately described as order of arrival within a particular context. As a result, it is entirely possible for a younger adult or youth to have seniority over an older adult:

> Seniority is highly relational and situational in that no one is permanently in a senior or junior position; it all depends on who is present in any given situation. Seniority, unlike gender, is only comprehensible as part of relationships. Thus, it is neither rigidly fixated on the body nor dichotomized. (Oyěwùmí, 1997)

Even if occurrence is unlikely, the possibility of seniority being dislocated from the biological is ground-breaking. This possibility can be credited for the commonplace nature of women and youth occupying influential positions of leadership. Property ownership was also afforded to women by right (Oyěwùmí 1997). Yoruba culture's disinclination to entangle power and biology represents a precolonial corrective to which it is theoretically possible to return. In so doing, the body would be no hospitable space for or site of political warfare. While equitable representation would not be guaranteed by this means, a more participatory culture like that of the preapocalyptic Yorubaland would face far less resistance. Our awareness of the epistemological crime against our bodies from which all other modern human rights violations spawn is the start of a hope for reinvention.

In the United States' colonial setting, 'youth' as a social category underwent several reinventions tracked through postmodernity by Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock in *Youth Rising*. They clarify the variable nature of this category, naming how its borders and meanings have shifted with time and among different demographics. Citing a 1987 study by Robert Enright and colleagues studying psychologists' perspectives on youth from as early as 1880, there is a 'close and consistent relationship between changes in social, political, and economic conditions in the United States and shifts in accounts of adolescence made by US developmental psychologists' (p. 23). The fickleness of psychologists appeared to be manipulations of scientific perspectives according to the extent that youth labour benefited the economy (Sukarieh and Tannock 2015). With a rise of capitalism in the United States came new science on 'proper stages of adolescent development, and a corresponding obsession with identifying, labeling, correcting problems of youthful delinquency, deviance, delay, precocity, and pathology' (p. 51). Again, the sociogenic principle rings true in the

fabrication of 'sciences' to develop narratives around youth identity that reflected Wynter's articulation of the overrepresented white, biological, and economic male figure with which 'human' has come to be identified.

Richmond's Pervading Age Tensions

Richmond's racial and less pronounced gender tensions cast the shadow wherein the intergenerational standoff conceals itself from mainstream scrutiny. In 2016, Richmond elected the youngest mayor in the city's history. While Richmond's patriarchs set the age requirement at what we might consider a tender 21, no one younger than 35-year-old Levar Stoney had captured the mayoral seat. This fifteen-year gap represents the contested border territory between youth and adulthood in the Western worldview.

This is evidenced, in part by the founding fathers' gradation of age and levels of political leadership; House representatives, Senators, and the President have respectively higher age requirements. Restricting leadership by race, gender, and property ownership is being wrestled away from public favour. Still, age remains the codified and acceptable discrimination in leadership. New York mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani teased his challengers this year about age expectations in leadership in his birthday address: 'You're worried about a thirty-three-year-old becoming Mayor of New York City, and I want you to know, I hear you. That's why, this weekend, I'll be making a change. I'm turning 34.' (Mamdani 2025). Even in a city known for progress and a characteristic hospitality to social shifts often ahead of the rest of the nation, constituents launch discriminatory concerns regarding Mamdani's age. Richmond has yet to enjoy such recent and explicit intergenerational tensions in the electoral arena, but not due to an absence of said tension.

During Stoney's reign, a pattern either emerged or continued wherein younger, more youthful, and more progressive political candidates would pursue elected offices held often by older incumbents. In the hope of 2020's social upheavals, some of the youth or younger candidates ran formidable campaigns, especially considering their disparities in funds. Allan-Charles Chipman ran against a long-time incumbent in Richmond's gateway sixth district and won 36% of the vote. Nicholas Da Silva ran as a breakout progressive in his fifth district against another young-adult, Jer'Mykeal McCoy, who won almost 22% of the vote although it would not be enough to win. Alexsis Rogers, at 31 years old, fiercely challenged the mayoral incumbent and came in second place. Richmond youth and young adults have attempted to overturn age biases within the electoral system, and yet confront obstacles.

While their political defeats can signal continued stigmas associated with younger leaders, their still-impressive performances also indicate appetite for a departure

from the status-quo leadership model. Richmond's younger generation of imaginative leaders are apparently not electable enough to take the mayoral or council seats, and this traps them in less intimidating arenas of leadership where their influence can be monitored or stifled. Other areas of Virginia are beginning to turn a tide as age trends downward for state-wide representation in the General Assembly (Younger Senators Heading to Office 2023). While occasionally sought after as council liaisons, young people in this city are seldom named as a vulnerable political bloc deserving of representation.

At the grassroots level, the Richmond chapter of Southerners On New Ground (SONG) conducted a citywide survey of queer and trans residents. With an average respondent age of 30.8 and a median respondent age of 28, this was one of the city's most comprehensive studies of younger people's political perspectives during that time. SONG RVA QT (Queer and Trans) Census Report formally introduced Richmond youth's experience of age and young bodies as an added terrain for discrimination. For most youth respondents, housing was among their most pressing political priorities: 'Across all demographic categories, housing was the issue that most respondents ranked as their top priority' (SONG RVA 2021). Spatial justice, as it impacts housing quality and access, is an unquestionable preoccupation of the politicised young Richmonder, according to this report. Still, there are other nuances to consider; the report also revealed a stark finding amongst queer and trans young Richmonders who have had interactions with police:

> Overall, 73.18% of respondents have experienced noteworthy interactions with police officers. Of Black respondents, 80% have had an interaction with police officers. Of those who experienced some police interaction, 38% experienced some form of police misconduct as a minor. (SONG RVA 2021)

The study goes on to outline that, among those who have had interactions with police, age is reported as the most frequent basis of police targeting after gender expression, race, political work, and outreach work. Multi-marginalised young people in Richmond are self-reporting police targeting largely based on either political and outreach work or biologically based identifiers. What provided further consistency to this view was the report's surprising admission that zero percent of respondents who interacted with police reported being targeted based on sexual orientation. Sexual orientation, unlike age, race, and gender expression, has no 'visible' biological signal. The SONG RVA QT Census Report establishes both a widespread concern for spatial justice (and particularly affordable housing access) among young people and connects it to policing as an expression of state control through disparities in how it targets certain bodies. Close to 90% of survey respondents supported reduc-

tions to Richmond law enforcement's budget. Of that 90%, 38% of these respondents supported reallocation of funds to public housing.

Even more recent research findings are sounding an alarm for spatial justice as a public health concern. A study in partnership by Virginia State University and Virginia Commonwealth University examined the continued impacts of redlining on patterns of violence against local youth ages 10–24. This study has found that Richmond's formerly redlined areas constitute a vast majority of hotspots for youth violence. Even more disturbing, nearly a quarter of injuries 'were the result of abuse by a caretaker or other adult' (West et al. 2025) The study acknowledges that the impacts of racist failures in spatial justice continue to cause harm to youth and young adults today.

This study along with findings from SONG RVA QT Census report on the way youth and young adults are victimised, criminalised, and policed, especially in formerly redlined areas, shows a continuity in targeting using biological determinants where these patterns reproduce in dangerous form. It is here that describing age relation in Richmond as a 'tension' seems to lack a necessary potency. These statistics suggest a sort of warfare, as the data does not seek to communicate that youth broadly are more violent.

> The current study thus sought to identify and characterise the temporal stability of geospatial hot spots for adolescent violence risk in Richmond, VA. As a secondary aim, we also explored how violence hot spots may be associated with historically redlined regions in the city to understand how systemic racism instituted nearly a century ago may still manifest as modern-day risk to adolescents living in these communities. (West et al. 2025)

This study also found a majority of victims to be Black as well as women and girls. Both studies evidence more of what we knew – that victimhood has been designed into the city grid with age included in the colonial cocktail of biologically contrived signifiers by which one's full humanity is compromised.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Collective Healing Initiative identified the healing potential in Richmond. We became one of nine cities across four continents hosting intergenerational dialogues. The four main components of Collective Healing Circles include: 'Exploring our common past and recognising enduring intergenerational legacies and trauma; Affirming/restoring human dignity through dialogue and inquiry; Reconnecting and nurturing intercommunal relationships; Envisioning and activating our shared future(s)' (Global Humanity for Peace Institute 2024). Moreover, the Collective

Healing Circles utilise intergenerational dialogue and inquiry as a means of connecting community members to forms of wisdom and knowledge-making that can respond to the compounded traumas of colonialism (Global Humanity for Peace Institute 2022).

Intergenerational dialogue provides perspective across ages in recognising age as a line of difference. As our intergenerational dialogue unfurled, predictable race solidarity and gender tensions emphasised a less anticipated divide. Contrasting with an intention for Collective Healing Circles to be youth-driven, there was a noticeable disparity in speaking time between younger and older community members, with older members taking up more space. More subtly, age emerged as an axis of power even in a charitable intragroup discussion. This did not fully prevent elders from acknowledging the wisdom of youth and youth from respecting the contributions of their elders. Elders acknowledging generational missteps was a significant breakthrough within our circle dialogue and created openings for acknowledging youth/young adult wisdom. Perhaps most importantly, fellow participants began recognising the need for transfers of power from older adults to those who are younger. One participant would note:

> 'And I think one of the reasons people don't want out of the way is because a lot comes with that seat they're in. And one of the one of the things that I teach is based on basic arithmetic, teaches that there can be no difference without subtraction. And everybody wants to see what difference they want, but they're not willing to name what is the subtraction they're responsible to embracing because some people won't move out of the way because they get paid the way all the time'. (Collective Healing Circle Participant 2023)

While this dissonance remaining confined to the anecdotal would have been a fair expectation, Richmond has already been unofficially immersed in a decentralised intergenerational dialogue. This conversation of sorts continued years later as UNESCO sought to fill even more epistemological gaps in the youth leadership development field via ongoing global study examining youth leaders' needs.

I was among youth researchers living in Richmond and southeast Virginia who provided the United States' representation in the study's focus groups. In these focus groups, we named adultism explicitly and spoke of our experience of discrimination. We expressed a desire to challenge the hierarchical nature of youth leadership development as well as democratise access to leadership opportunities. We all shared an awareness of the disparaging attitudes that inhibit our leadership potential even as we were uncertain how to overcome these attitudes from a cultural approach. Much of our discussion unfolded with recognition that increased resourcing of our leader-

ship development would depend almost entirely on paradigmatic shifts from older adults with influence and access to capital.

In June 2024, another intergenerational dialogue was initiated in the sought-after public forum. The City of Richmond began applications to appoint members of the Zoning Advisory Council (ZAC). In a civic arena not known for its youth appeal, 42% of the applicants were 34 or younger. Young people had a surprising appetite for probably the least titillating of urban affairs. While by no means the youngest applicant, at 27, I was the youngest member participating when appointed. This body would publicly display one of the more glaring examples of the correlation between age and spatial justice agendas.

Richmond has struggled to find consensus regarding its own public historical narrative. At a Southerners on New Ground organising school in June 2025, Phil Wilayto of the *Virginia Defender* spoke about how resistant the Richmond public can be to confrontation with its historic harms, saying that many in the city never could have imagined the descent of Confederate statues (Wilayto 2025). A similar confederate/colonial worldview would have it that young people's desire for spatial justice is dismissed as whimsical and naive beyond practicality. With abundant evidence that this central Virginia metro area is rife with age discrimination, this article concurs with thinkers like Wynter, Spillers, and Oyěwùmí in recognising how biology itself is colonised to wrest social control over groups upon which it imposes inferiority.

Intergenerational Dialogue Meets Richmond's Spatial Justice Deficit

Richmond's participation in urban renewal, as well as the suburban experiment, instituted a few urban features, necessities even, as enemies to white illusions of peace. The '76 zoning code ensured that a majority of land in Richmond, 59%, would be used for single-family housing. Single-family housing districts commonly require minimum setbacks and prevent the home from taking up more than a certain percentage of the lot. These lots are larger and less likely to be in historically redlined areas. The surplus land and larger homes drive up costs, especially for those in need of more bedrooms. Still, Richmond was not exempt from national attitudes on urban density rotting into explicit racial conflict.

Due to the more professional, solution-oriented nature of the Zoning Advisory Council as a political advisory body, its potential for healing dialogue is stifled. This interracial and intergenerational (although not reflective of Richmond demographics) group was appointed to preside over the advisement of Richmond's most comprehensive land use overhaul since 1976. As part of the project's community en-

gagement imperative, consultants hired by the City of Richmond conducted a city-wide survey to explore perspectives on potential changes.

In the survey, younger respondents were overwhelmingly more in favour of increased density. Younger respondents aged 25–44 were decisively supportive of duplexes being allowed in Residential Detached (RD) districts that traditionally tend to be limited to a single household per parcel or lot. About three times the number of respondents supported this change versus preferring the status quo. When asked about unit maximums for Residential Attached Districts (RA), 'Older adults show a stronger preference for maintaining low-density development...This group also strongly expressed a desire to preserve the character of their current neighborhood' (City of Richmond, 2025).

In public comments to the Zoning Advisory Council, residents resistant to even gentle or more aggressive density do cite widespread, solvable concerns like green space, shadows, and traffic increases. Just as prominently, we hear concerns for preserving the appearance and the nebulous 'character' of one's neighbourhood. With little effort, this can be construed as myopic and out-of-touch in its lack of consideration for an ongoing housing crisis disproportionately impacting marginalised communities first and most. The survey asked respondents which zoning districts they would like to see in the future:

> Of residents interested in Mixed Use, Commercial, or Industrial zoning, respondents ages 25–44 (38% of all survey respondents) represented over 60% of interest, and respondents ages 18–24 (1.6% of all survey respondents) represented 16% of interest, while ages 45–64 (32% of survey respondents) represented only 16% of interest and seniors 65+ (28% of survey respondents) represented just 5% of interest. (City of Richmond 2025)

This is where the generational divide is vivid. Older adults report wanting their neighbourhoods to be primarily focused on residence – homes. This stricter categorisation of zoning use is a carryover of traditional zoning policy that favours strict zoning categorisations by use of the space. This way of categorisation discourages density and contributes significantly to housing segregation (Kelly 2022). Interestingly, the association of whiteness with strict categorisation according to the use of space – building or body – betrays yet again a fixation on social control. In this way, colonial space has come to mirror its values as they are imposed on human bodies.

The 2025 formation of Richmond's Housing Justice Collective and subsequent zoning subgroup gave area young people a forum to reclaim political agency. The roughly 20-member zoning subgroup is driven and predominantly comprised of

younger adults, with much of the facilitation led by an elder local housing official. In this space, open disagreement with the elder is just as commonplace and unremarkable as any other dissent of opinion. All perspectives and expertise are respected. We have a collective awareness of and regularly discuss the intersections of racial and spatial justice as core concerns for our policy agenda. The body is one of many emerging spaces where intergenerational dialogue contributes to social healing and spatial justice. This subgroup has formed its own policy agenda that supports gentle density while opposing the displacement of long-term and legacy residents of the city. We meet regularly to discuss organising strategy and updates to a shared policy agenda.

Richmond youth and young adults are poised for changemaking even despite the discrimination they face. Youth and young adults in Richmond have shown little to no hesitation to enter spaces dominated by older generations in pursuit of spatial justice. Richmond youth are consistently expressing a pressing concern for collective well-being that is not as clear a priority among older adults. Still, we are maintaining a collaborative spirit that aspires towards respectful, equitable cooperation amongst all generations to recover humanity for those denied agency.

Intergenerational Dialogue for A Participatory Future

Intergenerational dialogue in protective space allows for youth to encounter their own agency as a corrective response to a history of bio-logical warfare. Youth and young adults are seeking out these dialogue spaces even in unconventional form. While healing circles are one promising strategy, this dialogue takes place in civic, religious, and public institutions or is decentralised and de-institutionalised in less choreographed yet beautifully undocumented grassroots movements.

Richmond, with a woefully under-analysed history of youth repression, would have much to gain from a comprehensive integration of youth interests and perspectives in its design. This remains a critical need for multi-marginalised youth who are facing the most acute impacts of insufficient resourcing and are disproportionately threatened by violence in historically Black areas. These disparities, arising from historical harm and body-based discrimination, have not kept youth and young adults from being invested in social transformation. The Richmond area has intergenerational dialogues emerging sporadically and usually siloed from contributions to healing work. This area has an extensive history of body-targeted transgressions to account for.

This dialogue is a return to an existing ancestral indigenous practice which was interrupted by the colonial enterprise. Intergenerational dialogue then becomes practice and prefiguration of power sharing between youth and older adults. This power sharing unravels personhood from corporeal presentation and frees our humanity to be

expressed and recognised regardless of biological specifications. While liberating youth is a worthwhile end in itself, this decoupling of biology and power clears a similar liberating pathway for all. When we can no longer use the body to uphold colonial imagination and resulting power disparities, targeted bodies will more readily question and reject their prescribed social status.

'Youth' as a representation of adolescence, hope, and whimsy, infuses public thought with radical possibility that transcends production in order to be future-focused. This can threaten the status quo and those with deep investments in it. These conflicting interests can cause intergenerational dialogue to break down if not carefully and compassionately facilitated. Even if at an impasse, intergenerational dialogue reveals interests and motivations as this essay has outlined. We know who we are by one another.

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Resisting State Violence under the Regulatory Model of Sex Work Activism in New Delhi, India

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Abstract: Eurocentric feminist and sex-work frameworks inadequately capture the complexities of Southern sex-work movements. Unlike Western/European abolitionist (Dworkin 2003) and decriminalisation (Grant 2014) theories, India's movement reflects a synergy of emotion, culture, politics, and nationalism. Drawing on ethnographic research in New Delhi (2020–2024), this paper foregrounds female sex-worker (FSW) activists' narratives alongside those of NGO staff, paralegals, academics, volunteers, children of female sex workers, and other stakeholders, proposing a renewed feminist historiography. It challenges colonial moral frameworks, particularly the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act 1956 (ITPA), which position the state and police as protectors, and advocates a bottom-up politics of collective action, intergenerational solidarities (Roy 2009; 2015), and sisterhood rooted in the historical legacies of Indian prostitution (Mukherjee 1978). Sex-work non-governmental organisations (NGOs) emerge as mediating spaces linking grassroots realities with policy while amplifying marginalised voices.

However, this intergenerational sisterhood is embedded in historically exhaustive Hindu cultural traditions, and contemporary advocacy, especially under the right-wing BJP, risks re-inscribing Vedic moral hierarchies through oral storytelling. The paper critiques the radical politicisation and neoliberal co-optation of the regulatory model (Roy 2016), recentring grassroots advocacy that prioritises intersectional voices of FSW communities. By affirming affective and cultural legacies (Singh 2021), it contributes to a gender-inclusive, culturally grounded, and justice-oriented intersectional governance model, redefining feminist praxis from the ground up without invoking a politicised Hindu past.

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Keywords: Indian Female Sex Workers, Regulatory Sex Work Activism, State-Sanctioned Structural Violence, Collective Solidarity, Bottom-Up Grassroots Mobilisation

Introduction

Feminist debates on sex work have long been polarised between abolitionist perspectives that frame it as patriarchal violence (Dworkin 2003) and decriminalisation approaches that emphasise labour and agency (Grant 2014). However, these frameworks remain rooted in Western/European epistemologies that inadequately account for the postcolonial, caste-based, religious, and historical complexities shaping sex work in the Global South (Basu 1995). As Kotiswaran (2011) and Roy (2015) note, Indian feminist movements operate within distinct socio-political contexts marked by colonial legacies, moral regulation, and neoliberal governance, rendering Western/European typologies insufficient. This paper critiques their uncritical application through an examination of regulatory sex work activism in New Delhi, situating it within the political genealogies of Southern sex-worker movements. It argues that while such activism enables material survival and political recognition, it also functions as a technology of governance that disciplines sex-worker subjects and reproduces a public Hindu moral order through formal advocacy and informal regulation, including intergenerational oral histories and internalised violence that consolidate collective belonging. To ground this analysis, the paper first contextualises Garstin Bastion Road (G.B. Road) and the predominantly Hindu historical formations of Indian sex work in New Delhi.

Stretching from Ajmeri Gate to Lohri Gate, G.B. Road is the fifth-largest red-light district in the area (Prasad n.d.). While some scholars trace its origins to the Mughal period, others, such as Singh (2021), locate Indian prostitution, largely shaped by Hindu social formations, in the pre-Vedic era. This historical lineage reveals a persistent binary between the 'ideal Hindu woman' (*sati–savitri aurat*), prescribed in the *Manusmriti* as fertile, modest, marriageable, and silent, and the *veshya* (FSW), marked as impure, dangerous, and socially outcast yet necessary for male sexual pleasure. At the same time, FSWs historically occupied strategic roles as political intermediaries, spies, or allies, whose affective labour and networks could be mobilised by rulers during periods of political unrest.

Lal (2005) shows that the political and economic autonomy once associated with the community became increasingly regulated under Mughal rule, which institutionalised distinctions between elite *tawaif*s and lower-class FSWs based on skill, education, beauty, caste, religion, and class. These hierarchies intensified competition among Hindu and Muslim FSWs and generated resentment toward Islamic governance for the loss of social, political, and economic status. Mukherjee (2019)

and Singh (2021) further suggest that this marginalisation deepened under British colonialism, as British-Irish Christian morality redefined sex workers as impure and socially dangerous, subjecting them to heightened regulation and exclusion. In response, Indian nationalist discourse politicised the figure of the Indian woman by consolidating Hindu cultural identity around a rigid binary between the 'ideal Hindu woman' and the *veshya*, erasing the community's historical rights and entrenching patriarchal legal and social norms shaped by Christian morality. These shifts reshaped sex-worker advocacy as some collectives mobilised narratives of a 'golden Hindu age of prostitution' invoking shared identity and solidarity while attributing contemporary marginalisation to 'foreign' religious and cultural influences.

Against this historical backdrop, since the mid-1990s, regulatory models adopted by collectives such as Veshyay Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) and Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM) have embodied rights-based, community-led approaches aligning FSWs' struggles with broader feminist, human rights, and labour agendas. Framed as empowerment, these models integrate FSWs and activists as peer educators, leaders, and partners in state governance, particularly in HIV/AIDS prevention and welfare delivery (Pai et al. 2014). This paper engages Roy's (2016) warning that inclusion often operates through disciplinary regimes of recognition rather than emancipatory incorporation. It argues that through NGOisation[2], sex-worker movements are reconstituted as extensions of state policy, shifting from collective mobilisation toward project-based service provision governed by state funding, audit cultures, and moral regulation. Drawing on fieldwork, the paper examines how this regulatory framework produces a paradox of empowerment through discipline, exploring how generations of FSW activists negotiate intersectional identities, collective solidarity, agency, and resistance within a system that simultaneously protects, empowers, and morally polices them.

Research Methodology

This study employed a reflexive (Pillow 2003), decolonial (Tuck and Yang 2012), and qualitative ethnographic approach (Sinha 2017) to examine the lived experiences of FSW activists, advocates, and NGO representatives in Delhi, with a focus on G.B. Road. Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews, focus-group discussions, participant and non-participant observation, and sustained reflexive field journaling. My primary gatekeepers were sex-work NGOs such as the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW), *Kat-Katha*, *Prajwala*, SANGRAM, VAMP, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya

[2] Defined as the transformation of grassroots movements into professionalized and bureaucratised entities

Committee (DMSC) and Women's Initiatives, along with Community Based Organisations (CBOs) such as Catalyst, *Srijan*, and Global Organisation for Life and Development (GOLD). A total of 79 respondents participated, selected through purposive and snowball sampling design. The following table represents the profile of my respondents:

Category	Age-range	Predominant religious identification
Active FSW Activists	25–55 years	Hindu, Muslim, Christian
Retired FSW-turned Activists	40–65 years	Hindu, Muslim
NGO Representatives and Advocates	30–60 years	Hindu, Muslim, Christian

While facilitating access to a highly surveilled field, the research also generated power asymmetries that were critically examined throughout the study. Ethical considerations were central to the design and included informed consent, confidentiality, secure data storage, and an ethic of care attentive to stigma, constrained consent, and emotional risk. Fieldwork under Covid-19 restrictions required adaptive methods and adherence to government guidelines to minimise harm. Narratives were analysed using an interpretive critical thematic approach (Terry et al. 2017), situating participants' accounts within dominant state, legal, and NGO discourses. Manual coding attended to contradictions, silences, emotional registers, humour, and refusal, resisting institutional disciplining. Drawing on institutional ethnography and intersectional feminist analysis, participants' narratives were treated as situated critiques of bureaucratic languages of empowerment, rescue, and rehabilitation.

Historiographically, the study challenges Western/European feminist, legal, and NGO-centric representations by foregrounding lived experience and intergenerational oral histories as critical archives. By reading life histories against official and funding-driven texts, it exposes the epistemic violence of institutional filtering. Methodologically, centring lived experience repositions FSWs as co-theorists, advancing a decolonial feminist intervention that interrogates how regulatory models normalise structural violence under the guise of rights and protection.

Intergenerational and emotional knowledge emerged as central analytic themes, transmitted through everyday practices of care, survival, and resistance. Older activists mentored younger women in negotiating clients, managing police harassment, and navigating NGO interventions, producing expertise largely absent from official representations. Emotional knowledge surfaced through embodied expressions of

fear, shame, humour, pride, and endurance, often conveyed through tone, pauses, or refusal. Attending to these affective and intergenerational narratives reveals how survival is sustained through relational labour and collective memory, offering a counter-archive to dominant discourses of empowerment and vulnerability.

Outlining the Regulatory Model

This emphasis on lived, affective, and historically situated experience complicates universalising frameworks of FSW by foregrounding the plurality of voices within feminist and historical debates. Ferguson (1984) highlights this diversity by noting the polarisation between abolitionist and decriminalisation perspectives. Abolitionist scholars such as Dworkin (2003) conceptualise commodified sex work as sexual violence, equating it with rape and framing rescue as a paternalistic intervention to 'save' innocent victims. In contrast, advocates of decriminalisation and professionalisation, including Grant (2014) and Sutherland (2004), reject rescue narratives and challenge representations of sex workers as permanently stigmatised and non-agentic. By centring consent, they disrupt the victim–agent binary and emphasise structural and economic constraints. Grant's (2014) framework is particularly valuable for acknowledging constrained agency without denying political subjectivity.

To move beyond this binary, scholars such as Davis (2015) advocate a regulatory model of activism that promotes legal recognition and bureaucratic organisation of sex work. Practised in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, New Zealand, and Australia, this approach extends decriminalisation by encouraging sex workers to act as peer educators and agents of change within state-recognised civil society. The Dutch *gedogen* model exemplifies this pragmatic governance through tolerance rather than prohibition (Hubbard et al. 2011), reflecting state concern over exploitation and social disruption (Boutellier 1991).

Critics, however, urge caution. Hubbard et al. (2011) warn that detaching regulatory models from broader feminist movements risks erasing their genealogical ties to earlier struggles and intergenerational solidarity. In postcolonial contexts such as India, this detachment obscures local socio-cultural, political, and religious histories shaping activism. Under the ITPA, sex work operates within partial criminalisation, shaped by urban governance and policing, and further inflected by politicised Hindu nationalism that frames sexuality and labour through ideals of purity, respectability, and heteronormativity. These narratives intensify stigma by casting FSWs as threats to the moral and national body, legitimising surveillance and reformist intervention. This context situates the study within debates on nationalism, moral governance, and marginalised sexual economies in urban India. Scholars such as Kotiswaran (2011; 2018; 2019) and Pai et al. (2014; 2018) therefore call for in-

tergenerational and transnational frameworks that locate Indian sex-work activism within a broader feminist continuum, recognising both its historical lineage and contemporary agency.

The Indian Regulatory Model of Sex-Work Activism

The Indian regulatory model of sex work activism differs significantly from the Dutch model in its origins, ideology, and intergenerational evolution. Introduced by VAMP in Karnataka in 1996, it gained greater visibility after the BJP's rise in 2014, when Hindutva politics politicised the caste and nationalist dimensions of sex-work activism (Basu 1995). Emerging amid global decriminalisation debates, VAMP and SANGRAM articulated a rights-based framework that challenged the universality of Western feminist models. Drawing on the symbolism of *Bharat Mata* and *Manusmriti*'s informed moral binaries, this framework distinguished the ideal Hindu woman deserving of protection, from the *veshya*, deemed undeserving. While projecting radical Hindu religiosity and nationalism, this ideology paradoxically mirrored the Virgin Mary paradigm of British-Irish Christian morality, reinscribing a colonial moral order embedded in the ITPA 1956 (Mukherjee 2019; Singh 2021; Jha and Sharma 2016).

This moral architecture shaped postcolonial legal regimes and the conditions under which alternative governance models emerged. As Vasant (2018) notes, the Dutch model prompted Indian advocates to pursue a state-regulated approach adapted to caste hierarchies, colonial legacies, and religious pluralism. The Indian model presents itself as both a localised adaptation and an intergenerational continuation of feminist and sex-work struggles, advancing sensitisation programmes that position FSWs as peer educators and agents of change (Roy 2015; Kotiswaran 2011; 2018; 2019; Pai et al. 2014; 2018). Unlike the Dutch model, rooted in LGBTQ+ mobilisation and spatially regulated *tippelzones* (legal street sex-work zones) (Hubbard et al. 2011), India's approach draws on the ideological legacies of the Independence movement, Gandhian socialism, and *Ambedkarite* anti-caste politics, foregrounding intergenerational solidarity across caste, religion, class, and gender. The absence of municipal mechanisms such as quality marks or standardised contracts (Boutellier 1991; Hubbard et al. 2011) underscores its bottom-up, community-driven ethos. In line with 'nothing about us without us' (Lobo et al. 2021), Indian FSWs have cultivated collective solidarity and intergenerational knowledge exchange, reinforcing historical continuity and evolving forms of agency within sex-worker movements (Cornish 2006; SANGRAM and NNSW 2016).

The Regulatory Model as a Site of Empowerment and Feminist Continuity

Advocates and representatives of sex work NGOs and CBOs present the Indian regulatory model as a progressive, rights-based alternative to abolitionist and rescue paradigms, offering a distinctly Southern feminist framework that integrates empowerment with continuity. Emerging from VAMP's 1996 initiative and institutionalised through networks such as SANGRAM, NNSW, and AINSW, the model frames FSWs as rights-bearing citizens rather than victims. Roy (2009) argues that this shift is crucial, as rescue-oriented frameworks reproduce politicised religious melancholia and paternalistic logics that deny women's self-determination, sustaining faith in the state as moral guarantor while reproducing existing hierarchies. In contrast, NGO-led activism reframes FSWs as agentic political subjects (Grant 2014). Drawing on Roy's (2015; 2016) Southern feminist framework, advocates valorise the regulatory model for transforming collective resistance into state-recognised activism, positioning it as a pathway to inclusion through religious–legal recognition, welfare access, and public legitimacy, while remaining grounded in affective and historical feminist and labour legacies. By situating sex work within intersecting structures of caste, class, gender, religion, and state violence, the model aligns with Collins's (2017) transversal feminist politics, demonstrating how agency can be exercised under constraint and why recognition, rather than rescue, is central to sex work politics.

As Meena (name changed), a 52-year-old Hindu educator and FSW activist with NNSW, recalled about the government's assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic:

> 'We were all so happy with the services and assistance provided by the government. It was because of them the Supreme Court recognised our rights as human rights and we got our Aadhar cards, free food, water, clothes, medicines, supplies and everything. We would have literally died without their support. All of us were very happy. They were able to feed themselves and their children and family. I think the government is now slowly recognising our contributions and are accepting us as a part of the community. I am confident that if the government keeps supporting us, we would be able to soon remove all negativity and violence against the business. This support will also help us fight against ridiculous laws and challenge the court. All we need to do is stay united.'

Meena's testimony illustrates the emotional and material dimensions of the regulatory model, where state support and NGO advocacy coalesce to secure both survival

and dignity. This continuity between earlier struggles for recognition and contemporary demands for rights situates the regulatory model as both a product of intergenerational feminist learning and a mechanism through which political legitimacy is produced and policed. Sustained through subaltern oral epistemologies, collective memory of struggle, violence, stigma, and prejudice functions simultaneously as a resource for resistance and as a regulatory archive that authorises particular political subjects, solidarities, and modes of engagement within the community (similar to discussions by Purvis 2004; Chazan and Macnab 2018).

Similarly, Survee (name changed), a 48-year-old Hindu FSW activist and advocate from Catalyst claims:

> 'You know, sister, we remember everything. The good and the bad. And we make sure that our children learn them too. We might not often tell them of the extreme violence we face. But they do know what violence, stigma, or prejudice looks like for our community. And this is one thing that we want them to remember. It will help them feel like they can understand and maybe support our advocacy and activism, and maybe one day we can live like we did in the past and get the respect that we once had.'

Survee's declaration that 'we remember everything', locates memory as a collective subaltern archive, sustained through intergenerational feminist storytelling rather than formal historical record. As Chazan and Macnab (2018) argue, such storytelling operates as process and praxis, producing political knowledge through relational, embodied, and affective modes of transmission. In this account, memory is intentionally curated and passed on to ensure continuity of community consciousness in the face of stigma and erasure. This intergenerational labour renders memory a form of resistance, cultivating political subjectivities grounded in shared experiences of violence, prejudice, and survival, and orienting younger generations toward advocacy and activism. Yet memory here is also a regulated practice marked by selective narration and protective silences around 'extreme violence.' Drawing on Purvis's (2004) analysis of intergenerational feminism as a site of negotiation and power, this selectivity reveals how memory simultaneously disciplines affect and political aspiration. By emphasising particular histories of stigma and respect while invoking a past marked by dignity and recognition, storytelling authorises specific modes of political engagement and moral legitimacy. Survee's memory of the intergenerational violence thus functioned ambivalently. It resisted erasure and fostered collective solidarity, while also reinforcing normative ideals of respectability and belonging that shape how political futures are imagined and pursued within the

community and echoing Roy's (2009) argument on the reproduction of politicised Hindu melancholia and Collins's (2017) analysis of feminist politics.

This affective and moral economy of belonging, as experienced by Meena and Survee, is not only culturally reproduced but increasingly institutionalised through development and public health frameworks that translate solidarity and respectability into legible indicators of success. As the model's positive framing is sustained by the production of measurable progress through state–NGO partnerships. NACO's (National AIDS Control Organisation) Targeted Interventions (TIs) report that 73% of Indian FSWs receive HIV/AIDS or STI treatment, and 79% have regular access to condoms. Such figures are frequently cited as indicators of empowerment and inclusion within public health governance. Moreover, activist testimonies, such as Gargi's (name changed) from Srijan (a local CBO), highlight the regulatory model's cultivation of informed, assertive citizenship: 'When state government criminalised clients, the NGO informed us... we made a letter... we said in a very firm way, you should not punish them.' Meena, Survee, and Gargi's gratitude toward the state must be read not simply as empowerment but as a response to differentiated forms of structural violence that are selectively alleviated through state recognition. As Collins (2017) argues, violence operates intersectionally, not only as physical harm, but as regulatory, bureaucratic, and moral discipline. Access to *Aadhaar* cards, welfare provisions, and legal recognition mitigates immediate material and bodily precarity. Yet, I argue it does so by reinscribing FSWs and FSW activists within a Hindu moral order that frames them as redeemable subjects deserving protection only insofar as they align with norms of respectability, unity, and national belonging. Violence is thus displaced rather than eliminated, shifting from overt repression to conditional inclusion and surveillance.

This conditional protection reflects what Roy (2009) conceptualises as melancholic politics. Gargi's account of NGO-mediated resistance to client criminalisation further illustrates how violence is negotiated within institutionalised, state-sanctioned channels, limiting the scope of dissent. Such transversal politics (Collins 2017) enables collective action but also circumscribes it within a Hindu moral governance that distinguishes between legitimate (*sati savitri aurat*) and illegitimate sexual labour (*veshya*). Cultural practices and collective celebrations further reinforce the model's positive representation. Festivals, awareness campaigns, and public events are framed as spaces of empowerment that normalise sex work as legitimate labour and foster intergenerational solidarity. For instance, Gudiya (name changed), a 22-year-old academic activist from Catalyst (a local CBO), recalled: 'They felicitated all the four district helpdesks run during Covid times... we work with Dalit and women's movements, to celebrate Diwali, Holi, everything, and other events such as Mother's Day, Women's Day, Labour Day and others'.

Gudiya's account of state felicitation of district helpdesks during Covid-19 highlights how recognition is selectively distributed through moralised regimes of governance. While such acknowledgement appears to affirm grassroots labour, Collins (2017) shows how intersectional violence is often obscured when activism aligned with *Dalit*[3] and women's movements is absorbed into state narratives of care and inclusion. Public celebration through participation in religious festivals and nationally sanctioned commemorative days reframes crisis work as civic virtue, embedding activist labour within a politicised moral imaginary of national duty, service, and respectability. Read through Roy's (2009) melancholic politics, this moment of visibility offers symbolic and intergenerational inclusion without challenging the structural conditions that sustain caste, gender, religion, and sexuality-based violence. Recognition operates affectively, producing a sense of belonging and legitimacy while leaving intact the regulatory frameworks that criminalise sex work and discipline sex-worker activism. The celebration of helpdesks thus masks ongoing forms of surveillance and moral regulation, positioning activists as temporary partners in governance rather than as agents capable of contesting the systemic injustices that shape their lives and labour.

Crenshaw and the Indian Sex-Work Movement

Crenshaw's (2006) articulation of intersectionality further offers a critical lens for understanding how the community's experiences of crisis, governance, and recognition are shaped by the convergence of gender, caste, class, religion, labour informality, and legal stigma. The above statements reveal how structural exclusion operates not only through moral condemnation but through bureaucratic invisibility. Meena's account of receiving *Aadhaar* documentation, welfare entitlements, and Supreme Court recognition underscores how access to state support in India is mediated by legal legibility. In a policy landscape where sex work remains ambiguously positioned[4], documentation becomes a prerequisite for survival rather than citizenship alone. Crenshaw's framework helps explain why such recognition feels transformative, as it temporarily interrupts the layered marginalisation produced by informal labour regimes, gendered stigma, and caste-based poverty. At the same time, the optimism expressed in Meena's statement reflects the conditional nature of inclusion within Indian governance structures, where welfare access often coexists with continued surveillance and moral regulation.

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[3] Known as untouchables (*harijans*), they are identified as a person outside of the four main castes (varna) and are thus most marginalised.

[4] Neither fully legal nor explicitly recognised as labor

Crenshaw's (2006) concept of political intersectionality is particularly salient in the Indian policy context, where feminist, abolitionist, and carceral approaches to sex work frequently conflict with FSW's own claims to livelihood and safety. Gargi's response to the criminalisation of clients mirrors longstanding critiques of the ITPA, under which ostensibly protective measures routinely intensify police harassment, eviction, and economic precarity for FSWs. Laws that criminalise surrounding activities, such as clients, third parties, or public solicitation, operate through a gendered predominantly Hindu moral logic, while disproportionately harming women located at the intersection of informal labour and social stigma. Her analysis then clarifies how such reforms, framed as advancing women's rights, reproduce violence by ignoring how law itself becomes a mechanism of control for marginalised women. For instance, Gargi's collective intervention through an NGO demonstrates an intersectional political strategy that resists both criminalisation and paternalistic protection, reframing safety as autonomy, economic security, and freedom from state violence rather than rescue or rehabilitation.

Crenshaw's (2006) theoretical framework also helps situate Survee's reflection within an intersectional politics of memory and transmission shaped by structural inequality. Her emphasis on remembering 'the good and the bad' illustrates how communities positioned at the intersection of gender, labour stigma, religion, and class cultivate alternative archives of knowledge when formal institutions erase or criminalise their experiences. By selectively transmitting awareness of violence, stigma, and prejudice to their children, Survee highlights how structural violence is not only lived in the present but anticipated and negotiated across generations. This reflects Crenshaw's (2006) argument that vulnerability is produced through intersecting systems of power rather than isolated acts of harm, making oral storytelling a key means through which injustice is remembered and transmitted, and through which the next generation is incorporated into the long-standing sisterhood of Indian FSWs.

At the same time, *Survee*'s account reflects what Crenshaw identifies as coalition-based identity politics, where memory functions as a resource for future advocacy rather than a retreat into victimhood. Teaching children to recognise injustice equips them to understand and potentially support collective mobilisation, ensuring that marginalised voices are not silenced within broader political movements. Her aspiration to 'live like we did in the past and get the respect that we once had' underscores how intersectional consciousness links historical loss to contemporary struggle, transforming remembrance into a forward-looking political project. In this sense, intergenerational memory operates as both an affective inheritance and an intersectional strategy for reclaiming dignity, rights, and recognition.

Finally, Crenshaw's (2006) engagement with identity politics provides a framework for understanding coalition-building among FSWs and FSW activists such as Meena, Survee, Gargi, Gudiya and others, within broader social movements in India. Gudiya's emphasis on collaboration with *Dalit* and women's movements reflects an intersectional reconfiguration of political identity that challenges the isolation of sex work from caste, religion, class, and gender struggles. In a context where dominant feminist discourse has often marginalised FSWs by framing them solely as victims, such alliances disrupt single-axis narratives and assert sex workers as political subjects embedded in multiple histories of oppression. Her insistence that identity groups function as coalitions rather than homogeneous entities resonates strongly here, as they navigate internal differences while forging intergenerational solidarities through politicised Hinduism across movements. This approach not only contests exclusionary feminist and legal frameworks but also reclaims intergenerational solidarity, collective identity, and historical sisterhood as a site of resistance, enabling them to articulate rights-based demands without relinquishing the specificity of their much aspired 'golden Hindu past'.

The Ujjawala Rehabilitation Scheme

It is precisely at this juncture that structural intersectionality becomes analytically necessary, revealing how rescue and rehabilitation regimes reconfigure collective solidarity into sites of regulation that intensify rather than alleviate intersecting forms of control. Government rescue and rehabilitation provisions like the *Ujjawala* Rehabilitation Scheme can then be read, through Crenshaw's (2006) lens of structural intersectionality, as instruments of domestication. Identified as a welfare apparatus of the state, the scheme operates at the intersections of gender, morality, labour, and carcerality, positioning 'rescued' FSWs within a narrow repertoire of feminised economic futures. Younger activists such as Gargi and Gudiya's hesitant critique of the model's emphasis on domestic and economically constrained vocational training such as cooking, baking, pickle (*aachar*) or *papad* (poppadum) making, sewing, cattle rearing, and jewellery production, highlight how welfare interventions reproduce gendered hierarchies of labour under the guise of rehabilitation.

These activities are framed as tools for the 'wholesome development' of the 'rescued' woman, yet they reinscribe caste-coded, gendered, and classed moral economies that confine FSWs to socially acceptable structural violence. Her analysis further clarifies that such morally inscribed structural interventions prescribed by the regulatory model, fail to account for differences and actively consolidate multiple systems of marginalisation by imposing a unified development script on all FSWs and FSW activists. The scheme's requirement that each state government maintain at least one rehabilitation centre further exemplifies structural intersectionality's erasures, as it

collapses a highly heterogeneous group of FSWs into a single institutional category. Women with children escaping violence, trafficked minors, rape and acid attack survivors, women fleeing domestic abuse, and victims of dowry-related violence are housed together and collectively referred to as 'inmates', invoking a carceral logic that mirrors the very violences the scheme purports to remedy (SANGRAM and NNSW 2016). Crenshaw's (2006) intersectional framework helps illuminate how this administrative flattening renders specific experiences illegible, producing harm not through overt exclusion but through institutional indifference to difference. By refusing to account for the distinct ways in which gendered violence intersects with caste, age, sexuality, migration status, religion, and labour, the scheme exemplifies how welfare can function as a site of intersectional violence rather than protection.

The debates between younger activists such as Gargi and Gudiya and elder figures like Meena and Survee can then be understood as an instance of political intersectionality, wherein differently situated actors negotiate the tensions between engaging state structures and resisting them. Meena's pragmatic engagement with welfare and legal recognition reflects a strategy shaped by survival within intersecting regimes of poverty, stigma, and governance, while the younger activist's scepticism foregrounds how such engagements risk reproducing control and depoliticisation. Crenshaw's (2006) concept of identity politics captures how these disagreements are not merely generational but arise from distinct political locations within overlapping systems of power. Importantly, these conversations sustain the movement's reflexivity, ensuring that solidarity does not collapse into consensus and that collective identity remains open to critique rather than enforced unity. Beyond survival, intergenerational dialogue preserves what Singh (2021) describes as the affective-cultural legacy of sex-work communities, functioning as a counter-archive to state and NGO knowledge regimes.

This legacy, encompassing songs, rituals, festivals, humour, and practices of mutual care, constitutes what Crenshaw (2006) might recognise as an alternative epistemology grounded in lived experience rather than institutional categorisation. As Kotiswaran (2008) notes, workshops where older FSWs recount the history of *Sonagachi*'s peer-led health initiatives while younger women share strategies for digital self-defence exemplify how knowledge circulates across difference without erasure. The resulting Indian FSW identity, rooted in local socio-cultural and religious epistemologies yet attentive to global political dynamics, resists both Western/European liberal victimhood dichotomy and Southern NGO managerialism. In this sense, the intergenerational continuum operates as the movement's epistemic spine. Through oral historiography, the model and the movement mobilise emotion as knowledge, memory as method, and sisterhood as governance, while sustaining an intersectional politics that refuses both carceral rescue and depoliticised welfare.

Experiences of Structural Violence by the Indian FSW Community

At the same time, the movement's ethical and epistemic commitments are forged in direct confrontation with institutional regimes whose practices systematically convert care into control and protection into punishment. The everyday realities of FSWs and FSW activists reveal a continuum of violence perpetuated by institutions meant to protect them. Drawing on SANGRAM's report called 'Raided' (2018) and testimonies across generations, police abuse, custodial torture, and forced rehabilitation are situated within O'Neill's (2013) continuum of coercion and choice, where women's 'protection' is inseparable from discipline. The constitutional promise of dignity under Article 21 coexists with the state's carceral control, while judicial inconsistencies over the ITPA 1956 leave FSWs caught between illegality and conditional recognition. These contradictions reflect a moral economy rooted in the ideal Hindu woman–FSW binary (Mukherjee 2019; Singh 2021), rendering women simultaneously venerable and violable. Within this terrain, intergenerational dialogue functions as survival. Older women teach the next generation both legal literacy and the necessary survival skills needed to navigate fear, humiliation, and resistance.

For instance, Survee's 20-year old daughter Priya (name changed) notes that

> "The NGO and CBO that I am associated with teaches me all the laws and social policies. My mother and my aunts teach me that before I am a FSW activist, I am a woman, a human and a poor labourer in the unorganised sector. So, I should fight for it by becoming educated, participating in all the advocacy and activism strategies of the NGO. I will give you an example. Our Srijan in collaboration with SANGRAM, NNSW and AINSW are proposing this policing initiative. We are saying that a FSW activist should be accompanied along with the government and police people to recognise and rescue genuine trafficked girls. But it's still at a standstill. They do not want to listen or cooperate with us."

Crenshaw's (2006) intersectional framework helps illuminate how Priya's narrative integrates structural, political, and intergenerational dimensions of power. Learning laws and policies from NGOs/CBOs while being taught by her mother and aunts that she is 'a woman, a human and a poor labourer in the unorganised sector' reflects a layered political consciousness grounded in intersecting structures of gender, class, labour, and stigma. This dual pedagogy resists the reduction of FSW activism to rescue or criminality and instead reframes it as a struggle for labour and human rights, aligning with Crenshaw's insistence that identities must be understood relationally

rather than in isolation. The stalled policing initiative further exemplifies political intersectionality, as FSW activists' experiential knowledge is excluded from state-led anti-trafficking coalitions that claim to protect them. Despite proposing to accompany police to 'recognise and rescue genuine trafficked girls', activists are denied participation, revealing how inclusion remains conditional and hierarchical. This exclusion underscores Crenshaw's critique of reforms that adopt inclusive language without redistributing power, thereby reproducing epistemic and institutional silencing. Integrating Purvis (2004) and Chazan and Macnab (2018), the account also demonstrates intergenerational feminist praxis as both method and strategy. Familial teachings provide ethical grounding, while NGO training offers tactical tools, together enabling activists to navigate institutional spaces without full assimilation. Such dialogic knowledge production sustains collective agency across generations, transforming lived experience into political action while resisting co-optation.

These exchanges are then embedded in a utopian and melancholic historiography (Roy 2009) and rooted in a predominantly Hindu radical imagination, which romanticises yet constrains the community's past. This melancholic attachment to an imagined history of respect does not undo stigma but instead reworks it, constraining political possibility even as it sustains collective identity (Mukherjee 2019; Roy 2009). Intergenerational pedagogy, shaped by shared memories of trauma and endurance, functions as embodied knowledge through which loss is continuously narrated and transmitted. Emotions such as fear, humiliation, pride, and defiance thus form a living archive of politicised Hindu melancholia, one that both enables survival and reproduces awareness of how structural violence persists through state institutions and everyday encounters (Purvis 2004; Chazan and Macnab 2018). SANGRAM's survey reinforces this, revealing that 50% of FSWs and activists endured verbal abuse, 35% physical assault, 20% bribery, and over 60% threats of sexual violence, statistics that, while striking, only partially capture the human cost. One such FSW activist recounts:

> 'In 2011, I knew this auto driver who took me to a place near the Devasthanam temple at night and offered me Rs 1000 (approx. £8.51). When we reached the room, there were eight policemen in plainclothes. They shut the door and raped me... They threw Rs 50 (approx. £ 0.43) on the floor and even took away my clothes. I was hospitalised for two days and could not get up for a week.'

Crenshaw's (2006) theory of structural intersectionality elucidates how the violence described in the testimony is produced not merely through individual criminal acts but through the convergence of gender, class, caste, and state power. The rape perpetrated by police officers reveals how institutions ostensibly responsible for protection

become sites of violence for women positioned at the margins of legality and respectability. As she argues, women located at intersecting structures of subordination experience violence in qualitatively different ways because their access to remedies is structurally foreclosed. In this case, the survivor's economic precarity, reliance on informal transport, and presumed association with sex work render her vulnerable to both sexual violence and subsequent institutional abandonment. The token payment of Rs 50 and the theft of her clothes further underscore how material deprivation and bodily violation are intertwined, reflecting the assertion that violence against marginalised women cannot be understood as purely psychological harm divorced from economic and structural dispossession.

The absence of meaningful legal redress in the narrative further mirrors her critique of legal frameworks that fail to account for intersecting barriers such as fear of criminalisation, stigma, and lack of institutional trust. The hospitalisation that follows functions as the only form of intervention, emphasising how support systems respond to injury while remaining silent on structural causes. Crenshaw's (2006) framework thus reveals how the survivor's experience of rape is inseparable from her social location within a system that normalises violence against women perceived as disposable. At the same time, her reconceptualization of identity politics as coalition-based offers a critical response to such violence. The survivor's experience cannot be adequately addressed through a singular category such as 'woman' or 'rape victim', as mainstream feminist discourse often presumes access to protection and justice that are unavailable here. Intersectionality insists that gender-based violence must be understood through coalitions that account for classed, caste-marked, and criminalised identities, allowing marginalised voices within feminist movements to be heard rather than erased. By grounding identity politics in the lived realities of those most vulnerable to structural violence, her framework challenges both the invisibility of such testimonies and the inadequacy of legal and feminist responses that fail to confront the state's role in producing harm.

The survivor's lived experience, moreover, starkly contrasts with the dominant ideal of the *sati-savitri aurat* (Singh 2021), revealing what Roy (2016) describes as the paradox of limited agency under conditions of structural constraint. Women who deviate from patriarchal purity norms are positioned within a moral economy that renders them expendable, where violence is naturalised as the consequence of perceived moral failure rather than structural injustice. This reframing exemplifies Roy's argument that empowerment does not necessarily lie in transcendence of constraint, but in strategic negotiation within it. Drawing on Mukherjee's (2019) critique of the *Manusmriti*, these movements challenge patriarchal codes that equate women's worth with chastity and obedience, asserting instead that economic contribution, however informal or stigmatised, constitutes a legitimate claim to rights and recog-

nition. Within this framework, the Rs. 50 thrown at the survivor is not merely an act of humiliation but a material articulation of what Collins (2017) identifies as structural violence embedded in everyday practices of governance and capitalism. The gesture symbolises the profound devaluation of women's labour and bodies within a political economy that assigns worth only to productive, respectable, and compliant subjects. At the same time, centring the survivor's testimony resists the erasure of agency that often accompanies narratives of victimhood.

Drawing on Roy (2016) and Collins (2017), agency is conceptualised as relational, structurally constrained, and collectively produced. It emerges through practices of naming injustice, forging intergenerational solidarities, and politically revaluing marginalised labour, thereby reconstituting the 'poor working Indian woman' as a subject of situated knowledge and emergent feminist consciousness rather than a passive victim. This process of agency formation is affectively mediated. As Tilly (2008) argues, emotions such as grief, anger, and outrage function as mobilising mechanisms that transform individual trauma into collective critique. Survivor narratives thus operate as pedagogical and political acts, enabling what Purvis (2004) and Chazan and Macnab (2018) describe as an intergenerational relay of experience through which personal pain is converted into shared political knowledge and sustained feminist agency.

Punitive Rehabilitation and the Politics of Rescue

This collective knowledge production foregrounds how violence is embedded in institutional arrangements, inviting an intersectional analysis of state power rather than a focus on individual wrongdoing. Crenshaw's (2006) structural intersectionality helps explain how state-led raids and rehabilitation regimes produce violence through institutional design rather than individual excess. During raids in Kolhapur, Mumbai, 79% of women 'rescued' were voluntary workers aged 25 to 52, yet most were incarcerated against their will, 168 returned to sex work after release, and one died in custody (SANGRAM 2018). These outcomes illustrate how welfare and anti-trafficking frameworks collapse consent, labour, and victimhood into a single carceral response that disregards women's differentiated social locations as workers, caregivers, and economic providers. The testimony shared by a younger activist of her friend in *Sudhar Gruha* (rehabilitation centre) that '[They] were asked to wear makeup and fancy clothes and entertain the men who are visitors there... If they stand near the window, the staff beat them', demonstrates how rehabilitation centres reproduce gendered and sexualised discipline while ignoring material harms such as women being left hungry, beaten, and abused. In Crenshaw's (2006) terms, these institutions fail precisely because they assume women's needs are moral or psycholo-

gical, rendering invisible the intersecting realities of poverty, labour, and familial responsibility.

Her framework also illuminates how political intersectionality operates through the convergence of state power, humanitarian discourse, and feminist rescue narratives. The recollection of Seema (name changed), a 39-year-old FSW activist from AINSW, of a forced raid in New Delhi, 'they pulled the women by their hair, some disrobed, some still in nightgowns', reveals how women are simultaneously framed as victims and subjected to public humiliation. The presence of media and NGO representatives transformed the raid into spectacle, aligning with Collins's (2017) observation that exposure functions as epistemic control. As older activists recall similar scenes from the 1990s, they identify the continuity of what Sanders et al. (2017) term 'the rescue industry', wherein FSWs' suffering is mobilised to legitimise intervention while excluding them from political voice. Crenshaw's (2006) critique is evident here. Dominant feminist and humanitarian agendas marginalise those women whose experiences do not conform to singular narratives of rescue.

At the same time, intergenerational exchanges between older and younger activists demonstrate intersectionality as a lived political practice. Younger activists document violations through smartphones, creating counter-archives that challenge official narratives, while elders contribute embodied memory of raids, disappearances, and incarceration. These exchanges transform spectacle into testimony, sustaining what older activists describe pragmatically as the lesson that 'rescue often becomes a euphemism for disappearance'. Such oral histories function as an informal archive of state violence, resisting the erasures imposed by reformist discourse. However, as these narratives circulate upward into NGO offices and donor reports, activists confront a new dilemma: how to preserve radical memory without allowing institutional mediation to domesticate its meaning (Purvis 2004; Chazan and Macnab 2018).

The campaign against the 2018 Anti-Trafficking Bill illustrates Crenshaw's (2006) argument that intersectionality offers a stronger foundation for collective identity politics than either abolitionist or carceral frameworks. The articulation of Vani (name changed), a 53-year-old counsellor, that 'There are two situations. One is willingness, the other is force', captures an intersectional logic grounded in lived complexity rather than ideological purity. As younger activists adopt this distinction under the slogan 'Nothing About Us Without Us', fragmented experiences of violence are translated into unified political claims. In this intergenerational transmission, lived emotion, politicised melancholia, and street-level praxis are rearticulated as legislative resistance, ensuring that collective mobilisation emerges not despite internal tensions, but through them.

Everyday Policing and the Continuum of Coercion

As politicised structural violence and stigma become institutionalised, they encounter what Crenshaw (2006) would describe as the structural conditions that shape vulnerability through everyday governance rather than exceptional violence. Power here operates through dispersed, mundane practices – policing, documentation, welfare, and surveillance – wherein care and coercion blur into one another. These diffuse modalities of power find their most concentrated and legible expression in the everyday practices of policing. The intergenerational praxis of the movement, in which elder activists theorise from emotional memory while younger activists confront institutional authority, finds its sharpest articulation in encounters with the police. These moments render abstract notions of structural violence immediate and embodied. One middle-aged FSW activist from AINSW recounts: 'Police catch us and then torture us. They threaten to put chili powder in our eyes and private parts, make us clean the station, and sexually harass us.' Another FSW activist from AINSW adds: 'If we don't pay the festival donation, they beat us.' Moreover, Raja (name changed), a brothel manager, confesses to paying regular *hafta* (bribe) to prevent harassment. Through Crenshaw's (2006) lens, such accounts reveal coercion not as episodic abuse but as a routinised exchange produced at the intersection of gender, class, criminalisation, and state power, where FSWs are structurally positioned outside the protections afforded to other citizens.

Her conceptualisation of structural intersectionality also clarifies how formal institutions reproduce harm by negating women's legal adulthood and consent. By disregarding intergenerational, embodied pedagogies of survival, NGOs, CBOs, and courts not only erase modes of knowledge transmission but reinscribe dependency within professional and legal hierarchies. As Collins (2017) notes, institutional infantilisation amplifies both structural and physical violence. SANGRAM documents cases where courts returned adult women to parental custody 'for their own protection'. For instance, Swati (name changed), a 28-year-old FSW activist in SANGRAM, observes that 'the court requires a 30- or 40-year-old woman to be sent to her father or brother.' Crenshaw's (2006) analysis helps situate such practices as structural failures of law that treat women's vulnerability as individual incapacity rather than the outcome of intersecting inequalities. For younger activists like Swati, hearing senior colleagues recount decades of similar paternalism cultivates a political consciousness that recognises infantilisation as systemic rather than incidental, transforming personal humiliation into collective historical memory and critique. This intersectional pedagogy of survival extends beyond legal infantilisation to encompass economic and digital forms of coercion that shape everyday life.

FSW activists such as Deepa (name changed), 26-year-old, and Devina (name changed), 27-year-old FSW activist from NNSW explain how police raids entangle women in cycles of indebtedness through legal fees, fines, and bribes averaging approximately Rs 25,000 (approx. £211.80), often accruing interest rates of up to 30 percent. 'Eighty-five percent came back to sex work,' Devina explains, 'but not easily....the debt pushes them closer to destitution.' Crenshaw's (2006) intersectional framework underscores how such economic coercion operates at the intersection of gendered labour, criminalisation, and poverty, foreclosing exit while intensifying dependence. Similarly, Mousim (name changed), a 29-year-old Muslim FSW activist from SANGRAM, recounts online exploitation during Covid-19 lockdowns, where clients refused payment or threatened to leak videos. These testimonies show how digital economies reproduce the same intersecting hierarchies that organise analogue spaces, extending structural vulnerability into new technological domains. Across generations, these narratives function as counter-archives that map how legal, economic, and moral regimes constrain agency while producing survival strategies rooted in collective solidarity. Through Crenshaw's (2006) lens, intergenerational mentorship emerges as a form of political resistance that transforms shame into analysis by asking why corruption persists, how capitalism and patriarchy co-constitute vulnerability, and why intergenerational solidarity, rather than respectability, offers protection. Yet this process remains shadowed by what Roy (2009) terms 'radical melancholia', as longing for a lost moral and cultural order risks reproducing harm through its entanglement with politicised Hinduism (Mukherjee 2019). The movement thus, remains suspended within the productive tension Crenshaw identifies, between survival within oppressive structures and the ongoing struggle to transform them without erasing difference, memory, or dissent.

Toward an Intergenerational Feminist Praxis

This reorientation remains precariously situated within institutional regimes that, as Crenshaw's (2006) analysis of structural intersectionality makes clear, invoke care while reproducing subordination through bureaucratic control and moral governance. The contemporary regulatory model, marked by punitive rehabilitation, NGOisation, and politicised morality, governs through violence while claiming benevolence, producing what Roy (2009) describes as 'radical melancholia': a collective awareness of repeated institutional betrayal and loss. Yet within this apparatus, intergenerational dialogue among the community of FSWs generates forms of counterpower. Through shared oral storytelling, survivors of rape, torture, and incarceration teach younger activists that pain can function as political vocabulary when personal suffering is reframed as a lens to understand structural violence. These autonomous epistemic and affective spaces assert collective voice, cultivate resilience, and redefine empowerment on community-driven terms, exemplifying Crenshaw's (2006) insist-

ence that solidarity must accommodate internal difference rather than erase it. The movement thus inhabits a productive tension between remembrance and refusal, mobilising affect not as nostalgia but as political consciousness.

In addressing the marginalisation and structural limits of the regulatory model, the proposal to draw on Shearing and Ericson's (1991) notion of 'craft of policing' reflects an attempt to intervene within state structures without relinquishing grassroots knowledge. By granting autonomy and flexibility to local police stations, participatory policing could enable context-specific enforcement of the ITPA through consultation with FSWs, FSW activists, and representatives of sex work NGOs and CBOs, responding to SANGRAM's (2018) concern that indiscriminate raids push consenting adult FSWs activists into unsafe spaces. However, as Crenshaw's (2006) conceptualisation of political intersectionality cautions, inclusive frameworks risk reproducing exclusion when epistemic hierarchies remain intact. Collins (2017) similarly warns, participation can amplify FSW's voices only when they align with institutional agendas, reproducing epistemic violence under the guise of inclusion. Building on the arguments and lived experiences documented by SANGRAM and NNSW (2016) and SANGRAM (2018), Akriti (name changed), a 22-year-old Hindu FSW activist and educator from NNSW, AINSW and Kat-Katha, articulates bottom-up, community-led alternatives (Bayat 2010) such as the *Mahila Panchayats* (Women's Village Councils). As she explains,

> 'We need help from the *Mahila Panchayat*. They have political influence and have a good understanding of the law. Even the police officials are afraid of them as they are elected leaders and represent the government. We need to come together to fight this social evil and work towards equating sex worker's rights with human rights.'

Akriti's vision exemplifies intergenerational feminist praxis, wherein locally embedded women's councils become dialogic and pedagogical spaces that transform shared vulnerability into collective agency. This emphasis on relational engagement resonates with Shearing and Ericson's (1991) 'craft of policing' and aligns with Beera's (name changed), another FSW activist from NNSW, AINSW and Prajawala (a local CBO) call for collaborative partnerships with law enforcement. As Beera recounts, 'In the past five years we have collaborated with the police in the area of human trafficking and various other cases, that gave us the opportunity to understand the department closely.'

Both interventions illustrate what Purvis (2004) and Chazan and Macnab (2018) describe as transformative negotiation, where institutional spaces are inhabited but not fully absorbed. Yet, as Crenshaw (2006) and Roy (2016) together remind us, such in-betweenness remains precarious. NGOs and CBOs mediate access to policy

but are vulnerable to co-optation, professionalisation, and technocratic rationales that depoliticise grassroots energy (Bayat 2010; Roy 2015). Without dismantling carceral, patriarchal, and neoliberal logics, inclusion risks becoming performative rather than transformative (Sanders et al. 2017). Following Singh (2021), the way beyond this melancholic impasse lies in reorienting collective emotions toward futurity, mobilising the community's emotional and historical oral archives not as a return to purity but as a project of radical re-imagination. In this reconfiguration, melancholia becomes a generative political force, enabling Indian FSW activism to sustain intersectional solidarity, epistemic plurality, and a forward-looking vision of justice grounded in lived experience rather than institutional promise.

Drawing on these women's experiences, scholars are prompted to rethink Western/European feminist and sex-work frameworks grounded in binaries of victimhood/agency, rescue/choice, and legality/illegality (Dworkin 2003; Grant 2014). Knowledge emerges less from formal policy than through intergenerational praxis, affective memory, and collective storytelling, what Roy (2009; 2016) calls a 'politics from below'. These embodied archives challenge assumptions that empowerment comes solely through NGOisation, legal recognition, or state inclusion, revealing regulatory models as technologies of governance that discipline marginalised subjects via moral, religious, and bureaucratic logics. By foregrounding intersectionality as lived and historically situated (Crenshaw 2006), narratives show how caste, class, religion, nationalism, and colonial legacies shape Indian FSW activism in ways universalist frameworks obscure. This demands a decolonial feminist epistemology recognising FSWs as co-theorists, valuing emotion and memory as political knowledge, and framing agency as relational, constrained, and collectively produced.

Conclusion

This paper examines the Indian regulatory model of sex-work activism as a paradoxical site of empowerment and control, highlighting how FSWs in New Delhi navigate state-sanctioned protection, moral governance, and structural violence. Situating the framework within colonial legal legacies, caste hierarchies, and the rise of politicised Hindu nationalism, the study shows that regulation does not simply mitigate harm but reconfigures it through conditional inclusion, surveillance, and carceral welfare. State recognition, NGO mediation, and public health interventions offer material relief and legitimacy, yet simultaneously reinscribe radical Hindu moral hierarchies that separate redeemable from expendable sexual subjects. Drawing on Crenshaw's (2006) intersectionality and Roy's (2009) melancholic politics, the analysis reveals that violence against FSWs operates along a bureaucratic, affective, and everyday continuum. Intergenerational solidarities emerge as critical feminist praxis, mobilising memory, emotion, and embodied knowledge to resist erasure, negotiate

survival, and assert political claims. These exchanges act as counter-archives, challenging rescue narratives, NGO managerialism, and carceral feminism by reframing agency as relational, historically grounded, and structurally constrained.

The paper also cautions against uncritical celebration of the regulatory model. Its alignment with Hindu moral imaginaries and neoliberal governance risks depoliticising grassroots resistance and reproducing exclusion under the guise of rights and welfare. The study advocates bottom-up, community-led governance, such as *Mahila Panchayat*s and participatory law enforcement engagement, that preserves epistemic plurality and centres FSWs' lived expertise. Ultimately, this research contributes to decolonial feminist scholarship by challenging Eurocentric paradigms and advancing an intersectional, culturally grounded understanding of Indian sex-work activism, positioning intergenerational feminist praxis as a dynamic resource that transforms melancholia, solidarity, and collective emotion into forward-looking struggles for justice, dignity, and autonomy.

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Unspoken Love, Unlived Futures: Dialogic Possibilities and Well-Being Pathways in British Chinese Intergenerational Relationships

Lin Zheng[1]

Abstract: In parts of the British Chinese diaspora, adult children raised in the UK are increasingly reported to be distancing themselves from first-generation parents. What appears as conflict or apathy is often unspoken love: care expressed through sacrifice and control that fails to register as love in an English-dominant, autonomy-valuing environment. This article theorises this as an intergenerational affective mismatch and asks how recognition might be restored when local ethical anchors, such as Confucian norms of filiality, are absent or rejected by UK-born youth. The study draws on participant observation at a weekend Chinese school in southern England, semi-structured conversations with parents, educator reflections, and anonymised vignettes, complemented by community talks and public materials. Using intercultural legibility as an analytic lens, this article illustrates how parents' and educators' accounts depict children as frequently reading these actions as constraint. Dialogic interventions, including bilingual mediation, narrative reframing, and intergenerational workshops, are explored as pathways for co-created recognition, making parental intentions legible without erasing children's autonomy. Academically, the article advances the idea of care as legibility, highlighting how the absence of ethical anchors is itself an intercultural pedagogical problem. Practically, it calls for new dialogic spaces in schools and communities that enable mutual recognition, positioning dialogic repair as a priority for well-being in diaspora contexts.

Keywords: Intergenerational Dialogue, Affective Mismatch, Intercultural Legibility, British Chinese Families, Well-being Futures

[1] Dr Lin Zheng is a scholar of Global Intercultural Studies whose work explores interculturality as lived practice. Her research examines how intercultural legitimacy, intercultural legibility and intercultural dissonance shape international student experiences and the dynamics of intergenerational relationships in migrant families. She studies how affect, especially shame, misrecognition and fragile belonging, travels across cultural and generational boundaries, producing tensions in which care, responsibility and success become difficult to read. Through practitioner research and community-based collaborations, she develops concepts such as anchored translation and dialogic repair to address moments when care becomes culturally unreadable, contributing to emerging debates on recognition, well-being and the politics of intercultural encounters.

Introduction

In accounts from the British Chinese diaspora, a quiet but consequential shift appears to be reshaping family life. Adult children raised in the UK are increasingly reported to be distancing themselves, sometimes permanently, from first-generation parents.

What appears publicly as conflict, coldness, or 'ingratitude' is often something more paradoxical: unspoken love that fails to be recognised as care. For many first-generation parents, love is enacted through sacrifice, risk aversion, and achievement-oriented guidance: long working hours, diligent saving, and heavy investment in tuition and credentials. For many second-generation children socialised in English-dominant norms that emphasise autonomy, consent, and emotional articulation, these same practices appear as conditionality, surveillance, or silence. Relationships do not necessarily fracture for lack of love; they fracture because love is not legible as care.

This article uses a single-site qualitative study in a British Chinese community school to examine how such misrecognition emerges in everyday interactions and to explore how dialogic practices might repair recognition without erasing children's autonomy or elders' dignity. This article names this patterned misrecognition as an intergenerational affective mismatch. By mismatch I mean a recurrent gap in legibility regarding who and what count as care, in which moral worlds, and with what warrants of justification. In many UK-based families, the usual 'local ethical anchors' that once grounded recognition, for example, Confucian norms of filiality or respectability, are weak, contested, or explicitly rejected by UK-born youth. This is not only a value disagreement; it is an anchoring problem. When no shared anchor is available, even sincere parental sacrifice can arrive as constraint, and appeals to duty can sound like attempts to curtail autonomy. Recognition is organised by scripts, institutions, and communicative norms; when these do not supply a mutually acceptable anchor, legibility collapses. This article takes this mismatch seriously, not only because it strains relationships, but because it carries long-term well-being consequences. Severed ties truncate kin networks, weaken community safety nets, and curtail intergenerational learning: the ordinary transmissions of language, story, practical wisdom, and reciprocal care that sustain lives across time. In this sense, family estrangement produces unlived futures: lost possibilities for belonging, support, and flourishing. The stakes are social as well as personal, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals on health and well-being, gender equality, reduced inequalities, and peaceful, inclusive communities.

Much has been written about 'tiger' parenting, academic pressure, and filial piety in Chinese and diasporic contexts. These literatures illuminate values and structures

that shape everyday schooling and family life, yet two gaps remain particularly salient for this study. First, we know little about the interactional mechanisms through which love becomes illegible: how sacrifice or control are heard, seen, and evaluated in particular encounters, and why some justifications travel while others stall. Second, we lack practice designs for moments when shared anchors are absent: what families and schools can do when filial duty no longer persuades youth, and when appeals to autonomy fail to reassure elders.

To address these gaps, this article advances two linked ideas. The first is intercultural legibility: a way of asking not 'who is right?' but 'through which locally credible warrants can different ways of loving become mutually recognisable?' 'Warrants' here refers to reasons that carry authority in situated moral worlds: safety, dignity, reciprocity, duty of care, institutional fit, mental health, community harmony. The second idea is dialogic repair: designable, iterative practices that help families externalise love scripts, co-produce or recover anchors they can jointly endorse, and translate contested actions into recognisable care while protecting children's autonomy and elders' dignity. Where traditional anchors are absent or rejected, dialogic work requires provisional anchoring: bilingual mediation to protect tone and face, narrative reframing that shifts talk from intent to impact, and intergenerational workshops that trial small procedures and review them together.

Empirically, this study is situated in a weekend Chinese school in southern England, a naturally occurring site where parents congregate while children are in class, and where educators, volunteers, and community actors intersect. This article draws on sustained participant observation, semi-structured conversations with parents, brief educator reflections, anonymised vignettes that weave recurrent patterns across cases, and publicly available community materials. Guided by this approach, this article addresses the following research questions:

- In British Chinese families, which care practices (for example sacrifice, control, achievement orientation) become illegible as love across generations, and through what interactional mechanisms?
- What happens when shared local ethical anchors are weak, absent, or rejected, and how can provisional anchors be co-produced in ways acceptable to both generations?
- Which dialogic interventions, including bilingual mediation, narrative reframing, and intergenerational workshops, help restore recognition while protecting children's autonomy and elders' dignity, and how might insights from these inform well-being pathways in schools, community organisations, and local services?

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. It first reviews scholarship on Chinese migrant parenting, recognition and relational ambivalence, and dialogic ethics, motivating a shift from normative prescriptions to legibility-centred analysis with attention to anchoring gaps. The article then outlines the qualitative design. Findings are organised around recurrent sites of legibility breakdown and provisional anchoring. This paper synthesises these into a set of dialogic procedures that schools and communities can adopt and concludes with implications for practice and policy. Among these, this study treats intercultural legibility as the primary analytical lens, with anchored translation and dialogic repair as practice-oriented extensions.

Literature Review

Scholars of Chinese and broader East Asian families have long asked why practices often labelled 'authoritarian' in Euro-American psychology are locally understood as forms of care. Chao (1994) showed that *guan* was not simply control but a form of guided training, where discipline and diligence embodied parental love. Su Yeong Kim and colleagues (2013, 2015) further demonstrated that Chinese families often combined warmth and regulation in ways that do not fit Western parenting typologies. In migration contexts, these logics are intensified by the pressures of assimilation and mobility. Louie (2004) and Zhou (2009) found that thrift and delayed gratification were moralised as protection: parents saved, postponed, and sacrificed so that resources would be available at decisive life stages. Such accounts challenge stereotypes of 'authoritarian' parenting, but they are largely parent-centred, telling us less about how children actually read these practices.

Filial piety research provides a sharper lens. Yeh and Bedford's (2003) Dual Filial Piety Model distinguished reciprocal filiality, based on gratitude and mutuality, from authoritarian filiality, based on duty and obedience. Meta-analyses suggest that reciprocal filiality is consistently associated with positive outcomes, while authoritarian filiality shows more mixed effects (Cheung 2020). This distinction helps explain why sacrifice may be read by some children as love but by others as pressure. However, most of this work remains at the level of values. What is still missing is an account of the interactional mechanisms through which parental intentions stop being legible as care in English-dominant, autonomy-oriented contexts.

Beyond mainland Chinese settings, diasporic studies have begun to theorise how intergenerational obligations and care scripts are reworked through migration. Tu's work on Chinese one-child migrants between China and the UK, for instance, demonstrates how filial piety persists but is renegotiated as a 'family contract' under conditions of transnational mobility and middle-class aspiration (Tu 2016). Ch-

eung's study of second-generation Chinese immigrants in the Netherlands similarly shows that adult children do not simply reject filial care but translate it into new expectations of emotional support, reciprocity, and negotiated independence (Cheung 2020). Guo (2021) identifies multiple sources of intergenerational conflict in Chinese immigrant families in North America, including divergent acculturation trajectories, language barriers, and different understandings of autonomy and obedience. These studies highlight that filial norms are not disappearing but being transformed across borders. However, they tend to remain at the level of values, obligations, and relationship types. There is still relatively little research on the micro-interactional mechanisms through which care practices become illegible in specific encounters, or about dialogic strategies that might repair recognition once it fails, particularly in British Chinese contexts.

Family sociology offers concepts for this gap. Lüscher and Pillemer (1998) described intergenerational ambivalence as a structural feature of kinship, while Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identified relational dialectics such as autonomy–connection and openness–protection. Hwang (2006) showed how migration amplifies these tensions, as language and authority collide across generations. Bourdieu's (1991) idea of symbolic capital helps explain why parental investments in thrift or examination success may be symbolically valuable for them but devalued by their children. These insights sharpen diagnosis but rarely show how ambivalence hardens into estrangement, or how families might repair recognition once it breaks down.

Recognition theory offers another frame. Honneth (1996) argued that recognition is a condition for human flourishing: without it, people experience damage to self-relation. Applied here, if parental efforts are not recognised as love, both sides are injured. Fraser (2000) insisted that recognition must be analysed alongside redistribution and institutional support; in migrant families, limited resources or language barriers make parental intentions more vulnerable to misreading. Butler (2004, 2016) showed that intelligibility itself is framed: whether 'I did this for you' is heard as care depends on whether it fits the child's frame of meaning. So far, recognition theory explains why misrecognition wounds; interculturality explains how misrecognition is produced and negotiated in practice.

Intercultural education scholars take this further. Dervin (2011, 2016) critiqued the idea of fixed cultural 'packages', arguing instead for attention to situated negotiations. Holliday (1999, 2018) emphasised 'small cultures', the everyday practices of families, schools, or communities rather than grand civilisational blocks. These perspectives suggest that intergenerational misrecognition is not a clash of 'Chinese' versus 'British' culture but the friction between overlapping small cultures in specific families. Toulmin's (1958/2003) account of warrants makes this concrete: reasons

only carry authority if they are locally credible. A parent may frame thrift as love, but if the warrant does not hold in the child's world, the act cannot be read as care.

Affect theory clarifies why such misrecognition wounds. Ahmed (2010, 2013) argued that emotions circulate like economies, sticking to certain practices as 'good' or 'bad'. A parent's supervision may be intended as protection but felt by the child as mistrust. Berlant (2011) described this dynamic as cruel optimism: the pursuit of the good life of respectability and upward mobility can itself become depleting. In migrant families, shame emerges as a central affective mechanism. Parents may feel ashamed when their sacrifices are declined; children may feel ashamed when they fail to meet expectations. Shame functions as a barrier, silencing dialogue and deepening distance. Misrecognition is thus not only cognitive but affective, leaving embodied scars in intergenerational ties.

Most existing research on Chinese and East Asian parenting remains limited by the absence of children's voices. Young people's experiences are often inferred indirectly, through parental narratives, survey proxies, or institutional outcomes, which reproduces the very asymmetry under analysis: parental warrants dominate while children's anchors of recognition remain muted. This study does not claim to represent children's voices directly; rather, it analyses how children's responses are mediated, recalled, and often misrecognised within parental narratives. Building on this observation, two gaps become clear. The first is a mechanism gap: while parenting scripts, filial logics, ambivalence, and symbolic capital have been richly described, this study still knows little about how practices intended as care fail within the micro-interactions of daily life. The second is a design gap: recognition and affect theories illuminate why misrecognition matters but rarely translate into practical strategies for repair. Existing interventions too often rely on generic communication training, overlooking the need for locally credible warrants that both generations can accept. Addressing these two gaps, mechanism and design, frames the contribution of the present study.

Methodology

This study uses an ethnographically informed, single-site case design to generate thick, situated accounts of intergenerational affective mismatch and to identify points for dialogic repair. The field site is a community-run Saturday Chinese language school in southern England. While children attend lessons, parents wait in corridors or nearby cafés, creating a naturally occurring space for talk about schooling, parenting, and family life. Prior to fieldwork, I met school leaders, agreed minimal-disruption principles, obtained written site permission, and posted a bilingual (English/Chinese) information sheet in parent areas.

By 'ethnographic sensibility' I do not claim a full ethnography but an orientation of prolonged, situated engagement and reflexive attentiveness to context. Practically, this meant weekly visits over one school term, extended time in parent waiting areas, and attention to mundane routines such as drop-offs and homework supervision. Informal corridor conversations were treated as traces of the site's affective climate rather than mere information. Throughout, the researcher remained aware of their positionality as a British-based, Chinese-background educator–researcher, variably read as insider or as representative of UK educational norms. Fieldnotes recorded spoken interaction, embodied cues, silences, and affective atmospheres, which then informed interview coding and the construction of vignettes.

Parent participants were all first-generation migrants from mainland China, living in the Southwest of the UK and sending their children to the Saturday Chinese language school. They were approximately 25–68 years old, mostly mothers with a smaller number of fathers and one grandparent. Class-wise, they clustered into small business owners in catering and retail (takeaways, cafés, sushi outlets) and salaried professionals in higher education, finance, and healthcare, with some households combining waged work and self-employment. All families had at least one child in UK primary or secondary school. The sample is not statistically representative but highlights contrasting enterprise-based and professional trajectories that recur in the analysis. Participants are adult parents or guardians (18+) affiliated with the school who consented to observation and/or interview in Mandarin, Cantonese, or English. Recruitment combined an opportunistic approach in waiting areas with maximum-variation sampling across occupations (for example hospitality/restaurant and academic/professional), migration histories and family forms. The dataset comprises sustained participant observation across one school term; approximately sixteen semi-structured parent interviews (30–60 minutes) and two to three short educator/volunteer interviews; and publicly accessible materials such as school handbooks, event posters, and community newsletters. Minors were not interviewed: children's perspectives enter indirectly via parental narratives and educator reflections. For digital traces (for example, WeChat), only participant-volunteer excerpts were included and paraphrased; no screenshots were retained.

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006): (1) familiarisation through repeated reading/listening and memoing; (2) generating initial codes by hand on printed transcripts and fieldnotes; (3) collating codes into candidate themes; (4) reviewing themes against the corpus; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing analytic narrative with illustrative paraphrases. Coding was manual (no software). A short codebook was iteratively refined; a second reader spot-checked a subset of interviews to discuss code boundaries, not to compute reliability. Triangulation across observations, interviews, and documents, together with

brief member sense-checks (theme summaries shared with willing participants), supported credibility. I also looked for negative cases (for example high control recognised as care, or high expressivism read as pressure) to stress-test themes.

Ethics approval was obtained from the author's institution. All participants received bilingual information and gave written consent. They could refuse recording, skip questions, or withdraw without consequence. Pseudonyms are used; place names and distinctive timelines are masked. Any disclosure of risk followed site safeguarding protocols. Audio files and notes were stored on encrypted institutional drives with restricted access. Participants were also reminded that their involvement had no bearing on their children's schooling or access to community services, and care was taken to avoid reproducing power asymmetries between researcher and families. In digital contexts, consent was re-confirmed before including paraphrased WeChat excerpts, and no material from non-consenting individuals or minors was retained**.** This embedded, opportunity-plus-purposive sample cannot represent all British Chinese families and over-represents parents available on-site during class hours. The claims are therefore mechanistic instead of prevalence based. Transferability is enhanced through thick description of the setting and by reporting concrete interactional patterns and dialogic moves that practitioners can adapt in place.

The small, single-site sample is a deliberate feature of the design rather than a limitation to be solved within this study. The aim is not to estimate prevalence of estrangement or conflict across the British Chinese diaspora, but to trace interactional mechanisms and dialogic possibilities with enough contextual depth to inform practice designs. A wider survey would be needed to assess how widespread particular patterns are; here the focus is on how love becomes illegible and how families and community institutions might begin to repair recognition in a concrete setting.

Findings

The 'cases' presented here are analytic vignettes rather than bounded family case studies, designed to foreground recurrent interactional mechanisms.

Case A: Late provision-early estrangement

This case illustrates a hidden but significant form of intergenerational tension in Chinese migrant middle-class families. The parents, both professionals, grew up in China during a period of scarcity, where thrift and delayed gratification were moralised as the highest forms of care. Having internalised this ethos, they carried it into their lives in the UK, consistently choosing to save for the future instead of investing in present comforts or opportunities. Holidays were postponed, birthdays were marked with practical gifts such as books, and family treats were minimised. Even

when they could have afforded broader educational support, including tutoring or alternative schooling options, they held back, convinced that every spare pound should be reserved for the future. For them, provision equalled love: disciplined saving, delayed consumption, and the promise of security at decisive life stages such as university, housing, or marriage. Their adult son recalled these years differently. For him, love was anchored in the present, being seen, listened to, and enjoying opportunities comparable to peers. While classmates accessed extracurricular resources or private schooling, his parents' restraint appeared as absence instead of care. What they understood as prudence and foresight translated into distance and control. Over time, the gap widened: Christmas visits became symbolic and brief, WeChat messages reduced to minimal replies, and even large financial offers such as house deposits were politely declined. For the parents, these refusals were painful; intended as responsibility, they were interpreted as belated and transactional.

Analytically, this dynamic is best captured as a warrant-anchor misfit. Parents justified their practices through warrants of prudence, discipline, and long-term security, while the child anchored recognition of care in fairness, visibility, and shared opportunities in the present. Provision was available but deferred, and the deferral itself was experienced as neglect. This reflects what Bourdieu (1991) would describe as a mismatch of symbolic capitals: parents invested in economic security, while the child valued cultural and emotional capital circulating among peers. Digital mediation exacerbated the problem: terse money transfers labelled 'for your future' lacked tone and were read as transactional. The mother's belated archiving of photos and certificates was an attempt at narrative witness, but it could not undo years of misrecognition. The well-being consequence is clear: recurrent misalignments hardened into estrangement, visible in the son's reluctance to return home, what one popular maxim describes as the strongest indicator of intergenerational distance.

Case B: Enterprise-care pull

Restaurant-owning families form one of the most visible subgroups in the dataset, reflecting a broader demographic pattern in first-generation Chinese migration to the UK. Running takeaways, cafés, or sushi outlets is not simply an occupation but a livelihood strategy that dominates daily rhythms. In the Chinese community schools surveyed, parents with catering businesses made up the majority. Unlike professional families such as Case A, these parents often have limited English proficiency and remain strongly rooted in first-generation cultural logics, where love is expressed through financial provision and visible presence instead of through discursive recognition. The structure of care is directly shaped by enterprise demands. Children are frequently kept physically close to restaurant spaces, seated behind counters with tablets or homework so parents can 'see them and keep them safe'. Meals are impro-

vised from shop kitchens, and sleep routines are disrupted by late-night returns. When both parents are on shift, children may be left alone or rely on screens as substitute care. Financially, many families are secure, often sending children to selective or private schools; money is not the bottleneck. The gap lies in cultural scripts of care. Parents justify their approach through warrants of safety, togetherness, and provision, while children and schools anchor recognition in predictability, co-regulation, and undivided attention.

This disjuncture generates conflict. What parents interpret as protection ('my child is always near me in the restaurant') may be read as neglect ('no one is really with me'). Screens, intended as safety devices during rush hours, become long-term parking tools. Teachers' feedback, often through WhatsApp, is received as public scolding due to language barriers, provoking shame and withdrawal. Parents retreat from communication; schools escalate documentation, reinforcing mistrust. Analytically, this dynamic illustrates the enterprise–care pull: parental warrants rooted in enterprise survival clash with children's anchors of recognition, producing intercultural misrecognition. In extreme cases, safeguarding thresholds are crossed, leading to social services involvement and family rupture. The significance of Case B lies in its representativeness. It highlights how financial capital does not automatically translate into educational or relational legitimacy when linguistic and cultural distance persists. The well-being consequences include heightened shame, parental withdrawal, and children's feelings of neglect, despite parental intent to provide love through enterprise.

Case C: Performance-coded care and micro-resistance

In many middle-class Chinese migrant households, parental devotion is performed through *Jiwa* (鸡娃): intensive investment in tutoring, enrichment classes, and exam preparation. Families spend heavily on online tutoring platforms, particularly around the 11+ stage, where large sums are directed to reasoning courses and mock exams for grammar or private school entry. Parents describe this as a necessary sacrifice, 'spending heavily on extra tuition' as visible care even when fees reach what some describe as 'excessive' or 'crazy' levels. For them, money is not the obstacle; what is scarce is ease. The cultural logic is clear: in Chinese scripts, discipline and achievement equal love, and advancement equals security. In the UK, however, tutoring is often associated with remediation, not acceleration. Parents see tutoring as 'excellence training'; peers may interpret it as 'falling behind'. Children caught between these scripts ask, 'Why must I do more if others do not?' The result is a collision between two cultural anchors. Parents tie love to measurable achievement and future competitiveness, while adolescents tie love to fairness, autonomy, and a tolerable load.

Responses are subtle rather than explosive. Declining engagement, skipped rehearsals, and tactical silence operate as micro-resistances, signalling withdrawal without direct confrontation. Shame and face magnify the conflict: peer comparisons and extended-family commentary ('hard-working girls', 'top sets', 'mock results') drive parents to escalate further, adding classes or tasks, even as children signal fatigue. The family environment risks becoming what one teenager described as 'every hour is booked; I am never off'. Analytically, Case C exemplifies a cultural misfit. Parents import a Chinese logic of competitive effort as visible care, but in the UK, it collides with local scripts of balance and autonomy. The 11+ (grammar school entrance exam) tutoring market becomes a site of symbolic struggle: for parents, an investment in security; for children, a loss of freedom. This reflects a failure of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey 2008), where parental warrants of security and discipline do not map onto children's anchors of autonomy and well-being. The well-being costs include sleep deprivation, stigma, irritability, and relational withdrawal, showing how care can erode legitimacy when cultural scripts fail to translate.

Case D: Grandparent co-residence-achievement, authority, and role compression

When grandparents from China co-reside in the UK for extended visits, intergenerational conflict frequently centres on the education of the third generation. Grandparents typically carry an education logic rooted in their own Chinese upbringing, where discipline, test scores, and comprehensive excellence are equated with love and responsibility. Even when children perform strongly across academics, music, and sport, grandparents may remark, 'if only the art scores were higher', implying that achievements are never sufficient. Care is framed as continual improvement, pushing the child toward all-round success. Parents, as first-generation immigrants, have partly absorbed UK discourses of autonomy, self-regulation, and balance. Their warrants of care emphasise voice, emotional well-being, and sustainable motivation. Grandparents, however, often issue direct instructions, 'you should...', 'he must...', 'she should not...', positioning themselves as enduring authorities. In small, shared spaces, these interventions occur publicly, creating authority overlaps. Parents perceived these interventions as undermining; grandparents perceived them as duty. The child is triangulated, caught between achievement as proof of love and autonomy as recognition of trust.

This clash reflects deeper cultural layering: grandparents embody first-generation Chinese traditions, parents straddle Chinese obligation and British autonomy, and children grow up in peer cultures where care is anchored in fairness and choice. Educational disagreements are flashpoints, but the tensions extend further, to household authority, daily routines, and expectations of respect. Well-being impacts are signi-

ficant. Grandparents experience redundancy and loss of identity when resisted, reporting loneliness, headaches, and sadness. Parents feel guilt, indebtedness, and irritation, torn between gratitude and daily frustration. Children navigate conflicting demands, learning that love comes with incompatible conditions. Often visits end early, with elders declaring they 'will not come again', reducing long-term contact and weakening intergenerational bonds. This case illustrates role compression and symbolic dissonance. Grandparents' achievement-focused warrants of care collide with parents' autonomy-focused anchors, and children are pulled into role conflict. Authority overlap in co-residence creates symbolic dissonance: love is both affirmed and eroded in the same gestures. Repair strategies, such as authority-sharing rules, narrating experiences instead of instructing, and supporting elders' self-care plans, help mitigate conflict, but cannot erase cultural incongruence. The well-being of all three generations is strained when educational logics diverge without mediation. For a comparative summary of the four cases, including parental/grandparental warrants, child/school anchors, principal friction sites, observed well-being consequences, and the anchored-translation repair moves, see Appendix 1.

Discussion

This study set out to explain why love is so often misrecognised across generations in British Chinese families and how structured dialogue might repair this difficulty. The analysis suggests that recurrent tensions are not reducible to private disagreements or failed empathy but arise as patterned outcomes of a legibility problem: practices that index care in one moral world become unreadable, even aversive, in another. In this sense, the findings extend Honneth's claim that recognition is a precondition for flourishing (1996), while also illustrating Butler's insight that frames delimit which acts count as intelligible (2004). Repair, therefore, requires more than exhortations to communicate; it demands a process of anchored translation, aligning warrants of love and responsibility with ethical anchors jointly credible across generations.

Across the four cases, the intention to care was never in doubt. What faltered was the interpretability of care practices. Parents consistently offered thrift, presence, effort, and discipline as warrants of love, while children and adolescents, as they appeared in parental and educator narratives, anchored recognition in fairness, autonomy, enoughness (a sense of sufficient load and expectations), and being seen. In Case A, disciplined saving was intended as prudence but was experienced as absence; in Case B, co-presence in restaurants was read as neglect rather than protection; in Case C, tutoring investments became signs of mistrust rather than devotion; and in Case D, instructional guidance was reframed as pressure and displacement. These are not isolated clashes in this dataset but patterned pairings of competing

warrants, each internally moral. Such dynamics refine recognition theory by demonstrating that breakdowns are not deficits of intention but failures of warrant–anchor credibility across intergenerational frames. Fraser's argument that recognition is inseparable from institutional arrangements (2000) resonates strongly here. Parents' warrants faltered not because they lacked sincerity, but because they failed to travel across normative environments structured by schools, peer groups, and digital platforms. Butler's notion of intelligibility sharpens this further: whether parental acts 'count' as care depends on whether they are legible within children's interpretive frames. What this study adds is an account of how these frames are historically layered and cohort-specific within diasporic families, rather than fixed by cultural essence.

Two mechanisms emerged as especially consequential. The first is a warrant–anchor misfit, where parental warrants of prudence, sacrifice, and responsibility do not map onto children's anchors of fairness, autonomy, and well-being. The second is a temporal mismatch: parents justified their actions in the long run, while children evaluated them in the near term. Case A epitomises this temporal dissonance, where thrift was warranted by future security, but children sought recognition in the present. Case C, similarly, showed tutoring warranted as future protection but experienced as immediate overload. These findings give empirical depth to Lüscher and Pillemer's (1998) theorisation of ambivalence as constitutive of intergenerational life, while extending Ahmed's (2013, 2010) account of affective economies by showing how shame and pride circulate not only across bodies but across divergent time horizons.

In the cases analysed, shame and face operated as affective governors throughout. Parents feared losing face in community comparisons, while children feared becoming an embarrassment. Peer talk and rank-based comparisons triggered shame spirals that escalated control – more tutoring, stricter rules – or shut down dialogue through withdrawal and refusals. In these moments, parental sacrifice was reframed as mistrust, echoing Butler's argument that recognition is contingent on frames of intelligibility. At the same time, these attachments exemplify Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism: parents clung to education and mobility as proofs of love, yet these very attachments exhausted the relationships they aimed to sustain. Importantly, however, the data also suggest that surfacing shame can sometimes prompt new negotiations, complicating Ahmed's account by showing shame not only as corrosive but also as a potential site of repair. Digital mediation intensified these dynamics. Money transfers labelled 'for your future' in Case A were interpreted as transactional; WhatsApp screenshots in Case B became exposures of neglect; bilingual directives from grandparents in Case D produced mishearings across generations. Each instance supports Dervin's (2016) view of interculturality as situated negotiation rather than fixed cultural clash.

Generational cohorts also appeared to shape these misrecognitions. Parents in their fifties drew on thrift and respectability scripts rooted in scarcity; those in their forties reflected China's tutoring era and oscillated between discipline and autonomy; those in their thirties blended gentle-parenting discourses with neoliberal productivity pressures. In three-generation households, these orientations collided, with grandparents promoting score-based warrants, younger parents endorsing negotiated autonomy, and middle-aged relatives arbitrating between them. These patterns exemplify Holliday's (1999, 2018) notion of small cultures, underscoring that misrecognition arises less from 'Chinese versus British' civilisation blocks than from the friction of overlapping micro-worlds within families.

The patterns described here are also classed and gendered. Class-wise, enterprise-based families and salaried professional households faced different constraints and possibilities. Restaurant-owning parents in Case B experienced time and energy scarcity under long opening hours and precarious margins; keeping children physically close to the shop was a rational strategy of care within these limits, yet one that clashed with school-based anchors of predictable routines and undivided attention. Professional families in Case A and C, by contrast, were more able to convert economic capital into tutoring or school choice, but also more exposed to competitive middle-class norms around 'investing' in children's futures. Gender-wise, mothers appeared most frequently as brokers and emotional managers, carrying the labour of translating between school expectations, grandparents' warrants, and children's anchors, while grandmothers in Case D embodied achievement-focused care scripts that sometimes collided with younger women's commitments to mental health and balance. Making these classed and gendered dynamics explicit underscores that intergenerational affective mismatch is not only intercultural but also shaped by unequal distributions of time, economic security, and care labour.

From these insights, an actionable model of anchored translation can be drawn. Repair requires surfacing the warrants each side uses, identifying overlaps such as safety, dignity, and mental health as shared ground, and then redesigning practices so they are credible in both moral worlds. In Case A, this meant pairing financial help with narrative witness; in Case B, embedding micro-presence routines into enterprise schedules; in Case C, co-setting ceilings for tutoring commitments; and in Case D, reframing instructions as narration rather than imperatives. Stabilising dialogue through face-saving formats and boundary protocols enables conflict to survive bad days, while brokered third spaces, teachers, mentors, community facilitators, allow dual aims of achievement and well-being to be voiced without forcing ideological conversion.

This framework resonates with Freire's pedagogy of dialogue (1970) and with peacebuilding approaches that embed dialogue in local norms (Lederach 1997; Zehr 2002), while aligning with decolonial critiques (Andreotti 2011; Mignolo 2011; Tuck & Yang 2012) that caution against universalist skills templates. By foregrounding warrants and protecting dignity, it adapts these traditions to the lived complexities of diasporic family life. Intergenerational affective mismatch emerges not as a deficit of love but as a problem of intercultural legibility. Love falters not when it is absent, but when its warrants are not jointly credible. Anchored translation offers one way to render intentions legible without erasing autonomy, pointing to a broader question that extends beyond the Chinese diaspora: how can families sustain recognition when their ethical anchors diverge so profoundly that no shared ground seems possible?

It is important to note that the Saturday Chinese school is only one of several mediating institutions in many diasporic lives. In participants' narratives churches, Chinese associations, WeChat parent groups, and occasional cultural events also appeared as sites where intergenerational norms were discussed or implicitly transmitted. In the present study, however, these spaces were less consistently accessible for sustained observation and were often experienced as more segmented by age or language than the school. The Saturday school thus functioned as a particularly dense intergenerational hub: parents, grandparents, teachers, and children coexisted in a shared space, and talk about schooling, parenting, and care was part of the weekly routine. Future research could extend the analysis to temples, community centres, and literary or performance circles, comparing how different institutions enable or constrain dialogic repair.

The implications are both intimate and institutional. For families, small routines such as retell-name-confirm or credit-and-ask can shift conversations from judgment to shared problem-definition, while temporal bridging practices, such as monthly witness hours, link parents' long-term warrants of provision with children's anchors of present recognition. Community and supplementary schools can develop this work by moving informal corridor talk into structured support, for instance through parent meetings around common warrants or dialogue labs where adolescents practise disagreement without shame. Mainstream schools and local services may benefit from warrants-first approaches that begin with parents' own definitions of good parenting before suggesting changes. Brokered triads of parent, child, and teacher or mentor provide workable spaces where academic progress and well-being can be voiced together. At the level of policy, light-touch measures such as small grants for supplementary schools, safeguarding standards that treat intergenerational legibility as a well-being factor, and pilot workshops trialling anchored translation would

place this agenda within broader commitments to health, equality, and inclusive communities.

At the same time, several limitations should be noted. This single-site study cannot represent the full diversity of the diaspora, and restaurant and professional households are more visible than other groups. Children's voices were not directly included, entering instead through parental and educator accounts. The analysis is therefore mechanistic rather than prevalence based. Future research should test the anchored-translation model across a wider range of families and schools, track outcomes longitudinally, and extend attention to grandparent–grandchild relationships and other kinship forms where recognition scripts may diverge again.

Conclusion

This article has reframed recurrent conflict in British Chinese families as a deficit not of love but of legibility. Across four cases, the analysis has shown how prudent provision, protective presence, performance management, and achievement-focused instruction, offered as care, can be received as control, silence, or mistrust when warrants and anchors misalign. Anchored translation offers a pathway for repair: surfacing warrants, locating overlaps such as safety and dignity, and redesigning practices so they are credible in both moral worlds. Conceptually, the study advances a legibility account of intergenerational ambivalence in migrant contexts; practically, it proposes a toolkit of micro-procedures and institutional pathways that schools, services, and communities can adapt. If left unaddressed, such misrecognition can prune kin networks and foreclose intergenerational learning, producing unlived futures. Addressed with anchored translation, unspoken love can be converted into dialogic commitments robust enough to sustain difference and support well-being. More broadly, the challenge of sustaining recognition amid divergent ethical anchors extends beyond the British Chinese diaspora, raising questions about how families in many contexts can hold together across cultural and generational divides. As a researcher working at the intersection of academic analysis and community practice, I am mindful that anchored translation is not only a theoretical construct but also an everyday effort. It requires humility, patience, and a willingness to remain in dialogue even when recognition falters. This reflexive stance underscores the argument of the paper: that sustaining intergenerational ties depends less on resolving differences than on cultivating the conditions in which love can once again be recognised as love.

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Meaning Making as a Transformative Practice: Young People Co-Creating an Alternative Meaning of Work through Intergenerational Dialogue

Beata Boór[1]

Abstract: This paper explores the cultural and political dimensions of intergenerational dialogue on the meaning of work, focusing on how young people in Austria navigate inherited narratives of work and articulate alternative visions of meaningful work. Drawing on qualitative data from a mixed-methods study on young adults' meaning-making practices around work. The paper examines how intergenerational exchanges within families, institutions, and public discourse shape and contest values attached to work. The paper foregrounds the asymmetries of power that structure intergenerational dialogue itself within the broader demographic and political dynamics of the Global North. In ageing societies, where older generations dominate political representation and policymaking, youth voices are often marginalised despite their heightened exposure to polycrisis manifesting in precarious working conditions, the climate crisis, and long-term structural uncertainty. This imbalance suggests that dialogue about the future frequently unfolds on uneven terrain, constrained by institutional inertia, cultural hierarchies, and politics of age. Moreover, the paper highlights the importance of agency within transformative practices. Young people engage critically with dominant work ideologies through acts of resistance or reinterpretation, co-creating alternative frameworks based on autonomy, balance, purpose, and sustainability. Hence, these meaning-making practices function not only as cultural critique, but also as an imaginary of the

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future of work, and what constitutes key dimensions of inclusive futures and well-being. By theorising intergenerational dialogue as a site of both cultural co-creation and power contestation, the paper contributes to debates on the cultural politics of work, intergenerational justice, and the epistemic conditions for inclusive and sustainable futures.

Keywords: Meaning of Work, Youth Studies, Cultural Contestation, Power Relations, Transformative Practices, Work Futures

Introduction

Intergenerational dialogue has recently gained renewed attention in global debates about justice, sustainability, and the future. The United Nations Pact for the Future underscores the necessity of equitable intergenerational processes for securing peace, structural justice, and inclusive well-being (United Nations 2024). These debates highlight that the challenges societies face today, ranging from climate change and demographic shifts to labour market transformations (Chung et al. 2012; Harper 2014; Hofäcker et al. 2021; Kalleberg 2020; Vlandas 2023), cannot be addressed without active engagement across generations. Simultaneously, it is crucial to acknowledge that in an age-stratified society these dialogues are far from neutral: they are embedded in social structures, shaped by cultural hierarchies, and constrained by unequal access to political and economic power (Foucault 1981; Gordon 2007; Sukarieh and Tannock 2014; Taft 2015; Zilberstein et al. 2023). This paper brings the lens of intergenerational dialogue to the study of how young people in Austria make sense of work.

Work has long held a central place in European societies, framed as both an economic necessity and a moral obligation, and celebrated as a pathway to personal identity and social belonging (Weeks 2011). Yet young people entering the labour market today encounter precarious employment conditions, rising living costs, and intensifying global insecurities (Kalleberg 2020). For them, inherited narratives about work as duty, sacrifice, or stability fundamentally conflict with lived experiences marked by uncertainty and limited opportunity. This raises the question of how young people navigate inherited meanings and make sense of their experiences to reconcile this mismatch.

In this paper, I argue that intergenerational dialogue – conceptualised in a broad relational and cultural sense, occurring in families, schools, workplaces, or political arenas – is a key site for negotiating contradictions surrounding the meaning of work. However, these dialogues unfold within a context of demographic, discursive, and political imbalance. In the Global North, ageing populations translate into the electoral, discursive, and institutional dominance of older cohorts (Bessant et al. 2017; Harper 2014; Vlandas 2023). Policies often reflect their interests, while

younger generations' perspectives, especially those related to long-term risks and future well-being, remain underrepresented (Vlandas 2023). This raises questions about whose voices are considered in the construction of meaning of work and whose visions of the future are legitimised. Yet, as this paper demonstrates, youth are not merely recipients of cultural transmission but active participants who reinterpret, resist, and contest dominant ideologies of work. In an act of cultural resistance (Fraser 1990), they generate alternative imaginaries centred on autonomy, balance, sustainability, and collective well-being. By situating young people's meaning making within intergenerational power dynamics, this paper argues that dialogue around work is both a process of cultural co-creation and a field of political contestation. Drawing on qualitative interviews with young adults in Austria, it examines how inherited work ideologies are engaged with, how new orientations emerge, and what these negotiations reveal about the possibilities of more just and inclusive work futures. Ultimately, the paper seeks to contribute to debates on intergenerational equity by showing how youth voices can reframe the future of work as a space of shared flourishing rather than inherited obligation.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews meaning-making practices around work, explaining how societal and individual meanings constitute each other in a cyclical process. It then traces the context in which young people construct meaning and links these practices to intergenerational dialogue by conceptualising it as a field of power. The paper continues by presenting the methodology, including the interview process, analysis, and ethical considerations. The empirical section explores the meaning-making practices of young people, discussing how these practices are influenced by inherited understandings while also contesting them through creating alternative understandings. It further argues that intergenerational dialogue needs to acknowledge age as an axis of power to foster meaning co-creation and more equitable work futures. The paper concludes with a short summary of its main contributions, limitations, and potential insights for future research.

Societal Work Ideologies, Youth Realities, and Intergenerational Contestations

In contemporary Western capitalism the meaning of work on a societal level becomes evident through the orientation of the whole society toward work as well as its dedication to it, which guarantees the functioning of a society as a whole (Quintanilla and Wilpert 1991). Weeks (2011) addresses this issue through the term *work society*, while Frayne (2015) builds on her work and discusses it as a *work-centred society*. Both terms understand the meaning of work on a societal level through work's function as the main mechanism for distributing income, rights, and

social belonging among the members of a society. It builds on the idea of perceiving participation in waged work as a moral act, with those who are unemployed without any societally accepted reason being deemed inferior members of society (Frayne 2015; Weeks 2011). The work society is legitimised by the post-Fordist work ethic, a set of ideas sustaining the structures and cultures of work through manufacturing common meanings and constructing docile subjects that are willingly committed to and subjectively invested in their work (Frayne 2015; Weeks 2011). It evolved from the Protestant work ethic to align with contemporary Western capitalist ideals by reframing work through the ideas of self-expression, self-development, and creativity, ultimately portraying work as the primary source of personal fulfilment and happiness (Weeks 2011, 2017). The work ethic is present in societal norms and institutions as well as passed on within families, creating pressure to conform to the centring of waged work and the willing participation in it (Furåker 2020).

Farrugia (2019, 2021) shows how the idea of self-actualisation through work guides the meaning making of young people across different aspirations and backgrounds, despite the increasing precarity of many employment relations. This framing, though seemingly empowering, critically reinforces the legitimacy of the hegemonic meaning of work. Nikolopoulou (2021) identifies this idea as not only the most prevalent one for meaning making but also as a mechanism of reinforcement of the dominant work ideology, a point echoed by Farrugia (2019, 2021). Consequently, most people prioritise latent intrinsic aspects for meaning construction, even though they acknowledge income as a fundamental outcome of work up to a certain threshold (Roosmaa et al. 2021). This deep internalisation of the work ethic's ideals makes individuals more adaptable to demanding or precarious work conditions in pursuit of self-fulfilment. The work ethic, operating as a potent legitimising force, is instrumental in cultivating a disciplined workforce (Farrugia 2022). It achieves this not only by guiding young people into employment but by fundamentally transforming them into workers, thereby subjecting them to its pervasive dictates (Farrugia 2022). Thus, they become the embodiment of a disciplined factor of production, where the very act of being a worker comes to define their identity and existence, often at the expense of other life spheres. In this way, the work ethic solidifies its position as the dominant legitimising discourse of work, instilling it with profound meaning and defending its pervasive influence across all societal spheres (Weeks 2011). Consequently, individuals construct their personal meaning of work, which is fundamentally grounded in the established and dominant societal meaning of work.

This process of sense and meaning making involves individuals actively gathering and comparing information to synthesise diverse meanings, with the resulting interpretation becoming a guiding 'quasi-fact' for future understanding, choices, and behaviour (Pratt and Ashforth 2003). This interpretation and evaluation of work's signi-

ficance is deeply rooted in the prevailing social and cultural system, which assigns value to various work activities (Rosso et al. 2010). Indeed, the social, cultural, discursive, and interpersonal context profoundly shapes the available interpretations of work, thereby dictating their perceived legitimacy and prominence within specific settings (Bailey et al. 2019; Note 2010; Rosso et al. 2010; Wrzesniewski et al. 2003). Consequently, an individual's context significantly influences 'their underlying ontological assumptions, their self-understanding, their "choices" of what they do and do not consider meaningful' (Note 2010, 140). Within this inherently circular process, workers emerge as active agents who not only operate within existing structures but also critically shape them, rendering context both an indispensable input to and a dynamic output of sense-making (Wrzesniewski et al. 2003). Therefore, in this paper I argue that the meaning and meaningfulness of work are inextricably embedded in society, culture, and relational contexts, perpetually co-created in a cyclical process by these foundational structures and the individuals who engage with them.

This deeply embedded meaning not only shapes the present but also steers future societal expectations. Young people are extensively socialised into this dominant understanding by parents, educational institutions, and public discourse, leading to an expectation that their personal work experiences will conform to this ingrained framework (Johnson et al. 2020; Levine and Aley 2022; Levine and Hoffner 2006; Mortimer and Lorence 1979). However, the contemporary labour market and broader societal landscape have undergone significant transformations, driven by factors such as the neoliberal turn and its attendant flexibilisation and deregulation (Kalleberg 2009). These changes have led to a labour market that is characterised by increasing polarisation between 'good, well-paying jobs, and bad, low-wage, relatively dead-end jobs' (Kalleberg 2020, 260) as well as unemployment, underemployment, and precarious employment (Bessant et al. 2017). These changes have impacted young people profoundly as well as disproportionately, as this group historically is more vulnerable to adverse labour market conditions (Kalleberg 2020; Shin et al. 2023). As a result, young people today are worse off than previous generations, breaking with the promise of the generational contract of the capitalist era that assured each generation it would have it better than the one before (Bessant et al. 2017). In addition, reforms of the public pension system, which are necessary due to an ageing population, will particularly affect young people (Hofäcker et al. 2021). Instead of relying on the benefits of the public pension system, they are expected to invest in private pension plans to ensure their future income, all while having less stable employment and lower wages (Hofäcker et al. 2021). While the EU has already acknowledged youth unemployment as an issue, the strategies to address it do not cover the increasing systematic uncertainties and have too narrow an age focus in disregarding young people between 25 and 35, who struggle to start living independently (Chung et al. 2012).

Simultaneously, ageing societies affect the electoral composition of democracies, leading to public policies that prioritise older voters' interests, such as, pensions, healthcare and inflation, while addressing concerns affecting the youth less, including unemployment, growth, and social investment (Vlandas 2023). Moreover, young people are treated as incomplete citizens that have to be managed, rather than as social actors and political subjects in their own right (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014). Combined, this leads to 'young people becoming and feeling marginalised' (Chung et al. 2012, 302) and powerless, creating intergenerational inequalities (Hofäcker et al. 2021). Consequently, young people today face a context of increasing precarity, polarisation, and systematic insecurities (Kalleberg 2020) that fundamentally no longer align with the societal understanding of work into which they are being socialised, creating a profound mismatch between inherited expectations and lived realities. As the context has changed, established and inherited meanings no longer suffice for young people to make sense of their everyday lived experiences (Zilberstein et al. 2023), leading to a cultural contestation (Fraser 1990) of the meaning of work.

Intergenerational Dialogue, Work Meanings, and Power Dynamics

In this paper, I argue that intergenerational dialogue is the space where such dissonances are articulated and where new meanings can be negotiated. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) dialogism, I conceptualise intergenerational dialogue not as limited to literal verbal exchanges or interpersonal communication, but as a broader relational field encompassing any encounter in which meanings circulate, clash, or are negotiated across generations. This expanded view is essential to capturing the full spectrum of generational dynamics: it includes not only overt speech but also tacit norms, familial modelling, institutional expectations, policy messages, and structural conditions that *speak* to young people and to which they *respond*. While youth are socialised into dominant cultural expectations of work through conversations with parents, teachers, or employers (Johnson et al. 2020; Levine and Aley 2022; Levine and Hoffner 2006; Mortimer and Lorence 1979), it is these same dialogues that also provide opportunities for young people to articulate counter discourses (Fraser 1990) that correspond to their lived experiences and hold up in the current labour market context. This adaption is necessary as it allows young people to embrace elements that help them create a plausible future while rejecting elements that are considered a mismatch between imagined futures and available possibilities (Zilberstein et al. 2023). Yet, it is crucial to resist the tendency to romanticise intergenerational dialogue as mere cooperation and harmony between the young and the old and to acknowledge its embeddedness in power structures (Bessant et al. 2017; Foucault 1981). Rather, I argue, it should be understood as a contested pro-

cess in which knowledge, values, and visions of the future are transmitted, negotiated, and reconfigured across generations. In this sense, it always involves contestation and a struggle over who gets heard, whose values matter, and which futures are prioritised.

Based on this, I conceptualise intergenerational dialogue as a field of power where continuity and change are negotiated: a process where cultural inheritance, epistemological authority, and political structures converge but can also be questioned and transformed. In this understanding intergenerational dialogue is shaped by power and inequality; it is a space where people struggle over meaning, authority, and legitimacy in shaping collective life. I consider three dimensions of power as relevant within intergenerational dialogue: demographic power, where ageing populations lead to the numerical dominance of older generations in the democratic system (Harper 2014; Vlandas 2023); discursive power, where older generations hold the monopoly of dominant narratives about work, shaping what is considered legitimate or illegitimate (Bessant et al. 2017; Foucault 1981; Lukes 2005); and institutional power, where structural arrangements disproportionately reflect older generations' experiences and expectations (Vlandas 2023). In this sense, I understand intergenerational dialogue simultaneously as a mechanism of reproduction of dominant ideologies, and as a potential site of transformation where young people articulate alternative futures of work. It is not merely about bridging gaps between generations but also about transforming hierarchies of knowledge and legitimacy. This perspective foregrounds the inherent complexity of intergenerational dialogue, which is neither a neutral exchange nor a guaranteed pathway to consensus but rather a contested terrain where meanings of work, visions of the future, and relations of justice are at stake.

This theoretical understanding sets the stage for the empirical analysis that follows, examining how young people in Austria navigate inherited work narratives, contest discursive and institutional asymmetries, and articulate alternative visions of meaningful work that enable more inclusive and just work futures.

Methods

This qualitative study utilises data from a broader mixed-methods project focusing on young adults' meaning construction around work in Austria. For this paper, I conducted 27 problem-centred interviews (PCI) (Witzel and Reiter 2012) with young people aged 18 to 30. These individuals had first entered the workforce in 2023 or 2024, possessing one to two years of work experience at the time of interviewing. Thereby I focus on emerging adults in their early career stages in this paper. The sample comprised 15 male and 12 female interviewees, representing diverse pro-

fessions including knowledge workers, healthcare and social workers, and skilled workers in service jobs and craftsmanship. Recruitment was conducted through personal contacts, university networks, social media advertisement, and snowball sampling. Conducted between December 2024 and September 2025, either online or in person, each interview lasted 45 to 90 minutes. They followed a 'discursive-dialogic method of reconstructing knowledge' (Witzel and Reiter 2012, 4), which facilitated capturing the interviewees' perspectives on their understanding of work and reconstructing the meaning of relevant aspects of the topic.

To uphold ethical standards, I ensured informed consent through written consent forms that were explained before the beginning of the interviews, together with some basic information on my research. I ensured that all personal data is processed and stored according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), I treated all personal information confidentially and worked with pseudonymised data as early as possible. I also want to highlight the awareness of my own position as a researcher and acknowledge the need to reflect consistently on aspects of positionality and to ensure transparency towards my interview partners as well as in the process of presenting my research. I recognise that as a PhD candidate and employee in higher education I occupy a privileged position, and I have considered possible imbalances in power structures when planning and carrying out the interviews as well as the subsequent analysis. Simultaneously, as someone who is also part of the same age group and in my early career stage, I was particularly attuned to the interviewees' reflections on their experiences and their perceptions of reality. Thus, it was important to be aware of how my own experiences might shape my reading of the material, especially when interpreting emotional tone or underlying frustrations.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. As the interviews were conducted in German, I translated the quotes presented in the following sections to facilitate reader accessibility. I analysed the material through thematic analysis (TA) following Braun and Clarke (2006), aiming to uncover latent constructs of meaning and gain a nuanced understanding of the structures of work meaning. By combining the semantic and latent levels of TA, I integrated discourse analytical aspects, which critically interrogated the underlying ideologies shaping the semantic content. This approach provided a more robust and nuanced understanding of how meaning and sense-making of work are constructed and contested. Consequently, I focused on discourse both as a reflection and as a constitutive element of ideology, extending beyond a strict linguistic analysis to consider how individual meaning aligns with or challenges dominant societal understandings of work.

From these interviews, I identified core aspects that profoundly illustrate young people's meaning-making practices concerning work. The subsequent empirical ana-

lysis systematically unpacks these aspects, demonstrating the pivotal role of meaning making practices as sites of cultural co-creation, power contestation, and the formulation of an alternative imaginary for the future of work. Moreover, it highlights the inherently dialogic nature of meaning making by demonstrating how young people enter a conversation with established meanings and previous generations through engaging with inherited narratives, parental expectations, cultural discourses, institutional structures, and exclusionary political rhetoric that marginalises their voices. This comprehensive approach enables a nuanced understanding of how young adults articulate their work values and expectations, uncovering the intricate interplay between individual aspirations and broader societal narratives concerning employment. Consequently, the study's findings make a significant contribution to a deeper understanding of young people's work valuation and provide insights into potential pathways for intergenerational dialogue to bridge divergent perspectives and foster more equitable work futures.

Shaped by the Past: Inherited Work Ideologies and Intergenerational Expectations

In this section, I illustrate how young people engage in a dialogue with inherited cultural narratives transmitted through parental modelling and socialisation. By responding to these narratives, they converse with previous generations. This exploration reveals the influence of inherited work ideologies from preceding generations on how young individuals perceive and engage with their professional lives. This exploration reveals the complex interplay between societal expectations passed down through familial and institutional channels and the emerging values of a new generation navigating a rapidly transforming labour market. This dynamic interplay often leads to a re-evaluation of traditional success metrics, prompting young people to forge new definitions of professional fulfilment that diverge from established norms.

Interviewees consistently articulated their foundational understanding of work as deeply ingrained since childhood, predominantly shaped by parental influence and early life experiences. This involves the internalisation of a strict work ethic, a profound sense of responsibility, and a firm belief in the intrinsic value of diligent effort and sustained perseverance. This inherited conceptualisation functions as a formative framework, leading young people to largely perceive work as a transactional exchange of time and effort for financial remuneration. By internalising these parental perspectives, which often reflect dominant societal work ideologies, they largely adhere to an established path. This naturalised and unquestioned acceptance of work aligns with Weeks' (2011) framework of the work society and further adds to it by suggesting that intergenerational dialogue within families is crucial for its reproduction. One interviewee vividly illustrated this unconscious adherence:

> Um, I'd say, more subconsciously. I think that – at least I haven't had a moment where I think, this is work, but rather it's more like this. I think these are also questions that you don't really confront in everyday life. *You're stuck in these patterns, and you do a lot because you just do it that way. And you don't think about it at all.* (..) So you don't always take the greater, I don't know, distance and try to see it from a broader perspective, but rather (...). *One just does it. That's the given path, sort of.* (Adrian, consultant, 26 years old)

A notable number of interviewees reported guilt or difficulty in not working or reducing work hours, influenced by societal expectations for full-time employment and parental perceptions of work's central role. This early socialisation also instilled a strong work ethic, including a pressure to work even when ill, leading to reluctance to take sick leave, particularly in early career stages where self-presentation is crucial. This finding aligns with Furåker (2020), demonstrating how inherited work meanings generate social pressure, and expands them by highlighting the heightened expectations to conform during the initial stage of one's career.

Many interviewees perceived work as an inherent, unavoidable aspect of modern society, especially within capitalism. They frequently raised the concept of work as an obligation for societal functionality, including funding statutory services, and believed it was fundamental to maintaining the current structure. This leads to the sentiment that *everyone is in the same boat* and a difficulty comprehending those who choose not to work, a view often rooted in family values and personal upbringing. Interviewees perceive work as an inherent necessity for survival and financial stability within the current system, driven by both personal livelihood and a broader societal contribution. Despite frustrations with the *it has always been this way* justification and significant challenges, individuals feel a strong obligation to work to avoid negative consequences (e.g., homelessness or reliance on social welfare). The sense of obligation extends beyond personal financial gain to a broader contribution to society, particularly in maintaining social systems like healthcare and education. While not always termed a duty, its necessity was unequivocally acknowledged. This perspective supports the work by Weeks (2011, 2017), reflecting *how* deeply entrenched work structures have become, even as calls emerge for re-evaluating societal contributions beyond purely economic metrics.

Many interviewees articulated a clear perception of society, particularly within Austria, as fundamentally meritocratic. In this view, relentless hard work and tangible achievement are paramount determinants of an individual's worth and social standing, leading to an unyielding societal expectation to work full-time, secure a *good* job, and cultivate a successful career. Unemployment or less prestigious occupations fre-

quently elicit negative judgment. This intense societal valuation glorifies long hours and personal sacrifices as indicators of commitment and ambition, instilling a potent internal drive to achieve and avoid the stigma of being perceived as *useless* or unproductive. This pervasive societal expectation cultivates a profound internal pressure to constantly strive for excellence and dedicate exceptional effort, frequently at the expense of personal well-being. This deeply ingrained pressure originates in early life through familial upbringing and educational systems, persisting vigorously throughout professional careers. Central to this performance culture is the deeply embedded belief that *the more you put in, the more you get out*. For many, this saying is not merely a pragmatic strategy, but a foundational principle intrinsically tied to their sense of self-worth and the pursuit of accomplishment, extending beyond mere financial remuneration. This theme corresponds to the moralised conceptualising of work highlighted by Weeks (2011) and Frayne (2015), and supports Farrugia's (2019, 2021, 2022) argument of young people being subjected to the dictates of the post-Fordist work ethic. It further supports previous work by Nikolopoulou (2021) about the relevance of discursive constructions of meanings by showing how the seemingly empowering narrative of self-actualisation through work obscures its exploitative consequences, making it hard to question or critique. These sentiments are encapsulated by interviewees who articulate both the intrinsic motivation and the systemic origins of this pressure:

> Stupidly put, *you just want to avoid being a (..) good-for-nothing*. You simply want to achieve something. Yes, and that works even better the more you put in. So, aside from the money, I would also consider that a motivation, to look at yourself in the mirror and feel like you're actually achieving something. (4) (Adrian, consultant, 26 years old)

> Yes, it is. *I feel like it [pressure to perform] comes from all sides*. It starts in kindergarten and elementary school and ends in the job you're currently doing, but it's *also passed on from the family.* (...) (Hannah, social pedagogue, 25 years old)

Overall, the interviewees demonstrated a critical and emotionally ambivalent response to these inherited understandings of work. While acknowledging the immense dedication and sacrifices of their parents and previous generations – recognising how these efforts shaped contemporary society and afforded them greater opportunities and a better life – they simultaneously express profound sadness and consternation. This stems from observing their parents compromise their health and well-being for work, which actively motivates the younger generation to consciously re-evaluate and pursue different life and career priorities. This finding challenges the assumption that young people are mere recipients of inherited meanings and shows,

in line with Wrzesniewski et al. (2003), how young people become active agents of meaning making. Two interviewees illustrate this intergenerational shift.

> And in my opinion, this results from the fact that our generation had a very good time during our childhood and youth because our parents could give us everything and could more or less afford everything for us or did everything for us. But we also saw that they had to work very hard for it and perhaps didn't have much time for us now, and many young people naturally want to do things differently**.** [...] For many people, it's more important to have free time and enjoy life because they say life is too short to work all the time. (Martin, sustainability officer, 29 years old)

> When I think about my parents, for example, they would go to work supremely ill, with the worst cold, with the worst fever, they would go to work, and they would only stay home if they collapsed. *And I'm basically watching them destroy themselves with it*. (Nora, social worker, 23 years old)

Moreover, a profound disillusionment is increasingly evident despite this deeply ingrained belief in hard work. Many interviewees feel betrayed by a system where diligent effort frequently fails to yield proper rewards. This sentiment is exacerbated by the observation that individuals performing the contractual bare minimum supposedly receive similar benefits to those consistently exceeding expectations. Such glaring disparities intensely fuel frustration, especially when juxtaposing personal sacrifices with often disappointing outcomes. This directly challenges the underlying premise of a meritocratic system, fostering a sense of injustice. While older generations firmly uphold the traditional commitment to relentless effort, younger generations are critically re-evaluating the very necessity and efficacy of such intense dedication, leading to mutual misunderstanding and growing friction. While this aligns with observations of young people being disproportionately disadvantaged by structural changes in the labour market (Bessant et al. 2017; Kalleberg 2020; Roosmaa et al. 2021), the resulting feelings of unfairness and the questioning of the meritocratic system challenge the assumptions that a robust work ethic is sufficient to legitimise the work society and transform young people into disciplined workers (Farrugia 2019, 2021; Weeks 2011). This suggests that the argument of the post-Fordist work ethic is insufficient for younger individuals to comprehend their work experiences, and the self-fulfilment it offers seems increasingly out of reach. Thus, it shows how the generational shift is not merely attitudinal but is profoundly shaped by a starkly altered economic landscape and deteriorating societal conditions. Consequently, the pursuit of intrinsic meaning and personal passion in work has become not merely

desirable but essential, particularly given that financial security is no longer assured by merely holding a job. This critical re-evaluation means that positions lacking either substantial compensation or genuine purpose are increasingly rejected by younger individuals, leading to a noticeable and deliberate shift away from traditional or less inherently engaging professions.

This generation-spanning perspective allows for an examination of how early socialisation influences young people's understanding of work, revealing how parental work ideologies are inherited and internalised. These ideologies instil a perceived necessity and inescapability of work in society, fostering a sense of obligation that profoundly impacts individuals and the broader societal fabric. This perspective strengthens the theoretical understanding of cultural and social embeddedness (Rosso et al. 2010) by illustrating how established work ideologies are fundamental to the concept of the work society (Weeks 2011) and its continued existence. However, it also enriches the theoretical discourse by demonstrating that a changing environment, coupled with individuals prepared to challenge prevailing collective understandings, facilitates diverse processes of meaning making and introduces variety into the interpretations of work.

Challenging the Present: Youth Work Values and Acts of Contestation

In this section, I delve into how younger generations are actively forging and articulating alternative understandings of work, centred on values like autonomy, balance, purpose, and sustainability. These perspectives represent a conscious deviation from inherited narratives and dominant societal expectations about labour, expanding intergenerational dialogue so that young people's responses to previous generations become a contestation of established meanings. I further discuss how these meaning-making practices serve as transformative acts of reinterpretation and resistance, thereby becoming profound cultural critiques and subtle yet powerful political acts that fundamentally challenge established norms. Through this articulation young people actively perpetuate intergenerational dialogue in a reciprocal manner.

These narratives underscore a profound and growing conviction that work must be re-envisioned as a component of life, rather than its defining entirety. This re-evaluation fundamentally prioritises a holistic balance, integrating work harmoniously with personal life, leisure, meaningful relationships, and robust overall well-being. While acknowledging work's role in personal development and societal contribution, interviewees firmly asserted that it should never eclipse the other dimensions of a fulfilling existence. Thus, youth meaning making around work can be understood as a counter public practice (Fraser 1990). This sentiment is aptly captured by one

interview quote: 'So, I really see it exactly like this: that work, work can be important, but not so important that you forget and lose everything around it and do nothing but work, 24/7.' (Martin, sustainability officer, 29 years old).

At the core of this transformation is the concept of work-life balance, manifesting in a widespread desire for increased leisure time and ample opportunities for diverse personal pursuits. These pursuits encompass a broad spectrum, from engaging in hobbies and nurturing relationships with family and friends to simply reclaiming moments of essential relaxation. Crucially, for many, work is explicitly reframed as a pragmatic means to an end, a vehicle for financial stability that *enables* a rich life beyond professional confines, highly contrasting with its previous status as the sole existential focus. Aligning with Roosmaa et al.'s (2021) findings, young people value income up to a certain threshold; beyond this, other factors increasingly dictate their engagement and satisfaction. Consequently, while work remains valued, its significance is not paramount. It is deliberately situated within a broader framework of personal well-being and life priorities, marking a profound shift from solely intrinsic aspects to a comprehensive appreciation for a life rich in meaning and fulfilment outside of work. This paradigm shift places a profound emphasis on self-realisation, consciously extending its scope far beyond narrow professional achievements to encompass comprehensive personal growth, meaningful relationships, and an overarching sense of happiness. This perspective diverges from the prevalent argument that young people primarily pursue self-actualisation through their careers, often using it to navigate the precarious nature of employment (Farrugia 2019, 2022; Nikolopoulou 2021). By extending self-realisation, young people reclaim authority in defining their self-worth and directing their time and energy. In doing so, they challenge the dominance of work in society, resist its heteronomous structures, and affirm their autonomy.

This critical stance is juxtaposed with the interviewees' self-identification as members of a generation that unequivocally prioritises a high quality of life, personal fulfilment, and enriching experiences above the accumulation of material wealth. As these interviewees explained:

> Then I think to myself, what good is the money if I'm just at work? [...] We [young people] do as much as we think is right for us. If we're sick, then we're sick, and we don't want to overwork ourselves, especially Gen Z. And we don't put up with much anymore [from employers/superiors], so we're talking about it. We're not lazy. Just because the older generation sees it that way, it has nothing to do with us, because we do a lot more. (Melisa, retail saleswoman, 19 years old)

> I think it's more the case that the younger generation simply looks at themselves and sees what their needs are and what their body can manage. [...] And yes, I think it's good when the younger generation sets an example and says, "*This is my limit, I'll do this much and no more, and that's for sure.*" [...] Especially with older people, they don't really have a sense of what a lot is because they've always done it this way and it's always been this way. I think that's the wrong way of thinking. *Yes, I'm proud to be part of this young generation that says, "My life is important and my free time is important.*"‘ (Valentina, graduate nurse, 26 years old)

The overarching sentiment unequivocally affirms that while work can be important and fulfilling, it must never compromise one's overall well-being and personal freedom. The younger generation is actively pioneering this paradigm shift, resolutely establishing personal boundaries, and insisting upon a more balanced approach to work: 'I do think that young people, the younger generation, take better care of themselves' (Charlotte, social worker, 24 years old). They categorically reject the notion that working long hours inherently equates to productivity or success, asserting instead that less work, coupled with higher motivation and efficiency, is demonstrably superior. Within this narrative, interviewees demand a more human-centred approach to work, one that fundamentally considers individual circumstances and recognises individuals as far more than mere labour units. They underscore the critical importance of flexibility and the imperative to manage work in a way that genuinely suits their needs. They argue against any dehumanising perception of people, stressing the importance of acknowledging their inherent humanity and individuality, seeing workers as complete individuals with their own needs. One interviewee emphasised

> *[t]hat you see people as people again*, and not just as machines or numbers that can be replaced by machines. That you *simply emphasise or bring out the personal level a little bit*, and then people are more motivated again and feel accepted. (Sophie, junior marketing manager, 25 years old)

Overall, the interviewees advocate for a profound shift in perspective that *unconditionally* recognises the inherent value and dignity of each individual, *entirely irrespective of their work contributions*. This shows a rejection of the moralised understanding of work (Frayne 2015; Furåker 2020; Weeks 2011) and a reinterpretation of it that allows for a truly sustainable human-centred work environment.

These narratives suggest that centring autonomy, balance, purpose, and sustainability is an increasingly normalised understanding among young people, contesting the

inherited meanings discussed in the previous section. However, this reinterpretation of work does not happen without struggles. Society's high valuation of work often pressures individuals, making external fulfilment complex and sometimes framing alternative priorities as laziness. This tension creates inner turmoil, as individuals grapple with societal expectations versus a desire for a bounded view of work. These findings are consistent with the tension of balancing contradictory ideas described by Zilberstein et al. (2023), illustrating how young people grapple with societal and familial expectations in a changing environment, trying to cope with it through meaning making and adapted narratives of work. As young people increasingly embrace these different narratives and experience peer reassurance, they foster a cultural shift towards a more holistic life. This willingness to de-prioritise work, driven by self-awareness, challenges established norms and has the potential to redefine societal success and the nature of work. Thereby, these narratives represent contestations of the work society (Weeks 2011), particularly through their refusal to prioritise work above everything else and their expectation of being seen as a human being rather than merely a means of production. Through these acts of resisting and reinterpreting inherited meanings, young people not only imagine different futures but actively try to shape the present and bring those imaginaries alive. This reflects a proactive dialogue with the changing nature of work and a desire to shape it in ways that are more meaningful and sustainable for individuals and society alike.

Dialogue Under Constraint: Structural Asymmetries and Political Marginalisation

In this section, I analyse the cultural negotiation of work meanings through the lens of intergenerational dialogue as a field of power. Entrenched institutional and political structures uphold profound asymmetries in power and recognition between generations, systematically impeding genuine reciprocal dialogue and actively inhibiting young people's efforts to engage meaningfully in shaping discourses on work. Thus, while intergenerational dialogue is often framed as an ethical or cultural good, these segments show the limits of its potential and how it can become distorted by entrenched structural asymmetries.

Many interviewees expressed frustration with the disconnect between their lived experiences and dominant political discourses. Several described the feeling of being excluded from meaningful participation in shaping the world of work, even as they were expected to conform to inherited norms and absorb the consequences of decisions made by older generations. This led to disappointment with political inaction and a loss of trust in institutions. This echoes previous scholarly concerns (Bessant et al. 2017; Chung et al. 2012; Hofäcker et al. 2021) that the demographic shifts inherent in ageing societies exacerbate intergenerational inequality, fostering a profound

sense of marginalisation, political disempowerment, and subsequent disillusionment among younger individuals. Moreover, young people's perspective is also heavily influenced by the view of the future as unpredictable and unstable, with interviewees primarily citing political developments, climate change, and global conflicts as sources of anxiety. This pervasive uncertainty, further exacerbated by events like the COVID-19 pandemic, complicates long-term planning, manifesting a focus on the *here and now* and a sense of helplessness regarding global issues. Specific concerns include political instability, the rise of right-wing extremism, and ineffective governance. Two interviewees explained this sentiment.

> *I think too little is happening at the political level*. [...] And the main problem, as always, is that people don't listen properly. [...] So I think there's a lot of *this lack of dialogue between the generations on this topic*, and so many things are simply portrayed as worse than they perhaps actually are. (Patrick, disability assistant, 23 years old)

> I can even remember thinking a few years ago: Why am I working so much now to build a future for myself later on that I don't know what it will look like and whether it will actually be as I've been told it will be? (Hannah, social pedagogue, 25 years old)

A recurring theme highlights the impact of generational differences, where younger generations' innovative ideas often encounter resistance from older generations, who cling to traditional views and power structures. Furthermore, in line with Hofäcker et al. (2021), significant concern revolves around the future of the pension system, with its perceived instability compelling younger individuals to question future support and make private provisions. Additionally, anxieties exist about increasing societal aggression, intolerance, and the potential undermining of democratic institutions. Overall, these concerns support the critique voiced by Chung et al. (2012) about political strategies inadequately addressing youth issues but also expose the systematic demographic and institutional power imbalances that distort intergenerational dialogue. In ageing societies, this imbalance consistently leads to the marginalisation of youth concerns in policymaking, privileging the interests of older voters due to their majority (Vlandas 2023) and thereby exacerbating feelings of disenfranchisement among younger generations.

Moreover, interviewees frequently encounter the stereotype of their generation as being lazy and unwilling to work. This perception, often voiced by older generations including parents and colleagues, is widely circulated in traditional and social media and highlights discursive power asymmetries (Bessant et al. 2017; Foucault 1981; Lukes 2005) inherent in intergenerational dialogue. The media narrative reinforces negative biases through influencing the perceptions of older colleagues and the pub-

lic. Simultaneously, the constant exposure to these stereotypes creates additional societal pressure on young people, leading to feelings of being misunderstood and unfairly judged. Some view the stereotype as an easy way to dismiss and denigrate young people without truly understanding their perspectives or circumstances. Hence, they are disheartened by the lack of understanding and empathy from some members of the older generations. In this environment, young people often feel their perspectives on work, and the future more broadly, are disregarded or actively silenced.

Yet, young people challenge such stereotypes and emphasise that a diverging approach to work does not equate to laziness. In line with Zilberstein et al. (2023), they explain the contestation of established work meanings as a necessary adaption to the current context of increased pressure and insecurity. The perceived lack of understanding from older generations regarding these contemporary realities exacerbates intergenerational tensions and points to a deeper tension underlying intergenerational dialogue: while often promoted as a democratic ideal, it frequently operates within a framework that privileges established voices and institutional logics. Thus, the findings confirm that intergenerational dialogue is far from neutral communication but inherently political (Gordon 2007; Lukes 2005), reflecting underlying asymmetries in authority, recognition, and access to social legitimacy. Consequently, when dialogue fails to account for power dynamics, it risks reproducing, rather than transforming, generational hierarchies. In this context, intergenerational dialogue becomes less a means of co-creating the future and more a site of negotiation shaped by unequal stakes and authority. Therefore, it is crucial to examine critically who gets to speak, who is heard, and whose definitions of meaningful work are legitimised.

Conclusion: Towards Just and Inclusive Futures

Through an analysis of young people's meaning-making processes around work, this paper demonstrates that intergenerational dialogue functions as both a space for cultural co-creation and a site of power contestation. Young people's redefinitions of meaningful work often centre values such as balance, purpose, sustainability, and collective well-being, challenging prevailing ideologies that equate work solely with sacrifice, productivity, or status. However, this study has also shown that young people's effort to challenge established meanings are often met with resistance. They frequently encounter persistent stereotypes and a lack of understanding from older generations, which is reinforced by the *demographic, discursive, and institutional power asymmetries* inherent in intergenerational dialogue in an age-stratified society. Thus, it is necessary for intergenerational dialogues to shift from a model of guidance or inheritance to one where young people are not only listened to but em-

powered to shape work futures on their own terms. Only then can we move toward futures of work that are not just inclusive in form, but truly just in substance – actively shaped by the visions young people are already developing today.

This research contributes to the field in two important ways. First, it significantly enhances the understanding of how young people value work, actively challenging simplistic assumptions about their commitment and critically addressing persistent questions of cultural contestation around the meaning of work that dominate public discourse. Second, the analysis substantially demonstrates that truly equitable intergenerational dialogue must transcend mere inclusion, demanding a fundamental redistribution of power, a redefinition of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, and the proactive creation of institutional spaces that genuinely value and integrate youth perspectives on work. Such dialogue, therefore, must not merely transmit established values but actively function as a dynamic space for critical reflection, mutual learning, and ongoing revision. Crucially, this necessitates the deliberate creation and strengthening of mechanisms that effectively amplify diverse youth voices in institutional decision making, alongside a nuanced consideration of youth through an intersectional lens rather than as a homogenous category. Ultimately, this paper underscores the critical imperative to recognise, culturally and politically, that young people are co-authors of the future of work and not merely recipients of the intergenerational transmission of meanings. Thus, listening and empowering youth, especially in times of crisis and transformation, is a democratic and ethical imperative.

This paper has conceptualised intergenerational dialogue as a cultural, epistemological, and political process shaping how young people in Austria understand work. However, its focus on one regional context, while illustrative of broader trends in the Global North, limits the transferability of insights to other socio-economic and cultural settings. Future research could adopt a comparative lens to explore how intergenerational meanings of work vary globally. Moreover, this study privileges young people's perspectives and future research could benefit from participatory or dialogical approaches that capture interactions and negotiations across age groups more directly. Finally, while the discussion highlights discursive power, future work might examine the material and institutional structures that sustain or challenge intergenerational inequalities in labour and welfare systems. Addressing these dimensions would help deepen the understanding of dialogue as both a site of conflict and a potential foundation for solidarity and futures of shared well-being.

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From Tasawwuf to Civic Literacy: Human Security Framework for Intergenerational Dialogue and Community Security

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Abstract: This paper explores how Muslim movements in the United Kingdom draw upon *tasawwuf* (the inner spiritual and ethical discipline of Islam) to strengthen community security through intergenerational dialogue. Rather than relying on the term 'Sufism', the paper reclaims the term *tasawwuf* as understood within Islam itself, where it denotes a traditional Islamic discipline of moral and spiritual formation embedded within Qur'anic ethics and legal reasoning. The ethical principle of intergenerational dialogue is grounded in Qur'anic narratives, including those of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) (pbuh) and Prophet Ismail (Ishmael) (pbuh)[2], and Prophet Musa (Moses) (pbuh) with al-Khidr, which illustrate humility, patience, and mutual trust as foundations of moral learning.

The study focuses on two contemporary movements, the Hizmet Movement and Minhaj-ul-Qur'an International (MQI), which apply principles of *tasawwuf* through practices such as *sohbet* (conversation) and *halaqa* (learning circles) to cultivate civic literacy, empathy, and responsibility. These gatherings transmit ethical and intellectual values across generations; therefore, they link spiritual development to social harmony.

Using a human security theoretical framework (UNDP 1994; UNTFHS 2016), the paper argues that sustainable community security for Muslims in Western contexts depends on moral, intellectual, and affective development rather than surveillance-based approaches. It concludes that *tasawwuf* functions not as mysticism detached from Islam but as a traditional Islamic moral discipline that nurtures dignity, trust, and social cohesion, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Pact for the Future.

Keywords: Tasawwuf, Human Security, Intergenerational Dialogue, Civic Literacy, Community Security, Hizmet Movement and Minhaj-ul-Qur'an International

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[2] The acronym pbuh (peace be upon him) is used by Muslims as a mark of respect after mentioning the names of all prophets.

Introduction

Securitisation and the Question of Muslim Belonging

Over the last two decades, the rise of far-right hatred and the fragmentation of social cohesion have intensified the challenges faced by Muslim communities across the globe. Islamophobia and racism continue to increase, while policies related to security and integration are often criticised for deepening marginalisation instead of promoting inclusion. Within this environment, many young Muslims, like other young people from diverse backgrounds, face questions of identity, belonging, and moral responsibility as they seek to reconcile their religious faith with their civic participation in Western societies (Meer and Modood 2009; Cesari 2012; Kundnani 2014; Abbas 2021).

This paper explores how young Muslims navigate these tensions, overcome the dilemmas of belonging, and embrace both their Muslim identity and their role as responsible citizens in the West. It argues that intergenerational dialogue, civic literacy, and *tasawwuf*, understood as the inner spiritual dimension of Islam and grounded in Qur'anic ethical narratives, together provide an ethical and educational framework, situated within a human security framework, that strengthens resilience to extremism. While public debates about radicalisation and integration often rely on surveillance or policy-based approaches, this study suggests that lasting and effective resilience is rooted in the moral, intellectual, and emotional formation that Muslim communities transmit across generations (UNDP 1994; Kaldor 2007).

The paper focuses on two transnational Muslim diaspora networks, the Hizmet Movement and Minhaj-ul-Quran International (MQI). Both movements draw on classical Islamic scholarship and *tasawwuf* and have adapted these traditions to the realities of modern society through education, dialogue, and community service. The Hizmet Movement, inspired by Fethullah Gülen, places emphasis on *hizmet* (service) and *sohbet* as pathways to moral development and civic responsibility (Çelik et al. 2015; Weller 2022). MQI, founded by Shaykh-ul-Islam[3] Dr Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, combines spiritual education and legal literacy through *halaqa* and public outreach to counter extremism (Mursaleen 2022). Although their structures and emphases differ, both share a commitment to social harmony, ethical citizenship, and the prevention of ideological polarisation.

The paper analyses the examples of the Hizmet Movement and MQI to illustrate that *tasawwuf* functions as a moral tradition, rather than an isolated mystical prac-

[3] The title Shaykh-ul-Islam means 'Scholar of Islam' and denotes a leading authority in Islamic scholarship and jurisprudence.

tice, and actively contributes to human security, civic virtue, and community cohesion within the contemporary world. Its approach to securitisation shifts the analytical focus from state-centred threat management to questions of dignity, belonging, and everyday security.

Tasawwuf rather than Sufism: a traditional Islamic discipline of spiritual and ethical formation

Tasawwuf is understood here not as abstract mysticism but as a traditional Islamic discipline of spiritual and ethical formation, encompassing moral refinement, spiritual practice, and modes of transmission oriented toward *ihsan* (spiritual excellence). For this reason, this paper uses the term *tasawwuf* rather than 'Sufism'. The latter entered Western academic discourse in the nineteenth century through Orientalist frameworks that often detached Islamic spirituality from its legal and ethical foundation (Ejaz and Hashmi 2024). However, this is not representative of Orientalist scholarship as a whole, as Schimmel argues that Sufism developed from within Islamic belief and practice and cannot be understood apart from them, including its grounding in the prophetic tradition (Schimmel 1975). This paper therefore adopts the term *tasawwuf*, understood as the inner spiritual dimension of Islam as articulated within Muslim traditions (Abu Hanieh 2011).

Tasawwuf is not a branch of Islam, unlike Sunni and Shi'a traditions, but a path of practice, emphasising inward transformation alongside outward religious observance. It concerns spiritual purification and closeness to God through disciplined practice, ethical refinement, and inward devotion, guided by the Qur'an and the Sunnah (prophetic practice). To conceptualise how *tasawwuf* is integral to Islam: *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) provides structure, *aqidah* (doctrinal belief) grounds faith, and *tasawwuf* cultivates the inner life through intention, moral refinement, and *ihsan* (Busari et al. 2016; Sattar 2024). In this respect, tasawwuf sustains Islam's ethical and relational integrity (Hanifiyah 2021; Isā 2009).

These practices illustrate how *tasawwuf* is operationalised as a disciplined mode of ethical and spiritual formation rather than a purely individual experience. Some seekers also join a *tariqah* (spiritual order), where *murids* (disciples) cultivate spiritual discipline under the guidance of a *shaykh* (spiritual teacher). Common practices include *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *muraqabah* (silent meditation), *sohbah* (spiritual companionship), giving *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) and *khidmah* (selfless service). *Hizmet* is a Turkish word derived from the Arabic *khidmah* (service), and followers of the Hizmet Movement emphasise this principle as central to their ethical and civic objectives.

This integrative understanding has long been articulated within classical Islamic thought. Imam Malik ibn Anas, one of the four founders of Sunni jurisprudence (the Maliki school), emphasised that *tasawwuf* without knowledge of *fiqh* risks deviation from Islam, while *fiqh* without *tasawwuf* risks moral corruption, underscoring the need for outward legal practice and inward spiritual discipline (Uthmani 2004).

As previously stated, the Hizmet Movement prioritises service and emphasises *tasawwuf* through ethical instruction and *sohbet*-based reflection, cultivating inward discipline. MQI, by contrast, emphasises *tasawwuf* through structured spiritual authority, clear doctrine, and externally disciplined moral formation, integrating inner purification within formal religious learning, legal reasoning, and guided spiritual practice.

Methodology and Positionality

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive case-study methodology to examine MQI and the Hizmet Movement as transnational Muslim organisations engaging in education, dialogue, and civic life. The analysis draws on organisational publications, public statements, educational materials, and secondary academic literature, rather than primary ethnographic fieldwork.

The author acknowledges the methodological issue commonly described as the insider-outsider problem in the study of religion. The author has a longstanding personal connection to MQI and is currently undertaking a diploma in Islamic and Arabic studies at the Minhaj Institute, an educational institution affiliated with MQI. This proximity offers familiarity with theological language, pedagogical structures, and ethical frameworks shaping the movement. At the same time, the analysis is conducted with reflexive awareness of how positionality may inform interpretation, with attention to maintaining analytical distance and evaluation.

By contrast, engagement with the Hizmet Movement takes place from an observational position, drawing on publicly available materials and ongoing observation of Dialogue Society activities. Without claiming neutrality, the paper treats positional awareness as a methodological resource, while remaining mindful of its limitations and the importance of transparency in analysis (Hufford 1999).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Human Security Paradigm: From State to People

Human security was first introduced in 1994 through the *Human Development Report* published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (Kaldor

2007; Bosold 2010). There are seven components of human security: (1) economic security, (2) food security, (3) health security, (4) environmental security, (5) personal security, (6) community security, and (7) political security. This paper focuses on community security as it reflects the interconnectedness between individual well-being and collective social harmony within diverse societies. Human security is a complex and multidimensional concept that has been examined and defined in diverse ways by scholars. Although there is no single universally accepted definition, human security is generally understood through three key dimensions: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from indignity. Mary Kaldor (2007) distinguishes human security from state-centred security, explaining that while the latter focuses on national threats, human security prioritises the protection and development of individuals and communities. She further critiques conventional security discourse for creating an artificial separation between security and development, a division that, she argues, may itself produce insecurity.

David Bosold (2010) argues that the field of human security has reached its intellectual limits, while Thomas Owen (2004) suggests that it should serve as a threshold concept defined by selective criteria. Despite these critiques, human security has gained attention in academic discourse and has been expanded through perspectives such as feminist theory and critical race theory (Estrada-Tanck 2019; Maass 2023). This is particularly relevant to Islamophobia, as Muslims of colour with visible markers of faith often experience overlapping forms of marginalisation. Human security provides a valuable framework for examining how these intersecting inequalities affect individuals and communities. Alternative approaches such as 'shared security' extend human security beyond individual security by emphasising the collective responsibility for addressing the roots of violence and insecurity (WCRP 2006).

The relevance of human security lies in its focus on dignity and everyday well-being rather than state survival. It provides a framework for understanding how Muslims in the United Kingdom experience insecurity not only through physical threats but also social exclusion, discrimination, and unequal access to rights and opportunities.

From Silsila to Civic Literacy: A Theoretical Framework of Intergenerational Dialogue

Within the US, CSU Monterey Bay (CSUMB) integrates civic literacy as a core aspect of its educational mission. CSUMB uses civic literacy to cultivate students' understanding of social power, privilege, and inequality. Thus, it fosters a civic ethos, promoting civic inquiry within academic programmes and encouraging civic action as a lifelong practice. The university equips students to become multicultural community builders who create equitable and inclusive communities, with the intention

of imbedding ethical awareness in graduates who can then engage critically and responsibly in the mainstream society. (Pollack 2015).

Within civic literacy, religious literacy plays a vital role. Walker et al. (2021) emphasise that it is not merely about knowing facts about religions, but a core civic competency that helps citizens understand how religion and spirituality shape everyday life. They further argue that this requires legal literacy involving awareness of civil, constitutional, and human rights, and media literacy, defined as the ability to identify accurate sources about religion. Together, these literacies foster an inclusive society. As Walker et al. (2021) note, 'acts of religious-based bullying, discrimination, and violence often occur when the general public is illiterate about both religion and the law.' They further observe that the rise of anti-Muslim hatred, antisemitism, and far-right misinformation since the pandemic suggests growing desensitisation to intolerance and violence, which is increasingly becoming normalised in society. Patrick Keegan (2021) argues that civic education must treat emotion as central to democratic life, and he therefore develops Critical Affective Literacy (CAL) for the civics classroom. CAL comprises four principles: (1) examining why we feel what we feel; (2) striving for affective equivalence (feeling with, not merely about, others); (3) interrogating how objects of emotion such as fear or pride are produced and propagated in everyday politics; and (4) using the performative power of emotions to pursue social justice. Citing research after the 2016 US election showing that teachers frequently heard derogatory language aimed at students of colour, Muslims, and immigrants, Keegan contends that schools are also communities where emotions circulate and where 'affective citizens' are formed. He advocates CAL as a way to equip students and teachers with informed media literacy and an understanding of the language that enables xenophobia and Islamophobia, thereby fostering more just and inclusive civic participation in wider society.

From this, we can recognise a model of teacher-student relationships grounded in civic literacy and intergenerational dialogue. This relational model has long existed within Muslim communities, particularly within the *tariqah* tradition, where the relationship between the *shaykh* and the *murid* embodies a dynamic of ethical guidance, emotional awareness, and shared civic responsibility expressed through acts of service. Both frameworks highlight the importance of learning that extends beyond the transfer of knowledge, nurturing empathy, reflection, and moral development within a community of practice, which in turn is essential for sustaining community cohesion and security.

Within the traditional *tariqah* the *silsila* refers to the unbroken spiritual chain linking each *murid* to their *shaykh* and ultimately to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). It serves as a sacred thread of intergenerational dialogue, ensuring the authenticity of

spiritual transmission while enabling the passage of both outward knowledge and inward transformation grounded in *tasawwuf*.

In the next section, it is shown how the Qur'anic narrative presents intergenerational dialogue through both familial and pedagogical relationships, notably between Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) and Prophet Ismail (pbuh), and between Prophet Musa (pbuh) and a wise man in green known as al-Khidr. These encounters foreground humility, patience, and moral virtues that continue to be transmitted in *tasawwuf* through the encounter of Mawlana Rumi[4] and Shams al-Tabrizi and sustained through *tariqah* practices. These narratives continue to shape frameworks of civic literacy, moral formation, and ethical pedagogy.

Historical and Religious Foundations

Qur'anic Paradigms of Dialogue: Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) and Prophet Ismail (pbuh), and Prophet Musa (pbuh) with Khidr

Intergenerational dialogue can be traced back to the pre-Islamic era and is attested in the Qur'an. A prominent example is the exchange between Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) and his son Prophet Ismail (pbuh), which reflects the transmission of faith and obedience across generations. Another significant instance is the non-familial intergenerational dialogue between Prophet Musa (pbuh) and al-Khidr. Although scholarly interpretations differ regarding al-Khidr's status, whether he was a prophet or a righteous servant endowed with *hikmah* (wisdom that is not easily attained).

'When he (Isma'il) reached the age to work alongside him, he (Ibrahim) said (to him): "My dear son! I have seen in a dream that I am sacrificing you. So think, what is your opinion?" He (Isma'il) replied: "My dear father! Do whatever you are commanded. If Allah pleases, you will find me among the patient."' (*Manifest Qur'an* 37:102, trans. Qadri). The dialogue between Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) and Prophet Ismail (pbuh), as recorded in the Qur'an, illustrates a profound exchange in which a father values his son's opinion concerning a divine command. Ordinarily, upon receiving a commandment from God, one would obey without question; however, Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) chose to consult his son, demonstrating a model of mutual respect and spiritual maturity. This episode exemplifies an ideal form of communica-

[4] *Mawlana* is an honorific Arabic title meaning 'our master', used as a mark of respect for established scholars and spiritual teachers in the Islamic tradition. It is commonly used in reference to Mawlana Rumi, who for Muslims was not merely a poet but also an Islamic scholar and jurist. He taught that *tasawwuf* is to surrender the ego in love so that the heart realises the presence of God, essentially prioritising the inner self's connection with the Divine over worldly desire, a core theme in the *Masnavi* and *Divan-e Shams*.

tion between parent and child, characterised by reciprocity, trust, and shared submission to divine will.

The Qur'an further extends intergenerational dialogue beyond familial relationships in the account of Prophet Musa (pbuh) and al-Khidr, as recorded in chapter 18 *al-Kahf* (The Cave). He was among the most eminent prophets and was honoured with the title *Kalim Ullah* (the one with whom God spoke directly). Despite this status, he once claimed to be the most knowledgeable, and God corrected him by informing him of a servant endowed with greater knowledge. In pursuit of this knowledge, he journeys to meet al-Khidr, who is endowed with *hikmah*, and is warned that he will struggle to remain patient and must refrain from questioning (*Manifest Qur'an* 18:60–70, trans. Qadri).

During their journey, al-Khidr performs three actions that appear unjust: damaging the boat of poor fishermen, killing a young boy, and repairing a wall in a hostile town. Although Khidr warned Prophet Musa (pbuh) each time not to question his actions, Prophet Musa (pbuh) nevertheless disagreed, unable to understand the reasoning behind them. Khidr eventually reveals the divine wisdom underlying each deed. Although each act appears harmful from an external perspective, each serves a hidden good ordained by God. The damaged boat is spared from seizure by a tyrannical king, the boy's death prevents future suffering for his parents, and the repaired wall safeguards the inheritance of orphans until they reach maturity (*Manifest Qur'an* 18:71–82, trans. Qadri). This narrative underlines the limitations of human understanding, even that of a prophet, and demonstrates that divine wisdom is granted solely by God, irrespective of an individual's spiritual status or proximity to Him.

These narratives form the moral framework later formalised in the *silsila* of *tasawwuf* and remain applicable to contemporary society. The Qur'anic narrative of the respectful exchange between Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) and Prophet Ismail (pbuh) highlights mutual respect and consultation despite the difference in status between parent and child. Similarly, Prophet Musa's (pbuh) encounter with Khidr teaches essential virtues such as patience, humility, and moral restraint. These values remain both to *tasawwuf* and to modern civic life, underpinning listening, empathy, and moral accountability.

These stories, recorded in the Qur'an revealed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and transmitted through his *sahabah* (companions) to the *ummah* (Muslim community), these narratives constitute a continuous form of intergenerational dialogue that preserves the divine guidance while nurturing ethical and spiritual growth. The core concept of dialogue found within the Qur'an, deeply rooted in divine revelation, was reaffirmed in *tasawwuf* through the *silsila*, which continues

this sacred exchange across generations and sustains the ethical foundation for civic literacy and community harmony in the modern world.

Exemplars of the Classical Tradition of Tasawwuf: Rumi and Shams

Mawlana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi Rumi is a central figure in the classical tradition of *tasawwuf*. Although widely recognised as a poet, he was also an Islamic jurist and theologian whose writings reflect profound spiritual formation. His transformation was shaped by his encounter with the dervish Shams al-Tabrizi, whose companionship inspired both his spiritual insight and poetic expression (Fath 2021; Çakmaklıoğlu 2010; Iqbal 2014).

When Mawlana Rumi and Shams met in Konya in 1244, they spent many hours in deep spiritual conversation and remembrance of God. Shams guided Mawlana Rumi from outward scholarship to inward realisation, often using paradox and intellectual provocation as pedagogical tools. Although this initially unsettled Mawlana Rumi, he came to distinguish as *'ilm* (outer knowledge) from *ma'rifa* (inner knowledge) and experienced *kashf* (unveiling), a direct perception of divine truth that is normally concealed from ordinary understanding. This enlightenment revealed to him that every new insight lifts another veil, showing that the journey towards knowing God, *al-Hayy* (the Ever-Living) is infinite and ever-unfolding (Çakmaklıoğlu 2010). Their companionship lasted about sixteen months, after which Shams departed from Konya, leaving Mawlana Rumi in profound spiritual longing (Fath 2010).

Numerous sources describe their relationship as analogous to that of Prophet Musa (pbuh) and al-Khidr, a parallel Rumi acknowledged by inscribing 'the *maqam* (station) of al-Khidr's beloved' on Shams' cell (Küçük 2010). Their relationship illustrates the internal dynamic of the *silsila* as an intergenerational transmission, grounded in dialogue, humility, and self-transformation rather than formal hierarchy. In contemporary terms, this dialogical model parallels civic literacy by cultivating empathy, recognition of difference, and moral responsibility, thereby strengthening community security.

Reviving the Silsila: Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani and the Modern Expression of Tasawwuf

Building upon the classical model of spiritual companionship exemplified by Rumi and Shams, this section examines how Mawlana Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani revitalised the *silsila* in a modern context, extending *tasawwuf* into contemporary spiritual and social life.

As the *silsila* serves as a sacred form of intergenerational dialogue, this principle is distinctly embodied in many shaykhs, most prominently in the spiritual presence and teachings of Shaykh Nazim (1922–2014), the Cypriot shaykh of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order. He was the fortieth shaykh within the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Golden Chain, a lineage tracing back to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) (Abu Hanieh 2011). Under his leadership, the order expanded significantly beyond the Muslim world, particularly into Europe and North America. He was known for his ability to communicate mystical teachings to Western audiences while preserving their spiritual depth. In a 1996 interview, he stated that his teaching emphasises 'Respect. There must be respect. Without respecting each other, it is impossible to do anything. Allah Almighty ordered His servants to have respect among themselves. Respect brings good understanding. Good understanding brings love. Love brings everything.' His approach integrated *dhikr*, and *adab* (spiritual courtesy) with disciplined mentorship, illustrating how spiritual authority in *tasawwuf* is transmitted through lived example.

Shaykh Nazim's approach to intergenerational and intercultural dialogue reflected the continuity of the tradition of *tasawwuf*, transcending ethnicity and nationality boundaries while emphasising the timeless transmission of spiritual knowledge from teacher to disciple. Despite his passing, his gentle and paternal guidance on nurturing one's relationship with God while navigating everyday life continues to resonate, particularly among Muslims and Western converts. In a 1996 interview, he emphasised the intellectual and spiritual seriousness of his Western disciples, asserting that the order's appeal among educated Europeans and Americans reflected the universality of the Naqshbandi message. He complemented his spiritual teachings with an emphasis on social cohesion and community security, embodying compassion, humility, and service both personally and institutionally.

Through recorded *sohbahs* circulated via digital media, he transformed the Naqshbandi-Haqqani path into a space of spiritual dialogue between East and West, maintaining the central relationship between *shaykh* and *murid*. He encouraged his *murids* to uphold both their Muslim and Western identities, framing spiritual discipline as compatible with civic belonging and social responsibility. This integration fostered a form of spiritual resilience suited to multicultural societies. As he summarised in his 1996 interview, 'To be good servants for Allah, and to be good to each other.'

Case Study I: The Hizmet Movement

Origins and Development of the Gülen Movement

Fethullah Gülen (1938–2024) drew inspiration from the Naqshbandi *tariqah* and its principle of non-violence, as conveyed through Said-i Nursi (1876–1960) (Alianak 2012; Albab and Nurwahidin 2023). At a young age, Gülen was taught by the Qadiri teacher Shaykh Muhammad Lutfi, whose teachings, according to Gülen, awakened his spiritual consciousness and perception, shaping his intuition (Hermansen 2015). Although he did not become a *murid* of a *tariqah*, in the 1960s he envisioned educating students to integrate scientific and religious concepts, adhere to the Sunnah (traditions and practices) of the Prophets, and incorporate Sufi principles into their daily lives, believing this was essential for a 'Golden Generation' rather than a 'Lost Generation' (Topal 2012). After Nursi's death in 1960, his movement divided into several branches, but a new influential leader, Fethullah Gülen, emerged. Gülen developed a new form of religious organisation that moved beyond traditional *tariqah* structures, shifting the focus from textual study to practical action and emphasising *hizmet* as the movement's core value (Finley 2015). Therefore, the Hizmet Movement, or Gülen Movement, a transnational religious and social movement inspired by Gülen and established by his followers, began in Turkey in the 1960s and established educational and communal institutions both in Turkey and throughout the world (Abu-Nimer and Seidel 2018).

Sohbet Circles and Educational Networks

Sohbet is a Turkish word meaning 'conversation' and is derived from the Arabic word *sohbah*, which means 'companionship' (Neval 2024). Both the Qur'an and Hadith emphasise the importance of *sohbah*, as illustrated in the encounter between al-Khidr and Prophet Musa (pbuh) (Manifest Qur'an 18:66–7, trans. Qadri). Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir 'Isā (2009) said, 'Reading and study alone cannot purify the soul; one needs the guidance and company of spiritually mature people whose example reflects the Prophet's light and helps others grow in faith and moral character.'

Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* placed emphasis on interpreting the Qur'an through reason and science, advocating for the integration of faith and modern knowledge. Nursi's ideas heavily influenced Gülen and the Hizmet Movement, where *sohbets* played crucial roles in spiritual teaching, community building, and the promotion of Nursi's faith-oriented but rational approach to Islam (Albab and Nurwahidin 2023; Neval 2024). Within the Hizmet Movement, informal religious study groups known as *sohbetler* (plural of 'conversation') are organised for Turkish Muslim children and young adults. While the movement's formal education curriculum does not include Islamic

lessons, these *sohbetler* are explicitly religious, focusing on the writings of Nursi and Gülen (Cıngıllıoğlu 2017; Geier et al. 2019). The Hizmet Movement's *sohbetler* for university students comprise weekly evening meetings hosted in shared residences, typically categorised by gender and grouped by age and academic level. These students gather to socialise, share a meal, offer prayers, and study the texts of Nursi and Gülen. Each session is led by an *abi* (elder brother) or *abla* (elder sister), steering discussions and connecting different groups. The *sohbetler* generally consist of reading, reflection, and discussion, promoting community and religious education within the movement's educational system, although the format is flexible (Geier et al. 2019; Sunier and Şahin 2015; Sunier 2023). Emine Neval further identifies that *sohbet* serves three primary functions within the Hizmet Movement: supporting spiritual growth and religious learning, facilitating socialisation, and fostering a sense of community (Neval 2024).

Hocaefendi ('master teacher') was the respectful title given to Gülen, who considered teaching a sacred endeavour committed to the cultivation of both intellect and morality. His work as an educator underscored faith, love, and dialogue as fundamental to human development. He advocated for teachers to serve as moral models, embodying wisdom, patience, and selflessness in order to direct students toward a balance of mind, heart, and spirit. The concept of the 'Golden Generation', as envisioned by Gülen, focuses on educators inspiring young people to serve humanity. His global network of schools embodies his vision of educators as compassionate leaders who promote peace and understanding (Sakowicz 2018).

Silsila refers to the chain of transmission through which religious knowledge, ethical conduct, and spiritual authority are conveyed from *shaykh* to *murid*. While the Hizmet Movement does not formally operate through a classical *silsila* structure, elements of transmission and moral authority are nevertheless present in its pedagogical practices. In *sohbet* settings, guidance is often provided by *abi* or *abla* figures, whose authority is informal and relational rather than institutional. These figures do not function as *shaykhs*, but as morally senior participants who introduce religious texts, facilitate discussion, and frame ethical reflection, while participants are encouraged to relate teachings to their lived experiences. In this context, the Hizmet Movement adapts traditional methods of transmission into a practice shaped by dialogue, which is structured yet responsive to generational contexts. Existing ethnographic research further characterises *sohbet* not merely as an adult education space, but as a central pedagogical setting in which moral values, religious authority, and collective identity are cultivated through structured interaction and spiritual discipline (Sunier 2023; Neval 2024; Cıngıllıoğlu 2017).

Dialogue as Civic and Moral Formation

This section examines the Dialogue Society as a prominent British *Hizmet*-inspired organisation and how it operationalises dialogue, ethical formation, and civic literacy in response to questions of belonging, social cohesion, and community security in the United Kingdom. The Dialogue Society, founded in 1999 and inspired by the Hizmet Movement, promotes intercultural and interfaith dialogue, social cohesion, and community engagement across the United Kingdom. Although *Hizmet*-inspired, it identifies as non-religious and non-ethnic, focusing on building connections between diverse communities and encouraging open discussion. Its project 'Life of a Chickpea' uses the chickpea, found in dishes such as Noah's Pudding (*aşure*), to explore identity and unity through creative storytelling (Kent 2025). Between November 2024 and June 2025, the project was delivered in at least nine primary schools across London and neighbouring boroughs as part of the *Life of a Chickpea London Community Fund panel series* (Dialogue Society 2025). This initiative demonstrates how *Hizmet*-inspired organisations integrate cultural narratives with civic education, encouraging individuals from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds to uphold British values such as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of differing beliefs. This approach contributes to civic literacy and enhances community security for British Muslims while reinforcing a shared commitment to British values. The organisation regularly collaborates with schools, local councils, and community organisations as part of its community cohesion strategy, delivering projects such as *Dialogue Iftars* and *Christmas Community Dinners* held in public and educational venues across the United Kingdom

In early 2024, the Dialogue Society delivered a five-session course entitled *Dialogue in Islam: Building Resilience Against Extremism*, which examined Qur'anic and Sunnah references to dialogue and intercultural and interfaith relations, alongside contemporary barriers such as extremism and social polarisation. The course was open to both Muslims and non-Muslims, including young British Muslims, community leaders, council members, and academics. The course adopted an interactive pedagogical format, combining textual study with structured discussion, question-and-answer sessions, and applied coursework, offering participants the opportunity to develop transferable skills such as blog writing or video content production. It equipped attendees with communicative skills to engage constructively within wider society. In this way, the Dialogue Society operationalised dialogue not merely as an ethical blueprint but as a practical form of civic and ethical formation rooted in Islamic interpretive traditions (Dialogue Society 2023).

Tasawwuf emphasises inner ethics and moral refinement, which are transmitted through the *silsila*, the spiritual lineage connecting *shaykhs* and their *murids*. This

chain ensures the continuity of ethical and spiritual teachings, transmitting values such as humility, service, and compassion across generations. In contemporary Western contexts, *Hizmet*-inspired organisations such as the Dialogue Society embody this transmission by translating spiritual ethics into civic literacy, teaching respect, dialogue, and community service as both religious and civic virtues. In doing so, they reflect a core principle of *tasawwuf* within the traditional *tariqah*, such as the Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya, that spiritual growth is inseparable from service to others.

Case Study II: Minhaj-ul-Quran

Tahir ul-Qadri and Minhaj-l-Quran

Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri is a Pakistani Islamic scholar trained in Islamic law and the Qadiriyya tradition of *tasawwuf*. In 1981, Shaykh-ul-Islam founded the organisation MQI, which had expanded globally to over 90 countries by 2012 and included over 500,000 members in Pakistan and 25,000 members overseas. Additionally, he established Minhaj University in Lahore, offering a curriculum that includes religious and social sciences. His organisation promotes moderation, counter-terrorism, and interfaith harmony, and Qadri is known as the author of over 1,000 works (Qadri 2010; Hermansen 2020). For example, in 2010, he issued a *fatwa* (Islamic religious ruling or opinion) on terrorism, telling his followers at a conference in London: 'Terrorism is terrorism, violence is violence, and it has no place in Islamic teaching. No justification can be provided for it, nor any kind of excuses or ifs and buts. The world needs an absolute, unconditional, unqualified, and total condemnation of terrorism' (Taylor 2010). His counter-terrorism theology and educational approach have also been examined in recent academic research, which provides an in-depth insider perspective on the role of his scholarship and spiritual framework in countering extremist narratives (Mursaleen 2022).

Halaqa and the Transmission of Silsila

According to Shaykh-ul-Islam, the relationship between *shaykhs*, or *awliya* (friends of God/ saints), and their *murids* operates as a form of spiritual transmission developed through remembrance of God and sustained by divine energy. Those of lower spiritual advancement gain spiritual strength through association with spiritually mature individuals, through which *shaykhs* transmit divine influence and create a chain of spiritual connection grounded in remembrance of God and fellowship (Qadri 2015)

In contrast to the Hizmet Movement, *halaqa* within MQI operates through a more explicit engagement with traditional silsila. It functions as a structured study circle

in which religious knowledge, ethical guidance, and doctrine are transmitted within an established framework of authority. Sessions may be led by a recognised shaykh, senior figures, or students and recent graduates of the Islamic studies and Arabic diploma at the Minhaj Institute. Participants span different age groups, though authority remains clearly defined. Although opportunities for clarification exist, the pedagogical emphasis remains on structured learning, continuity of knowledge, and established interpretive traditions. In this respect, *halaqa* reflects a classical model of transmission adapted to contemporary organisational contexts

Building on this concept of spiritual transmission, Shaykh-ul-Islam and his organisation, MQI, apply the *halaqa* format in their educational and spiritual gatherings worldwide. This approach reflects both traditional mode of knowledge transmission and the spiritual interaction between teacher and student. It draws inspiration from al-Azhar's teaching style prior to the nineteenth century, when students sat in *halaqas* around a *shaykh*, memorised classical texts, and took part in scholarly discussions. The period of study ranged from six to twenty years and concluded with the award of an *ijaza* (licence to teach) (Qadri 2011). For instance, MQI's London branch holds a fortnightly *halaqa* on Friday evenings. Continuing this legacy of learning and spiritual guidance, Shaykh-ul-Islam's grandson, Shaykh Hammad Mustafa al-Madani al-Qadri, led a Grand Halaqa at the London branch in 2023, where he discussed how Muslim communities could draw on the strategy adopted after the Treaty of al-Hudaybiya, a peace agreement between the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the Quraysh of Makkah. He explained that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) signed treaties with non-Muslim, Christian, and Jewish tribes, granting them protection and civil liberties. As a result, the Muslim community of that period prospered, flourished, and grew without hostility. He advised his followers 'to use this prophetic wisdom and pragmatism to begin their preaching, to spread the message of harmony, faith, mercy, and compassion, and to promote love and peaceful coexistence among people of various communities, backgrounds, creeds, religions, and ethnicities' (al-Qadri 2023).

Civic Literacy, Dialogue, and the Prevention of Extremism among British Muslim Youth

Using his 600-page *Fatwa on Terrorism and Suicide Bombings* in 2010, MQI established what it described as the United Kingdom's first summer camp against terrorism, Al-Hidayah, for British Muslims. Led by Shaykh-ul-Islam, the camp was attended by approximately 1,500 young Muslims from across the United Kingdom, Europe, and North America. Shaykh-ul-Islam said the 'cancer of terrorism' does not emerge from nowhere but begins as an 'ideological infection', namely a narrow misinterpretation of the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical authorities. He explained that this

process starts in mosques, schools, universities, and online spaces, where extremist groups spread their ideology and recruit followers (Minhaj-ul-Quran International 2010). The initiative aimed to prevent young people from becoming radicalised and to equip them with the knowledge and critical skills necessary to challenge extremist ideologies (Morris 2010). Shaykh-ul-Islam continued to develop this educational approach through the release of the *Islamic Curriculum on Peace and Counter-Terrorism* in 2015 (Qadri 2015; Wyatt 2015). He stated that the curriculum seeks to educate imams, clerics, teachers, and young people about the ideological and theological roots of radicalisation, clarifying Islam's true teachings. MQI has developed teams that deliver school talks and university workshops nationwide. He further emphasised that combating radicalisation is a shared responsibility of Muslims and the wider society, and that education remains central to promoting lasting peace, harmony, and social cohesion (Qadri 2015).

Comparative Analysis: The Hizmet Movement and Minhaj-ul-Quran - Commonalities and Contrasts in Dialogue, Trust, Resilience, and Civic Formation

Both the Hizmet Movement and MQI represent modern Muslim initiatives that seek engagement with contemporary, pluralistic societies through dialogue, education, and civic participation. Both are transnational networks that utilise diaspora communities to maintain global influence through the teachings of their respective leaders. Each also employs familial terms to express communal solidarity and mentorship: *baji* (sister) or *bhai* (brother) within MQI, and *abla* (elder sister) or *abi* (elder brother) within the Hizmet Movement.

Despite their shared objectives of peace and interfaith understanding, their theological perspectives, organisational frameworks, and civic methodologies reveal significant contrasts in their respective conceptions of civic literacy and community security. Although both movements follow the Hanafi school of thought and integrate elements of *tasawwuf* into their ethical frameworks, MQI aligns closely with the Qadiriyya *tariqah*, whereas the Hizmet Movement functions as a non-*tariqah* civic movement.

These distinctions shape their methods of engagement. MQI adopts a more overtly religious approach, using Islamic teachings as the foundation for its civic initiatives and primarily operating through mosques and religious centres worldwide. The Hizmet Movement, by contrast, employs a civic and educational strategy centred on schools, dialogue centres, and charitable institutions. MQI promotes civic literacy through an Islamic framework, with a focus on religious education, counter-extremism initiatives, and citizenship training, whereas the Hizmet Movement cultivates

civic literacy through universal ethical values and intercommunal dialogue. The Hizmet Movement operationalises *tasawwuf* primarily through ethical pedagogy and civic dialogue, whereas MQI embeds it within formalised spiritual authority and juridical instruction.

As the Dialogue Society is presented as an example of a *Hizmet*-inspired, community-based organisation that welcomes participants from all faiths and ethnic backgrounds, MQI operates as a large-scale religious institutional organisation grounded explicitly in Islamic scholarship and formal theological authority through Shaykh-ul-Islam. However, both the Dialogue Society and MQI share commonalities in that they aim to challenge extremism through holistic approaches such as education and the promotion of social harmony. The Dialogue Society cultivates trust and civic literacy through sustained interpersonal contact and community-based dialogue, whereas MQI seeks to shape civic responsibility and resilience to extremism through institutional authority, formal religious education, and mass educational interventions.

Moreover, their differing leadership models shape their distinct forms of resilience. Gülen's intellectual and spiritual mentorship encourages moral autonomy, reflective dialogue, and the pursuit of universal ethics through education, cultivating an adaptive form of civic spirituality. By contrast, Shaykh-ul-Islam's juridical-religious authority provides structured theological clarity and direct engagement with issues such as extremism and interfaith relations, grounding civic participation in Islamic scholarship and collective discipline. Together, these movements represent two complementary paradigms of Muslim civic renewal: one driven by education and dialogue, the other by theological guidance and moral reform.

Implications for Human Security and Policy

Intergenerational Dialogue as a Foundation for Human Security and Resilience to Extremism

Intergenerational dialogue functions as a vital foundation for sustaining human security and resilience to extremism through a holistic approach that integrates spiritual, ethical, and civic dimensions, rather than fragmenting them within a society increasingly affected by suspicion and secularisation. Throughout Islamic civilisation, intergenerational dialogue is embodied in the *silsila* of *tasawwuf*, the unbroken chain of ethical and spiritual transmission linking teacher and student, generation after generation, tracing its origin to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Through its emphasis on softening the heart and cultivating humility, *tasawwuf* enables individuals to develop mutual respect, empathy, and a sense of shared responsibility. Con-

sequently, intergenerational dialogue fortifies communities against ideological fragmentation and social polarisation, thereby enhancing both spiritual well-being and collective security. This paper does not frame intergenerational dialogue as either purely authoritarian or egalitarian. Instead, it refers to a form of structured transmission with dialogical elements, rooted in practices such as *silsila*, *sohbet*, and *halaqa*, through which ethical and religious knowledge is conveyed within recognised pedagogical hierarchies while remaining responsive to generational context, lived experience, and contemporary social realities.

Human security plays a key role in merging intergenerational dialogue and community resilience by shifting the focus of security from the state to the individual and community. Within this paradigm, genuine security is not defined merely by the absence of conflict but also by the essence of dignity, mutual trust, and tolerance within social relations. Intergenerational dialogue through Qur'anic narrative, traditional *tasawwuf*, and contemporary Muslim networks such as the Hizmet Movement and MQI, addresses these challenges through an emphasis on civic literacy within *sohbet* and *halaqa*, where they transmit authentic Islamic teachings that protect young people from ideological distortion. These gatherings provide their followers not only with spiritual knowledge but also with religious and legal literacies to ensure the continuity of values such as compassion, humility, and service, which are essential for preventing the ideological isolation that often precedes extremism. For example, Shaykh-ul-Islam, using his legal expertise, utilises legal literacy as evidence in *Fatwa on Terrorism* to demonstrate that extremism is not only un-Islamic but also unlawful under national and international law.

Therefore, not only religious literacy but also legal literacy is essential in strengthening both human security and resilience to extremism. Legal literacy provides individuals with informed knowledge to navigate their civic rights and responsibilities within a pluralistic society, thereby reducing ignorance and hostility toward different communities. It empowers individuals to understand the moral and legal boundaries of their actions and to uphold justice and mutual respect in social relations. Within this framework, *tasawwuf* serves as the spiritual dimension that refines moral character, softens the heart, and inspires service to humanity. It is, in essence, the inner flavour that elevates the Muslim faith, guiding believers to become better individuals before God and to embody compassion and responsibility in service to others.

Contributions to UN SDGs and the UN Pact for the Future

The integration of civic literacy, religious literacy, and affective education resonates strongly with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particu-

larly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The relational model found in both Keegan's Critical Affective Literacy (CAL) and the *tariqah* tradition of *tasawwuf* advances these aims by fostering empathy, ethical reflection, and community service. The intergenerational dialogue between the *shaykh* and the *murid*, grounded in mutual respect, ethical discipline, and emotional awareness, aligns with Walker et al.'s (2021) conception of religious literacy and Keegan's (2021) civic mission of modern education to cultivate responsible, compassionate, and legally and religiously informed citizens. In this sense, the classical Sufi pedagogy of intergenerational dialogue and moral cultivation offers a traditional Islamic framework that realises the SDGs' vision of education as a pathway to justice, equality, and sustainable peace.

This framework is reflected in contemporary movements such as the Hizmet Movement and MQI, which translate the ethical and spiritual principles of *tasawwuf* into civic practice. The work of the Hizmet Movement advances the SDGs through interfaith dialogue, community cohesion initiatives, and educational projects that nurture mutual respect and coexistence, while MQI utilises Islamic scholarship, youth engagement, and interfaith dialogue to promote peace and counter extremism. Both movements operationalise the SDGs by linking spiritual ethics with civic responsibility, demonstrating how faith-inspired education can strengthen community security, reduce inequalities, and foster inclusive social cohesion within the framework of human development.

Beyond the SDGs, *tasawwuf*-inspired civic literacy aligns with the United Nations' Pact for the Future (2024), as it offers a timely global roadmap that coincides with the pedagogical aims of civic, legal and religious literacies. By committing to five areas, including sustainable development, peace and security, youth and future generations, and global governance, it strengthens the ethical framework within which movements such as the Hizmet Movement and MQI operate by incorporating the principles of *tasawwuf* through intergenerational teacher-student relationality expressed in *sohbet*, *halaqa*, service, and moral cultivation. This is in accordance with a global pact dedicated to achieving inclusive, peaceful and just societies for all. As the Pact for the Future itself declares, 'We reaffirm the need to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies that provide equal access to justice and that are based on respect for human rights, on the rule of law and good governance at all levels, and on transparent, effective and accountable institutions' (UN 2024).

In this context, the religious ethics of *tasawwuf* align with the diplomatic ethics of multilateralism, providing a spiritual and moral foundation that complements global policy frameworks for peace, justice and sustainable human development. This framework holds practical value for policymakers across the globe, particularly in the

United Kingdom, where government departments such as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) seek to strengthen social cohesion and support initiatives that mobilise community security. Integrating insights from religious literacy and Keegan's CAL can further cultivate interfaith understanding that extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge to promote empathy, mutual respect and civic responsibility. By embedding *tasawwuf*-inspired civic ethics, alongside other faith-based ethical frameworks, within existing programmes on community engagement and education, policymakers could adopt this approach to foster a more inclusive, compassionate and resilient society. Such an approach is particularly relevant in contexts where communities have become desensitised due to misinformation and a lack of media, religious, legal and civic literacies.

Conclusion

The paper argues that the most effective way to establish sustainable community security for Muslims in Western contexts involves moral, intellectual, and affective development transmitted across generations rather than surveillance-focused policies. Reclaiming *tasawwuf* by omitting 'Sufism' has been essential, as *tasawwuf* is misunderstood in some popular Western receptions and reduced to poetic mysticism detached from Islamic ethical and legal traditions, rather than recognised as an integral dimension of Islamic moral practice. Within the lens of human security, this inner formation addresses freedom from fear, want, and indignity by strengthening dignity, trust, and social cohesion where securitisation and Islamophobia have compromised them. Human security highlights the centrality of community security, as different communities pursue civic literacy while sharing the goal of advancing peace, justice, and strong institutions in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Pact for the Future.

The Qur'anic paradigms of Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) and Prophet Ismail (pbuh), and Prophet Musa (pbuh) with Khidr, were the foundations of an ethic of mutual consultation, humility, and patience that are woven into the *silsila* and connected to civic literacies including religious, legal, and media literacy. As demonstrated in the comparative cases of the Hizmet Movement and MQI, both represent viable and complementary pathways from *tasawwuf* to civic literacy. The Hizmet Movement emphasises universal ethics, education, and intercultural dialogue, while MQI foregrounds juridical clarity, religious literacy, and explicit counter-extremism. Both utilise intergenerational structures, *halaqa* and *sohbet*, to cultivate trust, belonging, and pro-social action. Their differences, *tariqah*-adjacent versus non-*tariqah* and mosque-centred versus school-centred, show that both different approaches ultimately advance the ways Muslim citizens enact civic virtue without diluting religious integrity.

Although human security frameworks have limitations, they remain compatible when addressing securitisation and hatred faced by Muslims. Faith-based intergenerational formation should be understood as an asset for social cohesion, not a risk to be managed by mere policies. A civic literacy component that pairs religious literacy with legal and media literacy, echoing Critical Affective Literacy's focus on emotions and empathy, can protect youth from ideological manipulation while deepening pluralistic commitment. There is also a continuing need for governments, schools, and community organisations to fund and evaluate dialogical spaces such as *halaqa*, *sohbet* circles, and interfaith dialogues as preventive and community-owned infrastructures for resilience, similar to the Life of a Chickpea Project.

In summary, *tasawwuf* is not anti-intellectual mysticism as some may misunderstand. It is a matter of discipline that delves into the seeker's inner self to perfect their *ihsan* while following *fiqh* and fulfilling civic responsibility. Shaykh Nazim, whose followers included many professionals, encouraged intellectual discipline through *tasawwuf* by refining the ego and inspiring service to others.

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Across continents and cultures, a thread connects communities across time: the stories elders tell, the questions young people ask, and ancestral practices renewed in new circumstances. This living thread is intergenerational dialogue, a theme this Special Issue takes seriously, as more than a technique, by framing it as epistemic practice, ethical commitment, political process, and a relational way of being.

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