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Intergenerational Dialogue as a Decolonial Praxis of Healing

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

Colonial disruption and fractured genealogies

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

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

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

Dialogue as decolonial praxis

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

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

Memory, storytelling, and the possibility of repair

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

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

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

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

Power, institutions, and the risk of instrumentalisation

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

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

Dialogue, futurity, and collective wellbeing

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

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

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

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

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

Reframing Intergenerational Dialogue from Exchange to Praxis

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

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

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

Generational relations and epistemic inequality

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

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

Coloniality and the disruption of intergenerational transmission

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

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

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

Dialogue as relational and situated praxis

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

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

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

Holding tension and dialogue without resolution

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

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

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

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

Towards a reframed understanding

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

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

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

Memory, Silence, and the Politics of Transmission

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

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

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

Epistemic trauma and the limits of articulation

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

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

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

Silence as presence, protection, refusal, and resistance

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

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

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

Storytelling, translation, and the risk of extraction

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

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

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

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

Fractured genealogies and the conditions of transmission

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

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

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

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

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

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

Language revitalisation and the reconfiguration of authority

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

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

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

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

Youth political engagement and the politics of translation

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

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

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

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

Continuity, fragmentation, and institutional mediation

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reframing practice beyond emancipation or constraint

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

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

The Limits of Dialogue and the Conditions of Decolonial Praxis

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

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

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

Dialogue as extraction of storytelling, data, and epistemic appropriation

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

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

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

Temporal tensions and the ethics of engagement

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

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

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

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

From instrumentalisation to relational ethics

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

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

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

Epistemic humility, silence, and temporal openness

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

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

Context, plural futures, and dialogue as unfinished practice

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

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

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

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

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